

Spiritual Gifts: Hope or Headache for The Church Today

I. Introduction and Background

My personal interest in the subject of spiritual gifts began in the fall of 1980. I had returned to the Seminary for my second year, and I figured that if God wanted me to be a pastor then He must have equipped me with the “gifts” to be one. That same fall in a class on evangelism the concept of spiritual gifts was formally presented. The instructor was reputed to be a staunch conservative who had a tendency to use Reformed materials. In the presentations, there were things that seemed questionable but nothing objectionable. The instructor counseled us to pray that the Lord reveal to us our spiritual gifts and to use the well-known steps for finding them out. For the next three years, I prayed about my gifts. In September of 1983 I quit praying and began this study.

Please note: This is not an attack on spiritual gifts. This is not an attack on those pastors who use spiritual gifts material. This is not an attack on the “In His Service” program used in the Texas District or on the “His Love Our Response” program used in other Districts. This is not a final statement. This is one part of a lifelong process of studying God’s Word.

II. In its present form, the “theology” of spiritual gifts presents a muddled picture.

In the literature I have consulted, the distinction between a talent, and a spiritual gift is never made clear. Is every ability a spiritual gift? If so, then does the unbeliever who is a great motivational speaker have the gift of exhortation? Does a talent become a spiritual gift once we’re baptized? If so, then what happens when a Christian with the gift of exhortation, in a moment of weakness, uses his gift to exhort a group to bomb an abortion clinic? Is he really using his gift or is he in the process of losing it?

The overlapping, splitting of hairs, and the individualized use of terms makes it appear as if no one is certain what the difference is between leadership and administration, knowledge and wisdom, prophet and teacher. If having these gifts or testing for them is so needed by the Church today, why didn’t the Holy Spirit speak clearer?

Clarity must be lacking, for those who write about the gifts of the Spirit cannot even agree which ones exist and which do not. Flynn, Nadasdy, and Yohn, authors of books on this subject, speak of the gift of intercession. My professor said that this was a “Reform gift,” and said that it was ridiculous to say that some could pray better than others. If you really want to wade into muddy waters try looking into the existence of the gifts of miracles, celibacy, martyrdom, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. The “In His Service” material speaks of these almost reluctantly. It doesn’t study them because if a person has them, they already know it.¹ (I hope so! How embarrassing if they didn’t!) The second reason the Texas District program gives for not studying the miraculous gifts is even more ridiculous: “Some of these gifts do not seem readily useable in a Lutheran context.”² Hold on there!! If someone has the gift of miracles or physical strength in my congregation—even in the District, I want to know about it. I could really use him or her. Furthermore, if the Holy Spirit intends to give us diagnostic instructions on spiritual gifts, what goes for one goes for all, even in the “Lutheran” context.

This lack of clarity, in my opinion, comes about because the literature I have read seems hopelessly mired in biblicism. For example, craftsmanship is a gift to some because God provided craftsmen to build the temple. Well, why not have the gift of lion-slaying because God gave David the strength to kill a lion. If someone really put his mind to it, I’ll bet a really interesting gift could be drawn from some of Solomon’s activities.

In hopes of proving the hypothesis that there is no clear understanding or definition to even the most frequently mentioned spiritual gifts, I gave the following test to a group of 10 pastors. These pastors had a moderate to low degree of exposure to the subject of spiritual gifts. They were given 29 verbatim descriptions of spiritual gifts quoted from various sources. They were to identify which of the 28 gifts were being described. They were told that not all were described and some were described more than once. They missed 166 out of a possible 290 or 57% of the descriptions. If the Holy Spirit does not give us clear definitions or descriptions of spiritual gifts in His Holy Word are we wise to do so? How can we conduct classes and give tests on what is so manifestly muddled?

