



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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### *Temporary Spiritual Gifts (1)*

(I Cor. 12:8–11; 13:8-13)

**F**OR TO ONE IS GIVEN BY THE SPIRIT THE word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. (I Cor. 12:8–11)

When we study spiritual gifts thoroughly, we see that they fulfill two major purposes.

First, *permanent gifts* edify the church. Paul lists these in his letter to the Romans (12:6-8): prophecy, ministry (serving), teaching, exhortation, ruling, and mercy. God will continue to give these gifts to believers for the duration of the church age, and these are to be ministered by His people at all times in the life of the church.

Second, the *temporary gifts* were signs to authenticate the apostolic message as being the very Word of God until the time when the Scriptures, His written Word, were completed and became self-authenticating.

After years of studying the Scriptures and the issue of spiritual gifts, I am convinced that the present passage is one of the most misunderstood in all the Bible. Most commentators insist that all the gifts spoken of here are still with us today.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, however, we are not only left with some inconsistencies in the list, but more seriously a very real weakening of the Word of God Itself.

To study this fine point of doctrine adequately, we'll also need to examine another passage in I Corinthians (13:9-13). Let's look at five principles, the first one of which is overlooked by many teachers on the issue of temporary spiritual gifts.

#### **I. The Finality of Inspiration**

As II Timothy 3:16 declares, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." The Greek word for "inspiration" (*theopneustos*) is derived from two Greek words: *theos*, "God," and *pnein*, "to breath out, or to blow." The best way to understand these Greek words is to contrast them with two other words. One is *psuchin*, "to breath gently." In contrast, *pnein* speaks of a forceful expiration of air. Another word is the Hebrew *ah-ayrh*, "to breath unconsciously," but to contrast again, *pnein* speaks of a conscious breathing. All this provides a clear definition of Inspiration: *Inspiration is the forceful and conscious exhaling of God into the Scripture writers.* That definition reflects what is meant when we say the Scriptures are "God-breathed."

We also read in II Peter 1:20-21, "No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Scripture didn't come by anyone's experience. It didn't come from anyone's private interpretation. It didn't even come from the men who wrote it. From whence did it come? *Holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit of God.*

"Moved" translates *pheromenoi*, which means to be "carried along." Luke used this word to describe how a

ship is carried along by the wind (Acts 27:15, 17). It's also interesting to note that Peter evidently loved this word, for he uses it six times in his two Epistles. Being an outdoorsman, he wanted to paint us a picture, and what a picture it is! Men today are moved, motivated, and mastered by many things, but the men God used were driven by only one thing, the Holy Spirit.

So, the Biblical view of inspiration is stated theologically as "Verbal, Plenary Inspiration." The term "verbal" means that the Holy Spirit guided the choice of the words. "Plenary" simply means full or complete and, therefore, describes the Bible as being the full, complete revelation of God. All this gives us a complete and conclusive definition of inspiration:

Inspiration is the activity of God by which He superintended the reception and the communication of His message, even in the specific words used, while still allowing for the style and personality of each writer, with the results being the Word of God.

Now, the point of all this is to ask a question. Is inspiration still going on today *in any way, shape, or form*? Is man getting any "flashes of insight," any wisdom, any knowledge, or any discernment whatsoever from *any other source* except the Scriptures? If we say "yes" at any point, then we have just violated the doctrine of Verbal Plenary Inspiration.

With the words "but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," our text declares that the Scriptures, as They stand today, are the complete record. No new revelation is being given, no matter who claims otherwise. There is no other wisdom, no other tool for discernment, no other spiritual knowledge, no "flashes of insight," or anything else. This is proven by the tense of the verb translated "spake." The Greek verb (*elalesan*) is in the Aorist tense, indicating punctiliar action that occurred *then* not *now*.

This leads us to a second principle.

