

Receiving the Spirit's Gifts

Sometimes Christians get caught up in a frenetic quest to discover their spiritual gifts. Theologian Charles C. Ryrie tells how to save the blessing and avoid the panic.

How important is it to know your spiritual gifts? Does vitality in your Christian life and in your church hinge on discovering these gifts?

Some spokesmen today are saying things like, "Only through the exercise of spiritual gifts on the part of each believer will the body be built up." And, "If we do not understand what our spiritual gifts are, then we will not experience meaningful achievement in life."

But others are saying, "Gifts are not the important thing. Indeed, all of the gifts may only have been given to the early church and none are being given today. The important thing is to be mature in Christ."

Does the Bible speak clearly on this matter? I believe it does.

It was in 1956 that I first preached a sermon on spiritual gifts. I well remember that every time I preached that sermon the reaction was one of excited astonishment. As people realized that God had endowed them with abilities to serve Him, they

blossomed right before my eyes.

Knowing the power of this New Testament theme, I am distressed when I see believers becoming bogged down in the current debate over which gifts they should seek and whether there are even any gifts to be received! Let's examine, therefore, the biblical guidelines about the gifts you and your fellow believers can expect to receive from the Spirit.

Gifts still given today

In the first place, it must be stated that God *is* giving spiritual gifts to His people today. The New Testament abundantly affirms that gifts are given to all believers. Those who say that the gifts were only for the first generation of Christians and the founding of the church usually point to the book of Acts and Paul's earlier epistles like I Corinthians (chapter 12). But what about Ephesians (chapter 4)? Also, there is I Pet. 4:10 which says that every Christian has received a spiritual gift. Both Ephesians and I Peter, according to conservative scholars, were written in the early 60s. In other words, sec-

ond generation Christians scattered throughout the Roman provinces in Asia Minor had been given gifts and were expected to use them in ministering to each other.

A second reason that compels us to believe that God is giving gifts to His people today is that gifts are necessary for the proper functioning of the body of Christ. This is certainly the emphasis of Romans 12, I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. Although it seems to be true that certain gifts were given only for the beginning of the church (Eph. 2:20 says that apostles and prophets were given to found the church, the body of Christ), other gifts continue to be necessary as long as the body is not complete in numbers and maturity. Or to put it another way, as long as the Great Commission is not yet fulfilled, it will be necessary for God to give gifts and for believers to use them.

Obviously the gifts of evangelism, helps, showing mercy and so forth are involved in bringing people to Christ, while such gifts as teaching, exhortation, helps and administration are indispensable in "teaching them

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Crass materialism, of course, is always the sin of the other guy. And yet . . . Poet Luci Shaw sets a tongue-in-cheek prayer against God's point of view.

Now that the Good Life is lived out in Harmony Harbor (each 100 foot lot with its own tropical palms and waterfront), now that happiness is founded on fringe benefits, the Four Freedoms and the American Standard of Living, God, forbid that I should have to put up with the inconvenience of unprepared foods, clothes that need ironing, the rising price of sugar, gas rationing, or the rigors of winter in the North.

Guarantee, please, that I won't discover worn spots on my carpeting or my creeping bent. God, forbid that I should suffer from the lack of a color TV, a Polaroid Land camera, a stereo-tape deck, Right Guard and my husband's Christmas bonus. And please see that I am not deprived of good coffee, a phone in every room, a digital clock radio to wake or lull me, my accustomed vacation to the woods, the mountain or the shore, and Valium on the night table. God, forbid that I ever feel obligated to order chopped sirloin instead of Prime Filet when we eat out.

Insure, please, that our church building is equipped with air-conditioning, cushioned pews, the tender vibrations of an electric organ and reliable janitor service. And spare us from prickly and opinionated preachers who confront us with uncomfortable doctrines about sin and Satan and responsibility and love, instead of reassuring us and building up our faith in the status quo.

God, forbid that I should experience pain, fatigue, boredom, insomnia, anxiety, air pollution or criticism. (To the enlightened twentieth-century Christian, surely these should be things of the past, eliminated by the blessings of Behavioral Psychology and Life Enrichment courses at the local college.) Please see that in my old age I am not forced to be dependent on anything but Social Security, life insurance, Medicare and an ample pension. God, forbid that I feel led to tithe more than 10%, or undergo the petty annoyances of providing hospitality to missionaries with small children, or spend my valuable time in chit-chat with my new neighbor, no matter how lonely she is. And God, while I admire the fresh greens and glowing reds of my well-groomed rose garden, guard me from sensing the sterility and drought of my own heart.

God, forbid that I should ever have to push past the velvet curtains of affluent suburban living and come to grips with real life; that I should seek goals beyond

my own ego-satisfaction, comfort, fulfillment, security and social success. May I never personally have to face the issues of hunger, economic recession, ghetto life, drug abuse, alcoholism, divorce or unevangelized pagans. Forbid that I ever be *driven* to your Word because of my own inadequate resources; or that I agonize in prayer for my children (or myself) when they find my kind of Christianity less than convincing.

