

PNEUMATOLOGY (141)

Gift #13 - The gift of discernment . I Cor. 12:10; 14:29; I John 4:1

The gift of “discernment of spirits” or “distinguishing of spirits” is an important gift. There is controversy that surrounds this gift as to whether or not this was a gift needed when the revelatory gifts were operative, but is no longer needed once we have the written Word of God. To understand this gift, we would like to discuss it in question and answer form:

(Question #1) - What is the gift of discernment or distinguishing of spirits?

The word “distinguishing” is a word that expresses an ability to be able to discern something or distinguish something to the level of being able to make a discriminate judgment or decision. It is the ability to make an arbitrary decision or judgment (G. Abbott-Smith, p. 108).

The particular realm in which this gift operates is specifically and explicitly stated to be in the arena of the “spirits.” Clearly, the emphasis of the I Corinthians 12 context is on the work of **one** Holy Spirit and the true work of **one** God as opposed to the false work of **many** demonic spirit beings (I Cor. 12:4, 8, 9, 11). When Paul wrote concerning this gift, there were many religious systems all claiming they could make you right with God, which were false systems fooling many—Judaism, Greek Mythology, Roman Polytheism, Asceticism, Mystics, Cults and many False Prophets. These systems were demonic (I Cor. 10:20) and their leaders were well disguised but were ministers of Satan (II Cor. 11:13-15). Each system sounded good and looked good. That is why this gift was needed.

The gift of discernment of spirits is a supernatural ability that enabled a person to judge the truth of God versus the lies of Satan. It was a supernatural ability which enabled that person to sift through the theological rhetoric and see what was truly from God and what wasn't from God. Obviously as with the other gifts, not everyone had this gift, but it was certainly one that was needed in the church, especially when there were no written Bibles.

(Question #2) - What was the purpose of the gift?

The primary purpose of this gift was to make judgment decisions between truth and error, between God and Satan, between believer and unbeliever. One with this gift is not demonically gullible and is divinely guided. One with this gift could listen to someone and supernaturally detect whether or not he was telling the truth. This particular gift was given by God to His church for **protection** purposes.

(Question #3) -What kind of judgments or discernments are to be made in a N.T. Church?

There are at least five judgments which are to be made in the church:

Judgment #1 - The church is expected to judge false prophets . I Cor. 14:29; I John 4:1-6

False prophets are satanic and their doctrine is demonic and dangerous. False prophets are nice people; they are sincere, very religious and somewhat righteous. But false prophets are satanic.

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They can present messages that are interesting, stimulating, challenging, moral and scholarly, but they **do not** present the pure truth of God. False prophets will talk about Jesus Christ, and may even suggest we need to believe on Jesus Christ, but they **distort** and **disrupt** the pure truth of the grace of God and they are to be accursed (Gal. 1:6-8).

Matthew 23 lists several qualities of those who are false:

- 1) Those who are false are religiously authoritative. Matt. 23:2
- 2) Those who are false are personally hypocritical. Matt. 23:3
- 3) Those who are false are practically unsympathetic. Matt. 23:4
- 4) Those who are false are publicly acknowledged. Matt. 23:5-6
- 5) Those who are false are arrogantly proud. Matt. 23:12

In determining a false prophet, the following keys may be used:

- 1) A false prophet **is not** determined by spectacular results. Deut. 13:1-4; Matt. 7:22; 24:24
- 2) A false prophet **is** determined by his concept of Jesus Christ. II Cor. 11:3-4; Gal. 1:6-8; I John 4:1-3; II John 7
- 3) A false prophet **is** determined by his impact on the world. I John 4:6
- 4) A false prophet **is** determined by his response to God's Word and God's teachers. I John 4:6

Judgment #2 - The church is expected to judge those who oppose true doctrine.
Rom. 16:17-18; II Thess. 3:14-15

One who is not in conformity with true teaching and instruction of the Bible is to be spotted and avoided. Truth rejecters are not to be appeased, they are to be avoided.