## II. The Reason That Some Spiritual Gifts Were Temporary

While we will deal with the passage again, it is essential that we here mention I Corinthians 13:8-13:

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I

am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Verses 8 and 9 reveal that what has come before this passage, that is, the things of chapter 12, are partial knowledge, only temporary. Verse 10 says that there is something coming that is "perfect," that is, mature or complete. But the question is, "What exactly is coming?" No matter what the objections may be, this can refer to one thing only. The Greek for "perfect" is *teleio*, which literally means "perfect, full grown, complete." It is also important to see that the word appears in the *neuter* gender. Therefore, this is referring to a "thing" not a person. Because of that fact, "perfect" cannot refer to Christ as some have suggested. Faced with this textual fact, others have said that it refers to Christ's *Second Coming* (a thing). But that doesn't fit the context, nor is it spoken of elsewhere. It is poor exegesis to insist that Paul here throws a weak and uncertain reference to the Second Coming into a discussion of something entirely different. Violating the context is one of the chief reasons for error. One other view says that "perfect" refers to *eternity*, that is, the eternal state, but this falls for the same reason as the Second Coming View—it just doesn't fit. Paul is talking about that which is needed on earth, not what will be in heaven. Ultimately, this view, as all the others, weakens the absolute and sole authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

There is only one view that fits the context. The "mature, full-grown, complete thing" can refer only to *the completed New Testament Scriptures*. Throughout his letter Paul has been emphasizing preaching, teaching, and knowledge. Right here in verses 11 and 12 he speaks of immature and incomplete knowledge. But when the New Testament Scriptures were completed, there was then mature, full-grown, complete knowledge. Instead of being children, they would then be adults. Greek born scholar Spiros Zodhiatus makes this comment:

The phrase "when that which is perfect is come" refers to the written revelation of Scripture. When this revelation was completed, there was no need for the temporary gifts (e.g., tongues, prophecies, and knowledge) which were given in order to substantiate the message that the apostles were preaching.<sup>2</sup>

Henry Morris agrees:

Since the previous verse refers to the incompleteness of the divine revelation at that time, "that which is perfect [complete]" almost certainly refers to the completion of Biblical revelation, as finally announced by John, the last of the apostles (Revelation 22:18,19). In the Scriptures, we now have all the prophetic truth needed for the guidance of the church until Christ comes again. With few, if any, exceptions, we also have all the attestation we need

to its veracity and power, so there is little need any more for miraculous signs, even though many still desire them.<sup>3</sup>

In his book, *Decisions, Decisions*, Dave Swavely also concurs:

Some commentators have suggested that “perfect” or “complete” is the eternal state, but it seems more likely that it is a reference to the completed canon of Scripture. Paul knew that when the Bible was completed, there would be no more need for any further revelation, and therefore no need for revelatory gifts.<sup>4</sup>

Consider also New Testament scholar Merrill Unger:

“But when that which is perfect is come [Greek, *to teleion*, the completed and final thing, which means ‘the New Testament Scripture;’ the neuter in the Greek denotes neither Christ nor His second advent, both of which thoughts are foreign to the context], then that which is in part [partial or piecemeal revelation through the gift of directly inspired prophecy and knowledge before the New Testament was given] shall be done away with [*katargēthēstai*, shall be superseded, rendered unnecessary, and meaningless, because no longer needed and so shall be cancelled and done away with].”<sup>5</sup>

This view has been criticized because some say it teaches that we have “all knowledge,” but this view says no such thing. The Word of God nowhere says It contains all knowledge. There are many things about God’s nature and workings that we know nothing about, things that are not revealed in His Word. Rather, the Word of God contains all the knowledge God wants us to have, all the knowledge we need to live correctly for Him. Indeed, the knowledge that existed before the completion of the Scriptures was incomplete, but with the Scriptures came a complete knowledge, complete in the sense that it is now adequate for all earthly purposes and absolutely authoritative.

We should also interject here that a cross reference to verse 11 is Ephesians 4:14 (a text we will examine in coming issues of TOTT), where we are told to “be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine.” In both of these texts and contexts Paul is speaking of maturity in the *present*, and the only thing that will bring that about is the Word of God.

Finally, the “eternity view” says that the “Word of God view” has a problem explaining the words “face to face” and that these words are best explained as the believer being with God in the eternal state. That is a nice thought, and we all look forward to that reality, but again, it does not fit the context. Why does Paul throw in something about eternity when the entire context speaks of something that is needed *now*? “Face to face” simply

refers to the comparison that Paul makes between the Word of God and a “glass” (mirror). Mirrors of that day were often made of bronze, and because of the worldwide renown of Corinthian bronze, the analogy undoubtedly struck the Corinthians profoundly. Even the best mirrors, however, reflected images imperfectly, but the Scriptures would remove all obscurity and distortion. In other words, Paul is simply telling his readers that when they look at themselves and truth *now*, they see things unclearly, but when they look at them *then*, when they have the completed Word, the answers will be clear. No longer will they need the temporary things, for they will have the *exact* words that God wants them to have for life on earth.

