

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

THE APPROACH OF MARINERS CHURCH

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The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to all who put their faith in Jesus for the common good (1 Cor 12:7). There are four Greek words in the New Testament used to describe spiritual gifts: *pneumatikos*—spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1), *charismata/charisma*—gifting (Rom 12:6-8), *charis*—grace (Eph 4:7), and *domata*—gift (Eph 4:8).¹

Spiritual gifts are gifts of grace to unite Christ's body—His Church (1 Cor. 12:4-6)—in love to be witnesses of His work and mission (Acts 1:8). Everyone is born with talents and abilities. At conversion, the Spirit indwells the believer, and sometimes He will supercharge that talent or ability so that its effects become supernatural. For example, the Spirit can take a new believer naturally gifted at administration and deploy administration as a spiritual gift for the good of others and the glory of God. As Daniel Darling explains, “Spiritual gifts are not merely physical talents (though they also come from God) but are a special power to fulfill the mission God has given believers as they serve as part of Christ’s universal body.”²

COMMON POSITIONS

1. Cessationist: Sign Gifts Have Ceased

Many cessationists believe that the sign gifts or miraculous gifts (apostleship, prophecy, tongues, healing, etc.) ceased with the close of the biblical canon and the apostolic age. Therefore, the sign gifts are not characteristic of the life of the believer today. Cessationists believe that, while all the spiritual gifts existed earlier in salvation history, the sign gifts served a specific purpose in the early Church: to validate the apostles and their gospel message. In this view, after the New Testament was written and the canon was compiled and closed, the sign gifts were no longer operable and were said to have passed away (1 Cor 13:8; Eph 2:20; Heb 2:3-4).

Many cessationists believe in the possibility of miracles in the present age and encourage praying for healings or miracles.³ The distinction is that: God can work miracles, but they are not normative; the power for healing is not found in a person with the spiritual gift. For the cessationist, the gifts of tongues, healings, and miracles do not appear to be normative or characteristic of the life of believers throughout Church history.

2. Continuationist: Sign Gifts are Available Today

Continuationists believe that there is no explicit teaching in Scripture on any spiritual gifts passing away in this age. In fact, the passages used for spiritual gifts passing away by cessationists (1 Cor 13:8; Eph 2:20; Heb 2:3-4) are interpreted as not ceasing after the apostolic age or at the close of the biblical canon, but in the age to come when Christ returns (1 Cor 1:4-9; Eph 4:11-13). The continuationist view is that sign gifts are available today for believers. There are varying perspectives within the continuationist view when it comes to how normative the signs gifts are and what it looks like to desire, pursue, and practice them.

SO WHERE IS MARINERS?

Mariners Church holds to a continuationist view of spiritual gifts. We believe the sign gifts have continued and are available today. We hold this view because of hermeneutical reasons from the Bible and historical evidence from early Church fathers, as will be explained in the rest of this paper.⁴ Spiritual gifts, including sign gifts, are powerful and can be used to bless—but they can also be misused. We do not want to stifle the Spirit; rather, we seek to test everything (1 Thess 5:19-21) and practice spiritual gifts with wisdom, discernment, and love.

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1. We submit to the Scriptures and the Spirit of God.

We are Bible-based and Spirit-led. The Bible is the Word of God which is both inspired and inerrant (2 Tim 3:16-17). The Spirit of God illuminates the Word of God, which reveals who He is and guides us in wisdom of all matters—including spiritual gifts. The Spirit will never lead a believer in what is contradictory to what is written in Scripture.

2. The Holy Spirit's primary work is to draw us to Jesus (John 14:26; 16:7-14).

Being Spirit-filled leads to transformation, as we become more like Jesus. Being Spirit-led is to live in alignment with the presence of God—to be with Jesus. “The Spirit is supremely Christocentric,” Sam Storms reminds us. “Any ministry today, any teaching, vision, mission, or otherwise that elevates the Spirit above the Son, is decidedly unbiblical.”⁵ The role of the Holy Spirit is to convict the world of sin (John 16:8-9), remind us of Jesus’ teaching, and to glorify Jesus (John 16:14). “His ministry is both to reveal Christ to us and to form Christ in us, so that we grow steadily in our knowledge of Christ and in our likeness to Christ.”⁶

3. There is one Spirit-baptism and multiple fillings (Eph 5:18-21).

The prerequisite to receiving spiritual gifts is to first receive the gift of the Spirit through faith in Jesus. The Old Testament prophet Joel spoke of the Spirit being poured out on all believers (Joel 2:28). Under the Old Covenant, the Holy Spirit came upon individuals temporarily, but under the New Covenant, the Spirit of God moves in permanently at the moment of conversion.

