

The Gifts of the Church

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 7 of 10

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Few subjects split the church of the last century like the gifts of the Spirit: one side wrote books calling tongues demonic, the other made them the proof of true salvation, and then in the 1990s everyone simply stopped talking about it. This session takes the subject up anyway, graciously and without flinching. Listen for the claim that reframes everything: your gift is not yours, and for the surprising place the third commandment lands in the debate about modern prophets.

STUDY SHEET

1. A divisive gift, handled graciously

The teachers open with history. Before the 1990s the literature was polemical: some books argued the supernatural sign gifts had ceased and demonized their modern practice as satanic; others answered that a church without tongues and prophecy was no true church, and a Christian without them had not evidenced the baptism of the Spirit. Each side manufactured a new essential and used it to question the other's salvation. The inclusiveness of the 1990s, partly the fruit of postmodern culture, ended the bickering, but at a cost: now almost no one writes on the gifts at all, for fear of looking divisive. The course's stance: these questions are non essential for salvation but genuinely important, because the gifts are the primary means by which the ministries of the church are accomplished, so stopping at the ministries would leave the whole structure unexplained.

2. What the class is and is not doing

A quick review sets the sequence: the nature of the church grounds its purpose, the purpose is fulfilled through the five ministries, and the ministries are accomplished by the gifts. The teachers cite George Barna's polling: 71 percent of churchgoing Christians have heard of spiritual gifts, but of those, only 31 percent can name their gift, 12 percent claim not to have one, and 57 percent do not know theirs. Even so, this is not a gift inventory session; the aim is the theology of the gifts. Four passages carry the subject, easy to remember as 4, 4, 12, 12: Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 4, 1 Corinthians 12, and Romans 12. And the first hurdle is honest: every one of these passages assumes its readers already know what the gifts are; nowhere does Scripture stop and define them with a complete list, and 1 Corinthians 12 through 14 in particular is written to correct a church already practicing them.

3. A manifestation for the common good

1 Corinthians 12 gives the working material: varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, varieties of ministries but the same Lord, varieties of effects but the same God, and to each one is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Manifestation means a showing: the gift is the way God shows himself through you, and since the term spiritual gift carries decades of baggage, the teachers commend the plainer phrase, the primary way God wants to work through you. The Spirit distributes as he wills, verse 28 ordering apostles, prophets, teachers, then miracles, healings, helps, administrations, tongues. And the purpose clause governs everything: for the common good. Your gift is not finally yours; it belongs to the body. Rhyme presses it personally: if God gifted him to teach, the gift is owed to the church, delivered with his own personality attached, and the same for every member. Which also answers the perennial question of whether a Christian needs the church: only in the body do you ever see the breadth of how the Spirit works, because no one member carries it all; if all were one member, where would the body be?

4. Equipping, not hoarding

Ephesians 4 adds the second governing principle: Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to build up the body. The gifted are given to enable, prepare, and train others, never to hoard the ministry. A pastor who gathers every ministry to himself neglects the body and, the teachers say bluntly, is not functioning as a true local church; the hardest discipline for the genuinely gifted is giving ministry away to people who will do it worse at first. Rhyme sketches the natural life cycle of a gift: a home study, then a four week series, then recognized teaching, and then the mature turn, training others to teach, which is exactly why the theology program runs its own teacher training. The counterexample is familiar: churches where, unless you are the pastor, in the choir, or watching children, there is nothing for you to do.

5. Mapping the gifts

The teachers offer the classic map, useful whatever camp you land in. The supernatural sign gifts divide into revelatory, apostleship, prophecy, and perhaps the word of wisdom and word of knowledge, and confirmatory, miracles and healings, with tongues hard to place and appearing in both columns. The logic of the division: revelation demands confirmation. If a man claims to speak for God or to carry apostolic authority, no one is obliged to believe him, and Scripture says we should not, until something confirms the claim, which is what the confirmatory gifts did. The remaining gifts fall into speaking gifts and serving gifts, which nearly everyone agrees continue.

6. Three positions

From the introduction course the three positions return. The continuationist holds the miraculous sign gifts are still given: prophets, apostles, tongues, and people who can heal, because that is how God manifests himself through them. The hard cessationist holds they ceased with the death of the last apostle and the completion of the New Testament: since the canon is closed and revelation has, at least for now, ceased, the confirmatory gifts that existed to authenticate revelation have no remaining function. The soft cessationist, also called open but cautious, holds the gifts could still be given but claims must be tested and the gifts should never be treated as normative, since revelation has, in the main, ceased.

