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Spiritual Gifts for the Church

“The greatest task of your Christian experience is discovering, and using, your spiritual gift.” Sound familiar? Such is the message of books on the subject of spiritual gifts. Today you can sign up for week-long seminars or fill in long questionnaires that guarantee an ability to discover your God-given, but previously unknown, spiritual ability.

Again we see that confusion exists at the definitional level:

- A spiritual gift is a God-given ability for service (C.C. Ryrie)
- A spiritual gift is a natural capacity of the individual that God has reworked for spiritual good and service (Anonymous)
- A spiritual gift denotes extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit dwelling and working in a special manner in individuals (Herman Cremer).

Those definitions, which span almost a hundred years of biblical research, leave many questions unanswered: Are spiritual gifts unique to the Christian experience? Is there an individual, residual capacity

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that God takes, and remakes? Can gifts be manifested outside the service of the church? How do you discover your gift(s)?

Further, why is it that, in the teachings of some of our most noted Christian leaders (who have had years of experience with the subject in their congregations), that significant confusion continues to exist? Why is there not clear formula for discovering your gift? It seems that the New Testament assemblies had little problem knowing what gifts they had. Their problem was taking those known gifts and using them in a proper manner. That manner of thinking on gifts has been somewhat forgotten. Some clarification would be helpful.

DISTRIBUTIONS OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Apart from the New Testament passages dealing with the problems associated with the exercise of gifts in the churches, we must focus on five New Testament passages that feature gift lists:

To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another the ability to speak in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:8-10).

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts (1 Cor. 12: 28-31).

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We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Rom. 12:6-8).

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11).

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

Those passages introduce us to the many manifestations of the Spirit's work in the body. The gifts include men as well as ministries and public as well as private services. We shall now make some initial observations to help us set the stage for specific inquiry.

CHURCH GROWTH BEGINS WITH UNITY

In each of the four epistles that record the gift lists, body maturity begins with unity. In 1 Corinthians, Paul strongly emphasizes that point:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

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But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other (1 Cor. 12:24b-25).

There is no question that God’s priority is unity. The diversity of gifts has a special place in the body, but the gifts are not to distract us from the same Spirit. Paul clearly points out that God Himself has lifted up in honor the “lacking parts” of the body for two reasons: first, to avoid divisions and second, to insure equal concern.

Similarly, Paul begins passages in other epistles with the same emphasis. In Romans, he states that “just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body” (12:4-5a). In Ephesians, the grace gifts given by the ascended Lord are “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith” (4:12-13a). Peter reminds us in his first epistle that believers, “like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.... You are the people of God” (1 Pet. 2:5, 10). Unity precedes diversity.

We can safely conclude that any stress on the issue of spiritual gifts that fractures rather than heals, or separates rather than binds, or uplifts rather than promotes oneness, is inappropriate and imbalanced. As we saw in Chapter 3, the very essence of the gospel has brought all believers into one body — without division or distinction. Gifts do not change that truth.

CHURCH GROWTH REQUIRES UNITY AND DIVERSITY

Oneness is not sameness. As illustrated by the character of the Trinity — unity can include diversity. The Body of Christ likewise is one, though its parts are many. Just as it would be folly for a physician not to evaluate a patient’s physical problems according to the

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health of his organs, muscles, blood, and so on, so also would it be equally inefficient for us to evaluate the life of the Body of Christ without some appreciation of its constituent parts.

Diversity is formed from the ground up:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-20).

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds (1 Cor. 3:10).

The apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the church, namely Christ. The builders are distinct from the foundation, in that they have become the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21).

A physical body is the sum of its cellular parts; so the Body of Christ is the sum of its individual parts: the eye needs the hand, and the head needs the feet. And each part of the body needs every other part (1 Cor. 12:14-22)!

CHURCH GROWTH BRINGS MATURITY

In Chapter 3, we developed an overview of the character and conduct of the church. We established that we are “members together of one body,” and that the work of the ministry is “speaking the truth in love, (so that) we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Eph. 3:6; 4:15). Church growth is not primarily involved with numerical growth, but with spiritual growth. Geographic and numerical expansion was a result of spiritual nurture within the New Testament assemblies. The church operates correctly when it understands who it is in Christ and what it is to do in Christ.

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Maturity. Growing *into* Christ. Four observations from Ephesians 4 help put this into perspective.

First, maturity is service.

To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (v. 12).

Earlier Paul had written forcefully that each of us is saved by grace through faith, and that this salvation is to result in good works (Eph. 2:8-10). Continuing this thrust, he reminds his readers that the diverse gifts of grace given to the Body have a unified function: they all produce service. Just as a pot or bowl is shaped with a purpose in mind, even so believers are saved with service in mind. James's solution to pure religion included, in part, a pouring out of a believer's energies into the needs of widows and orphans in distress (James 1:27). This is genuine religion. It is the leadership and the body cooperating to serve the needs of those around us. "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:39).

