

THE GOAL AND GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

Doug Goins

I love the lyrics of the hymn *Lavish Love, Abundant Beauty* by Peter Ellis:

*Lavish love, abundant beauty, gracious gifts for heart and hand,
Life that fills the soul and senses-all burst forth at Your command...
In Your loving heart You planned me, fashioned me with greatest care;
Through my soul You breathed Your Spirit, planted Your own image there. (1)*

He expresses what God has done in terms of gifting and joy and life, all in the first person singular.

In Romans 12:3-5 the apostle Paul talks about God's love for us expressed through gifting, and he too begins in the first person singular: "For through the grace given to me...." Then he expands it until we are all included: "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly...."

This summer men and women from this body are going to go out and use the gifts that God has given each one of them individually in ministry all around the world. Some of them may be trying out the gifting that perhaps God has given them. It is wonderfully encouraging how God expresses his love for us through all the ways that he has spiritually gifted us.

Unfortunately, the church in Corinth was confused about this issue, as they were in many other areas of church life. They misunderstood spiritual gifts and they were misusing the gifts. Look at 1 Corinthians 12:1, where Paul addresses this misunderstanding: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware." Farther on in 12:4 he will say, "Now there are varieties of gifts...."

This concern about the Corinthians' being uninformed, Paul would probably express today about the church of Jesus Christ in general, even though this Biblical doctrine of spiritual gifts is tremendously important to the spiritual health and effectiveness of the church. Apart from the direct energizing Spirit of God, nothing is more vital to our Christian service than the ministry of the spiritual gifts with which God has endowed us. If we really understood this dynamic, then every one of us in the body of Christ would be immersed in ministry in the church and in the community that surrounds us. Each one of us is gifted, and we are all to express the various gifts in ministry.

Contrary to what many people think about the nature of the church, the true church of Jesus Christ is not a visible, human organization run by a hierarchy of officials. It is not a social agency to meet the demands and needs of the community. It is not a convenient place to be baptized and married and buried. And it certainly is not a religious social club where people of like-minded beliefs and sensitivities and standards get together for fellowship and for occasional service activities. The church, as established by Jesus Christ and the writers of the New Testament, is a living organism. It is the supernatural body of Christ, who is its Head, the Lord. That is very clear in Romans 12:4, which we read earlier. And this beautiful picture of us as a body with Jesus as the Head will be amplified in our next study in the second half of 1 Corinthians 12. But the members of Christ's body are entirely and exclusively people who have become new creatures through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and as Lord. The church is created, established, empowered, and led by the Lord Jesus himself.

Every member of Christ's church has been given supernatural endowments, gifts of God's Holy Spirit, divine means to minister his life, word, and power among his people in the family of faith and in the community around us. Our spiritual gifts are given for the edification of the church and for the evangelization of the world. We can be part of what God is doing through understanding our giftedness. And it's through the exercise of our gifts that we keep growing in our faith as we worship, witness, and serve.

But again, the Corinthian Christians didn't understand that. Even though the apostle Paul told them back at the beginning of the letter in 1:7, "...You are not lacking in any gift...." he has to start over and review with them the place of spiritually gifted men and women in the body of Christ. Remember some of the besetting sins that this community struggled with: divisiveness, intellectual arrogance, competitiveness. The Corinthian Christians weren't building one another up through their gifts. Some

believers there thought they had every spiritual gift, and they looked down on people whom they thought were less gifted. Some gloried in the gifts of leadership, and they were trying to use those gifts for personal advantage, influence, and control of people. Spiritual gifting is not necessarily a mark of Christian character or spiritual maturity. These Corinthian Christians viewed their spiritual gifts as immature children selfishly playing with toys would, not as mature adults who were selflessly using the spiritual tools that God had given them to serve one another.

CONFESSING JESUS CHRIST AS LORD

So let's see how Paul corrects them on this issue of spiritual gifts. In verses 1-3 Paul summarizes the goal of the Spirit of God, focusing on the importance of our gifting, and then on this wonderful contrast between what our life was like before the Spirit made us alive, when we followed idols, and what our life is like now with Jesus Christ as Lord and with the Holy Spirit leading us.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed" [literally, "Jesus be damned"]; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

The goal of the Spirit's influence is always to lead us to confess Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives. Paul contrasts their experience as unconverted idolaters with their present experience as Christians. He had described in 6:9 the pagan background that God had brought them out of: "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God." That is what they had once been, and in their unrighteousness, they had worshipped dead idols.

