

Part 7 of this series on *The Church* is entitled, Our Ministries. In reference to the body of Christ, when used in the singular, ministry refers to the main function of the church at-large. However, when used in the plural, ministries refer to a wide variety of functions performed by various members of a local church. Knowing this to be so may prompt these questions: What are the ministries in particular? How can I know which one/s God gave to me? For answers, let's see what the Bible has to say.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul writes, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*." But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, NAS). The spiritual things that Paul addresses in these verses are gifts, ministries and effects that come from the same Spirit, Lord and God. As diverse as these spiritual things are, the source remains the same, and Paul will impress this important truth on his readers throughout the chapter. To say "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit," Paul means that the Holy Spirit is the source for all spiritual gifts. The "varieties of effects" Paul mentions are the changes or the results produced when spiritual gifts and ministries are employed. This includes people healed of diseases, miraculous signs and wonders performed, believers edified and equipped for ministry by teachers, etc. These powerful spiritual effects, as diverse as they may be, are all produced by "the same God who works all things in all" people. Once again, the application is diverse, but the source, which is God, remains the same. Paul states clearly the reason why God gives gifts and ministries to His children. It is not simply to benefit themselves, "but to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." This means that each of us, as individual members of the body of Christ, has certain God-given gifts to edify and enrich the body as a whole. So, the unique spiritual gifts God gives to you and me, are meant to work through us into the local body of believers of which we are a part. There is nothing more meaningful and rewarding than being used by God in ways that benefit others. For this reason, Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Paul continues by listing nine spiritual gifts that function as ministries: "For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:8-10, NAS). The apostle begins this list of nine gifts with "the word of wisdom" and "the word of knowledge." Like many ancient writers, Paul's list is random; therefore, readers should not interpret this list of gifts to be exhaustive, especially in view of two other lists presented, which we will consider later. "The word of wisdom" and "the word of knowledge" probably refer to special abilities given to speak and teach the truth of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:4-7). The Greek noun, *logos* ("word") as used in both cases here, probably refers to the truth or doctrine of God, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ Himself is called "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24), and in Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). Regarding the gift of "faith," as used here, some think it refers to power given to the apostles for the working of miracles, which may be why it is placed next to "gifts of healing." Paul possessed the gift of healing (Acts 28:8-9), but since he was unable to heal himself of his so-called "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), nor apparently able to heal Timothy of his stomach problem and frequent illnesses (1 Timothy 5:23), this

gift may not always have been resident in Paul. It is noteworthy that “the effecting of miracles” follows “gifts of healing,” since divine healing is a miracle in itself; however, Paul is probably referring to supernatural signs and wonders of all kinds. “Prophecy” is defined as either the foretelling of future events or the forthtelling of God’s word, which is the case here based on the context, especially in view of 1 Corinthians 14. “Discerning of spirits” is especially useful for judging prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:29). It also enables one to distinguish spiritual motives of individuals as right or wrong, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, whose lie against the Holy Spirit was discerned by the Apostle Peter (Acts 5:1-10). “Kinds of tongues” refers to supernatural ability to speak human languages never learned before, as at Pentecost when the gospel was proclaimed in many dialects, previously unknown to those speaking, but known by those hearing (Acts 2:4-11). This unique gift may also refer to a purely spiritual kind of language that has no earthly translation (1 Corinthians 14). “Interpretation of tongues” is the supernatural ability to interpret languages that are purely spiritual in nature (1 Corinthians 14:3, 26-27). In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul adds “helps” and “administrations” to his list, bumping the number of spiritual gifts in this letter from nine to eleven. As indicated in 12:4-7, all of the gifts come from the “same Spirit,” “same Lord,” and “same God.” Therefore, spiritual gifts are the manifestation of divine power, not human ability; and the purpose of the gifts is for “the common good” (i.e. edification and welfare) of all members of the body, not just one member.

