

Now Concerning Spiritual Matters ..."

I Cor. 12:1

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The subject matter of I Cor. 12:1 - 14:40 is, in the Greek, *ton pneumatikon*. These words which literally mean "spirituals" can be translated "spiritual persons", "spiritual gifts", "spiritual manifestations" or, more generally, "spiritual matters." The primary focus of this section of scripture is on how "spiritual people" are to properly utilize the manifestations of the Spirit in the gathered church or fellowship (i.e., *ekklesia*) of believers. Surely, there can be no real doubt that Paul expected these spiritual manifestations, or gifts, to be manifested in the lives of Christian believers until the time of Christ's return. In the interest of clarification of some of these terms we offer some comments by Gordon D. Fee, Professor of New Testament at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. Fee, who is a firm believer in the present availability of spiritual gifts, is widely recognized as one of the leading NT scholars in the world today. Highly recommended are his books on the subject of the holy Spirit including: *The New International Commentary on the NT: The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; and, *God's Empowering Presence: the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson). Following are some of his comments on the subject of "spiritual matters":

I think it is fair to note that if there is one thing that differentiates the early church from its twentieth-century counterpart it is the level of awareness and experience of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Ask any number of people today from all sectors of Christendom to define or describe Christian conversion or Christian life, and the most noticeable feature of that definition would be its general lack of emphasis on the active, dynamic role of the Spirit.

It is precisely the opposite in the New Testament. The Spirit is no mere addendum. Indeed, he [it] is the *sine qua non*, the essential ingredient, of Christian life. Nor is he a mere datum of theology; rather, he is *experienced* as a powerful presence in their lives. Whatever else may be said of the early

church, it was first and foremost comprised of people of the Spirit [Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, p. 111, Hendrickson].

The Term "Spiritual Gifts"

Speaking in regards to the term "spiritual gifts" in I Cor. 12:4-11, etc.:

Given the flexibility of language ... one should probably not overanalyze the different words used to describe the individual activities of the divine persons: "gifts," "services," "workings" [v. 4-6]. They are simply three different ways of looking at what in v. 7 Paul calls "manifestations" of the Spirit. This is supported by the fact that both "gifts" and "workings" occur again in the list [of v. 8-10] (associated with "healings" and "miracles" respectively).

[In v. 7-10] what "each one" is given in this case is not a charisma [gift], but a "manifestation of the Spirit." One should not make too much of the change of words, as if the following items would be wrongly called "gifts" because they are now called "manifestations." Most likely, the change reflects Paul's own emphasis throughout these chapters, which is on the Spirit himself, not on the "gifts." Thus each "gift" is a "manifestation," a disclosure of the *Spirit's* activity in their midst [Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p.163-164].

Thus, it seems evident that for Paul the manifestations of the Spirit listed in I Cor. 12:8-10 are also called "gifts" because each "manifestation" is "given" to the believer.

Speaking in Tongues

Speaking in tongues is certainly the most controversial of the manifestations of the Spirit listed in I Corinthians 12:8-10. However, what the Bible has to say about it is quite clear - at least for those who are willing to look at what the text says in an unbiased manner. As in all biblical subjects we have to let the text speak for itself and not pre-judge the issue. Certainly, this manifestation has been greatly abused in many charismatic circles but that does not detract from God's original intent for its godly usage in prayer and praise.

Paul's actual term is "different kinds of tongues." Enough is said in I Cor. 12-14 to give us a fairly good idea as to how Paul himself understood this phenomenon. (1) Whatever else, it is Spirit-inspired utterance; that is made plain by I Cor. 12:7 and 11 and 14:2. This in itself should cause some to speak

more cautiously when trying to "put tongues in their place" (usually meaning to eliminate them altogether) in the contemporary church. Paul does not damn tongues with faint praise, as some have argued, nor does he stand in awe of the gift, as apparently the Corinthians had done - and some contemporary proponents of tongues do. As with all Spirit-empowered activity, Paul held it in high regard in its proper place. (2) The regulations for its community use in 14:27-28 make it clear that the speaker is not in "ecstasy" or "out of control." Quite the opposite; the speakers must speak in turn, and they must remain silent if there is no one to interpret. Therefore the mind is not detached; but it is at rest, and thus fruitful. (3) It is speech essentially unintelligible both to the speaker (14:14) and to other hearers (14:16), which is why it must be interpreted in the assembly. (4) It is speech directed basically toward God (14:2, 14-15, 28); one may assume, therefore, that what is interpreted is not speech directed toward others, but the "mysteries" spoken to God. (5) As a gift for private prayer, Paul held it in the highest regard (14:4, 5, 15, 17-18; cf. Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:18) [*ibid.*, p. 889-890].

Interpretation of Tongues

This manifestation of the Spirit requires only a few words of explanation:

This is the obvious companion to "tongues," precisely because of the unintelligibility of the latter. Although this term could mean something close to "translation," it can also mean "to put into words"; in this context it probably means to articulate for the benefit of the community what the tongues-speaker has said. The evidence from 14:5, 13, and 27-28 indicates (a) that this, too, is a "Spirit-inspired" gift of utterance and (b) that it may be given either to the tongues-speaker or to another [*ibid.*, p. 173].

Prophecy

This manifestation requires a good deal of comment and I will allow Fee to speak for himself:

(a) Although prophecy was an especially widespread phenomenon in the religions of antiquity, Paul's understanding - as well as that of the other NT writers - was thoroughly conditioned by his own history in Judaism. The prophet was one who under inspiration of the Spirit spoke to God's people (e.g. Mic. 3:8). The "inspired utterance" came by revelation and announced judgment (usually) or salvation. Although the prophets often performed symbolic acts, which they then interpreted, the mainstream of prophetic activity, at least as it came

to be canonized, had very little to do with "ecstasy," especially "frenzy" or "mania." For the most part the prophets were understood only too well! Often the word spoken had a futuristic element, so in that sense they also came to be seen as "predictors"; but that was only one element, and not necessarily the crucial one.

(b) With the outpouring of the Spirit at the end of the age, the early Christians understood the prophecy of Joel 2:28-30 to have been fulfilled, so that "prophecy" not only became a renewed phenomenon, but was also potentially available to all, since all now possessed the Spirit in fullness (cf. Acts 2:17-18). This especially fits what we learn in the Pauline letters. It appears to have been a widespread phenomenon (cf. I Thess. 5:19-22; 2 Thess. 2:2; Rom 12:6).

(c) The evidence in I Cor. 14 indicates that it consisted of spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, intelligible messages, orally delivered in the gathered assembly, intended for the edification or encouragement of the people. Those who prophesied were clearly understood to be "in control" (see 14:29-33).

(d) Although some people are called "prophets," probably because they were frequent speakers of "prophecies," in I Cor. 14 the implication is that it is a gift widely available - at least potentially - to all.

(e) Although the prophetic tradition of the OT probably lay behind Pauline understanding, at no point does he understand the prophet to be speaking anything other than an ad hoc word [i.e. words spoken to specific situations]. This is evidenced by the fact that for Paul it must be "weighed" or "tested." Thus, there is never any sense that a prophetic word was to be raised to the level of "inspired text."

(f) There is no Pauline evidence for the phenomenon known in contemporary circles as "personal prophecy," whereby someone prophesies over another as to very personal matters in their lives. Where such might appear to be the case (e.g. I Tim. 1:18; 4:14), there is community affirmation (testing?) by way of the laying on of hands of the elders. Otherwise prophecy seems to be a strictly community affair, for the sake of the community's corporate life [*ibid.*, p. 169-170].

[See Fee's books for his insightful comments on the other manifestations, or gifts, of the Spirit]

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