We believe conversion and baptism in the Spirit are simultaneous experiences. Many charismatics believe there must be a Spirit-baptism after conversion where a believer will receive additional sign gifts and experience manifestations of the Holy Spirit, resembling the Day of Pentecost. However, the only reason the first disciples experienced this subsequent filling is they were saved before Pentecost.⁷

The believer is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). There is the initial filling at conversion and a continual filling of the Spirit must take place afterwards. “As an initiatory event, the baptism is not repeatable and cannot be lost, but the filling can be repeated and in any case needs to be maintained.”⁸ After being baptized in the Spirit, believers are to be filled with the Spirit regularly. “To be filled with the Spirit is to come under progressively more intense and intimate influence of the Spirit.”⁹ “To be filled with the Spirit” in the original language is *plerousthe*, which helps us to understand that it is a continuous (present tense) command (imperative) for the community (plural). The verb is also passive because we are filled by the Spirit—just as a sail is filled with wind. We position ourselves in a way to be filled by the Spirit as the Spirit moves.

4. The fruit of the Spirit is more important than the gifts of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

There is a temptation to value ministry competency over Christlike character or to evaluate spiritual maturity on the basis of spiritual gifting.¹⁰ In every account of leadership in Scripture, character is more important than gifting (1 Tim 3:1-12; Titus 1:7-9). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that as powerful as the gifts are, love is supreme. Love is the bond between spiritual gifts and spiritual fruit as it is listed first. Galatians 5:22-23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...” Stott reminds us that “the evidence of the Spirit’s fullness is not the exercise of his gifts, but the ripening of his fruit.”¹¹ Practicing spiritual gifts should always be complemented by the presence of spiritual fruit. We pursue spiritual fruit more than spiritual gifts.

5. Spiritual gifts should not be used as an excuse for disobedience.

With or without specific spiritual gifts, we cannot make excuses to neglect all that Jesus has commanded all believers to obey (Matt 28:19-20). All are called to serve, give, encourage, show mercy, etc, as we have been instructed in Scripture. We also must be careful to not idolize gifts and disobey Jesus’ prayer for unity of His Church (John 17) by comparing our gifts with each other (1 Cor 12:21-23).

WHAT ARE THE SPIRITUAL GIFTS?

Spiritual gifts can be organized in different ways, but we find three categories to be especially helpful. They are: (1) serving gifts, (2) speaking gifts, and (3) sign gifts (sometimes referred to as miraculous or revelatory gifts).

1. Serving Gifts

- a. **Administration** (1 Cor 12:28): The biblical term for administering is *kyberneseis*, and the root of this word describes what a pilot or steersman would do. Gifted administrators can organize and mobilize both programs and people in the right places, helping people see what is ahead while maximizing their effectiveness.

b. **Distinguishing/Discerning Between Spirits** (1 Cor 12:10): Having discernment is the special ability to discern truth and falsehood and to distinguish the influence of the Holy Spirit from the influence of the flesh or of demonic spirits and the enemy. People with this gift receive supernatural insight in evaluating prophecies. Discernment involves listening to God, submitting to Scripture, and caring for the community through seeking what is true and good.

c. **Faith** (1 Cor 12:9): The gift of faith is the manifestation of extraordinary trust (Matt 17:20). This gift refers to an extra measure of trust and confidence in God—the sight to see, often in times of darkness. “The gift of faith does not refer to the faith of justification (which all Christians have) or to that ongoing trust that serves as the basis of our daily relationship to God. Rather, this is a special faith that ‘enables a believer to trust God to bring about certain things for which he or she cannot claim some divine promise recorded in Scripture, or some state of affairs grounded in the very structure of the gospel.’”¹² Those with the gift of faith labor in expectant prayer, trusting God to answer.

d. **Giving** (Rom 12:8): This spiritual gift refers to the sharing of talents, treasures, and time (Luke 3:11). A person can be generous with physical possessions, spiritual blessings in the gospel, and even oneself (1 Thess 2:8). Sacrificial givers include people without material wealth, such as the widow and her last mite (Luke 21:1-4). More important than the amount given is the posture of cheerful generosity (2 Cor 9:7-15)—a spirit of not complaining or asking for anything in return.

