

What are spiritual gifts?

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defined and described

God gives spiritual gifts to those who have received [salvation through Jesus Christ](#) so that believers will grow and mature in their faith, the needs of the Church will be met, and God will be glorified. Wayne Grudem, author of *Systematic Theology*, broadly describes a spiritual gift as “**any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church**” ([Grudem](#), page 1016).

Charismata: Gifts of Holy Grace

In the New Testament, the Greek word *charisma* (singular) or *charismata* (plural) is used to designate the spiritual gifts. In the most technical sense, **charisma can be defined as “gifts of holy grace.”** *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* defines *charisma* as follows: “a (spiritual) *endowment*, i.e. (subjectively) religious *qualification*, or (objectively) miraculous *faculty*.” Throughout the New Testament, the word **charisma is translated in English as (free) gift**. In his “Lexical Aids to the New Testament,” Spiros Zodhiates notes that the word *charisma* is “derived from *charis*, [which means] grace, and the suffix *-ma*, indicating the result of grace. **A gift of grace; an undeserved benefit from God** (Rom. 1:11; I Tim. 4:14).”

In Ephesians 4:11–13, the Greek words *dorea* and *doma* “are also used to designate ‘gifts,’ referring to these gifts as ‘enablers’ or ‘equippers’ for personal service in the kingdom of God. . . . In I Corinthians 12:1, the word *pneumatika* is used to describe the gifts as ‘things belonging to the Spirit.’ . . . The point is that each of these words gives a contemporary meaning to the supernatural work of the Spirit in our lives as He prepares us for kingdom service and growth in grace. “For this to happen we are called upon to ‘earnestly desire the best gifts’ (I Cor. 12:31), thus removing the cloak of passivity and ardently **seeking to understand the operation of and appropriate response to all spiritual gifts is biblically proper**” ([The Spirit-Filled Life Bible](#), page 2022).

Filling With the Spirit of God

The Bible commands us to “**be filled with the Spirit**” (Ephesians 5:18). *The Spirit-Filled Life Bible* includes an article written by Dr. Paul Walker, titled “Holy Spirit Gifts and Power.” Dr. Walker expounds the message of Ephesians 5:18 as follows:

An analysis of the Greek verb translated “be filled” shows that it is in the present tense, indicating that **this blessing is one that we may experience and enjoy now**. The fact that the verb is a command (imperative mood) does not leave the responsive disciple an option in the matter. However, since the verb is in the passive voice, it is clear that being filled with the Spirit is not something the Christian achieves through his own efforts, but is **something that is done for him and to which he submits**. . . . [T]he Higher reaches down to gather up the lower into ultimate communion.

The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts as He wills. (See I Corinthians 12:11b.) The gifts are freely given; they can be neither earned nor purchased. (See Acts 8:9–24.) God gives them according to His good pleasure. “The gifts, even though they are ‘given’ to ‘each person,’ ultimately express the Spirit’s sovereign action in the life of the believer and the community as a whole” ([Fee](#), page 174).

Many Expressions of One Gift: The Holy Spirit

On the Day of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus did not receive gifts (plural), but rather they received “*the gift of the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 2:38). In the Christian’s life, therefore, the [motivational, ministry, and manifestation spiritual gifts](#) described in I Corinthians 12–14 are many expressions of the one Gift—the Holy Spirit—as He reveals His presence and power.

The motivational gifts are invisible evidences of God’s work—they are what God does *within* a believer to equip him or her to see life from a certain perspective. The ministry and manifestation gifts are visible evidences of God’s work—they are the things God does *through* the life of the believer to meet the needs of the Church. Each gift, whether it is used inwardly or publicly, is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work.

Distinct Demonstrations of the Holy Spirit

A spiritual gift is not a natural talent, a fruit of the Spirit, or a controlled, involuntary response to a situation. Ministry and manifestation gifts are unique and distinct demonstrations of the Holy Spirit, given by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life.

Gifts of the Spirit vs. Fruit of the Spirit

Spiritual gifts are not the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22–23. The fruit of the Spirit are aspects of Christ’s character, which every Christian is to seek, promote, and develop. On the other hand, “the *charismata* are sovereign manifestations of the Spirit’s power. [See I Corinthians 12:11.] The fruit of the Holy Spirit are attributes of redeemed nature, and as fruit they may be cultivated. . . . When a gift is displayed, it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. **It is a visible act which can be seen or heard or felt, not an invisible grace like the fruit of the Spirit**” ([Ervin](#), pages 64, 135).

Rather than being developed character qualities such as kindness or patience, **the manifestation gifts are supernatural and often sudden revelations of God’s power** “*for the common good*” (I Corinthians 12:7, NASB) and for the benefit of an entire congregation or community.

As the Body of Christ, believers must mature in their understanding and application of the fruit of the Spirit, and they must also mature in their understanding and practice of the gifts of the Spirit. Both are essential if the Body of Christ is to thrive and bear much good fruit, thus glorifying God. **“Spiritual maturity is the integration of the fruit(s) of the Spirit with the charisms of the Spirit”** ([Ervin](#), page 60).

Supernatural Abilities vs. Natural Abilities

A person’s talents do not constitute spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are not natural abilities; they are supernatural abilities given by God. **Whenever a believer puts a spiritual gift to work, it is an evidence of God’s grace.** The praise and glory belongs to God, who gives the gift and works through the believer for the good of everyone.

Temporary vs. Permanent Gifts

Manifestations of the Holy Spirit of God, by their very nature, are not permanent endowments. Our heavenly Father bestows them upon His children as needed. They are not private gifts that are “exercised” either—they actually are usually evidence of a believer’s sensitivity and obedience to the Spirit’s prompting, although God is not dependent on either of those two things. God is able to speak and manifest His power and presence at His discretion. Speaking of the manifestation gifts, John Rea shares this insight: **“The gifts are not regular, permanent abilities; instead, they are momentary powers** to effect a miracle, to bring healing, to know something in a flash. And it is the same God who energizes or activates all these gifts in those who act as agents and in those on whom the effect is produced” ([Rea](#), page 135).

Voluntary vs. Involuntary Responses

It is God's plan to equip us thoroughly (see Hebrews 13:20–21) to voluntarily carry out His will. He has ordained specific ministries for each of us, and He has placed us in the Church to carry out specific responsibilities. Howard Ervin explains this well: “. . . This very rational and voluntary control by the Spirit-filled Christian . . . distinguishes the *charismata* of the Holy Spirit from the cataleptic states of trance mediums and pagan psychics. The charismatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit involve a reciprocal relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. The only coercion the Spirit of God uses is the coercion of love. The Spirit-filled Christian is permeated with, not invaded by, the divine Spirit. **The charismatic manifestations of the Spirit are voluntary responses, not involuntary reactions, to the Holy Spirit's initiatives**” ([Ervin](#), pages 125–126).

Tools to Strengthen the Body of Christ

The person through whom a spiritual gift is manifested is not the primary beneficiary of the gift. Rather, **he is the channel through whom God works to bless others**. This arrangement offers believers the opportunity to demonstrate genuine love: meeting the needs of others without expecting anything in return. God is love, and He is the source of, and reason for, all spiritual gifts. Therefore, God's love is abundantly evident in the outworking of spiritual gifts.

One of the beauties of these gifts is the interdependency they generate. First, believers depend on God, Who grants the gifts and empowers Christians to use them. Then, believers depend on one another to work together, using every gift in the grace God supplies, so that the Church matures and brings glory to God.

*“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets, and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; **for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:** till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . . **that we . . . may grow up in him in all things**, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto **the edifying of itself in love**” (Ephesians 4:11–16).*