The Role of Spiritual Gifts in the Church

There are four New Testament passages that provide lists of gifts that are given to Christians by God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The following chart gives a summary of the gifts listed in these passages and they are broken down into four categories.

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<th>1 Corinthians 12:8–12, 27–29</th>
<th>Romans 12:6–8</th>
<th>Ephesians 4:11</th>
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This variation in the gifts listed in these four passages indicates that the lists are not intended to be all-inclusive. For instance, in the Old Testament artistic ability and craftsmanship were referred to as coming from the Spirit of God (Exodus 31:1–5) and instructions were given for the employment of those gifts in the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings. Thus, any God-empowered use of God-given abilities in the ministry of his Kingdom can be regarded as a spiritual gift (e.g., arts, music, craftsmanship, medicine, professional skills). Such gifts are gifts of God.

Notes on the Gift Passages
(Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12–14; Ephesians 4:7–16; 1 Peter 4:8–10)

When we read these passages discussing the gifts we learn:

**Their source:**
- God (Father, Son, and Spirit) is the source (1 Corinthians 12:4–11; Ephesians 4:7–8, 11).
- God gives gifts to individuals as he chooses (1 Corinthians 12:11, 28; Ephesians 4:7, 11).

**Their distribution:**
- Some people may multiple gifts (Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 14:13).
- Several people may have the same gift (1 Corinthians 12, 14).

**Their role and purpose:**
- Gifts are to be used for the good of others in the church and in the work of the kingdom (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:31; Ephesians 4:11–16).
- Gifts are not intended for selfish use (1 Corinthians 12:14 –26; 14:16–17), but within the context of serving the body. The governance gifts imply a body to be organized; the teaching gifts imply an audience; the sign gifts imply observers; the service gifts imply people being served.

**Their use:**
- Gifts are to be used with diligence, cheerfulness, and faithfulness (Romans 12:6–8; 1 Peter 4:10–11).
- Gifts are to be used in an orderly and fitting way (1 Corinthians 14:26–33, 40).
- Individuals have control over the use of the gifts they possess (1 Corinthians 14:26–33, 40).
- Gifts are to be used for the good of the church (1 Corinthians 14:5b; 1 Peter 4:10).

**Their nature:**
The gifts can be categorized into four groups, which we will look at directly:
➢ governance gifts
➢ teaching gifts
➢ sign gifts
➢ service gifts

Governance Gifts
In both 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, leadership offices of the early church are described as divine gifts to the church.

Apostles (apostolos, “one who is sent”)
The apostles of Jesus Christ were those twelve men, plus Matthias and Paul, who were commissioned by Jesus himself to oversee the establishment of the church. Paul says the foundation of the church is built upon the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20).

Prophets (prophetas, “one who speaks forth the word of God”)
The Old Testament prophets received messages from the Holy Spirit and proclaimed those divinely-inspired messages to their audience (2 Peter 1:20–21). They were God’s spokesmen. Only a small portion of their messages predicted the future. Similarly, those with the gift of prophecy in the New Testament received messages from the Holy Spirit and delivered those messages to the church. Paul says the Holy Spirit revealed divine truth to the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:5) and that the church’s foundation is built on the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20), the ones guided by the Holy Spirit to reveal divine truths.

Evangelists (euangeli sta, “one who speaks good news”)
While all believers are witnesses for Jesus Christ, and while apostles, pastors, prophets, and teachers all engage in teaching the word of God, the scriptures state that God has given to the church certain individuals who are especially gifted in leading the spread of the good news to the lost. These individuals serve as evangelists of the church.

Pastors (poimena, “a shepherd”)
A pastor cares for God’s people as a shepherd would care for the flock: feeding them with spiritual food, caring for them when they become spiritually weak, and protecting them from spiritual dangers. God gives pastors to care for his church.
Teachers

A teacher is one who is gifted with the ability to understand truth and then to explain what s/he has learned in such a way that others can learn also. They have a God-given ability to understand and explain the meaning of the Word of God.

The Goal of Church Governance

Paul says that Jesus gifted his church with leadership roles for specific purpose:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:11–16).

In summary, Paul says that leaders are responsible for equipping the church and building up the church, pursuing unity in the faith (dispelling divisive thoughts and behaviors) and maturity of the body. This maturity is measured by the standard of Jesus Christ himself, such that the body of believers, individually and collectively, become a living witness and representation of Jesus himself. Such maturity of the body will serve to protect itself against instability and error, and it will result in all the parts of the body working together to support and build up the whole.