But now they belonged to the living God. Their idols had never spoken to them, but God did speak to them through the Holy Spirit. We're going to see when we get to verse 10 that he spoke through them with the gift of prophecy.

When they were lost, Paul says in 12:1-3, they were captives of Satan and their own depraved natures, and they were spiritually blind. They were weak, so they couldn't help being led into idolatry. We saw in chapter 10 (Discovery Paper 4527) that they were under the control of demonic influence. That's what he's referring to in verse 2: "You were led astray...." or carried away. Perhaps the reference in verse 3 to saying, "Jesus be accursed," is recalling what the Corinthians were like when they were under the influence of the demonic prior to their conversion-that's the only way they could say those horrible words. But now the point he makes is the good news-the Spirit of God was directing them.

There is another important historical point to make about this confession "Jesus is Lord." A citizen of the Roman Empire was required once a year to put a pinch of incense on a pagan altar and declare, "Caesar is Lord." But people who were born again, who knew that Jesus was the only Lord, couldn't say this. It was really a challenge to faith. You see, it's only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can wholeheartedly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives.

Paul wonderfully summarizes that confession of faith in Romans 10:9: "...If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." Now, you probably agree that anybody can say the words, "Jesus is Lord." But to make the confession with full meaning, wholeheartedly, can happen only when we're controlled by the Holy Spirit of God. We don't make that discovery of the lordship of Jesus Christ by natural means, on our own. It's only the Holy Spirit of God who helps us to see that spiritual reality.

In summary, where the Holy Spirit is at work, Christ will be glorified. Jesus said of the Holy Spirit to come, in the upper room that last night before he was betrayed (John 16:13-14), "But when he, Spirit of truth, comes...he will not speak on his own...He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you." (NIV.) The goal of the Holy Spirit is always to reveal Jesus Christ. So if we are committed to exalting Jesus Christ in all of our ministries and our life together, if we are focused on him as the living Head of this body, then we can trust the power of the Spirit of God to be at work here among us, individually and collectively, in our lives and in our church.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER GIFTS, MINISTRIES, AND RESULTS

Now in verses 4-11, Paul is going to describe how the lordship of Jesus Christ is expressed in the church and in the world through the gifts of the Spirit. There are three emphases: (1) In verses 4-6 the source of our gifts is the triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit. (2) In verse 7 the goal of his giving gifts is the good of the church. And (3) in verses 8-11 he focuses on the process of how they're distributed. Let's read verses 4-6 about the source of our gifts from the triune God:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.

In every verse the word "varieties" is used. That's because God loves variety. As a triune God, he is unified within himself, but the gifts are given in great variety. Christians are wonderfully different from one another. God is too creative to use a cookie cutter when he makes us. And he encourages diversity in his church by gifting each one of us uniquely for ministry.

We see this principle at work in several areas. Think about the world of athletic competition. On any given team there are any number of players, but each player has a different skill set, a different specialty, a different position to play. We see the same thing demonstrated in our choir, in which there is great variety and diversity in vocal expression: sopranos, altos, tenors, basses; some voices that are solo voices, some that are ensemble voices. And in the orchestra there is a wonderful blend of instruments, skills, musical sensitivities, and abilities.

Let's look more closely at this Trinitarian expression of variety in spiritual gifting. A spiritual gift is a special enabling for ministry, a capacity for spiritual service, or a specific function appointed by God to accomplish his purposes in the church and in the world. Talents and personality traits are natural human resources that all of us have. They are not the same as spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are given by God's sovereign choice through the Holy Spirit at the time we become Christians. These are supernatural enablements so that we may serve God more effectively. Both natural talents and spiritual gifts must be employed in the power of the Holy Spirit, and not in the self-energy of the flesh, to please God and bring positive results for his kingdom.

Verse 6 talks about how these gifts are working "in all persons." Verse 7 says, "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit...." And verse 11 talks about the Spirit's "...distributing to each one individually just as He wills." That repetition means that no one was left out when the spiritual gifts were given. Every Christian has been spiritually gifted by God. And exercising our gifts will bring joy and fulfillment and adventure to our lives.

