

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## The Fallacy of the Seven Gifts.

BY THE REV. S. C. LOWRY, M.A.,  
*Vicar of St. Bartholomew's, Southsea.*

IN the season of preparation for the rite of Confirmation, a considerable time is spent by some teachers in dwelling on what are called the "Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit," which, it is maintained, will be imparted to the candidates at Confirmation, either for the first time or in an exceptional and intensified form. It is alleged (1) that the Gifts of the Spirit are Seven in number, each of them having a distinctive character, and each of them corresponding to separate needs of our complex existence; (2) that for this teaching there is scriptural as well as ecclesiastical authority; and (3) that these Seven Gifts form together the *complete* endowment and equipment of the soul.

The object of this article is to refute this teaching, and to show (1) that there is no reason why the number of the Gifts of the Spirit should be limited to Seven; (2) that the passage commonly quoted as indicating Seven Gifts, and differentiating between them, alludes not to Seven Gifts, but to Six, and is altogether unconnected with Confirmation; (3) that the Seven Gifts commonly specified are not exhaustive, that they do not afford a *complete* endowment for the religious life, but must be reinforced by spiritual gifts and graces of another type, if the man of God is to be "perfect and thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

1. It is, of course, obvious to the most rudimentary knowledge of the Bible that the number seven occurs with a frequency which cannot be simply the result of chance. There are, for instance, seven days of creation, seven years of plenty in Joseph's time, seven marches round Jericho, seven Deacons, etc. In the Apocalypse this numeral is more especially prominent, and dominates the whole book — *e.g.*, seven Spirits,

seven Churches, seven candlesticks, seven angels, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven vials, etc.

The fondness of the Jews for the number is not unique, since parallels are to be found in the religious literature of Persia and India. Possibly the week with its seven days, the quarter of a lunar month, gave in the first instance an importance to this particular figure, and its regard may also have been fostered by astronomical considerations, such as the seven planets and the seven stars of Arcturus. Whatever the origin, it seems to have been adopted by the Jews as a "cyclical number with the subordinate notions of perfection and completeness."<sup>1</sup> There is plenty of evidence that seven was regarded as a round number, especially as a round number of moderate size, very much as we use the expression "a dozen" or "half a dozen." When (to omit frequent passages in the Old Testament — *e.g.*, Gen. iv. 15, vii. 4, xxx. 3, xxxi. 23; 2 Kings iv. 35, etc.) we are told in the New Testament how out of Mary Magdalene were cast seven devils, how forgiveness should not stop at seven times, how Dives had seven brethren, and seven brothers married in succession the same woman, how an evil spirit took into partnership seven other spirits, it is impossible to think that these passages are to be taken with literal exactness, and it is far simpler to believe that in each case seven merely stands for "several." Even in the elaborate imagery of the Revelation there is difficulty in assuming that seven has a definite and exhaustive meaning, beyond the general sense of sufficient representation. Can it be thought that there were no other Christian Churches in Asia Minor than the seven to which letters are addressed in Rev. ii., iii.? Why is there no letter to the Churches at Tralles, or Magnesia, or Troas? The answer must be that the Seven Churches are more or less representative of certain types, and, as Professor W. M. Ramsay maintains in his book on the subject, that they formed a recognized group, being the centres of postal districts. The enumeration, however, is by no means exhaustive or complete.

<sup>1</sup> Hastings' Dictionary: "Numbers."

It is easy to see how this number, which was conspicuously prominent in Hebrew literature, especially in literature of an apocalyptic type, should form a precedent for Christian writings. Scholastic teaching largely revived its use. Thus, there were Seven Sacraments—a doctrine which arose with Peter Lombard in the twelfth century, and was formally defined by the Council of Florence. *But why stop at seven?* Is, for instance, “Benediction” more destitute of the elements of a Sacrament than “Penance”? Why should it be omitted, except that *a priori* it was decided that the number of Sacraments should be seven, and Benediction would have made an inconvenient eighth? Similarly, the Deadly Sins were enumerated as seven. But here again it is obvious that the list was adjusted to the number, and not *vice versa*. Why, for instance, it may be inquired, should Idolatry and Lying be omitted from the catalogue? Has Idolatry, which was punishable with death in a Jew, now become tolerable in a Christian? Is Lying more venial than Sloth? Is it not expressly stated that idolaters and “whoso loveth and maketh a lie” shall be excluded from the joys of heaven, quite as much as the slothful and unprofitable servant? There can, indeed, be but one reason for the omission of these sins, and this is, that any further items would have spoiled the desired number; and so Idolatry and Lying, faults in which the medieval conscience was not particularly sensitive, were omitted with others from the catalogue. As an instance of the folly to which perverted ingenuity can go in this direction, we may mention how, in Dr. A. G. Mortimer’s “Helps to Meditation,” which has passed through several editions, the “Seven Words from the Cross” are applied by a most unnatural straining to the “Seven Deadly Sins,” each of our dying Lord’s sayings being supposed to have special reference to one of these seven vices! Such presumption is only equalled by the dexterity of another Anglican writer, who makes the “Seven Words from the Cross” correspond, one by one, to the “Seven Sacraments”!