e. **Helps/Service** (1 Cor 12:28; Rom 12:7): Those who look after the needs of others (e.g., physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, etc.) have this spiritual gift. The word for serving is *diakonia*—the root word for deacon. All Christians are called to help others as God Himself is a Helper (Ps 121:1-2) and in conformity with Jesus, the Servant of all (Mark 10:45). Those with this gift are often the first to volunteer and find joy in serving rather than receiving.

f. **Mercy** (Rom 12:8): Mercy is seen in those who embody the presence of Jesus through providing relief and comfort to people who are suffering. People with this gift are uniquely effective in showing kindness and compassion. As Tim Keller said, “The ministry of mercy... is the best advertising a church can have. It convinces a community that this church provides people with actions for their problems, not only talk. It shows the community that this church is compassionate.”¹³ Mercy is to be practiced with cheerfulness (Rom 12:8) and often focuses on caring for the quartet of the vulnerable: the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, and the poor (Zech 7:9-10).

g. **Pastoring/Shepherding** (Eph 4:11): Pastors watch over the flock and care for the spiritual well-being of others (Acts 20:28). There are various expressions of every gift—including pastoring. Ezekiel 34:4 provides a helpful picture of what pastoring can be: strengthening the weak, healing the sick, bandaging the injured, bringing back strays, and searching for the lost as healers and counselors. Shepherds eagerly serve and sacrifice for others as they point the flock to the chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:2-4). Pastors must lead by example, know their flock, and be willing to lay down their life for others (John 10:11).

2. Speaking Gifts

a. **Leadership** (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 3:4-5, 5:17). Leaders articulate vision, make good and wise decisions, and help lead the community of believers into the future. Those with the gift of leadership ought to have godly character (1 Tim 3:2-7), the ability to lead with diligence (Rom 12:8), and a posture of serving others (Matt 20:25-28).

b. **Teaching** (Eph 4:11): Teaching is sharing God's Word with clarity and conviction. An effective teacher communicates biblical truth and sound doctrine with their words and their life in a compelling way that results in fruit and faithfulness for those who hear. Every spiritual gifts list in Scripture includes teaching, which signals its importance. The teaching gift is often related to the leading gift. However, not all teachers have the gift of leadership, and not all leaders have the gift of teaching. James 3:1 says that not many should seek to be teachers because of a stricter judgment. Not everyone with the gift of teaching is called to be a pastor or elder, while elders are called to be teachers (1 Tim and Titus).

c. **Exhortation/Encouragement** (Rom 12:8): Exhortation moves believers towards Christ. The term is *paraklesis*, a word often used to describe the Holy Spirit as a guide or comfort. Those with the gift of exhortation go beyond giving compliments to offering supernatural encouragement and hope that is rooted in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9). Exhortation and encouragement can show up in a variety of ways—through sharing the gospel (Luke 3:18), calling to repentance (Acts 2:40), helping others endure (Acts 11:23), charging believers on the road to sanctification (1 Thess 2:12), and warning people from sin (Heb 3:13). We find a good example of what exhortation can look like in 1 Thessalonians 5:14: "And we exhort you, brothers and sisters: warn those who are idle, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

d. **Evangelism** (Eph 4:11): Evangelism is sharing the good news of Jesus with those who do not believe. Some are uniquely gifted with evangelistic effectiveness, whose passion results in seeing others come to know, follow, and obey Jesus. Philip (Acts 21:8) and Timothy are examples of evangelists in the early Church who boldly proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ.

2. Sign Gifts

a. **Apostleship** (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11): New Testament apostles were those sent out by God who had seen Jesus (Acts 9:1-9) and been with Him (Mark 3:14-15). Like the prophets of the Old Testament, the apostles in the New Testament often performed signs and wonders (2 Cor 12:12).¹⁴ In the early Church, some were given the title of apostle: the twelve apostles minus Judas, plus Matthias (Acts 1:26), Barnabas (Acts 4:36), and Paul (Acts 14:14). "We simply cannot think of apostleship apart from the historical apostles."¹⁵ Those with the gift of apostleship are typically mission-minded church planters, missionaries, or leaders with other gifts of evangelism, leadership, or teaching. Those with the gift of apostleship do not have the same weight or power as historical apostles or Scripture.¹⁶

b. **Prophecy** (Eph 4:11): Prophecy is the communication of a revelation from God. Believers are to earnestly desire prophecies (1 Cor 14:22) and not despise them (1 Thess 5:20) because the Word of God itself is God's revelation (2 Pet 1:20-21). Old Testament prophecies of "Thus says the Lord" differ from prophecies today because we now have God's written Word—the supreme and final authority for Christian faith and practice. Prophecies must never contradict Scripture; they are the personal and unique application of truth for an individual or group of believers. Those with the gift of prophecy should share in proportion to their own faith (Rom 12:6). Prophecy today is not to be received with the same level of authority as the prophecies of the Old or New Testament.

