

## Spiritual Gifts

*"We must no longer be children....but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." Ephesians 4:14-16*

St. Paul uses a lot of "body language" in his letters. It paints a great picture of the church and helps us understand the importance of being a part of a whole. It also helps us see how vital it is that each part is working, not by its own steam or initiative, but by the equipping and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

**We all want to make a difference in the world.** It's part of being human and it's part of being Christian. One way we can grow in understanding not only how to make a difference but what difference God wants us to make is through the discovery, development, and deployment of our **spiritual gifts**.

If you are a life-long Christian and are asking, "Why have I never heard about spiritual gifts until now?" it's not because they are new. The use of spiritual gifts is in fact the oldest way of being the church. Spiritual gifts are not a fad, or a program, and they are not a reinvented "time and talent" approach to ministry. The **very first church** was established on the spiritual gifts God gave believers to do the work of ministry in order to grow the Body of Christ.

But a lot has happened between the birth of the New Testament church and the time we live in today. Ways of being the Church, and ways of "doing church", have ebbed and flowed over the centuries. Now, amazingly, we are finding ourselves living in a period of church history where there is a resurgence of seeking out the ancient, a hunger to rediscover the roots of our faith. I believe as we look to the New Testament church as our mentor we are being brought back by God to the way "church", the very Body of Christ, not only began but was meant to be all along.

So what is this New Testament way of being the church? And what are spiritual gifts, really? A good definition is the one given by Kenneth C. Haugk in *"Discovering God's Vision for Your Life; You and Your Spiritual Gifts"*. In it Dr. Haugk writes, "Spiritual gifts are unique endowments from the Holy Spirit, generously shared with Christians in community for building up the Body of Christ in practical ways." So where do spiritual gifts come from? They come from the Holy Spirit. They come from GOD! Imagine! The Creator of the Universe has instilled endowments in you, **on purpose** for His purpose! And who are spiritual gifts given to? They are given to Christians in community – not just any and everybody – but specifically to believers who are part of a faith

community. And why is that? Because the sole purpose of spiritual gifts is to grow the Body of Christ.

It's important to note that spiritual gifts are different and distinct from other gifts written about in the Bible. To know where writers are speaking specifically about **spiritual** gifts, and not some other kind of gift, we need to know where in the New Testament Greek text the word "charismata", meaning grace-gift, is used. This keeps us from confusing spiritual gifts (charismata), with the other good gifts and talents God gives all people.

*We have gifts (charismata) that differ according to the grace given to us (Romans 12:6a)*

While there are various legitimate ways to discuss spiritual gifts, and how they relate to natural talents, life experiences, and other good gifts from God, I have found it most helpful to rely on what the Bible says, and doesn't say, specifically about charismata when teaching on spiritual gifts. There are at least 20 spiritual gifts (charismata) listed in the Bible, all very different but yet alike in one way. They are not gifts given TO you, they are gifts given THROUGH you. You see, the gift itself is not meant for you but for those on the receiving end of your giftedness. And the gift is always Jesus. When you work through your spiritual gifts you are really allowing the Holy Spirit to be Jesus THROUGH you for the benefit of others. If, for example, your gift is to teach the faith, the teaching isn't for you but for those whom you teach. If your gift is mercy, the mercy isn't for you but for those on the receiving end of your love. See how it works? God being God through you - your body, your voice, your hands - to help heal a broken and hurting world.

*"Now there are varieties of gifts (charismata), but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)*

I love the subject of spiritual gifts because they are so specific - you can get your hands as well as your intellect around them. They are both what make us wonderfully diverse as Christians - and what unify us so strongly. You see, since no one may possess all of the spiritual gifts, we must learn to depend upon each other in the most healthy of ways. This isn't the kind of reliance that is imbalanced, as that of a small child with a parent. Rather, it's the kind of healthy interdependence members of a team have with one another. Spiritual gifts are what "get us in the game" and "keep us on the team". The most beautiful picture of the Church is the one Martin Luther painted by preaching the "priesthood of **all** believers", no one left out, no one on the sidelines.

*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift (charisma) each of you has received. (1Peter 4:10)*

Spiritual gifts are for serving. It's pretty much crystal clear. But serving like you may have never experienced before. This isn't dutiful serving. This isn't drudgery serving. This isn't square-peg-in-a-round-hole serving. This is the kind of serving that fills you to overflowing with energy and gratitude and humbleness and joy all rolled into one. You see, God loves you! He chose your gift(s) for you because He knows you better than you know yourself. He knows what will bring you fulfillment and purpose and how you can best be used as a vessel to grow His Body. He desires you to experience joy in serving, and when you use your spiritual gift I can guarantee you will experience joy, and freedom, like never before. God wants you to discover your spiritual gifts, to learn how to use them, and then to yield to Him by allowing the Holy Spirit to flow through you in the ways He chooses.

*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'* (I Corinthians 12:21-22)

There is no gift more important than another and there is no gift the Body is better off without. We are each given specific gifts on purpose to use in our faith communities so that our churches can be healthy and whole and well prepared to reach out with the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are not all designed to be the same, to have the same gifts, to do the same things. Can you imagine a church where every one had a gift of visionary leadership but not one person had a servanthood gift! Or a church where every person had a teaching gift without a helping gift in sight. Instead, we are meant by God's great design to be DIFFERENT – wonderfully diverse – so that only when we are put together are we whole. Scripture teaches us that each Christian (and that means every single one!) is given at least one spiritual gift. Thank God we are not asked to go it alone or do it all. Thank God it is a **promise** that each one of us has distinct purpose and empowerment, through the Holy Spirit, to make a difference and bring help and wholeness to our church and to our world.