2. The catalogues commonly given of the Seven Gifts of the Spirit are analogous to the Seven Sacraments and the

Seven Deadly Sins, except that in this case there is alleged to be definite Scriptural foundation for the number and the classification. The idea finds expression in fairly early Christian literature. From the ninth century downwards Christendom has been familiar with the lines of the *Veni, Creator*—

“Thou the anointing Spirit art,  
Who dost Thy *Sevenfold* Gifts impart”—

and the enumeration of the Seven Gifts (based upon Isa. xi. 2, 3) is found still earlier—*e.g.*, in St. Ambrose (“*De Mysteriis*,” vii. 42) and in the Sacramentary of Gelasius, from which, through the medieval Service-Book, the catalogue was imported into the Confirmation Service of the English Prayer-Book in the prayer beginning “Almighty and Everlasting God.”

The idea of the Seven Gifts is doubtless derived in the first instance from the expression, “the Seven Spirits which are before the throne” (Rev. i. 4, iii. 1, iv. 5, v. 6), an expression which may perhaps be understood to represent the Holy Spirit in the fulness and manifoldness of His operation, though more probably the Spirits are described as seven because the Churches in which they operate are seven.<sup>1</sup> If, then, there were Seven Spirits, it was natural to infer that each of these Spirits should have a different character and confer a different gift. And if there were Seven Gifts, the question arose, What were these Gifts? Such expressions as “the Spirit of Life,” “the Spirit of Holiness,” “the Spirit of Truth,” etc., might easily have supplied an answer, but they are too many. St. Paul’s list of the “Fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. v. 22, 23) might also have served the purpose; but here there are nine, and only seven were wanted. Fortunately, a passage in Isaiah seemed to supply just what was required. Here were apparently the Seven Spirits all side by side, with their distinguishing characteristics plainly indicated, and so this passage, written with a special object to describe the Messianic

<sup>1</sup> Swete, “Apocalypse,” p. 6.

King, was boldly appropriated to denote the Seven Gifts imparted in Confirmation.

To those who, like most of the Fathers, obtained their knowledge of the Old Testament from the Vulgate, which was based on the LXX., Isa. xi. 2, 3, might well seem to indicate Seven special Gifts. But a survey of the Hebrew dispels this idea.

For purposes of comparison we print in parallels the Revised Version, which is a translation of the Hebrew, and the LXX. and Vulgate versions :

## ISAIAH XI. 2, 3.

*Revised Version.*

2. "The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord ;

3. "And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord."

*LXX.*

πνεῦμα σοφίας καὶ συνέ-  
σεως, πνεῦμα βουλῆς καὶ  
ἰσχύος, πνεῦμα γνώσεως  
καὶ εὐσεβείας· ἐμπλήσει  
αὐτὸν πνεῦμα φόβου Θεοῦ.

*Vulgate.*

"Spiritus sapientiæ et intellectus, spiritus consilii et fortitudinis, spiritus scientiæ et pietatis. Et replebit eum spiritus timoris Domini."

It seems fairly clear from the Hebrew that *three pairs* of virtues (six in all) are given by Isaiah, which perhaps we may describe as (1) moral and intellectual perception, (2) administrative good sense and courage, (3) knowledge and fear of Jehovah. The first pair apparently has to do with *things*, the second with *men*, and the third with *God*. The virtues, it will be observed, are *six*, not seven, and the Hebrew sequel translated, "And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord," is merely an amplification of the last. How the LXX. came to introduce *εὐσεβεία* (*pietas*) into the catalogue it is difficult to say. There is no reason why the "fear of Jehovah" should be rendered in one clause by *εὐσεβεία*, and in another by *φόβος Θεοῦ*, since the *Hebrew is the same in both cases*, and is correctly translated by "the fear of the Lord." Possibly the love of the figure seven, even at that early date, led the LXX. translators to modify the list according to a preconceived number. At any

rate, it must be admitted that *the sevenfold classification finds no support in the Hebrew*, and rests on a precarious foundation.