7. The cessationist argument from confirmation

The hard cessationist case is walked through on its own terms. Why did Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, and the apostles work miracles? The texts tie the miracles to authentication: Jesus came proving who he was, and empowered the Twelve to prove the authority he had given them. Paul, defending himself against the so called super apostles in 2 Corinthians 12:12, appeals to exactly this: the signs of a true apostle were performed among you, signs and wonders and miracles, which assumes such signs mark true apostles and their absence unmasks false ones. John uses the word sign almost as a technical term for the confirming works of Christ, and when the disciples ask in John 9 whose sin caused the man's blindness, the answer is neither: he was blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him. Healing, on this reading, was never given primarily as benevolence, else Christ would have healed everyone at the pool of John 5, but as confirmation; and when confirmation's object, new revelation, ended, the confirming gifts ended with it.

8. What hard cessationism does not say, and fairness to the other side

Two corrections guard against caricature. First, hard cessationism is not the claim that God performs no miracles today. Every hard cessationist the teachers know affirms present miracles; the claim is only that God works them directly, not through individuals gifted to heal at will. God may lay a burden of prayer on someone and heal in answer to it, and no cessationist objects; what has ceased is the person who can walk a hospital ward emptying it. Second, continuationists deserve their best representation: since the signs and wonders movement of the 1990s associated with John Wimber, most tie the signs to the message, so that healing serves evangelism as it did for Christ, who likewise did not heal everyone on the mats but moved at the Spirit's leading; and those who class healing as a benevolence gift rather than a confirmatory one are making a coherent move that changes which ministry the gift serves.

9. Open, but under the rules

Patton locates himself in the third camp and explains the terms of his openness. He will never say God cannot give these gifts again, and a futurist reading of Revelation expects prophets again in the future. But a modern claimant must submit to the biblical rules, and the biblical confirmations were never trivial: water turned to blood, a staff to a serpent, the lifelong lame walking, the dead raised after days, works so undeniable that even Jesus' opponents disputed only their source, never their occurrence. Backaches easing and a leg lengthening an inch do not meet that bar. And the stakes are the third commandment: to take the Lord's name in vain is, at its root, to attach God's name to words he did not speak, the very thing pagan prophets did in the names of their gods. Say thus says the Lord and you have seated yourself in the prophet's chair, under the prophet's rules in Deuteronomy 13 and 18, where a failed prophecy carried death, because God does not like being made to say what he did not say. Saying instead, I think God has moved me to tell you this, is an entirely different and honest thing: subjective, and possibly wrong. Patton's own experience: many self announced prophets, moving audiences to tears, and not one confirmed. As for the neat chart of temporary versus permanent gifts, he adds the honest caveat: no verse says outright which gifts were temporary, which is exactly why caution, not dogmatism, fits.

10. Where do the gifts come from?

A quieter question follows: are the gifts brand new endowments at conversion, or God's use of who you already are? The supernatural view says the gifts are given by the Spirit at salvation for the church's edification. The supernatural natural view says the Spirit gives natural talents at birth and gifts at salvation, and that at conversion God takes the talents you carried into the faith and turns them to the body's good. The teachers argue from the image of God, recalling the humanity course: at conversion you did not receive a new image, you began to excel in the old one, restored toward Christlikeness; the same, usually, with gifts. The musician who converts is not typically rerouted away from music. Gift inventories, they note wryly, are essentially personality tests, and your personality the day after salvation looks much like the day before, though it changes as Christ changes you. A student supplies the sharpest observation of the night: the sign gifts could not be expressed through pre conversion personality, and the ordinary gifts could, which is a natural dividing line inside the gift lists even for those who want none. Patton accepts the charge that this sounds anti supernatural and reverses it: he holds a higher view of the supernatural already present in the image of God, and his anthropology shapes his view of the gifts. Church history agrees in practice: no era took gift tests; the church simply recognized what people were good at and set them to it.