Judgment #3 - The church is expected to judge those who continue to live in sin.

I Corinthians 5:11-13 clearly states that people "within" the church are to be judged and if a professing believer continues to participate in sin, he is to be excommunicated. There is to be a severance of "all" fellowship, which means a judgment is to be made. The church is not to be a free-for-all center which tolerates everything, there are serious judgments which are to be made.

Judgment #4 - The church is expected to judge those who live and believe contrary to God's Word. II Thess. 3:14

If one continues to disregard true teaching, believers **are not** to associate with him.

Judgment #5 - The church is expected to judge those who are even allowed into its home.
II John 10-11

Those who reject God and His Word are not even to be allowed into our homes. Obviously we must make some judgment.

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(Question #4) - Who should be making judgment calls in the church?

There are at least three groups of people who should make judgment calls:

Group #1 - Believers who have the spiritual gift of discernment. I Cor. 12:10

Those who truly have this gift will be able to discern, evaluate and determine truth far beyond the ability of the average believer. One with this gift will be able to judge things at a meat level as opposed to milk level. There will be a supernatural radar system which will be able to discern things others cannot discern. One with this gift will have a deep desire to carefully know the Word and doctrines of God, for this is what sharpens his/her ability to make judgments.

Group #2 - Believers who are elders who are to protect the Church. Acts 20:28-31

Elders of a church are to be discerning men. They are to watch the flock and particularly make certain that a flock is being taught the pure truth of God. They are to keep their eyes on teachers to make sure their instruction is not communicating heresy.

Group #3 - Believers who want full rewards.

- 1) Judgments are to be made concerning doctrine. Eph. 4:14
- 2) Judgments are to be made concerning sin. Eph. 5:3-5
- 3) Judgments are to be made concerning people. II John 10-11

God wants all of His people with their senses trained to judge good and evil—Hebrews 5:14.

(Question #5) - What is the duration of the gift of discernment or distinguishing of spirits?

As we said earlier, this is the point of contention concerning this gift. Some believe it was a temporal gift specifically operative during the days of the apostles when the revelatory gifts of God were operative. Others believe it is a permanent gift for the entire Church Age.

Although there **is no** specific statement concerning the duration of the gift like we have with others, it seems that this gift is an abiding, permanent spiritual gift. We draw this conclusion based upon three biblical facts:

Fact #1 - There **is no** passage that suggests this gift is temporal.

Many of the gifts in I Cor. 13:8-11 are temporal and we are able, in each instance, to substantiate this based on biblical evidence. However, there is no such biblical data for this gift that would indicate this one is temporal.

Fact #2 - There are many passages that suggest false prophets are presently operative and will continue to be until Jesus Christ returns. Matt. 7:21-23; II Pet. 2:1-3; I John 4:1-6; II John 10-11; Jude 4; Rev. 2:20; 3:3; 22:18-19

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Although the “gift of prophecy” ceased with the completion of the Scriptures, the satanic team of false prophets **did not** cease and **will not** cease until Satan is destroyed. In fact, the last warning of the Bible is in regard to adding things or subtracting things from God’s Word. This would certainly suggest that this gift of distinguishing of spirits will be necessary for the entire Church Age. One with this gift can tell whether something is added or subtracted.

Fact #3 - There are many passages that suggest the church is to make many different kinds of judgments.

Certainly one with this gift would be of great benefit in the church and could help protect the church from those not communicating the truth.

Gift #14 - The gift of showing mercy . Romans 12:8

The actual Greek word “mercy” is one that means to be compassionate to others. The gift is a supernatural ability to demonstrate compassion to others who are suffering or hurting. This person has a real heart and can identify with those who are hurting or who are in a helpless state or condition.

In Romans 12:8 it says that the utilization of this gift is to be “with cheerfulness.” The idea is not that one goes to someone who is hurting and tells them jokes; it is that the one with the gift of mercy is cheerful and happy to use his or her gift in being compassionate. A person with the gift of mercy loves to help hurting people and has a supernatural gift to do so.