If the attempt to enumerate the Gifts of the Spirit as seven depends on a mistaken view of Isa. xi. 2, 3, the attempts that are made to distinguish between the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit are equally unsatisfactory and inconclusive. Three of them —“ might ” or “ ghostly strength ” (*fortitudo*), “ godliness ” (*pietas*), and “ the fear of the Lord ” (*timor Domini*) —present no serious difficulty to interpreters. It is when they come to deal with “ wisdom,” “ understanding,” “ counsel,” and “ knowledge,” that we find the greatest diversity of interpretation. Some writers—for instance, Bishop Hall, in his book on Confirmation—seem to indicate that these four gifts are enumerated in an *ascending* scale ; “ knowledge,” which is eternal life, being the last and highest of all. Cardinal Manning, in his “ Internal Working of the Holy Ghost,” maintains that the *scale is just the reverse*, and that, as “ holy fear ” is the beginning of the spiritual life, “ wisdom,” which is the last of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost, may be said to be “ the blossom and the maturing, and as it were the perfection, of all the Seven Gifts.”<sup>1</sup> Some writers make “ knowledge ” to indicate insight into human life ; others, insight into the things of God. A similar diversity of opinions may be found with regard to “ wisdom.” Indeed, if any person will read the explanation of half a dozen writers who have claimed to interpret the exact meaning of these four gifts, he will probably rise from the perusal with a brain sorely perplexed and bewildered ; and, further, he will probably assent to the opinion that, if leading scholars differ so largely as to the precise shade of meaning to be given to each of these, it is a sheer waste of time to puzzle Confirmation candidates thirteen or fourteen years old by teaching them to distinguish between graces which seem so closely allied.

But is it necessary to distinguish ? And is it not a truer

<sup>1</sup> Manning, p. 384.

classification to say that wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge, though they may have varying shades of meaning, which are of interest to the scholar, are all parts of one general gift of illumination, rather than separate and distinct endowments? Present-day views of inspiration do not compel us to think that lists of virtues are compiled in the Bible with the precision of a modern treatise on Christian ethics. We know how voluble preachers will try to impress an idea by piling on words which mean very much the same thing; but no one would imagine that they intended to give distinct aspects to each word in their groups of synonyms. Tautology no doubt is to be avoided in correct writing, and the only apology for asking in the Prayer-Book that the Sovereign may "overcome" as well as "vanquish" his enemies, and that hereafter he may attain "felicity" as well as "joy," is that the rhythm becomes more sonorous by two words being given, while one would have done equally well. But Prophets are not bound by the trammels of correct writing, and if in a torrent of eloquence they pour forth words which practically mean the same thing, their utterances are not to be subjected to the analysis of a philosophical treatise. Even in more temperate writings, like the Epistles of the New Testament, the authors are not always careful of order or classification. When St. Paul gives a list of the "Fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. v. 22, 23), it is impossible to say that the list is exhaustive and complete, or that the order is strictly methodical. The difficulty of finding any regular order is still greater in the list of Christian virtues given by St. Peter (2 Pet. i. 5-7, R.V.). Indeed, we cannot but think that the various additions in St. Peter's catalogue partake of the nature of "after-thoughts," and that, in his desire to impress on his hearers the possibilities of the Christian life, he wrote down one grace after another, as they were successively suggested to his mind, without any idea of logical sequence or of a complete survey of Christian qualities. If, therefore, in New Testament Epistles we sometimes fail to discover an exact or complete classification, why should it be assumed that it exists in Pro-

phetic utterances, where, as in the Psalms, parallelism is often prized at the cost of unnecessary repetition of ideas?