Prophecy can come in many forms: truth-telling (Acts 11:28; 21:10-12), information, facts, or insights¹⁷, encouragement (1 Cor 14:3), assurance (Acts 18:9), a call to endure and keep the faith (Rev 14:12), and conviction or personal revelation (1 Cor 14:24-25) to build up believers with courage in the Lord. Prophecy is more akin to sharing something God has spontaneously brought to mind through the form of words, thoughts, images, impressions, dreams, or Scripture.¹⁸ Some believe the “message of wisdom” and “message of knowledge” fall under the umbrella of prophecy or teaching. A word of wisdom can refer to practical application, and a word of knowledge can refer to particular insight into history or doctrine.

c. **Tongues** (1 Cor 12:10; 1 Cor 14:13): The gift of tongues is the ability to speak in languages that are unfamiliar to the speaker (Acts 2:4-11) or mysteriously in the Spirit, whether Heavenly or angelic utterances (1 Cor 14:2, 1 Cor 13:1). As one writer comments, “Whether tongues referred to in Scripture were the miraculous speaking of foreign languages unknown to the speaker or the language of glory or both, the important point is that they were all languages.”¹⁹ The gift of tongues is for prayer (1 Cor 14:14), in praise, or through prophecy via an interpreter (1 Cor 14:27-28).

d. **Interpretation of Tongues.** Interpreting tongues refers to the miraculous and often spontaneous gift of understanding and translating someone who is speaking in tongues. It is not the learned ability to translate a foreign language.²⁰ The gift of tongues builds the individual up (1 Cor 14:4), but when accompanied by an interpreter, it builds up others also (1 Cor 14:26).

e. **Healing/Miracles** (1 Cor 12:9): Miracles can refer to divine intervention²¹ resulting in spiritual or physical restoration. In the Old Testament, several individuals healed and performed miracles—prophets such as Moses and Elijah. Jesus Himself healed many and displayed signs. “Much of our Lord’s miraculous ministry served to express his compassion and love for the hurting multitudes,” writes Sam Storms. “He healed the sick and fed the five thousand because he felt compassion for the people” (Matt 14:14; Mark 1:40-41).²² Physical healing is one of the blessings we may receive as a result of Christ’s death in our place: “...we are healed by his wounds” (Isa 53:5). After Pentecost, the apostles and other followers of Jesus performed miracles and healed others. The early Church cast out demons (Matt 10:1), healed the sick (Acts 6:8, 8:6-13), cleansed people with leprosy, restored sight to the blind, let the lame walk, and raised the dead (Acts 9:36-42). The same God of the Old Testament and of the early Church is the same God we serve and follow. God still performs miracles today.

While God may grant healing through the prayers of His people, those who pray for healing will not necessarily see the hoped-for result.²³ We pray for healing and surrender to the Father’s will. We do not “name it and claim it” because we do not know God’s will beyond what is in Scripture. There are times when God chooses not to heal immediately. “As with all infirmities of this age, however, God desires to be gracious with his people. He may choose to grant miraculous healing either through the prayers of his people or the manifestation of the gift of healing as defined above...On the other hand, God may grant His supernatural power to a person to persevere in the trial of their bodily infirmity (2 Cor 12:7-10). In both situations he does so for his own glory and our ultimate good.”²⁴ Even in moments where healing does not happen immediately, we know that on the final day, God will heal us all completely and make all things new.

4. Gifts Beyond These Lists

The lists we find in Scripture are not exhaustive, and “there may be some spiritual gifts available today that are not included in any list.”²⁵ There are gifts outside these lists (such as hospitality) in Scripture. And there may be other spiritual gifts like worship, creative arts, and others that are not in God’s Word.