Gift #15 - The gift of giving . Romans 12:8

The word “gives” is a rare Pauline word. It is only used five times in the N.T.. Four of those times it is used by Paul and the one other time it is used by Paul’s close friend, Luke (Rom. 1:11; 12:8; Eph. 4:28; I Thess. 2:8; Lk. 3:11). The word “metadidome” (μεταδιδομι) literally means to share, to impart and to give (G. Abbott-Smith, p. 286). It specifically has to do with sharing or giving or imparting something to one who has real need (Eph. 4:28). It also has to do with having more than enough to share (Luke 3:11; Rom. 12:8).

We define the gift of giving as **a supernatural gift and enablement of God whereby God prospers someone so that he might give and share and impart his prosperity to the work of God and to the needs of others.**

A person with this gift is one who is vital to the church. Now we want to carefully observe that Paul gives an important editorial comment concerning the use of this gift. He does not comment on the act of giving, but he does comment on the attitude of giving. One who has this gift should give “with liberality,” which means he should give in a generous and unselfish way with no thought of self gain. Dr. Ryrie said, giving “with no thought of return or gain for self in any way” (p. 91).

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This teaches us a very important point concerning giving and concerning spiritual gifts. Not only does God keep track of the utilization of the gift, but He also monitors the attitude in which the gift is being used. As we near the end, a giving attitude and this particular gift will become more and more unique because the attitude which will prevail as we near the coming of Christ will be one of buying and selling, not giving (Luke 17:28).

This gift is not one specifically reserved for the rich. In fact, we all are to be giving people. However, the gift does suggest that God will see to it that one to whom He gives this gift will have plenty to give.

Gift #16 - The gift of administration. I Cor. 12:28

The actual word “administration” is one that refers to one who steers or pilots or guides. An administrator is one who governs. We may observe in I Corinthians 12:28 the word is “administrations”—plural. This would indicate that there are several ways this gift may be utilized in the context of the church. We may understand this term as referring to one who is specifically gifted by God to lead and guide and steer. Ryrie says this is an “ability to rule in the church” (p. 91). One with this gift will be given a supernatural ability by God to lead and steer and pilot God’s people.

Gift #17 - The gift of leading. Rom. 12:8

Most connect this gift with the gift of administration; however, the word is different. This is a God-given gift that enables a person to lead, rule and govern other people. This is a supernatural gift which is to be used “with diligence” (Rom. 12:8).

These words give us good insight into this gift. The word “diligence” is one that means “haste.” It seems that one with this gift of ruling will have a supernatural ability to look at something as it relates to the church, analyze it in view of God’s Word and make a decision without having it become a long, dragged-out process.

One with this gift will make decisions which are right in accordance with God’s Word. This particular word, to lead or to rule, is definitely used of the elders of the church (I Thess. 5:12; I Tim. 5:17). An elder may not have the specific gift of ruling, but he has the responsibility to rule. It is very possible that God does give this gift to those who lead as elders, for elders are responsible and accountable to govern God’s church.

Gift #18 - The gift of wisdom. I Cor. 12:8

The specific word used for “wisdom” indicates that this is a supernatural ability to be very intelligent and very skilled in the Word of God and the things of God. In I Cor. 12:8 where it is called “the word of wisdom,” we observe it is a speaking gift. We define this gift as **a supernatural ability given by God which enables an individual to intelligently and skillfully communicate the truth of God as it relates to various issues and matters of life.**

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There is no doubt that this particular gift was definitely one associated with the apostles (I Cor. 2:6-7). They not only supernaturally spoke the Word of God, they wrote the Word of God. When the gift was first operative, it would have been one of **direct** revelation. One with this gift would have received a direct message from God. Prior to the completion of Scripture, direct revelation was certainly needed.