3. The fallacy, however, of the common teaching on the Seven Gifts is not so much that there are Seven Distinct Gifts to be sought, as that these Seven are a *complete* equipment for Christian uses. This is frequently maintained. Statements such as the following are common :

“As all the harmonies that were ever heard by the ear of man may be resolved into the seven simple notes, so may all the numberless perfections of the human soul be resolved into the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>1</sup>

Or—

“To pray for the Sevenfold Gift is to ask for the *full* equipment of the spiritual life. It is to kneel before the whole treasury of God, and seek to be filled with the riches of His grace.”<sup>2</sup>

Or—

“Together they” (the Seven Gifts) “meet and supply our manifold needs.”<sup>3</sup>

“These Sevenfold Gifts are all that are necessary for the perfection of the Christian life.”<sup>4</sup>

“These Seven Gifts elicit into action and expand into perfection the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and these again make perfect the reason, heart, and will; and thereby the whole soul in its natural and supernatural perfections is made perfect and united with God.”<sup>5</sup>

“We shall find that the Seven Gifts elicit from the Cardinal and Theological Virtues seven forms of spiritual activity whereby the characters and lineaments of the Perfect Man are unveiled—namely, the Seven Beatitudes, in which our Lord Himself expressed and set forth the Perfect Manhood of the Second Adam in action. The direct antithesis of these seven manifestations of holiness, priesthood, and service, is to be found in the Seven Deadly Sins. The means whereby the Seven Gifts bear fruit unto holiness is Prayer, and so we shall find that they correspond to the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer.”<sup>6</sup>

It may, however, fairly be asked whether these Seven Gifts, if we survey our own complex nature or the manifold

<sup>1</sup> Rev. C. R. Ball, “The Dispensation of the Spirit.”

<sup>2</sup> Rev. J. A. V. Magee, “The Sevenfold Gift.”

<sup>3</sup> Bishop Hall of Vermont, “Confirmation,” Oxford Library of Theology.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. B. Webb, “Instruction for Confirmation,” p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Manning, “Internal Working,” p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> Canon A. T. Wirgman, “Doctrine of Confirmation,” p. 400.

operations of the Holy Spirit indicated throughout the New Testament, are exhaustive and complete? Many may think that other gifts are needed by Confirmation candidates and ordinary Christians besides those specified in Isa. xi. 2, 3. In the Prophet's writing the subject is the ideal King of David's stem, who will introduce the Golden Age of Israel. Now, the gifts here specified are *the gifts more especially needed by a Ruler*—*i.e.*, intellectual vigour, moral strength, and reverence for the laws of God. It is not claimed that they are exhaustive. There is no intimation that they are the gifts equally needed by ordinary people. There is no mention of such virtues as meekness, kindness, etc., which at that time formed but a subordinate part of a kingly equipment, but which (except in Germany) we know to be most necessary for commonplace Christians to-day. Indeed, the contrast between the qualities here mentioned and the qualities to which the Beatitudes are promised in the Sermon on the Mount is at least striking; and the same contrast may be observed between Isaiah's list and the list of the "Fruit of the Spirit" given by St. Paul in Gal. v. 21, 22. But St. Paul's virtues are quite as useful as Isaiah's. The love of God is not less necessary than the fear of God, nor patience less to be admired than courage.

Nor can the distinction that is sometimes made between the "Gifts of the Spirit" (Isaiah) and the "Fruit of the Spirit" (St. Paul) be maintained. The difference between these two, according to Manning ("Internal Working of the Holy Spirit") and others, is that the Gifts of the Spirit are *bestowed*, the Fruits are *acquired*. The former are infused into the soul; the latter can only be attained by use and practice. The former are more directly imparted; the latter demand our co-operation. Such an explanation is at variance with experience. Can it be said with any degree of truth that knowledge cannot be acquired, or that goodness cannot be infused? On the contrary, most people are aware that, while genius may be innate, knowledge and understanding are commonly the result of a laborious process, and that no laying on of hands, Episcopal or otherwise,

will enable a person to pass an examination. Spiritual things, we know, are spiritually discerned, and a man needs Divine assistance for his natural abilities; but there is no valid reason for saying that the powers of the intellect are imparted or infused, while the powers of the heart are learned or acquired. St. Paul might equally well have called the nine virtues in Gal. v. 22, 23 the "Gifts of the Spirit," and Isaiah might have taught us with equal truth that the "Fruit of the Spirit" in the ideal Ruler was wisdom and understanding, etc. The contrast in the character of the virtues in the two catalogues is not due to any difference in the manner of their infusion or acquisition, but simply to the fact that St. Paul's mind naturally turns towards a certain class of graces, such as long-suffering and gentleness and temperance, because they are in sharp opposition to the works of the flesh—to the passionate violence, the unbridled licence, and the braggart insolence too common among heathen populations; while Isaiah is mainly concerned with the qualifications of an administrative Ruler and a victorious Prince. But there is no *a priori* reason, and there is no warrant in the Scriptures, for saying that Love (and the virtues which follow in St. Paul's list) is less a *Gift* of the Spirit than Knowledge; and there is no reason why a devout candidate for Confirmation should not ask God for an infusion and increase of the one quite as much as of the other.