Second, maturity is sanctification.

Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (v. 13).

When Christ rose from the dead, He established His final dominion over all things and initiated the doctrines of the Body of Christ (vv. 18-23). The church is both positionally the fullness of Christ and relationally moving toward that final sanctification. When our unity in the faith, our knowledge of the Son of God, and our measure of Christ's fullness all come together, then we are mature. Needless to say, maturity is not instantly gained.

Third, maturity is stability.

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Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (v. 14).

The naivete of children — not only are children full of questions, but almost any answer will do. So it is with spiritual infants. Any new wind of teaching can sidetrack them from major issues of ministry and growth. Spiritual maturity cannot occur without doctrine; it protects from danger, and provides a framework for growth.

Fourth, maturity is supportive.

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grow and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (v. 16).

One major objective in John's classes is helping students appreciate the finer things in life, namely, the Dallas Cowboys! There is a regular ritual. If the Cowboys lose on Sunday there is a guaranteed quiz the following week. If they win, then there is only a possibility of a quiz. It is amazing how that generates fan support! If the Cowboys, with all their individual talents, did not work together as a team, the result would be disastrous. Likewise, the "name of the game" in body growth is cooperation. As each part does its work, then the body is growing. Maturity is developing.

DESCRIPTIONS OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Spiritual gifts are distributions of grace by Christ and the Spirit. They are given to us for our individual and corporate growth. The identifications and distinctions among these abilities are as follows:

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| GIFT | PASSAGE | IDENTIFICATION |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Apostle (<i>apostolos</i>)</p> | <p>1 Cor. 12:28 1 Cor. 12:29-30 Eph. 4:11</p> | <p>The basic meaning of the term <i>apostle</i> is a “sent one.” This word, however, is used in the New Testament in two distinctive ways:</p> <p>(1) The term is used in a restrictive manner to identify those men who were <i>sent by Christ</i> to lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). Thus, the restrictive use of this word refers to an <i>office</i> that was filled by those who were selected, appointed, and commissioned by Christ Himself to lay the infant church’s foundation. Acts 1:22 presents partial, recognizable criteria for holding that office. This office is in view when the term <i>apostle</i> is used in reference to a gift given to the church. The need for this corporate gift ended with the establishment of the early church.</p> <p>(2) The term is used in a general manner to designate those men who were <i>sent by a church</i> to testify of Christ (Acts 14:14) or to perform functions to meet the needs of individuals in the church (Phil. 2:25).</p> |
| <p>Apostleship (<i>apostole</i>)</p> | <p>Rom. 1:5 1 Cor. 9:2 Gal. 2:8-9</p> | <p>This gift was given to the ones who were in turn given to the church as apostles. It, therefore, refers to the individual gift which was given to those who would be the corporate gift (office). Like the other gifts, apostleship could be perceived and recognized, and the recipient of this gift functioned in the related office (Gal. 2:9). This gift relates to the establishment of the early church (Eph. 2:20).</p> |
| <p>Prophet (<i>prophetes</i>)</p> | <p>1 Cor. 12:28 1 Cor. 12:29-30 Eph. 4:11</p> | <p>This New Testament gift to the church (corporate gift) corresponds to the Old Testament prophet in that both received special, direct revelation from God concerning both predictions about the future and principles for godly living in the present. The message of a New Testament prophet could contain both aspects as he would speak for God under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The primary</p> |

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| GIFT | PASSAGE | IDENTIFICATION |
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| | | responsibility of the prophet in the first century was the establishment of the infant church's foundation (Eph. 2:20). |
| Prophecy (<i>propheteia</i>) | Rom. 12:3-8 1 Cor. 12:8-10 | This is the individual gift which each prophet (corporate gift) was given by God so that he could function in that office. The message of the prophet edified, encouraged, and comforted the church (1 Cor. 14:3). |
| Evangelist (<i>evangelistes</i>) | Eph. 4:11 | This office (corporate gift) has as its responsibility the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. This term is only used three times in the New Testament (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11; and 2 Tim. 4:5). Philip is the only person designated as an evangelist (Acts 21:8); however, the term <i>herald</i> (<i>kerux</i>) seems to refer to this same office (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). In the book of Acts, the ministry of the one who was given this gift was directed toward unbelievers and was itinerant in nature. |
| Evangelism | None | Both the office of the apostle and prophet, as well as the pastor-teacher which will be discussed next, had corresponding individual gifts that were given to those who held those offices (corporate gifts). Even though not mentioned in the New Testament, a gift that corresponded to the office of evangelist is required. From the book of Acts, this gift involves the proclamation, or heralding, of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is the responsibility of every believer to participate in evangelism, but the one who was given this gift had a unique ability for the proclamation of salvation in Christ. This is evident when the church, except for the apostles, was scattered from Jerusalem in Acts 8. Philip, the evangelist (Acts 21:8), heralded (<i>kerusso</i>) Christ, but the rest of the church declared (<i>evangelizo</i>) the word (Acts 8:4-5). |