In an article entitled *Awareness of Spiritual Gifts Is Changing* from Barna Research Online, February 5, 2001, Christian researcher director George Barna wrote;

*"Imagine what might happen if nearly half of all believers had a clear and firm conviction that God has given them a supernatural ability to serve Him in a specific manner. If more believers understood the nature and potential of that special empowerment, the global impact of the Christian body would be multiplied substantially. One of the functions of the local church is to help believers understand who they are in Christ, and how to live the Christian life more fully. Focusing on spiritual gifts – what they are, who has them, how to discover one's giftedness, and how to use gifts appropriately – could ignite a movement of service and influence unlike anything we have experienced during our lifetime."*

Imagine it! Imagine YOUR church grounded in the spiritual gifts of God's people. Imagine what God wants to do through the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Imagine what God wants to do through YOU.

*"We are **one body** in Christ, and individually we are **members one of another.**"*  
Romans 12:5

If you haven't done so already, decide now to discover your spiritual gifts and encourage those in your church to do the same. You see, because the church is designed by God to be individuals who are knit together into ONE BODY, it will do no good to discover your gifts if you don't know the gifts of those you are in ministry with – and visa versa. Where God has made you are strong, others may be weak – and visa versa. The things that bring you great joy may bring others great weariness – and visa versa. Your 10's on any spiritual gifts assessment tool may be others' 0's – and visa versa. And that's to be celebrated! The wonders God wants to do through you can only compliment the wonders He desires to do through the others in your faith community.

A church that knows the gifts of its members is a community that has broken the 80/20 rule (where 20% of the people do 80% of the work while 80% of the people sit back and watch the 20% doing the 80...well, you get the picture). A church that knows the gifts of its members is a community that thrives on everyone doing what they are gifted to do so there are no more "warm bodies" doing what they feel obligated to do. A gifts based church encourages all of its members to discover their gift so that no one is left on the sidelines and no one is overextended. **A gifts based church understands that we are not here to be served, but to serve.** And finally, a gifts based church realizes that service is only God pleasing when it's done with cheerful, and grateful hearts.

If you want to learn more about the person God has created (and is creating) you to be, if you want your church to become a church that is based on the spiritual gifts of God's people, if you want to grow in biblical understanding and are ready to put into action the teachings and promises of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church, then say an excellent YES to helping to bring the ministry and teaching of spiritual gifts into your congregation.

These are my personal recommendations for developing a spiritual gifts based ministry within your church:

- Resist the temptation to ONLY use a spiritual gifts assessment tool, though it appears to be a quick and easy approach. This subject is much richer, deeper, and complex than may be initially recognized. Actual EDUCATION is required if individuals, and later congregations as a whole, are going to embrace the theology of a spiritual gifts based ministry. Remember, spiritual gift theology is NOT a reinvented time and talent approach to ministry or a passing fad. It is biblical truth that requires teaching.
- Educate and train individuals in small groups. Even though it is time intensive, so much more can be explored and learned since gifts are typically discovered in RELATIONSHIPS.
- Form a spiritual gifts ministry team that ideally includes the senior pastor, a gifted teacher of the faith, a visionary leader (if the teacher does not have this gift as well), a person gifted in wisdom, a person gifted in helps/servanthood, and faithful pray-ers who will intercess faithfully for both the leadership team AND the individuals in the small groups as they are learning about and discovering their gifts.
- Create the kind of atmosphere where experimenting with and exploring spiritual gifts is encouraged. Evaluate together the effectiveness of the gifts individuals explore (spiritual gifts bear fruit). Always keep in mind that assessment tools are just that – TOOLS – not the Gospel – which means that sometimes they don't work.
- Decide from the start you are in it for the long haul, no matter what! Changing a culture is hard work that will be resisted. But take heart in knowing others have gone before you and survived! (It has taken nearly 7 years of persistent, steadfast prayer and teaching for the culture of our current congregation to shift from being a standard 80/20 church to a church based on spiritual gifts theology.)
- Learn and use spiritual gifts language. Once you learn about a gift, talk about it! Help others to talk about their gifts. Seek servants for specific ministries who have been given specific gifts – but avoid being too narrowly focused. For example, there is certainly no need to require all Sunday morning teachers to have a teaching gift. Gifts of nurturing leadership, knowing, and servanthood (among others) are wonderful gifts to have when working with children and youth. On the other hand, wisdom and discernment gifts, though valuable throughout all of our ministries, are ones we have come to believe are absolutely essential gifts to have represented on our governing council.

- Celebrate the gifts of God's people. Be quick to praise God publicly for the spiritual gifts of your brothers and sisters, referring to specific gifts used to perform specific ministry. Lift up **diversity** as a POSITIVE every chance you get. Help your congregation delight in God's diverse creation.

There are not only good, but GREAT resources now available to help you and your congregation become steeped in spiritual gifts theology. I am blessed to have led hundreds of people through the discovery process using different materials and have found Tebunah Ministries' *Discovering God's Vision for Your Life; You and Your Spiritual Gifts* to be the best resource in which to base my teaching. It is biblically solid, incredibly well researched, and includes what I feel are the best assessment tools I have seen. A great bonus for Lutheran congregations is the fact that it is written by a Lutheran, Dr. Kenneth C. Haugk, the founder of Stephen Ministries. Since many Lutheran churches have experience with Stephen Ministry, I have found it to be an easier "sell" to Lutheran congregations than other materials might be.

Other good resources are available. The key is to find one that includes not only assessment tools but teachings so that you and your congregation can become biblically grounded in becoming an Acts church. God bless you on your journey! May your efforts be rewarded as you watch the fire in God's people ignite and then explode into meaningful service.

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