In the Book of Acts there is no indication of the particular character of the Spirit's Gift in connection with Confirmation, except the result of ecstatic language. But there is at any rate one passage in St. Paul's letters which directly alludes to the nature of the Spirit imparted to Timothy "through the laying on of his hands." This is described (2 Tim. i. 7) as "the spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." Whether the occasion was, as Bishop Chase<sup>1</sup> maintains, Timothy's Confirmation, or, as Dr. Hort<sup>2</sup> prefers, a special ordination of Timothy as colleague to St. Paul, is not here important. The

<sup>1</sup> Chase, "Confirmation in the Apostolic Age," p. 35 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Hort, "Christian Ecclesia," pp. 181-188.

point is that a spirit of love, as well as of power and a chastened mind, was an element in his equipment, and that this no less than the others was imparted by an outward sign. Indeed, it is sufficiently obvious that Love in its higher sense is a *Gift* of the Spirit quite as much as wisdom. When the Christ returned to Galilee fresh from His Baptism of the Spirit, He returned, as He Himself tells us, in the Spirit of active philanthropy (St. Luke). When the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit came upon the disciples, the immediate result was such an energy of affection that it took effect in practical communism. A collect of the Prayer-Book describes Barnabas as being endowed with "singular gifts of the Holy Ghost." If we inquire what was Barnabas's specially characteristic gift, it must be described as the gift of Consolation, or, more broadly, *Paraklesis*—i.e., readiness to help, either by word or deed. These and similar passages declare that Love and kindred virtues are Gifts of the Spirit quite as much as the intellectual qualities, and there is no valid reason for disputing the words of Bishop Wordsworth when he teaches us to sing to the Paraclete :

" Taught by Thee, we covet most,  
Of Thy *Gifts* at Pentecost,  
Holy, heavenly Love."

All this may seem obvious enough ; but it should dispel the fallacy that the catalogue in Isaiah was intended to supply a complete inventory of Christian virtues, and should cause us, when in customary language we speak of the "Sevenfold Gifts of the Spirit" as the heritage of Christians, to refrain from limiting them to those selected by the Prophet with a specific purpose and in a different connection.

What, it may be asked, is left, if we emancipate ourselves from the tyranny of numbers, and if the current application of the passage in Isaiah to Confirmation be discredited? Much, every way. Christian truth is too large a thing to rest on any isolated text in the Old Testament or to suffer by its withdrawal. The Old Testament should be interpreted by the New, not the New Testament by the Old. Christian teachers

can teach, and ought to teach, that the work of the Holy Spirit is manifold and inexhaustible; that He supplies our need in every department of life; that from Him comes strength to the weak, light to the ignorant, comfort to the mourner, patience to the sufferer, and inspiration and support for all the various energies and activities of the soul. Christian teachers can teach that, while the Holy Spirit's working is to be seen and recognized from childhood onward, and while He manifestly works outside the Church as within it, still we can prize that ancient and Apostolic rite which assures us of God's help, and which, to those who rightly accept it, may be also thought to convey it. Christian teachers can point to the prayer in the Confirmation Service, and the passage from Isaiah on which it is, perhaps without sufficient reason, based, as indicating *some* of the Gifts which the Holy Spirit imparts, though they should beware of limiting His Gifts to those therein mentioned. They can still speak, if they like, of the "Sevenfold" Gifts of the Spirit, provided they make it clear that "Sevenfold" is used in the sense of manifoldness and completeness, and that there is no warrant for specifying these Seven Distinct Gifts to the exclusion of others. Christian teachers can impress upon their hearers that, while every good Gift comes from above, these Gifts, whether intellectual, like knowledge and wisdom, or moral, like love and patience, cannot be developed without our co-operation and effort, and that every "Gift" is equally a "Fruit" to be matured by diligent cultivation.

If such teaching lacks that definiteness and exactness which some so highly prize, it is perhaps more Scriptural, more truthful, and less artificial. After all, it is more important that we should have a large appreciation of the Divine working than that our theology should be in accord with Patristic catalogues framed sometimes with greater regard to favourite numbers than to observation and experience.