Craig Duncan and I have been involved with a group of men for the last twenty months, learning to be better followers of Jesus and learning how to study the Scriptures together. We just spent six weeks studying spiritual gifts, trying to encourage one another in how we might be gifted spiritually. Two of the brothers think that they might be gifted as evangelists. I was struck by what one brother, John Clement, said about his adventures in sharing his faith with people at work, and how scary and yet how exciting that is. He said, "There's no other way to live!"

Verse 5 talks about "varieties of ministries, and the same Lord." Christ himself provides the opportunities for us to use our gifts. The term "ministries," or services, defines the divinely appointed tasks or areas in which we exercise our gifts. Jesus is Lord of our lives individually, he's the Lord of his church collectively, and he's sovereign over where and how we are to use our spiritual gifts.

Now, the way we're led to express those spiritual gifts may be different for different people. Sometimes an announcement, such as a need for help in the children's ministry, will be what the Lord Jesus uses to motivate you to express your gifts in ministry. Or you may see a need that hasn't been recognized, and God will sovereignly motivate you to walk into that to express your gifts. It's great when leadership recognizes how we are gifted, and we are encouraged that way. But that won't always happen. Yet the promise here is that Jesus is still sovereign over our ministry. He will open doors for us, no matter how we're encouraged or motivated to express our gifts.

Let me give you two examples. Last summer Brent Becker, our high-school pastor, announced that they needed people in the high-school department to disciple students and to lead Bible studies. Mike Mulkey is a good teacher in our body. So he stepped up and entered into the high-school ministry. Mike told me just last week how much he has loved the last nine months. He said, "I'm being stretched spiritually beyond belief." A contrasting example is Jennifer Espinoza. Jennifer went into East Palo Alto ten years ago as a single woman. It was her vision, her calling from the Lord. Nobody in leadership here had a vision for ministry over there. But Jennifer followed the Lord in obedience into East Palo Alto, and God raised up a team of people around her. God even found her a husband out of that ministry six years ago. But both Mike and Jennifer understand that Jesus Christ, who is sovereign over the ministry of gifts, will lead us where he wants us, if we are sensitive to him.

Finally, in verse 6, God himself is responsible for the variety of effects. Literally the word is "energizings." That means, logically, that we are not responsible. It takes a great weight off of us when we're trying to serve the Lord in ministry. What we're called to is faithfulness in exercising our gifts in the places where Christ directs us. Then God takes full responsibility for the eternal impact.

I was very burdened about preaching a certain message to the college group ten years ago. We had a huge group that summer, and there were a number of non-Christian guys who were showing up every week. I think they were there because of the girls. But a number of folks were praying for their salvation. I remember getting ready to preach Psalm 130, which is a very focused

evangelistic message, to the college students. I really preached my heart out, just praying that these guys would respond. But they didn't budge—there was no response. Yet two months later, I went to Puebla, Mexico, and preached the same message, through a translator, in a little Mexican church to a mixed audience that included children up through elderly people. Twenty-five people came forward to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. I was just as faithful both times in exercising the gift. But it was very evident to me that God was responsible for the results, not I.

EXERCISING SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN LOVE

Now in verse 7 let's look at the singular aim of our spiritual gifts, our ministries, and the effects.

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

They're given for the good of the church. We are gifted for the benefit of others, not to please ourselves. The Corinthian Christians especially needed this reminder, because they were using their spiritual gifts to promote themselves, not to prosper the church. The call for us is to accept our gifting with humility, and then to use our gifts lovingly to promote unity in the whole church. We're not to show off or compare ourselves to others. In contrast, we're to serve other people.

Gifts are to be exercised in the context of *agape* love. God's word is both consistent and insistent on the way that spiritual gifts are to be expressed, in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, which are the three sections of Scripture that list spiritual gifts. After the 1 Corinthians 12 discussion of gifts, Paul says, "I will show you a more excellent way." That way is love, as he explains so beautifully in 1 Corinthians 13. In Romans 12:9, right after the discussion of gifts, he says, "Let love be without hypocrisy." In Ephesians 4 the apostle talks about speaking the truth in love and of building in love. Additionally, the apostle Peter in his general discussion of spiritual gifts says, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another" (1 Peter 4:8).

