

Spiritual Gifts, Part 8

Word of Wisdom/Word of Knowledge and Discerning of Spirits

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Word of Wisdom/Knowledge

When Paul sets forth examples of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, the first gifts he mentions relate to the conveyance of wisdom and knowledge. “[T]he apostle speaks neither of wisdom nor of knowledge in themselves, but a *word, discourse* of wisdom or knowledge; for he seizes the gift in action at the moment when it is to serve the edification of the church.”¹ The apostle writes, “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit” (vs. 7-8). In the enumeration of gifts in 1 Corinthians, Paul places word gifts first perhaps because of the Corinthians’ obsession with what they considered to be the more sensational gifts (e.g., tongues). Many commentators, however, do not find a discernible pattern in Paul’s enumeration of gifts.

When Paul speaks of “the *word* of wisdom” or “the *word* of knowledge” he is speaking of the spiritual gift of speaking or communicating wisdom and the spiritual gift of communicating knowledge. This point is plain. The difficulty is one of understanding the meaning of the words “wisdom” (*sophias*) and “knowledge” (*gnoseos*) in this particular context. There is a great diversity of opinion as to the meaning of these words among scholars and commentators. Indeed, there are so many opinions regarding these words that we will only consider the most plausible interpretations of this passage.

One interpretation looks at these words in light of the broader context of Scripture. The word of knowledge has reference to teaching correct biblical doctrine. It would be instruction according to the perfect standard which is the only source of revealed truth regarding salvation and ethics: behavior, righteousness, justice, and equity. The word of wisdom is almost synonymous with the word of knowledge (wisdom of course is rooted in biblical doctrine and cannot be separated from it). However, wisdom deals more with the application of doctrine (e.g., salvation-sanctification, biblical law) to human experience. We find such an emphasis on these two things: doctrine (i.e., teaching or instruction) and wisdom (application to concrete daily experiences) in the book of Proverbs: “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: to know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding, to receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion” (Prov. 1:1-4). Paul probably alludes to the beginning of

¹ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 624.

Proverbs in 2 Timothy 3:15-16, "...the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." If one accepts this interpretation of wisdom and knowledge in 1 Corinthians 12, then he would view this gift or gifts as the ability to teach biblical knowledge or doctrine as well as make specific applications to the consciences of the hearers. This view would likely connect these gifts to the office of pastor-teacher and would affirm that they are ordinary and perpetual (i.e., they are not classed with the supernatural sign and revelational gifts that have ceased).

Another interpretation of the terms "wisdom" and "knowledge" is based on how these words are used by Paul in 1 Corinthians itself. This interpretation views the word of wisdom and knowledge as revelations from the Spirit given directly to the apostles and New Testament prophets regarding the meaning of the gospel (the person and work of Christ) which in turn is spoken or communicated to a congregation. In 1 Corinthians 1, when the apostle contrasts heathen wisdom with the wisdom of God, he sets up an antithesis between the wisdom of the world and Christ crucified. God has made the wisdom of the world foolishness through the message preached (the gospel). In other words the very foundation and essence of wisdom is to know God and this can only occur through the blood of Christ which to the Jews is a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness (v. 23). Clark writes, "Paul does not support anti-intellectualism. It was the wisdom and intricate plan of God that prevented the world from knowing God by its own wisdom. God foreordained pagan philosophy and Jewish disputes for the purpose of blinding the eyes of the reprobate and hardening their hearts. He made this wisdom nonsense. But far from teaching anti-intellectualism Paul even here in this paragraph, and more clearly elsewhere, commends the wisdom of God. This wisdom is Christ, here called *Sophia* rather than *Logos*. Therefore Paul preaches the doctrine of atonement."²

In chapter 2 the word "wisdom" (when not speaking of the world's wisdom) clearly refers to the system of truth that God has supernaturally revealed to the church.

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory...These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:1-8, 13).

² Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians*, 52.