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| GIFT | PASSAGE | IDENTIFICATION |
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| <p>Pastor-Teacher (<i>poimen-didaskalos</i>)</p> | <p>Eph. 4:11</p> | <p>The responsibilities of those who hold this office are leading, feeding, and protecting the church. All three responsibilities are intrinsic in the term <i>pastor</i> which means “shepherd.” However, this particular combination of words and their relationship to the function of the elder/bishop suggest an emphasis on the leading and teaching responsibilities of this office.</p> |
| <p>Leading (<i>prohistemi</i>)</p> | <p>Rom. 12:3-8</p> | <p>This term is used only eight times in the New Testament. Five times the term is used with reference to the function of those who lead the church (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4; 5:12, 17). Twice it refers to the “maintaining” of good works (Tit. 3:8, 14), and once it refers to a gift or ability for service to be used within the church (Rom. 12:8). The term means “to stand before,” and is the portrait of a shepherd guiding and caring for the sheep. In chapter eight, this gift was seen in relation to leadership in the church (1 Tim. 5:17).</p> |
| <p>Teaching (<i>didasko</i>)</p> | <p>Rom. 12:3-8 1 Cor. 12:28 1 Cor. 12:29-30</p> | <p>Teaching is the ability to communicate the truth of the Scriptures in a manner that brings clarification or conviction. In the New Testament, teaching involves both instructing and modeling the Word of God (1 Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:17; 4:9). This term is used in two distinctive ways in the New Testament:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) The term is used in a restrictive manner in reference to those who were responsible to teach in order to equip the body (Eph. 4:11; James 3:1; 2 Tim. 1:11). These individuals held the office of teacher. (2) The term is used in a general manner to address the responsibility of every believer (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 5:12) to teach those further behind them in their pilgrimage, at least in the foundational teachings of the Word (Heb. 6:1-2). |

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| Exhorting (<i>parakaleo</i>) | Rom. 12:3-8 | Akin to the term <i>paraclete</i> (“one called to the support of another”), this gift involves coming alongside another to help. Comfort, encouragement, as well as admonishment, are the means by which this gift may be used within the body. |
| Giving (<i>metadidomi</i>) | Rom. 12:3-8 | Only used five times in the New Testament. This gift involves the sharing or imparting of one’s material possessions for the benefit of others in the body. |
| Showin Mercy (<i>eleeo</i>) | Rom. 12:3-8 | The gift of showing mercy is the ability to manifest pity and compassion to those who are in need. |
| Word of Wisdom (<i>logos/sophia</i>) | 1 Cor 12:8-10 | This gift involves the translation of biblical truth into practical living. Application of the Word is in view. |
| Word of Knowledge (<i>logos/gnosis</i>) | 1 Cor 12:8-10 | The gift involves the accumulation of facets of truth into a systematic structure, resulting from study. Understanding the Word is in view. |
| Faith (<i>pistis</i>) | 1 Cor 12:8-10 | The gift of faith is the ability to trust the Provider amidst a problem or need. Focus is placed upon the resource, not the problem. |
| Gifts of Healing (<i>charisma/iama</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:8-10 1 Cor. 12:28 1 Cor. 12:29-30 | This gift involves the ability to restore another to health. |
| Operation of Powers (<i>energena/dynamics</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:8-10 1 Cor. 12:28 1 Cor. 12:29-30 | The ability to perform supernatural signs and miracles is the essence of the gift. |
| Discerning of Spirits (<i>diakriss/pneuma</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:8-10 | The gift involves the ability to determine the source of another’s speech or action. |

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| GIFT | PASSAGE | IDENTIFICATION |
|--|---|---|
| Kinds of Tongues (<i>genos/glossa</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:8-10 1 Cor. 12:28 1 Cor. 12:29-30 | The gift of tongues is generally regarded as the ability to speak in a known language that has not been learned by the one who speaks. |
| Interpretation of Tongues (<i>hermeneia/glossa</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:8-10 1 Cor. 12:29-30 | The interpretation of tongues is the ability to translate the foreign language spoken by one who possessed the gift of tongues into an understandable language. |
| Helping (<i>antilempsis</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:28 | The gift involves the rendering of assistance or supporting of another in need. |
| Administration (<i>kubernesis</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:28 | The gift of administration is the ability to direct others. |
| Serving (<i>diaknos</i>) | 1 Cor. 12:3-8 | This gift involves meeting the needs of others. |

Spiritual gifts are a lot like a diamond. As beautiful as the stone is, you cannot fully appreciate it from just one angle. You have to change the angle—catch the light in different refractions—in order to fully appreciate its beauty. Similarly, you have to see the different parts—coordinated and working together—in order to fully appreciate the spiritual gifts. A foot or hand severed from the body has no use. But in all the body parts working together is beauty.