The Teaching Gifts

In order to instruct the body in truth, God gifts individuals with the ability to teach effectively. Paul mentions specifically knowledge, wisdom, teaching, speaking, prophesying, and encouraging. The list might also include gifts such as intelligence, comprehension, memorization, logical organization of thoughts, and various personal character qualities (e.g., patience, compassion, love, virtue) that serve to underlie and bolster a teacher’s message.
The Sign Gifts

Sign gifts were miraculous signs given to apostles and prophets for the purpose of confirming that the messages they were receiving from the Holy Spirit were, in truth, from God. Sign gifts were also given to evangelists and select Christians in order to confirm to the community that the message of Jesus they were preaching was, in truth, from God. In the New Testament, the only individuals specifically mentioned as presenting miraculous signs were the apostles, Stephen, Philip, Ananias, Barnabas, and Paul. Again, there were, no doubt, many others who were given the ability to present miraculous signs to support their teaching of the message.

How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:3–4).

Remember, the earliest Christians had no written revelation from God (except for the Old Testament), so when they taught new truths from the Holy Spirit or took the gospel into new areas, there had to be some way to convince people that their message was truly from God. That was the purpose of the sign gifts. The presence of sign gifts among the early Christians is the only reasonable explanation for the successful spread of the gospel throughout the Roman empire.

Sign gifts were not for personal benefit or even primarily for the physical benefit—they were for confirming the teaching of divine truth. For this reason, sign gifts always consisted of powerful, convincing, outward evidences of God’s power through the agency of the spokesperson.

Even among the apostles, the sign gifts were not for personal benefit. For example:

- Paul left Trophimus on Miletus sick (2 Timothy 4:20).
- When with Paul in Rome, Epaphroditus was sick to the point of death (Philippians 2:27).
- Paul encouraged Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach ailments (1 Timothy 5:23).
- Paul did not gain healing for his own “thorn in the flesh,” even though he prayed for it.
- James, rather than advising his readers to seek miraculous healing by means of someone with gift of healing, advised them to call the elders to come and pray for them because “the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

These passages are further testimony to the fact that the sign gifts have a specific purpose, viz., the affirmation the message in the early days of the kingdom, not merely to keep people healthy.
Note: This understanding of the sign gifts does not mean God does not continue to do miraculous things. God can and does still intervene in human lives in miraculous ways. The presence of the sign gifts—miraculous signs worked through human agency—and the ability of God to perform miracles are two distinct issues.

**The Service Gifts**

Service gifts are many and varied: leadership, showing mercy, giving, and faith are some of the gifts listed. Interestingly, these gifts of service largely include things that are to be characteristic of all Christians. So in what way are these “gifts” from God?

In this context, since the passage implies that some Christians have the gift of mercy and some the gift of serving and some the gift of giving, etc., Paul must mean that God has gifted some individuals with greater measures of certain characteristics and skills for the purpose of serving the body.

➢ All Christians have the responsibility to give generously, but some are gifted with especially generous hearts (e.g., Barnabas, Acts 4) and some are gifted with especially lucrative occupations.
➢ All Christians have the responsibility to show mercy, but God has gifted some with especially large capacity for mercy and forgiveness.
➢ All Christians have the responsibility to serve, but God has gifted some with an especially strong desire to help people resulting in the fact that they actively search out opportunities to serve.

**Final Note on Gifts of God**

We may not know all the ways God accomplishes his work in us, but this much is clear—all our gifts—great or small—are from God. Thus, every talent and ability is made possible by, is inspired by, and has its source in a loving and gracious God (James 1:17). Further, all our talents and abilities, which are God-given, can, through the operation of the Spirit of God, be transformed into a spiritual gift that blesses the body of Christ. Further, through the operation of his Spirit, God can bless individuals with spiritual gifts that do not even coincide with what might be otherwise regarded as a person’s natural or learned abilities. In other words, God supernaturally gives the gifts that he desires to give to his people and that are needed within the body. The gifting of the body is God’s work in us. He created us to do the good works which he prepared for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). God works in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).
Use Your Gifts in the Body!

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Romans 12:4–8).

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:15–16).

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many (1 Corinthians 12:12–14).

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:10–11).

Each of these passages—the passages containing lists of gifts of God—emphasizes the importance of Christians utilizing their gifts for the health and function of the body. One of the most important keys to the growth of any body is the engagement of the members in using their gifts, and one of the greatest challenges of leadership is both to encourage and to implement members in the function of body.

Each person should understand this fact: God has given to us certain gifts—strong personal characteristics and capabilities. He did not give us these gifts merely so we can have a winning personality and achieve success in this life. God created us, he has guided our lives, he has opened doors of opportunity, and he has filled us with his transforming Spirit with the expectation that we will use the gifts given to us for the purpose of assisting the church in its function and growth. That is God’s will for every Christian. Peter says, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

What gift(s) has God given you?