

“On Men and Women, I Will Pour Forth of my Spirit”: Theological Reflections on Spiritual Gifts

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What about women in the church? What were their roles *then*, in the first churches? And what should be their roles *now*, in this day and age? The New Testament spotlights Jesus as the model. He treated women with respect and dignity, included them in spiritual matters, and involved them in religious work. New Testament theology—giving God’s words about women and their roles—teaches that the Holy Spirit equips all people (male and female) for God’s work. The New Testament history depicts the first-century church at worship. It describes women as full participants in the services, equal recipients of spiritual gifts, and leaders at all levels—even identifying female church workers by the same titles as male ministers.

The New Testament lists three categories of spiritual gifts in three passages of Scripture. Though each category is distinct in its purposes, all gifts share the following elements in common: (a) Each gift represents a unique way God’s grace *enables* individuals to effectively do His work in the world and in the Church. (b) God’s gifts are no reason for boasting; they are not given as a badge of honor to those who deserve them, but are *unmerited* gifts of grace. (c) Spiritual gifts are not for the benefit of the recipient, but are given for the common good, that is, to serve the needs of *others*, for the building up of the body of

Christ, and for ministry in the marketplace. (d) Thus, all gifts are to be operated with *love*.¹ (e) And, from the Day of Pentecost on, God has poured out His Spirit on sons and daughters alike, equipping *both genders* in every category of gifts.

Supernatural Gifts: 1 Corinthians 12-14

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. . . .

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. . . .

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines (1 Cor. 12:1, 4, 7-11).

First Corinthians 12-14 discusses the nine *supernatural* gifts of the Spirit: a message of wisdom, a message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing,

miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. The Holy Spirit makes the choice of which gifts He gives to which individuals (1 Cor. 12:11). And those spiritually-gifted persons comprise God's gifts to the Church. "God has placed the parts [in this context, (spiritually-gifted) people] in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Cor. 12:18). There is no evidence in Scripture that gender has any bearing on the choices He makes.

The members of the body of Christ and their spiritual gifts are diverse, yet together they form a unified whole. God's plan is that "there should be no division in the body" (1 Cor. 12:25). Every part (person, including their gifts) is needed; every part is to be valued; every part is to be honored and cared for—and every believer is a part of the Body (1 Cor. 12:27). Scripture warns against devaluing God's gifts (1 Thess. 5:20; 1 Cor. 14:39). Disregarding the "people-gifts" (that is, the persons God has supernaturally equipped for service) would grieve the Holy Spirit.

The supernatural gifts are so beneficial to the Church that Scripture encourages all of Christ's followers to seek them, especially certain gifts. Paul writes, "Eagerly desire the greater gifts;" that is, "those [gifts] that build up the church;" "eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy" (1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1, 12 [compare 6-11]). "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:39). If the apostle Paul is suggesting any ranking of supernatural gifts, the "greater" kind of gift seems to be prophecy. Does the Holy Spirit gift women with prophecy?

Yes, prophecy is a spiritual gift with which the Holy Spirit gifted women in the New Testament (1 Cor. 11:5). First Corinthians 11:5 gives evidence that prophesying women were active in the

worship service. Female prophets were among those the Holy Spirit gifted to the New Testament Church (Acts 21:9). Scripture explains that though not every person is a prophet (1 Cor. 12:29), *any* person (male or female) can be gifted by the Holy Spirit to prophesy (1 Cor. 14:31). Furthermore, prophets are the ones authorized to judge the authenticity of utterance gifts (1 Cor. 14:29). Thus those who prophesy have authority in the supernatural gifts. And because prophecy, as an intelligible utterance gift, has real potential to build up the Body, it is a supernatural gift that is highly esteemed. Since the Holy Spirit gifted women in the New Testament with prophecy—perhaps the highest of supernatural gifts—it follows that all the rest of the supernatural gifts are available to women too.

