

John Williams(pp. 94-96) says:

The stated and fundamental purpose of the gifts is for the spiritual edification of the Church, and only if this is carefully kept in view will Christians be preserved from extravagances. When the gifts are regarded as ends in themselves, or as rewards for spirituality, their tendency is divisive rather than cohesive. There are, in the main, two schools of thought concerning the charismata. One suggests that all these gifts were bestowed on the Church as a permanent endowment, and that their disappearance is due largely to a lack of faith and desire on the part of succeeding generations of Christians. This view, on the one hand, tends to play down the sovereign role of the Holy Spirit in the distribution and maintenance of the gifts; and on the other hand overstates the responsibility of Christians to achieve them.

The other school of thought distinguishes between the temporary, revelatory, sign gifts of apostolic times and the permanent gifts necessary for the continuing ministry of the Church through the ages. This view stresses that the miraculous gifts were particularly related to the apostolic period, prior to the completion of the New Testament canon, and had special evidential value for Israel in pointing to the Messiahship of Jesus. On this view, the Spirit's sovereign purpose, far from being frustrated by a noncooperative church, has been, and is being, fully achieved, and by the various means He prescribed. Professor Bromiley strikes a happy balance: "It is a safe conclusion, however, that though we may not command or claim the charismata, or any specific charisma, the Spirit's donation may still be looked for as and when He Himself decides."

Whatever our feelings about these matters, we shall be wise always to keep in mind the risen Lord's purpose in the distribution of gifts: "And He gave some to be apostles, and some, prophets . . . and some, pastors and teachers; for [pros] the perfecting of the saints, unto [eis] the work of the ministry unto [eis] the . . . building up of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12 RV). His intention evidently was that one thing leads to another! In other words gifts are means, not ends.

Given as means rather than ends, these gifts were to stimulate other members of the Body to become involved, so that they in turn will stimulate others. It envisages a sort of chain reaction so that in each succeeding generation the Lord's work is carried forward and His Church is built up. It's a bit like the domino effect in reverse. Paul writes: "[For] to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal [for the common good, RSV]." (1 Corinthians 12:7 RSV) He means that these gifts are not just for personal benefit, but for general blessing. All the members of the body are to be involved. For too long the majority have been sitting watching, waiting for the minority to get on with the job. The time has arrived when, as that delightful old children's hymn suggests, we each must use our gift: "You in your small corner, and I in mine."