THE CHALLENGE: DISCERNMENT AND DISCOVERY

Have you ever listened to the teaching of someone who was self-convinced that he had the gift of teaching but somehow had trouble convincing others? Maybe he did have the gift of teaching—and you just did not have the gift of listening. We have found that believers determine their gifts according to many factors. For example, personal experiences and desires, and insights and encouragement from other members of the body. Within a church organized according

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to this biblical blueprint, there will be a number of small group and informal settings where believers will minister and be ministered to. Elders and other believers can then be available to help a person evaluate his strengths and abilities.

It is important to note that the majority of gifts listed in this chapter are also given in similar fashion as commands for the believer. For example, concerning evangelism: “Do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5); leading: “Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good” (Titus 3:14a); teaching: “Therefore go and make disciples...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19a, 20a). The point is that we are to be obedient to the Scriptures whether or not we are sure about what gift(s) we may possess.

THE CULMINATION: GIFTS THAT RESULT IN RELATIONSHIPS

We have already seen that the church is to be moving toward unity as a local body and as a part of the Body of Christ. Now it also must be said that gifts are not to be seen as an end in themselves. How we function as parts of the Body of Christ is measured in terms of our mutual concerns and affections for one another.

| PASSAGE | CONTENT |
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| John 13:24 | “Love one another” |
| John 15:17 | “Love one another” |
| Rom. 12:10 | “Be devoted to one another” |
| Rom. 12:10 | “Honor one another” |
| Rom. 12:16 | “Live in harmony with one another” |
| Rom. 13:8 | “Love one another” |
| Rom. 14:13 | “Let us stop passing judgment on one another” |
| Rom. 14:19 | “Mutual edification” |
| Rom. 15:5 | “Spirit of unity among yourselves” |
| Rom. 15:7 | “Accept one another” |
| Rom. 15:14 | “Instruct one another” |
| Rom. 16:16 | “Greet one another” |
| 1 Cor. 11:33 | “Wait for each other” |

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| PASSAGE | CONTENT |
|---------------|---|
| 1 Cor. 12:25 | “Concern for each other” |
| 1 Cor. 16:20 | “Greet one another” |
| 2 Cor. 13:12 | “Greet one another” |
| Gal. 5:13 | “Serve one another” |
| Gal. 6:2 | “Carry each other’s burdens” |
| Eph. 4:2 | “Bearing with one another in love” |
| Eph. 4:32 | “Be kind and compassionate to one another” |
| Eph. 5:21 | “Submit to one another” |
| Phil. 2:3 | “Consider others better than yourselves” |
| Col. 3:9 | “Do not lie to each other” |
| Col. 3:13 | “Bear with each other” |
| 1 Thess. 3:12 | “Make your love increase and overflow for each other” |
| 1 Thess. 4:9 | “Love each other” |
| 1 Thess. 4:18 | “Encourage each other” |
| 1 Thess. 5:11 | “Encourage one another” |
| 1 Thess. 5:15 | “Always try to be kind to each other” |
| Heb. 10:24 | “Spur one another” |
| James 4:11 | “Do not slander one another” |
| James 5:9 | “Don’t grumble against each other” |
| James 5:16 | “Confess your sins to each other” |
| James 5:16 | “Pray for each other” |
| 1 Pet. 1:22 | “Love one another” |
| 1 Pet. 4:9 | “Offer hospitality to one another” |
| 1 Pet. 5:5 | “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another” |
| 1 Pet. 5:14 | “Greet one another” |
| 1 John 3:11 | “Love one another” |
| 1 John 3:23 | “Love one another” |
| 1 John 4:7 | “Love one another” |
| 1 John 4:11 | “Love one another” |
| 1 John 4:12 | “Love each other” |

The things we teach, the way we speak to one another, the financial and personal support we give, the mercy and faith we express—all are part of bodybuilding.

CONCLUSIONS

In the study of spiritual gifts *balance* is vital. There is a sense of de-emphasis of gifts in the epistles—they are not to be exulted in, or pursued, or desired for public performance. Rather, we must

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care for, and serve, one another in obedience to the Scriptures. We must also recognize that the Body of Christ will not grow without the exercise of its abilities for the maturity of its cellular parts. Both are true—at the same time.