11. How many gifts are there?

The counts betray the problem: Leslie Flynn finds 19, Charles Ryrie 16, Peter Wagner more than 30, including the gift of music and the gift of martyrdom, which, the teachers deadpan, is the gift that does not keep on giving, Robert Thomas 18 or more, and John MacArthur answers that you cannot really know, which the teachers think is the wisest answer. The lists are representative principles, not a taxonomy: gifts overlap and combine, encouragement and teaching may meet in preaching, and hunting for your exact label misses the point.

12. The gifts defined: the named and the obscure

Working through Ephesians 4: apostleship, one sent with authority, carrying divine revelation and unquestioned authority for establishing and nurturing the church, authenticated by miracles per 2 Corinthians 12:12. Prophecy, receiving messages directly from God by special revelation and declaring them uninterpreted, an office still governed by the untouched rules of Deuteronomy, since nothing in the New Testament repeals them. Evangelism, the ability and desire to present the gospel clearly, creatively, and sensitively, serving the outreach ministry. The pastor, from the shepherd picture: guarding, guiding, feeding, and exhorting a people in the word, under the interchangeable titles pastor, elder, teacher, bishop, shepherd. Then the obscure gifts of 1 Corinthians 12, and the teachers model honesty about obscurity. The word of wisdom: defined ten ways by ten people, and if defined as prophetic disclosure it collapses into prophecy, which is why Patton files it with the gifts he suspects are no longer given; he is openly amused at teachers who define so obscure a gift in confident detail. The word of knowledge: the same fog, every proposed definition collapsing into teaching or prophecy, and Patton admits he has no encouragement for its claimants because he does not know what it is. Faith, the supernatural ability to believe God through extraordinary circumstances, with the honest puzzle that this should describe every believer. Healing: visible, immediate, supernatural restoration from illness, handicap, or death, a confirmatory gift if confirmatory, a benevolence gift of the inreach ministry if not. Miracles: visible supernatural acts bringing astonishment, a word chosen deliberately, since no biblical miracle was small. Discerning of spirits: the ability to judge whether a teaching's source is God or another spirit, reached partly by elimination since it is named only once.

13. Tongues: four views and Paul's argument

Tongues gets the longest treatment because the definitions multiply: a known foreign language unknown to the speaker, for proclaiming the gospel; an unknown divine prayer language that only God understands; ecstatic utterance that edifies the church; or a known language in Acts and ecstasy in Corinth. Acts 2 anchors the discussion: at Pentecost the crowds heard their own languages, yet the region shared common tongues in which everyone could already have been addressed, so the point was not communication but sign, something undeniably supernatural. In 1 Corinthians 12 through 14 Paul corrects abuses, and his governing theme is the one the whole session has pressed: the gifts are for the common good, not private use, which in the teachers' judgment cuts against the private prayer language; and the verse often quoted for it, that the tongue speaker speaks to God and not to men, sits in a context of rebuke, Paul condemning a use nobody can understand, not defining the gift. The word's usage is tallied: often the physical organ, often a known language, with the debated occurrences concentrated almost entirely in 1 Corinthians 12 through 14, so consistency argues for the known language view, which Patton takes, and interpretation of tongues follows suit as interpretation for an audience to whom the language is foreign.

14. The serving gifts, the dangers, and discovering yours

Romans 12 rounds out the list: service, the desire to serve behind the scenes; teaching, transmitting the truth of Scripture so people grow, a principle that subdivides endlessly, from academics to family ministry; exhortation, the Greek *paraklesis* carrying both the warm and the hard sense, encouragement by words and even by sheer presence, and the rarer ability to tell painful truth well, which Patton cheerfully admits he lacks; giving, wisely sharing resources; leadership, sometimes administrations, wisely handling the necessary details; and mercy, joyfully showing compassion to those who suffer, so that others are comforted. The dangers: letting your one bright light excuse neglect of everything else; ranking gifts as the Corinthians did; and the arrogance of the up front gifts toward the hidden ones. The closing principles: everyone has a gift, and probably more than one; the gifts are mutually dependent and overlapping, so do not agonize over the label; leaders must not hoard ministry; weigh passions and natural abilities without limiting God, who answered Moses' objection about his mouth by asking who made the mouth. And the path to discovering your gift: give yourself to God first, involve yourself in various ministries, focus on one and develop it, talk with others in the body, and seek God's guidance the whole way, so that you can then help others find theirs.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Exodus 4 · Deuteronomy 13 · Deuteronomy 18 · John 5 · John 9 · Acts 2 · Romans 12 · 1 Corinthians 12 · 1 Corinthians 14 · 2 Corinthians 12 · Ephesians 4 · 1 Peter 4

KEY TERMS

Manifestation of the Spirit

Paul's own phrase for a gift in 1 Corinthians 12: a showing of God through you, given to each for the common good. The teachers prefer the plain paraphrase: the primary way God wants to work through you.