Motivational Gifts: Romans 12:3-8

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Romans 12:3-8 discusses the six *motivational* gifts. Like spiritual temperaments, the motivational gifts are the reason a certain Christian has zeal for one

ministry rather than another. These gifts are the inner inclinations that influence why individuals think and act the way they do. They are the very core of what motivates a person.

These motivations are spiritual gifts, graciously given by God to each member of the Body in order to serve Him with great joy. For example, the motivational gift of prophesying involves a drive to perceive the will of God and speak it out to others. Serving involves the joy of helping meet the needs of others. Teaching involves a love for research and communicating truth in an effort to see lives changed. Encouraging involves enjoying being a positive influence to help people live victoriously. Giving involves finding joy in investing resources to benefit others and advance the gospel. Leading involves thriving on organizing, facilitating, and directing. Showing mercy involves compassion that desires to heal hurting hearts.

As with all spiritual gifts, it is God who distributes them as He pleases. The Church is most strengthened when each of its members makes use of these gifts fully: prophesying with faith, giving with generosity, leading diligently, showing mercy cheerfully, etc. To paraphrase the apostle Paul, “Whatever your motivation, exercise it for all you’re worth!” (Rom. 12:6-8). All Christ’s followers, male and female, have been graciously gifted with unique motivations.² It would grieve the Holy Spirit to reject the passionate involvement in the Lord’s work of a person He had spiritually motivated.

Equipping Gifts: Ephesians 4:4-16

But to each one of us grace has been give as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to his people.”

... It was he who gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ... From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:7, 11-13, 16).

Ephesians 4:4-16 discusses the *equipping* gifts. Scripture specifies in this gift passage, just like the others (describing supernatural and motivational gifts), that it is the grace that Christ gives to a believer (Eph. 4:7) that qualifies him or her to be Christ’s gift to the Church. In this list the five³ gifts (sometimes called “offices”) are identified as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The way God gives grace to meet the Church’s needs with these gifts is through the people God sends as their leaders. These leaders’ work is to equip the members of the Body for ministry, so that the Church might grow in unity, orthodoxy,⁴ and maturity—growing into complete Christ-likeness. Apostles establish works for God. Prophets speak as mouthpieces for God. (A person who prophesies with regularity and is judged to be accurate and anointed may come to be recognized as a prophet.) Evangelists proclaim the “good news,” helping people come to Jesus in salvation. Pastors care for the flock of God. Teachers train the flock of God.

In the New Testament, the highest spiritual leadership gift is an apostle. If a woman could serve as an apostle, it would follow that she could serve in any other office. Were there any women apostles in the New Testament? Yes, Junia in Romans 16:7.

What is the New Testament theology of spiritual gifts and women? As Robert Clinton, noted author on leadership, explains, God gifts both men and women with natural abilities; God helps both men and women to acquire leadership skills; and God gifts both men and women with spiritual gifts. Clinton concludes concerning gender and leadership, “Definitions of leader, leadership, and power bases for influencing including giftedness are not gender biased. And I have strongly emphasized that both males and females can lead and exercise leadership with gifted power.”⁵ The New Testament also teaches that those gifted by God are responsible to employ their gifts for one another as good stewards of God’s great grace (1 Pet. 4:10).

Destined to become one of the greatest female evangelists ever, Maria Underwood [Woodworth-Etter] felt God’s call at age thirteen (1858). She said,

I heard the voice of Jesus calling me to go out in the highways and hedges and gather in the lost sheep. ... I had never heard of women working in public except as missionaries, so I could see no opening—except as I thought, if I ever married, my choice would be an earnest Christian and then we would enter upon the mission field.⁶