God, forbid that tragedy ever strike through to me in my comfortable habitat, so carefully planned (in beautiful taste, with eclectic furniture, and Bach chorales soaring through the intercom). Yes, God, forbid that death or cancer or disillusionment should happen; that I should need the contrast of darkness to know what light is; of sorrow that uncovers joy; of guilt that leads to forgiveness; of trauma that precedes peace.

Oh God, forbid that I should suffer!

When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends. Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.

Experience shows that the more we share Christ's suffering, the more we are able to give of his encouragement.

Since Christ had to suffer for you, you must fortify yourselves with the same inner attitude that he must have had. You must realize that to be dead to sin inevitably means pain, and you should not therefore spend the rest of your time here on earth indulging your physical nature, but in doing the will of God.

I beg you not to be unduly alarmed at the fiery ordeals which come to test your faith, as though this were some abnormal experience. You should be glad, because it means that you are called to share Christ's sufferings. One day, when he shows himself in full splendor, to men, you will be filled with the most tremendous joy.

After you have borne these sufferings a very little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to share his eternal splendor through Christ, will himself make you whole and secure and strong.

Scripture quotations taken from J. B. Phillips' translation of the New Testament: James 1:2-4; II Cor. 1:6-7; I Pet. 4:1-2; I Pet. 4:12-13; I Pet. 5:10.

to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." So let's not throw out the baby with the bath water—maturity is the goal for every Christian (Eph. 4:13), but the exercising of gifts is a part of achieving that maturity.

But another important fact to remember today is that it is not necessary to know your gift or gifts before you can serve the Lord effectively. After all, there is no verse in the New Testament that commands you to *discover* your spiritual gifts, but there are many commands to serve. Indeed, it is striking to notice that many of the commands to serve involve the same activities as are involved in exercising some of the gifts. For example, there is a spiritual gift of giving, but all Christians are to give. There is a gift of evangelism, but all are to witness. The accompanying table relates several of the Spirits' gifts with the corresponding commands which are directed to all believers.

The gift of ruling or administration is not given to all nor commanded except in relation to the qualifications for elders and deacons (I Tim. 3:4, 12). The other eight gifts specifically listed in the New Testament are considered by many to have been limited to the early be-

lievers (prophecy, apostleship, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, miracles, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and healing). Even if they are not so limited, there are no corresponding commands which are given to all believers. Nowhere are all believers told to prophecy, be apostles, heal, etc.

However, while debating whether or not certain gifts were limited to the early church, we must not lose sight of the main point: there are clear commands in the New Testament to all believers which we ought to be obeying whether or not we "discover" that we have the corresponding spiritual gifts.

Key to discovering your gifts

And herein lies an important practical clue: Activity may lead to discovery! If you are active in doing what you know to be pleasing to God, then the Lord will entrust other opportunities to you, and in the fulfilling of these opportunities you may be able to see what your spiritual gifts are.

When we are first introduced to Philip in the book of Acts, we find him helping distribute the relief money to a group of needy women (6:5). I doubt he sat down and

tried to decide whether or not he had the gift of ministering or helping before he allowed his name to be proposed along with the other six who were chosen to be helpers to the apostles. Here was an opportunity to serve, so he took it. He was willing to do this rather menial task, and he was faithful in doing it. The Lord then entrusted him with another ministry, that of evangelizing the Samaritans (8:5). Evangelizing was certainly one of his spiritual gifts, for later he is called Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8).

The same is true of Stephen. He first served along with Philip in ministering to those widows in the church (Acts 6:5). But he also had faith (6:8) and of course he was a great witness (7:54). Faithfulness in one ministry leads to other opportunities and the enablement (including the spiritual gifts) to fulfill them.

And this leads to another clue: Dedication or willingness is more important than discovering your spiritual gifts!

In all of our attention today on the matter of discerning one's spiritual gifts, we seem to have forgotten that being willing to do anything God might desire is of top priority. The passage on gifts in Ephesians 4 begins with an exhortation to a worthy life and lowly walk (4:1-2). The extended discussion on spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12-14 is preceded in that letter by several exhortations to dedication (3:16; 6:19-20; 10:31). And the passage on gifts in Romans 12 begins with that great call to dedication of life in verses 1 and 2. He gives the gifts, but we make the dedication. So dedication is our first concern.

Yes, the risen Head of the church is giving gifts today to the members of His body. But our responsibility is not only to try to discover those gifts but to be sure that we are unreservedly dedicated to the Lord, and that we are faithfully serving Him in all the opportunities He gives us each day. □

The Spiritual Gift to Some

1. Pastor (shepherding)
2. Ministering or helping
3. Teaching
4. Exhortation
5. Giving
6. Showing mercy
7. Faith
8. Evangelism
9. Discerning spirits

The Command to All

1. "Edify one another" (I Thess. 5:11)
2. "By love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13)
3. "Teaching them to observe all things..." (Matt. 28:19)
4. "Exhorting one another" (Heb. 10:25)
5. "Every man as he hath purposed in his heart, so let him give" (II Cor. 9:7)
6. "Be ye kind one to another" (Eph. 4:32)
7. "For we walk by faith" (II Cor. 5:7)
8. "Ye shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8)
9. "Try the spirits" (I John 4:1)