In verse 7 when Paul uses the expression “the wisdom of God in a mystery” he refers to a matter of revelation. The word “mystery” in the New Testament does not mean an enigma but something that was hidden or formerly not known or understood. With the apostolic and new covenant prophetic inspired exposition of the gospel, the full benefits and ramifications of what Jesus was and did are set forth and explained (see e.g., Eph. 3:3-7). When Paul continues his contrast of human wisdom with divine wisdom he says that: (1) God’s testimony or wisdom was preached in demonstration of Spirit and in power (v. 4). (2) The message was Christ and Him crucified (v. 2). (3) The truths Paul preached were mysteries (i.e., they were secrets kept hidden from the pagans and were not formerly known). (4) If the rulers of this age knew what God was doing in Christ they would not have murdered the Messiah. (5) The divine wisdom is taught by the Holy Spirit (v. 13). Wisdom in the context of 1 Corinthians refers to the apostles’ and New Testament prophets’ ability to declare what was once a mystery through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The word of wisdom, then, must refer to a Spirit-given inspiration to reveal truths regarding the plan of salvation and its consequences. This interpretation places it in the category of the temporary—extraordinary gifts that have ceased (cf. Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:9).

When one examines “the word of knowledge” in the context of 1 Corinthians it becomes evident that the word of knowledge is tied to the preceding “word of wisdom” and should be understood as a parallel expression (i.e., It is almost synonymous). Both terms are dealing with *Spirit-inspired* teaching. This point comes into focus when one examines Paul’s discussion of the cessation of the revelatory gifts in his exaltation of Christian love. He writes, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing....Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor. 13:2, 8-12). In verse 2 Paul places knowledge with prophecy and the ability to understand mysteries both of which are revelatory gifts. Then when the apostle discusses the cessation of the revelatory gifts he places “knowledge” alongside of prophecy and tongues (vs. 8-9). In the next chapter Paul once again places “knowledge” in the class of revelatory gifts: “what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching” (14:6)? In both chapters (immediately following Paul’s listing of “the word of knowledge”) *knowledge* refers to the apostles’ and new covenant prophets’ revealing of new knowledge by the Holy Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14 “knowledge” often does not mean ordinary human knowing or learning but rather refers to a special Spirit-inspired utterance of knowledge. Thus, the “word of knowledge” must be interpreted as a revelatory gift whereby God gives the church new information regarding the person and work of Christ. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the gifts that Paul lists (with the possible exception of the gift of faith) in 1 Corinthians

12:8-10 are all extraordinary supernatural gifts. Fee writes, “What distinguishes this listing is the concretely visible nature of these items....These, after all, are not only ‘gifts;’ they are above all *manifestations* of the Spirit’s presence in their midst, most likely chosen because they are, like tongues itself, extraordinary phenomena. It would scarcely do for Paul at this point to attempt to broaden their perspective by listing less visible items. This will come in time (especially through the analogy of the body and in the lists in vs. 28-30); but for now the emphasis is on the supernatural.”³ Interestingly, this is the only place in the New Testament that the expressions “word of wisdom”—“word of knowledge” are used.

Discerning of Spirits

Another gift that Paul lists is the “discerning of spirits.” This gift is listed after prophecy and before tongues (1 Cor. 12:10). There are basically two different yet related views regarding this gift. One interpretation views the discerning of spirits as the ability of recognizing heretical preaching. If one holds this view, then he could argue that this gift still exists in the church and that it applies to men who are especially gifted in theology and apologetics. A much more plausible interpretation is that Paul is referring to a Spirit-given supernatural ability to determine whether various revelations or prophecies in the church truly emanate from the Holy Spirit. This interpretation is strongly supported by Paul’s own discussion of the testing or discerning of prophecies in 1 Corinthians 14:29: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.” When the revelatory gifts were still in operation there were some people in the church who God gave the special ability to determine whether a “prophecy” or “revelation” was truly inspired or whether it was self-generated or even a message from a demon. One can observe the apostles exercising a very similar ability: first, when Peter supernaturally knew that both Ananias and Sapphira were lying to the church regarding the dispossession of their property (Ac. 5:1-11); and, second when Paul had a supernatural analysis of the purpose of Elymas the sorcerer (Ac. 13:6-11).

In favor of the first interpretation some point to 1 John 4:1 that says: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” The apostle John discusses ways to discern whether a person is a false prophet or not through doctrine. While both 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 John 4 deal with discerning what is true or false, the Corinthian passage deals with a supernatural gift that *only some* are given while John’s epistle discusses the responsibility of *every Christian*. Every believer has a moral obligation to learn “the faith once delivered to the saints” in order to defend the faith (1 Pet. 3:15) against false teachers and pretenders.

Copyright 2004© Brian Schwertley, Haslett, MI

[HOME PAGE](#)

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 591.