The loving exercise of our varieties of spiritual gifts is powerfully galvanizing. We struggle with unity in the body, and here we're told that as we use our diverse gifts, unity will be built among us. It will reinforce our common identity in Jesus Christ. But too often in the church we have a tendency to seek unity through conformity, not diversity. Rather than encouraging this exciting diversity of gifting in ministry, we discourage it. In many churches, the quest for uniformity is defined by absolute loyalty to the pastoral staff, and faithfulness in attendance to every single activity the church promotes. There's too often a top-down effort to get all the members of the church to think alike on every issue. There may be a certain efficiency in that sort of authoritarian approach to leadership, but it's spiritually self-defeating, because it doesn't recognize this dynamic of the giftedness of each and every member and of their ultimate accountability to the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the Head of the church. The choice is dull, lifeless conformity, or rich, colorful unity in diversity. (I admit, it's a lot less organized to live the latter way.)

GIFTS DEFINED

Now in verses 8-10 Paul offers a representative list of nine spiritual gifts. It's not systematic or comprehensive, but it does make clear that our gifts are sovereignly distributed by the Spirit of God.

For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.

There are two lists of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. The other one is given at the end of the chapter, and we'll look at that in the next message. If your appetite is whetted for a more exhaustive study of spiritual gifts, you may want to read Ron Ritchie's series *Now Concerning Spiritual Gifts* (Discovery Papers 4476-4481) on the three passages Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12.

Let's quickly look at the gifts that are listed here. Wisdom and knowledge (verse 8) are foundational speaking or communication gifts. Wisdom is the ability to perceive life from God's perspective, to have an intuitive insight into the true nature of things, and to be able to apply Biblical truth to specific, real-life situations. Someone described it as putting truth to work at home, in marriage, in the church, in business, in the world. Knowledge, on the other hand, is insight into truth gained from the hard work of careful study of God's word, and the ability to communicate that truth. It's systematizing and categorizing spiritual truth, breaking it into manageable, understandable portions for teaching. Our elders have observed these two gifts at work among us at PBC. They suggest that Steve Zeisler preaches more from a wisdom gift, and I preach more from a knowledge gift. You can see the similarities and dissimilarities in those two gifts. Both are important for the body.

The gift of faith is listed in verse 9. This is a firm persuasion or a conviction based on hearing truth. In the New Testament, faith is always focused on God. It's the ability to see what God can do, to believe it when nobody else sees it or understands it. It's believing that God can do anything and everything. It's the gift of vision. I'm thankful for the people here at PBC who have that

gift of faith vision. One of my dear friends, a brother in business who has this gift, has followed a vision for ministry from the Lord from Colombia to Mexico to Germany. And because he believed that God would open doors and provide resources, many of us in the body have "ridden his coattails"; we got to go along and minister with him. His latest vision is that we should buy a \$6 million hacienda in Mexico for the prison ministry. We'll see how that one works out-I don't see that yet. But he's got the gift of faith, I don't. So stay tuned!

Verses 9-10 talk about healings and miracles. Both of these are sign gifts, as are the gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues. First Corinthians 12 is the only place these four sign gifts appear. Corinth was the most charismatic church in the Pauline circle, and it was the most problematic and carnal church that Paul shepherded. The expression of these four dramatic gifts was destructively out of control, and Paul writes chapters 12-14 of this letter to bring needed correction and balance to the use of these gifts.

Healings and miracles always appear in the New Testament to authenticate the spoken message of the gospel, and are usually accomplished before nonbelievers to evoke saving faith in Jesus. Healings could be "gifts of healing" or "gifts of healings." This gift is the ability to heal someone who is physically ill, emotionally ill, or spiritually ill. Those are the three areas of life where we consistently need restoration. The word literally means to make whole. In the gospel it's used figuratively of spiritual healing. The gift of miracles is literally the energizing of powers. It's the ability to release the power of God in a unique and supernatural way, as Jesus did when he turned water into wine, when he walked on the water in the Sea of Galilee, and when he raised Lazarus from the dead.