Her marriage to an ex-soldier/farmer did not result in ministry, so she struggled with her call. They lost five of their six children to illnesses before Maria’s rededication to the Lord in 1879. She was “baptized with the Holy Ghost, and fire.”⁷ Still she hesitated and tried to study further, even as she prayed for her husband’s permission to go out in ministry. In her struggle, she thought, “If I were a man it would be a pleasure for me, but for me, a woman, to preach, if I could, would subject me to ridicule and contempt ... and bring reproach upon our glorious cause.”⁸ After seeing a vision of Jesus, finding examples in the Bible of how God used women to lead, and

studying Acts 2, Maria was convinced that “women are required to work for the advancement of Christ’s cause.”⁹

She began holding revival meetings in Ohio and planting churches (about age thirty-six). During the first year and a half, she “held four revivals, organized two churches—one of them with about seventy members—and a Sabbath-school of about one hundred scholars ... had preached in twenty-two meeting houses and four school-houses, for eight different denominations, and had delivered two hundred sermons.”¹⁰

In 1885 Maria Woodworth began conducting healing services as well, eventually traveling widely with an 8,000-seat tent, attracting publicity and winning converts around the country. She preached powerfully to a crowd of 25,000 in Indiana and then to thousands in California in 1889. From the time of her five-month crusade in Dallas in 1912 (at age sixty-eight), she remained a highly respected evangelist in the Pentecostal movement the rest of her life.

Her books went out as missionaries; as many as 25,000 copies sold between 1912 and 1921. Abridged versions were translated into French, Italian, Danish, Swedish, Egyptian, Hindustani, and other dialects of India and South Africa. In the preface to the fifth edition of *Signs and Wonders* in French, a national minister said, “The Pentecostal revival in France can be attributed in certain measure to the ministry of Woodworth’s books.”¹¹

The complete title of her autobiography is *Signs and Wonders God Wrought in the Ministry for Forty Years*. In it Woodworth-Etter explains the reason for her bold obedience to God. Here’s a paraphrase of her reasoning: When a woman is called by God, how can she be obedient without answering the call? How can you doubt the call when God himself confirms it with miraculous power?¹² The logic she used to

conclude that women may minister and lead in the Church is the same logic the first-century “apostles and elders” used to conclude that Gentiles may become Christ’s followers—the evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work of grace and power (Acts 15:6, 7-9, 12). How did the Jerusalem Council perceive that God makes no distinctions between people? They witnessed God’s grace in salvation and God’s power in signs and wonders. They saw God’s intent confirmed in Scripture (Acts 15:15-18). So

they concluded, “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19).

Woodworth-Etter experienced God’s grace and was convinced from examples in Scripture that God used women to lead. She resolved that she must obey. And God himself confirmed His calling with forty years of signs and wonders. As the first church concluded, may today’s church also say, “We should not make it difficult for the women who are obeying God.”

Excerpted from Chapter 7 of *God’s Women—Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace and Truth, 2004).

¹ Note that in close proximity to all three gifts passages is an emphasis on love (1 Cor. 13:1-13, Rom. 12:9-12, and Eph. 4:15).

² Don and Katie Fortune, *Discovering Your God-given Gifts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1987), 16.

³ It may be more accurate to count the equipping gifts as four since the Greek text seems to identify “pastor-teachers” as one spiritual gift to the Church.

⁴ Orthodoxy: accurate or right teaching, conforming to established doctrine.

⁵ J. Robert Clinton, *Gender and Leadership: My Pilgrimage* (Altadena, CA: Barnabas Publishers, 1995), 12, 20.

⁶ Maria Woodworth, *Life and Experience of Maria B. Woodworth* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren, 1885), 18.

⁷ Maria Woodworth-Etter, *Signs and Wonders God Wrought in the Ministry for Forty Years*, rep. ed. (Bartlesville, OK: Oak Tree, 1916), 28.

⁸ Woodworth, 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹¹ Wayne Warner, “Maria Woodworth-Etter and the Early Pentecostal Movement,” *Heritage* 6 (Winter 1986-1987): 13. See also Warner’s *The Woman Evangelist: The Life and Times of Charismatic Evangelist Maria B. Woodworth-Etter* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986).

¹² Woodworth-Etter, 30-31.