### III. The List Of Temporary Gifts

So, 13:9-13 sheds a tremendous amount of light on 12:8-10. As we saw in 13:9, Paul was referring to things before the completion of the New Testament Scriptures, even mentioning one of the gifts by name, **knowledge**. Therefore, we must conclude, beyond any question, that *all the gifts spoken of here were only necessary and were only in force before the completion of the New Testament Scriptures*. Let us look at each listed gift and demonstrate that this *must* be true.

**Wisdom** was the supernatural insight into and the understanding of spiritual truth. We have all heard someone say, “Oh, that person is so wise; he just has the gift of wisdom.” But that is incorrect. A supernatural imparting of wisdom is no longer needed because wisdom is now found in the Word of God alone. We often think that just because someone is older in years or is knowledgeable in the affairs of the world he is therefore “wise.” Not so! No one is wise if his words do not come from the Word of God.

“But James says,” it is argued, “that ‘If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.’ (Jas. 1:5).” Yes, God *will* give us wisdom if we ask for it, and the way He will do so is by illuminating His Word to us.

May we also add that if wisdom is still a spiritual gift, it is the only one we are told to ask for, which flatly contradicts the fact that we are never instructed to ask for *any* spiritual gift.

**Knowledge** was the supernatural ability to communicate practical truth from doctrine. Such supernatural knowledge is no longer needed because the completed Scriptures alone contain all the knowledge we need to live.

This gift is perhaps the best example of why this list is temporary. One highly respected expositor, for example, writes of this gift being active today: “The gift of knowledge is the capability of grasping the meaning of God’s revelation, which is mystery to the natural

mind.” But may we say that such a gift is totally unnecessary because of the Biblical doctrine of the Illumination of the Holy Spirit. The same expositor goes on to write:

The human writers of Scripture had the gift of knowledge in a unique way. God gave them truths directly, which they recorded as part of His written Word. Since the closing of the canon of Scripture, however, that gift has not involved the receiving of new truth but only understanding of truth previously revealed.

But that is conjecture. Nowhere does the Bible say, either here or anywhere else, that there are two types of this knowledge, one for the writers and another for us today. The bottom line is that with the completed Scriptures, we need no other knowledge and no other understanding than the illumination of the Spirit. As Unger submits again: “The completed revelation of Scripture in the canonical books of the New Testament would eventually make prophecy, knowledge, and tongues unnecessary and useless.”<sup>6</sup>

**Faith** was the supernatural ability for unusual reliance upon God. This, too, is misapplied today. Often we hear someone say, “Oh, that person has such great faith; he has the gift of faith.” Those who teach that this is a gift for today cite great men such as Hudson Taylor and George Mueller as those who had an unusual reliance upon God.

Once again, that is not so. Men such as Taylor and Mueller were simply trusting in the promises of God in His Word. In fact, no Christian should have either more or less faith than another Christian. Why? Because our faith is based only upon what the Word of God says. Absolutely nothing else is needed. We need only believe what God says!

**Healing** was the supernatural ability to heal sickness *and* restore life. There are many today who claim to have this gift, but there are at least three features of the miraculous healing of Jesus and the Apostles that disprove those claims. *First*, they healed with a word or touch, without prayer, and sometimes without even being near the person. *Second*, they healed any affliction, even congenital disease, no matter how severe or long-standing. *Third*, they restored life to the dead. This gift was one of the “sign gifts” that was needed to confirm certain things to the Jews in the early days of the Church (more about this later). These “sign gifts” were replaced by the permanence of the Scriptures; once It was completed, it was the only confirmation anyone needed. We’ll return to this in Part 2.

**Miracles** was the supernatural ability to perform supernatural acts. This, too, was a temporary “sign gift.” John tells us, for example, that Jesus’ turning the water into wine at the wedding feast was the beginning of the

“signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11). That was the purpose. The miracle was not to improve the party or to show off great power to the curious. Even with Jesus, the working of miracles, just as the work of healing, was confirmation of His coming as Messiah, the carrier of God’s power and message. This was also true of the Apostles. Paul later wrote the Corinthians, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles” (II Cor. 12:12). Miraculous signs were a mark of apostleship, authenticating the apostles’ message and work as being of the Lord. We’ll also return to this in Part 2.