I believe the Holy Spirit is free to cause all the gifts that he has given to the church, including these miraculous sign gifts, to be exercised at any time in history, in any generation. I've seen God heal people physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And I've known his miraculous power expressed through a brother in Christ whose wife was brought back from death. I don't personally know of anybody who I would say has been clearly blessed with gifts of healing or the effecting of miracles on a consistent basis. But that doesn't mean they aren't there.

The next gift, in verse 10, is much more common and is very important in the life of the church: the gift of prophecy. It's so significant that Paul will devote most of chapter 14 to its expression. Prophecy is very close to preaching. It's the ability to speak the mind of God, to stand before the word of God and reflect its reality to people. It can at times include an element of prediction, but it's primarily a sensitivity to what God is doing in the world, the ability to see his movement in history and then help people understand his activity. Paul describes the results of prophetic teaching in 14:3: "But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation." There is a practical result from prophetic teaching.

In the church at large today, there are some outstanding prophetic voices: John R. W. Stott, a Bible scholar, preacher, and writer is a great prophetic voice. Perhaps Kay Arthur of Precepts Ministry has a prophetic element to her teaching. Charles Colson is a great prophetic voice God has given to the church as well.

The gift of discernment is next in verse 10. It's the distinguishing of spirits, the ability to discriminate from God's word between the spirit of evil and the Spirit of God, between flesh and spirit, between error and truth, and to be able to make that evaluation before the spiritual fruit becomes evident to other people. We're blessed to have several people in leadership here with this gift. They can sense spiritual phoniness or false doctrine before anybody else can.

The last two gifts in verse 10 are various kinds of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Tongues is the ability to speak in an unknown foreign language. It voices praises to God as a sign to unbelievers, Paul says in chapter 14. The interpretation of tongues is the ability to understand and translate those tongues so people can understand the spiritual truth. That's a must, Paul says, for edification for the body. When we come to chapter 14 I'll spend more time on the spiritual gifts of prophecy and tongues.

THE GIVER OF GIFTS, THE HOLY SPIRIT

Now we come to verse 11. Paul closes here with the reminder that all the gifts are from one God by the Holy Spirit. Again, they represent our only hope for unity in the body. And they are distributed sovereignly by God. He's the one in control of the gifts.

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

That's a great summary of this whole section. It's the fifth reference to the Holy Spirit as the giver of gifts. It emphasizes once again that every believer is spiritually gifted. These gifts are not for some spiritual elite, but the entire body of Christ. We are all gifted. We are all called by the Lord to minister the gifts he has supplied.

There is no indication here that the gifts are to be sought after or asked for. God wills to give sovereignly. He knows what is best for us individually and collectively. The idea of seeking after gifts would also violate the intent of the text that we're looking at,

which is really to remind the Corinthians that all believers have different gifts. In God's sovereignty he has given the gifts to be the fulfillment of his divine purposes in our lives and in the life of our church. These aren't gifts on demand. This is not a smorgasbord from which believers can choose. The point of all this is that God knows what each church needs, and he has gifted each of us appropriately to meet the needs. All the gifts are right here, right now to meet those needs.

Let me ask you some questions in closing. Do you want our church to be more unified? Do you want it to be characterized by true fellowship? Do you want it to be more of a worshipping body? Do you want it to be more evangelistic? Do you want it to be a loving community? Do you want it to be a church that walks in total obedience to Biblical truth? Do you want it to be a spiritual family that is tenderly submissive to the leading of the Holy Spirit? Do you want it to be a servant church that in very practical ways meets people's needs? If the answer is yes, we must resist the temptation to say that somebody else better do something about this-if only those leaders would just get their act together...if those other people would exercise their gifts. No, it all begins as *we* become more and more fully the church that God has called us to be. It begins as each one of us accepts personal responsibility for the exercise of our spiritual gifts. We each need to respond to Paul's challenge to the young pastor Timothy: "...Kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you...."

Listen to the apostle Peter's great, encouraging, motivational words for how our gifts ought to be exercised: "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 forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 4:10-11, NIV.)

NOTES

1. Peter Ellis, *Lavish Love, Abundant Beauty*, © 1986 WORD MUSIC.

Catalog No. 4530
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
23rd Message
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May 31, 1998

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