Continuationism

The position that the miraculous sign gifts, prophecy, tongues, healings, and apostleship, are still given today; since the signs and wonders movement, usually with the signs tied to the message of the gospel.

Hard cessationism

The position that the sign gifts ceased with the death of the last apostle and the completion of the New Testament: revelation has ceased, so the confirmatory gifts that authenticated it have no remaining function. Not the claim that God works no miracles today.

Soft cessationism

Also called open but cautious: the gifts could still be given, but claims must be tested against the biblical rules and the gifts are not normative for the church. The camp Patton places himself in.

Revelatory and confirmatory gifts

The classic division of the sign gifts: revelatory gifts carry God's message, apostleship and prophecy chief among them; confirmatory gifts, miracles and healings, authenticate the messengers, which is why revelation's ceasing would end the need for confirmation.

The signs of a true apostle

Paul's defense in 2 Corinthians 12:12 against the so called super apostles: signs, wonders, and miracles performed among the Corinthians, assumed to mark true apostles and to unmask false ones.

The supernatural natural view

The teachers' preferred account of the gifts' origin: the Spirit gives natural talents at birth and, at conversion, turns who you already are to the edification of the body, just as conversion restores rather than replaces the image of God.

Word of wisdom and word of knowledge

The two most obscure gifts, named once in 1 Corinthians 12 and never defined; every proposed definition collapses into prophecy or teaching, which is why the teachers hold them loosely and Patton files them with the gifts he suspects have ceased.

Tongues

The most contested gift: a known foreign language, a private prayer language, ecstatic utterance, or a mix. From Acts 2 and the common good theme of 1 Corinthians 12 through 14, the teachers lean to a known language given as a sign.

Paraklesis

The Greek word behind the gift of exhortation, carrying both senses at once: warm encouragement that builds up, and the harder exhortation that names sin and tells painful truth.

The third commandment principle

Taking the Lord's name in vain is, at root, attaching God's name to words he did not speak. Thus says the Lord seats the speaker in the prophet's chair, under the rules of Deuteronomy 13 and 18; I think God has moved me is an honest and different claim.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. What did each side of the pre-1990s polemics wrongly manufacture?

- A. A new denomination
- B. A new essential: one side questioned the salvation of gift practitioners, the other the salvation of those without the gifts
- C. A new translation of Scripture
- D. A new office of the church

2. What is the first hurdle in studying the gift passages?
 - A. They survive only in fragments
 - B. They contradict one another outright
 - C. Every passage assumes readers already know what the gifts are; Scripture never stops to define them with a complete list
 - D. They mention no specific gifts
3. Who does your gift belong to, and why does that matter?
 - A. To you, as a private possession
 - B. To your family line
 - C. To the leaders who recognized it
 - D. To the body: it is given for the common good, owed to the church, which is also why only in the body do you see the breadth of the Spirit's working
4. According to Ephesians 4, why are the gifted leaders given to the church?
 - A. For the equipping of the saints for the work of service; a pastor who hoards ministry is not functioning as a true local church
 - B. To perform all the ministry themselves
 - C. To govern the state
 - D. To replace the apostles' writings
5. What is the logic behind dividing sign gifts into revelatory and confirmatory?
 - A. Revelatory gifts were for Jews, confirmatory for Gentiles
 - B. Revelation demands confirmation: no one is obliged to believe a claimed prophet or apostle until something authenticates the claim
 - C. The division follows the church calendar
 - D. Confirmatory gifts were given only to women
6. What is the hard cessationist argument in one line?
 - A. Miracles never actually occurred
 - B. The gifts were absorbed into the offices
 - C. The canon is closed and revelation has ceased, so the confirmatory gifts that existed to authenticate revelation have no remaining function
 - D. The church voted to end the gifts at Nicaea
7. How does John 9 serve the confirmation argument?
 - A. It records the first church council
 - B. It teaches that blindness is always caused by sin
 - C. It forbids healing on the Sabbath
 - D. Asked whose sin caused the blindness, Jesus answers neither: the man was blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him
8. What does hard cessationism NOT claim?
 - A. That God performs no miracles today; it affirms present miracles, worked directly rather than through individuals gifted to heal at will
 - B. That the canon is closed
 - C. That the apostles worked signs
 - D. That prophecy carried authority