“Ah,” but you say, “When tests are given to people, the majority find themselves having one or more of the gifts.” This too was somewhat of a mystery to me until I came across an article dealing with the unscientific nature of astrology in Christian News, Jan. 21, 1985, p.13. C.R. Synder, a psychologist at the University of Kansas, found that if you tell a group of people that a horoscope was written for their particular day of birth the majority of people will feel that it is accurate for them. Conclusion: If you tell people that everyone has one or more spiritual gifts and then show them a list of gifts, they will find themselves described by one or more— even if you tell them that there are other gifts than those listed. The power of suggestion is strong.

III. I Corinthians should not be used as a source for a “doctrine” of spiritual gifts without much more study.

In my opinion, the spiritual gift books ignore the overall context of the Corinthian letter. They whistle tunes like “Stand Up Stand Up for Jesus” and “Onward Christian Soldier” while 1 Corinthians plays “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted.” Right from the beginning Paul strikes this note: Not many are wise, not many are mighty, not many are noble Paul says of Christians in 1:26-29. Dr. Otto Betz is correct when he says in his article on *δύναμις* in the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, II, 605 that the Holy Spirit is not “simply an extra addition to men’s physical and spiritual powers. On the contrary, his supernatural origin and his characteristic as the power of God is proved by the fact that it is in weak men that he is powerful. For Paul, God is truly revealed as God where from a human standpoint there is nothing to hope for.”

St. Paul's attitude toward weakness does not seem to agree with the spiritual gift materials. In their spiritual gift inventories, they concentrate one’s attention on results. I get more results when praying, exhorting, evangelizing, etc... rather than saying, “When I am weak then I am strong.” In short, the message of 1 Cor. 1:26 seems to be changed into not many of you were wise, mighty, or noble, but the Spirit has made you these through His gifts. Sorry, that is not what St. Paul says. He says not many of you are these things, period! Nonetheless, God’s power of the Cross, that is, the Gospel, does work for you, in you, and through you.

Even if the current literature on Spiritual gifts did march to the same drum that I Corinthians does, the book should still not be used as the chief source for the study of spiritual gifts, except in a negative sense. The plain truth is that this was not a congregation using spiritual gifts well. Actually, this is a gross understatement. In 2:15, Paul says that the spiritual man *ὁ πνευματικός* appraises all things but is not appraised or examined by any. However in 3:1 Paul says that the Corinthians are not *πνευματικός* at all but *σαρκίνοις*. In other words, they did not have the ability to appraise all things and not be appraised because they weren’t spiritual. They did not understand the things of the Spirit. Neither can we say that they were fleshy simply because of their divisions or their exaltation of certain gifts. St. Paul describes their problem in 2 Cor. 11:4 as that of being led by strange spirits. It would seem they were in no better shape than the beleaguered Galatians. After all, it is no small thing to bear with those who preached “another Jesus,” “a different

spirit,” “a different gospel” (2 Corinthians 11:4).

If it is to be seriously maintained that 1 Cor. should be a source for our doctrine and practice—even in a negative sense—then the expressions of sarcasm Paul uses throughout the letter must be dealt with. (I am indebted to Dr. David Scaer for pointing out Paul’s tone of sarcasm in 1 Cor. 14.) For example, in looking at 4:3-10 we find that the Corinthians, who are not fit to be appraising spiritual things (2; 15) have the gall to ἀνακρίνω (4:3) Paul. This is the same word used in 2:15. Paul responds to such audacity with sarcasm; since you are the ones capable of appraising the apostles, you must be strong, but we are weak (4:10). The true extent of Paul’s sarcasm is lost unless one remembers 1:25, “The weakness of God is stronger than men.”

Sarcasm can also be noted in 7:40: “and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.” I would hope so! Paul, commissioned by the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ to speak His Word, ought to have some measure of the Spirit. Or how about chapter 14:18, 19? Paul admits to speaking in tongues more than they do. Wow what an admission! What a commendation for the pentecostal movement! However, Paul bursts the bubble with an emphatic ἀλλὰ. “But, on the contrary,” in the church Paul would rather speak 5 words than an indefinite number of words in a tongue. (Paul might be saying an infinite number of words if μυσίους is used in the same sense it is used in Rev. 5:11.) Isn’t this sarcasm? How could anyone seriously desire to speak in tongues if the relative benefit was 1/1,000,000? Isn’t this a sarcastic yet gentle nudge away from a false emphasis on this gift?