In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle writes, “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly*: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness” (Romans 12:6-8, NAS). Paul had just exhorted his readers, in the strongest possible language, of what all Christians (Jew & Gentile) must do in order to effectively serve the Lord and the body of Christ. They must present their bodies as living sacrifices to God, allowing Him to transform and renew their minds, enabling them to do His will as a unified church (Romans 12:1-5). Now, Paul acknowledges “different gifts” (spiritual in nature), which the Lord has graciously given to members of His body, the church. Spiritual gifts come by God’s grace, not human effort; therefore, believers must not be proud, but humble and grateful. A unified church results when diverse members serve one another in harmony under the Lordship of Christ. After making clear the fact that God endowed the church with different spiritual gifts, Paul goes on to list some of them, beginning with “prophecy.” The conditional word, “if,” precedes specific gifts in Romans 12:6-8 to show that not everyone possesses every gift. The gift of “prophecy,” as Paul states, is to be exercised according to the proportion of faith that God bestows on believers as He wills (see Romans 12:3). In other words, both the gift and the faith to put it into practice come from the Lord. Paul regards all the gifts as divine empowerments, but prophecy is ranked above the others, because it involves the proclamation of God’s word (1 Corinthians 14:1-3). This includes both the forthtelling and the foretelling of truth that is divine, not human (2 Peter 1:20-21). Paul follows prophecy with the gift of “service,” which refers to ministry of any kind. Although service or ministry may have a broad application (see Romans 15:25), its position between prophecy and teaching suggests that it refers to a certain office in the church (i.e. deacons: 1 Timothy 3:8-13). As in the case of prophecy, and all the spiritual gifts, Paul means that those who are gifted to serve should do so “in his serving” to others, according to the proportion of faith they have from God. If their gift is “teaching,” then they should teach according to the measure of faith they have

received. Paul lists four more gifts in this passage, to include “exhortation” (i.e. one who encourages the weak and admonishes the disobedient, whatever the situation requires (Ephesians 6:22); “giving” (i.e. providing for others according to their needs (Acts 2:44-47; 4:34-37); “leading” (i.e. church leadership, which is the responsibility of elders/overseers (1 Timothy 5:17); “showing mercy” (i.e. acts of compassion and care, especially to the needy (Jude 22). All gifts must be dispensed according to the measure of faith given by God, and always be offered in love (1 Corinthians 16:14).

To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, “He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). In this particular list, Paul presents ministries that correspond to “the grace” given by God to certain members of the body of Christ “according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Ephesians 4:7). The first ministry position Paul lists is “apostles.” Paul is not referring exclusively to the 12 apostles whom Jesus appointed and sent on mission during His earthly ministry (see Matthew 10:1-23), but also to those He sent on mission after ascending into heaven. In the New Testament, the Greek word *apostolos* applies to commissioned agents of Jesus Christ authorized to declare and propagate His will. Some regard missionaries as modern-day apostles. “Prophets” are listed next, and should be regarded as those who speak forth God’s word; the word *prophetes* literally means to speak forth. “Evangelists” are believers specially gifted to proclaim the gospel (i.e. good news) of Jesus Christ. They truly herald His good news, for the word *euaggelistes* literally means good news. “Pastors” serve as shepherds of God’s people; the word *poimen* literally means shepherd. In the New Testament, pastors functioned as church overseers (see Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2). “Teachers” are expounders of the Scriptures and doctrines of the Christian faith. If they functioned like Jewish teachers, Christian teachers probably offered biblical instruction to their congregations and trained others to do likewise. The positions listed may be in rank order, and some terms may overlap, which is probably Paul’s intent in the case of “pastors and teachers.”

Paul records 20 spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians, Romans and Ephesians, and apart from prophecy, which appears in all three letters, and teaching, which appears in two letters, all gifts listed are distinct from one another. In fact, each list in each letter is distinct. This is because Paul is writing to different church communities according to their particular issues and needs. Therefore, Christians should not interpret Paul’s record of 20 gifts as a comprehensive list, but instead as three separate selections tailored to three separate audiences. Paul does rank some gifts above others, like prophecy, as indicated in 1 Corinthians 12:28. This is because without the accurate proclamation of God’s word, the church is lost, and for that reason, Paul focuses on apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in Ephesians 4:11. He follows immediately by stating plainly the purpose of these particular gifts, which essentially is the purpose for all of the spiritual gifts. They are for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

Now, let’s consider this question, which you may be asking right now: How can I know which spiritual gift or gifts God has given to me? The answer for you and me begins to unfold in a conversation with the Lord about ourselves with regard to our personal interests, natural abilities and life experiences. God initiates by asking us these questions: What do you do well and enjoy? How can what you do well bless and benefit others? Give attention especially to the second question, with these words of Jesus in mind: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).