**Prophecy**, in this context, was the supernatural ability to proclaim new revelation from God. The Greek behind **prophecy**” (*propheteia*) has the literal meaning of speaking forth with no specific reference to prediction or other supernatural significance. Some believe (as I once did) that this was only revelatory and was possessed only by the apostles. But while it did have revelatory aspects during Old Testament and apostolic times, it was not limited to those. It simply refers to the Divine enablement to speak Divine truth, whether *new* truth or previously revealed truth. We find both of these in Scripture, in fact. Silas, for example, was called a prophet but gave no prediction or new revelation, rather he “encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message” (Acts 15:32).

The key, then, is the context. In the list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8, prophecy appears in reference to *speaking and serving* gifts. In contrast, in I Corinthians 12, it appears in the list of *sign* gifts, which are no longer needed. This distinction is extremely important. Without it, we are left with those who say, “God spoke to me in a dream,” or “God revealed this new truth to me.” This is simply unbiblical, not to mention outright dangerous. There are no new revelations. The Word of God is God’s final authority. We’ll return to this emphasis in our discussion of tongues in Part 2.

**Discerning of spirits** is one of the most important evidences of the temporary nature of these gifts. It was the supernatural ability to distinguish true revelation from God from that which comes from a satanic deceiver. The basic meaning of “discerning” has to do with separating out for examination and judging in order to determine what is genuine and what is error. Here is another common misnomer: “Oh, that person has the gift of discernment; he can see right through false doctrine.” *No, the only reason anyone can see through false doctrine or discern any error is because he knows what Scripture says!* Hebrews 4:12 declares that the Word of God is “the Discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” With His Word, God has given us all the tools we need to discern the true from the false. The only way to discern

truth from error is knowledge of the Word of God. Yes, before that was complete, a special gift was needed to expose error, but the Word of God does that now.

We'll conclude this study next month by examining the last two gifts, **tongues** and **interpretation**, and then underscoring why the position we are offering here is absolutely essential.

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**In The Next Issue:** *Temporary Spiritual Gifts, Part 2*

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Among those who do not (and with whom I agree) are S. Lewis Johnson in *Wycliff Bible Commentary*, and John Walvoord in Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. VI, p. 220.
- <sup>2</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1984, 1991), p. 1436.
- <sup>3</sup> Henry Morris, *The Defender's Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: World Publishing, Inc., 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> Dave Swavely, *Decisions, Decisions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing; 2003), p. 23]
- <sup>5</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), pp. 95-96 (brackets are Unger's).
- <sup>6</sup> Unger, p. 96.

**“First, my friends, stand over this volume, and admire its authority. This is no common book. It is not the sayings of the sages of Greece; here are not the utterances of past ages. If these words were written by man, we might reject them; but O let me think the solemn thought, that this book is God’s handwriting, that these words are God’s! Let me look at its date; it is dated from the hills of heaven. Let me read the chapters; they flash glory on my eye. Let me read the chapters; they are big with meaning and mysteries unknown. Let me turn over the prophecies; they are pregnant with unthought of wonders. Oh, book of books! And wast thou written by God? Then will I bow before thee. Thou book of vast authority! Thou art a proclamation from the Emperor of Heaven; far be it from me to exercise my reason in contradicting thee. Reason, thy place is to stand and find what this volume means, not to tell what this book ought to say. Come thou, my reason, my intellect, sit thou down and listen, for these words are the words of God. I do not know how to enlarge on this thought. Oh! if you could ever remember that this Bible was actually and really written by God. Oh! if ye had been let into the secret chambers of heaven, if ye had beheld God grasping His pen and writing down these letters, then surely ye would respect them; but they are just as much God’s handwriting as if you had seen God write them. This Bible is a book of authority; it is an authorized book, for God has written it. Oh tremble, tremble, lest any of you despise it; mark its authority, for it is the Word of God.”**

**Charles Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, Vol. 1, page 111**

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God’s people to carefully examine and discern Truth. Periodically, we will also include book reviews of popular books, for much that is published today demands discerning reading. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our “Q & A” section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed.

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