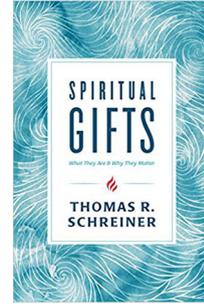


Book Review

Thomas R. Schreiner.
Spiritual Gifts: What they are & why they matter
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Thomas Schreiner is the James Harrison Buchanan Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to his academic role, he pastors at Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville. He draws on both roles in tackling an issue which is central to the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, namely the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. At the outset, Schreiner is gracious and respectful to his colleagues who hold differing views to his own, as demonstrated by his mentioning Wayne Grudem, John Piper and Sam Storms. Furthermore, he states his reluctance to write the book for concern that it might be polemical and divisive.

Schreiner's book begins with a theological sketch of Spiritual gifts, culminating in his support for a position called 'cessationism' (p.1). He defines cessationism as 'the belief that certain spiritual gifts in the New Testament – namely the more miraculous gifts – have ceased' (p.1). However, Schreiner holds to a 'kind of cessationism' suggesting a nuance with the more concise definition. He wasn't always a cessationist explaining he was a 'continuationist' due to Donald Carson's book on the subject (p.4). In eleven chapters, each with 'discussion questions', Schreiner presents a brief defence of his cessationist view.

Chapter one explores the strengths and

weaknesses of the Charismatic movement with Schreiner expanding on J.I. Packer's observations in this regard. He cites seven positive strengths and ten negative weaknesses. Undoubtedly many Charismatics would argue that not all of them subscribe to such 'weaknesses'. In chapter two, Schreiner defines spiritual gifts by drawing from Romans, 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. His understanding of a 'message of wisdom' and 'message of knowledge' is insightful differing from traditional Pentecostalism and many non-Pentecostals. Chapters three and four each explore five truths about spiritual gifts encapsulating both the Scriptural and practical and encourage the reader to discover and exercise his gift.

Given the controversies around spiritual gifts, Schreiner wisely reminds the reader that God gives gifts not to divide but unite. Schreiner demonstrates practical wisdom by exhorting readers to concentrate on their gift and to use gifts of giving, leadership and showing mercy. By concentrating on one's gift should inspire the individual to pour energy into his gift while guarding against overreactions such as declining to serve in another capacity simply because it isn't one's gift. Towards the end of the chapter, he addresses 'baptism of the Spirit' as referenced in 1 Corinthians 12:13 and other texts in Acts, and concludes that it occurs at conversion.

Chapter five addresses six pertinent questions about spiritual gifts. He tellingly remarks that

‘we can’t rule out the idea that someone might speak in tongues or do a miracle only once or on rare occasions’ (p.89). This remark might be an academic concession, but some might see it as weakening his position. Perhaps this statement alludes to Schreiner being a ‘kind of cessationist’. Chapter six asks ‘What is the gift of prophecy?’ while chapter seven asks if New Testament prophecy is mixed with error? This chapter is significant in that the book’s premise rests on whether New Testament prophecy is for today. He argues that New Testament prophecy is not mixed with error and therefore is infallible putting it on par with Old Testament prophecy. He appeals to and challenges Wayne Grudem’s interpretation of Ephesians 2:20 regarding prophecy’s foundational role. For Schreiner, the test of New Testament prophecy is that it must come to pass. Citing Scriptures that call for the evaluation of prophecies, he states that the burden of proof is on those who claim that New Testament prophecy is different from Old Testament prophecy. Furthermore, he says that if New Testament prophecy is mixed with error, then it is difficult to identify false prophets.

He disagrees with continuationists regarding the revelatory component of prophecy. While continuationists understand prophecy to be the communicating of a revelation, Schreiner considers it to be the sharing of impressions (p.118). He acknowledges that ‘God may speak to His people through impressions’ (p.119) and admits there have been occasions when such were ‘startlingly accurate’ (p.119). Some might consider this remark to be a manifestation of prophecy as in 1Corinthians 14:24-25.

Schreiner devotes chapters eight and nine to the gift of tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians and argues that tongues here refer to human languages (p.123), while in chapter ten he considers the significance of the gift itself. In

the remaining two chapters, he presents both unconvincing arguments for cessationism, and what he considers to be a convincing argument, respectively.

While his rejection of continuationism is gracious and articulate, he undoubtedly will not convince everyone. Under the subheading ‘Edification through understanding’, he correctly states that tongues edify if interpreted, but does not elaborate that speaking in tongues in a personal capacity also brings edification without the need for interpretation. His exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 concludes that ‘tongues are equivalent to prophecy if interpreted’ (p.128). This is ambiguous and perhaps could have been expanded to demonstrate that interpreted tongues are directed towards God, whereas prophecy is directed towards man, and that it is intelligibility which constitutes the equivalence. Furthermore, his comment that tongues in Acts 2 constitute prophecy again needs clarification (p.128, 163).

Schreiner agrees with continuationists’ interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8-12. He remarks that ‘if this was the only relevant text on the subject’ (p.155), then he would accept that all the gifts continue until Jesus returns. The lynchpin for his case is Ephesians 2:20, where the definition of New Testament prophecy is crucial. Schreiner posits that New Testament prophecy is inerrant. He argues that if New Testament prophecy is mixed with error then it becomes hard to determine which prophets are true and which are false. In addressing this issue, Schreiner does not avoid continuationist arguments, but his interpretation of Agabus’ prophecy is unconvincing. Furthermore, he equates ‘new revelation’ with prophecy which contradicts 1 Corinthians 14:3.

Schreiner avoids strawmen arguments and does not sidestep texts that continuationists

use to counter. He achieves his intention in presenting a case for a nuanced cessationism. However, while stating that apostles and prophets are no longer functioning, he does admit that it is difficult to 'discern whether gifts like tongues, healing and miracles exist today' (p.168), adding that his 'perspective could be mistaken' (p.171). Keener's two-volume scholarly work on miracles would reinforce the argument for miracles today. One might argue that Schreiner's interpretation of prophecy comes down to semantics (a communicated impression or revelation?). Although Schreiner is a 'kind of cessationist', he acknowledges that one can have and must not disregard 'powerful experiences of his presence' (p.30). He adds that it is possible that 'God would grant gifts of miracles, healings and signs and wonders in a cutting edge missionary situation' (p.31) reflecting nuanced cessationism.

Overall, this is a balanced and open-minded nontechnical view of a controversial subject and is a welcome addition to the debate.

