

## John Stott – Commentary on Romans 12:6-8

*We have different gifts*, Paul continues, *according to the grace given us* (6a). Just as God's grace had made Paul an apostle (3), so his grace (*charis*) bestows different gifts (*charismata*) on other members of Christ's body. Paul proceeds to give his readers a sample of seven gifts, which he urges them to exercise conscientiously for the common good. He divides them into two categories, which might be called 'speaking gifts' (prophesying, teaching and encouraging) and 'service gifts' (serving, contributing, leading and showing mercy).

The first *Charisma* Paul mentions here is *prophesying*, that is, speaking under divine inspiration. In Ephesians 2:20 apostles and prophets are bracketed as the foundation on which the church is built. So this reference to foundation-prophets is likely to be to the biblical prophets, including those New Testament authors who were prophets as well as apostles, such as Paul<sup>7</sup> and John. In two lists of *charismata*, however, prophets are placed in a secondary position to the apostles, suggesting that there was a lesser prophetic gift, subsidiary to that of the biblical prophets. Words spoken by such prophets were to be 'weighed' and 'tested',<sup>10</sup> whereas the apostles were to be believed and obeyed, and no sifting process was deemed appropriate or necessary in their case. Another difference seems to have been that prophets spoke to a local situation, whereas the authority of the apostles was universal. Further, Hodge was surely right in finding 'the point of distinction' in that 'the inspiration of the apostles was abiding', whereas 'the inspiration of the prophets was occasional and transient'.<sup>12</sup> It is in the light of these differences that we should understand the regulation which Paul here places on the exercise of the prophetic gift: *let him use it in proportion to his faith* (6b). Some think that this is a subjective restriction, namely that the prophet should speak only so long as he is sure of his inspiration; he must not add any words of his own. But it is more likely to be an objective restriction. In this case we should note that 'faith' has the definite article, and we should translate the phrase 'in agreement with the faith'. That is, 'the prophet is to make sure that his message does not in any way contradict the Christian faith'.

The remaining six gifts are more mundane. *If it (sc. a person's gift) is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach* (7). *Serving* is *diakonia*, which is a generic word for a wide variety of ministries. For 'there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord'. It is highly significant, for example, that in Jerusalem the ministry of the Word by the apostles and the ministry of tables by the seven are both called *diakonia*. So whatever ministry-gift people have been given, they should concentrate on using it. Similarly, teachers should cultivate their teaching gift and develop their teaching ministry. This is arguably the most urgently needed gift in the worldwide church today, as hundreds of thousands of converts are pressing into the churches, but there are few teachers to nurture them in the faith.

Four more gifts are included in the next verse: *If it is encouraging, let him encourage* (8a). *Parakaleō* is a verb with a wide spectrum of meanings, ranging from encouraging and exhorting to comforting, conciliating or consoling. This gift may be exercised from a pulpit or platform ('the gift of stirring speech', NEB), or through writing (12:1), but more often it is used behind the scenes as 'the gift of counselling' (REB), or in offering friendship to the lonely and giving fresh courage to those who have lost heart. Barnabas, the 'son of encouragement', evidently had this gift and used it in befriending Saul of Tarsus.<sup>16</sup>

Next, *if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously* (8b). Calvin thought this was a reference to ‘the deacons who are charged with the distribution of the public property of the Church’, and it could certainly include these. But personal giving is involved, and this is to be done *en haplotēti*, meaning either ‘with generosity’, without grudging, or ‘with sincerity’, without ulterior motives.

*If it is leadership, let him govern diligently* (8c). The verb *proistēmi* can mean to ‘care for’ or ‘give aid’, and some commentators opt for this sense because this gift comes between ‘contributing to the needs of others’ and ‘showing mercy’. But the more usual New Testament allusion is to leadership, whether in the home or in the church.<sup>19</sup>

Then finally, *if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully* (8d). Since our God is a merciful God (e.g. 12:1), his people must be merciful too. And to show mercy is to care for anybody who is in need or in distress, whether aliens, orphans and widows, who are often mentioned together in the Old Testament, or the handicapped, the sick and the dying. Moreover, mercy is not to be shown reluctantly or patronizingly, but *cheerfully*.

This list of seven spiritual gifts in Romans 12 is much less well-known than either the two overlapping lists in 1 Corinthians 12 (nine in the first list and eight in the second) or the short list of five in Ephesians 4:11. It is important to note both the similarities and the dissimilarities between them. First, all the lists agree that the *source* of the gifts is God and his grace, although in Romans it is God the Father, in Ephesians God the Son and in 1 Corinthians God the Holy Spirit. Being gifts of trinitarian grace (*charismata*), both boasting and envying are excluded. Secondly, all agree that the *purpose* of the gifts is related to the building up of the body of Christ, although Ephesians 4:12 is the most explicit, and 1 Corinthians 14:12 says that we should evaluate the gifts according to the degree to which they edify the church. Thirdly, all the lists emphasize the *variety* of the gifts, each seeming to be a random selection of them. But, whereas students of the 1 Corinthians lists tend to focus on the supernatural (tongues, prophecy, healing and miracles), in Romans 12 all the gifts apart from prophecy are either general and practical (service, teaching, encouragement and leadership) or even prosaic (giving money and doing acts of mercy). It is evident that we need to broaden our understanding of spiritual gifts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 326–329.