There is no doubt that we need God's wisdom today. In fact, we learn from further revelation that when we lack wisdom, we are to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5; Prov. 2:1-6). God promises to give a generous supply of wisdom to those who ask. There is no question that we need people today that are at a skilled level in communicating exactly what God's Word does say. However, the one feature we have today is that God's great wisdom has been communicated to us in writing. In other words, we have God's written Word which contains His wisdom. Therefore, one who wants wisdom will be asking God for it and carefully learning God's Word to find it.

Gift #19 - The gift of knowledge . I Cor. 12:8

The word "knowledge" refers to a high level of understanding in the things of God. The word literally means understanding or intelligence. As near as I can determine, one distinction would be that wisdom emphasizes the level of skill, whereas knowledge emphasizes the level of comprehension, getting knowledge versus grasping knowledge.

As we bring to a conclusion our study of Pneumatology, there are some final topics critically related to this doctrine:

RELATED TOPIC #1 – The topic of the old nature .

There are some very misguided believers who claim that once you believe on Jesus Christ, your old nature is eliminated and you now have only one new nature, which is that of a child of God. This is a gross misunderstanding of doctrine and since it is connected to Pneumatology, we address this issue here.

The term "old man" is only used three times in the N.T.—Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9. In Romans 6:6 the term is used in connection with the death of Christ, and in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 it is used as a basis for an appeal to live a holy life. By virtue of the fact that it is used in Romans 6 in regard to a co-crucifixion with Jesus Christ, we immediately observe that this **is not** a reference to the experience of a believer, since none of us literally were crucified with Christ, but **it is** a reference to our position in Christ. God has pronounced a positional judgment on our old nature by virtue of a positional link with Jesus Christ and it is this that makes it possible for us, as sinful people, to live holy lives. As Chafer said, "Positionally the 'old man' has been put off forever. Experimentally the 'old man' remains an active force in the life which can be controlled only by the power of God" (Vol. 6, p. 270). This power is wrought by the Holy Spirit.

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Evidently God knew of the doctrinal diversion some believers would take on this issue because I John 1:8, 10 gives specific warning to the believer, not the unbeliever, against saying that we do not have any sin nature. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer said, "It is the testimony of the Spirit of God with reference to every born-again person. For any such to say that he has no sin nature means that the person is self-deceived and the truth not in him. This passage is evidently intended for correction of those Christians who are claiming to be free from the sin nature and who may have made themselves believe that they are free" (*Ibid.*, pp. 271-272). The source of any sin we commit as a believer **is not** our new nature or the Spirit of God, **it is** our old nature. One who has a new nature, who is begotten of God, will not practice sin at a lawless level as he did prior to receiving his new nature (I John 3:9). In other words, one with a new nature cannot pursue the same lawless, sinful life that he once did because of his new nature. This, however, does not mean that he will not have moments of struggle or sin; in fact, God has made provision for this (I John 1:9).

RELATED TOPIC #2 – The topic of sinless perfection .

There are those who misunderstand the meaning of the word "perfect" in the original, and take it to mean one reaches a point where he/she has an incapacity to sin and therefore lives life in a sinless, perfect way. No such theme is ever presented in Scripture and it is a great misunderstanding of what God actually did put in writing to believe or think any differently.

The word "perfection" or "perfect" **is not** the idea of sinlessness , but the idea of that which is complete, mature, grown and finished. **It is not** possible for a believer in this life to reach a point of sinlessness, but **it is** possible and expected and promoted by the Holy Spirit that a believer will grow and reach the desired finished end, which is to be a complete, mature, full-grown believer who reflects the glory of God.

In the Bible, the concept of perfection is used in several ways:

- 1) To refer to people who were godly . Gen. 6:9; Job 1:1, 8
- 2) To refer to positional perfection in Christ. Hebrews 10:14
- 3) To refer to spiritual maturity and understanding . I Cor. 2:6
- 4) To refer to progression of spiritual growth in one's spiritual life. Gal. 3:3
- 5) To refer to the perfect will of God. Col. 4:12
- 6) To refer to imitating the character of God in reaching out to sinners. Matt. 5:48
- 7) To refer to perfectly being equipped to accomplish God's work. Heb. 13:21