WHAT THIS MEANS (AND DOESN'T MEAN) FOR MARINERS CHURCH

- 1. Pursue the Giver more than the gifts** (1 Cor 13:8-9; Ps 102:27). The gifts God gives to believers are powerful, but every gift from God should point us back to Him (Jas 1:17). “First and foremost we seek Him, not them.”²⁶ There is no gift greater than the Giver. “We allow every gift to show us something about the Giver.”²⁷
- 2. The Spirit always does inner transformation but not always miraculous works.** The Spirit of God works powerfully in the life of every believer. “Scripture places more emphasis on the experience of this power in the regular experience of daily life than in the miraculous.”²⁸ The empowering work of the Spirit looks different for every believer, but the fruit of inner transformation always looks the same: we become more like Christ.
- 3. Discover spiritual gifts.** Paul warned Timothy, “Don’t neglect the gift that is in you” (1 Tim 4:14). Spiritual gifts tests can be helpful, but perhaps a better way is to ask God to reveal our gifts, to pursue Christ by serving His bride—the Church—and to ask our community for feedback. As believers, our hope is to be faithful servants with the talents and gifts we have been given (Matt 25:21). Ultimately, God is the Giver of talents, abilities, and supernatural sign gifts.
- 4. Practice spiritual gifts with love** (1 Cor 12:31,13:1-3, 14:1). Without love, there is no benefit or value in spiritual gifts. Every spiritual gift is about building others up in love. Just as love and truth go hand in hand, so do spiritual gifts and love.
- 5. Spiritual gifts must be practiced wisely** (1 Cor 14:26-33). Paul encourages the church in Corinth toward order because our God is a God of peace. Being Spirit-led does not equate to being spontaneous. The Spirit of God can also move and work in strategic planning and coordination. So what does this look like at Mariners Church?

Serving Gifts: For administration, there is preparation and planning when it comes to the life of the church. For giving, there are opportunities to bring tithes and offerings to contribute generously to the work of the Lord. For service, we help where needed. For mercy, we look for new ways to care for the quartet of the vulnerable with joy, generosity, and compassion. For shepherding, our pastors lead by example and point believers to the Shepherd who laid down His life. For discernment, believers should weigh and evaluate what is being shared and said. For faith, believers pray for others and live with hope in God’s promises.

Speaking Gifts: For leadership, we appoint elders, pastors, staff, and volunteer leaders with spiritual authority. For teaching, believers exercise the teaching gift with diligence. There are a variety of settings to teach, ranging from one-to-many, one-to-a-few, or one-on-one. For encouragement, believers build up and are built up by one another. For evangelism, those with the gift should proclaim the gospel of Jesus and equip others to do the same.

Sign Gifts: For apostleship, we can affirm this gifting, and yet we do not appoint modern apostles.²⁹ For prophecies, they should be shared in an orderly fashion and with humility instead of saying they are a “direct quotation from the Lord.”³⁰ Prophecies should be evaluated and weighed by believers and then shared with others in an appropriate manner to encourage (1 Cor 14:29-32). For tongues, there should be an interpreter in corporate worship, spoken one at a time. If no interpreter is present, tongues should be spoken privately in prayer or praise. God can use technology, therapy, and medicine to help and heal individuals. When believers need restoration physically, spiritually, or beyond, we pray for healing individually and corporately (Phil 4:6). For healing, we pray for miracles because God loves His children and can intervene. Believers can go to the elders of the church for healing prayer and anointing with oil (Jas 5:14-17).

A WORD TO THOSE WHO DISAGREE

There are a variety of definitions and expressions for each gift. We understand that intelligent and sincere Christians hold different views. Therefore, we continually return to the Scriptures as our guide, and we remain committed to unity in Christ as the family of God.

Misuse, abuse, or fear cannot be excuses for downplaying or denying what the Scriptures teach. Some hesitate to be open to spiritual gifts for a variety of reasons, whether it be over-intellectualism or emotionalism. Others have misused or abused spiritual gifts. However “strangeness is not a criterion for truth.”³¹ There is a distinction between getting these gifts wrong and practicing these gifts falsely. Both the Scriptures and the Spirit convict and compel us to be wise and discerning in how we pursue and practice spiritual gifts.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit has sovereignly given each of us spiritual gifts. We need one another to display the fullness of God’s glory to the world because no one has every gift (1 Cor 12:21). God’s Word guides us in how we think about, desire, and practice these gifts. Spiritual gifts are both supernatural and essential in the advancing of the gospel. At Mariners Church, we seek to practice spiritual gifts in love and wisdom for our faith to grow, for the edification of the body, and for the glory of God.

ENDNOTES

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- 6 Stott, John. *Baptism & Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 27.
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- 10 Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderbvan, 2000), 1031.
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- 14 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1050.
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- 23 Storms, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, 246.
- 24 Saucy, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, 131.
- 25 Stott, *Baptism & Fullness*, 128.
- 26 Storms, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, 223.
- 27 Wilson, *Spirit and Sacrament*, 35.
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- 31 Storms, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, 161.