9. How do the teachers represent continuationists at their best?
- A. As date setters charting the end times
 - B. As denying the sufficiency of Scripture
 - C. Since the signs and wonders movement, most tie the signs to the message, healing serving evangelism as it did for Christ, who moved at the Spirit's leading rather than healing everyone
 - D. As rejecting the ordinary gifts
10. Why does the third commandment govern modern prophecy claims?
- A. Because it forbids all speech about God
 - B. Because prophecy is mentioned in the same verse
 - C. Because the commandment applies only to oaths in court
 - D. Because taking the Lord's name in vain is attaching God's name to words he did not speak; thus says the Lord seats you in the prophet's chair under Deuteronomy's rules
11. What made the biblical confirmations different from most modern claims?
- A. They were performed only in private
 - B. They were undeniable, the lifelong lame walking, the dead raised, so that even Jesus' opponents disputed only the source, never the occurrence
 - C. They required the temple to be standing
 - D. They were always accompanied by tongues
12. What is the supernatural natural view of the gifts' origin?
- A. Gifts are earned by spiritual maturity
 - B. Gifts are assigned by church leaders
 - C. The Spirit gives talents at birth and at conversion turns who you already are to the body's good, as conversion restores rather than replaces the image of God
 - D. Gifts replace all natural abilities at conversion
13. What sharp observation did a student add to that discussion?
- A. The sign gifts could not be expressed through pre conversion personality, while the ordinary gifts could: a natural dividing line inside the lists
 - B. Gift inventories are infallible
 - C. Personality never changes after conversion
 - D. The image of God is lost at the fall
14. Why do the teachers prefer MacArthur's answer on counting the gifts?
- A. Because sixteen is the traditional number
 - B. Because the lists are representative principles that overlap and combine, so you cannot really know the count, and hunting your exact label misses the point
 - C. Because Wagner's list was too short
 - D. Because the count is fixed at seven
15. How does Patton handle the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge?
- A. He defines both in confident detail
 - B. He identifies them with the ordinances
 - C. He treats them as the highest gifts
 - D. With open honesty about obscurity: every definition collapses into prophecy or teaching, so he holds them loosely and suspects they are no longer given

16. Why does the common good theme cut against the private prayer language view of tongues?
- A. Because prayer is forbidden in public worship
 - B. Because Paul never mentions prayer
 - C. Because Paul's whole correction in 1 Corinthians is that the gifts are for the common good, and the speaks to God and not to men line sits in a context of rebuke, not definition
 - D. Because tongues appear only in Acts
17. What double sense does paraklesis carry in the gift of exhortation?
- A. Warm encouragement that builds up, and the harder exhortation that names sin and tells painful truth
 - B. Public speech and private silence
 - C. Teaching and administration
 - D. Singing and playing instruments
18. What is the path the teachers give for discovering your gift?
- A. Take an inventory and wait for certainty
 - B. Ask your pastor to assign one
 - C. Fast until a gift is revealed
 - D. Give yourself to God, involve yourself in various ministries, focus on one and develop it, talk with others, and seek God's guidance throughout

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 A · 5 B · 6 C · 7 D · 8 A · 9 C · 10 D · 11 B · 12 C · 13 A · 14 B · 15 D · 16 C · 17 A · 18 D

TALK IT OVER

1. Your gift is not yours: it belongs to the body, delivered through your particular personality. What is the primary way God wants to work through you, and who in your church is currently going without it because you have kept it to yourself?
2. The teachers modeled being open but cautious: refusing to say God cannot, while testing every claim by the biblical rules. Where do you land among the three positions, and has your position been formed by Scripture, by an experience, or by a reaction against someone else's error?
3. Rhyme described the mature turn of a gift: training others to do what you do. If you have exercised a gift for years, who are you developing in it, and what one step would begin that this season?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul grounds the whole discussion in 1 Corinthians 12: there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good, the Spirit distributing to each one individually just as he wills.