All in all, I conclude that Corinth is a problem congregation, not a paradigm for congregations. They were experiencing false divisions (1:11, 12) because they were confused about the individual’s role in the ministry. In fact they were focusing on individuals to such an extent that they were missing the operation of the Spirit. They also were typified by arrogance (4:19, 5:2); a weak understanding of Christian discipline (5:1); and a denial of the resurrection of the dead (15:12). They brought from St. Paul strong statements of his apostolic authority (14:37, 38). The 1956 Proceedings of the Synodical convention recognized that Corinth was a problem congregation: “The Christians at Corinth, as so many others have done since, acted as though they believed that the gifts of the Spirit must of necessity disturb the existing order and that the greater the disturbance, the greater the proof that He is at work.”

Not only is the entire book not a paradigm for instruction on “gift-theology,” but even the 12th chapter is not written for that purpose. It is either a discourse on the unity that comes from being spiritual or on the proper conduct of one who deems himself to be spiritual.

The construction with which chapter 12 begins, Περὶ δὲ, is often misunderstood. In other places

where Paul says, “Now concerning,” he does not limit himself to narrow categories but broad ones. For example, in 8:1 Paul says, “Now concerning things sacrificed to idols.” In reality this is not the subject of what follows. What is, is the eating of things sacrificed to idols. Again in 7:25, Paul writes, “Now concerning virgins.” The subject in what follows is not about being a virgin but about whether or not one is to take a wife.

While the Περὶ δὲ construction may be misleading, it is the translation or more accurately mistranslation of τῶν πνευματικῶν that has caused the misreading of chapter 12. The KJV, NASB, Williams, AAT, RSV all supply the word gifts after the word spiritual πνευματικῶν. Phillips translates the verse quite differently, “Now my brothers, I want to give you some further information in spiritual matters.” Higlenfeld translates 12:1 as follows: “Concerning the inspired whether genuine or not,” while Ewald writes: “Concerning the men of the spirit.” The difference in translation can be traced to the understanding of τῶν πνευματικῶν.

The construction can either be neuter “spiritual things” or masculine, “Spiritual men.” The word πνευματικός conveys the sense of 1) Belonging to the realm of spirit/Spirit. 2) The essence or nature of spirit/Spirit. 3) Embodying or manifesting spirit/Spirit. Fifteen out of the 24 Pauline occurrences are in 1 Cor. The word is introduced at key points 2:13, 3:1, 12:1, 14:1, 31, 15:44, 15:46. I would agree with Dr. James Dunn’s comments in the New Testament Dictionary of Theology, III, 706; “It looks very much as though Paul is both taking over and reformulating the language of his opponents, thereby, meeting the challenge of what is best understood as an incipient gnosticism expressing an elitist and perfectionist spirituality.”

When πνευματικός is translated spiritual things, spiritual men, or spiritual gifts, it is made into an adjective. Paul indeed uses πνευματικός in this fashion in 1 Cor. 10:3, 4. But there it is to be noted that Paul follows πνευματικός with the nouns food, drink, and rock. If Paul wanted us to translate spiritual men or spiritual gifts, he would have included the noun men or gift. This is exactly what Paul does in Romans 1:11, μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικόν.

Ruling out the translations “spiritual gifts” or “spiritual men,” we turn now to the translation “spiritual things.” At first glance, this seems to be a fair one. However, this translation does not rightly consider that πνευματικός is with the article. “When identity is prominent, we find the article; when quality or character is stressed, the construction is anarthrous.”⁴ The translation “spiritual things” makes πνευματικῶν stress the quality or character of the things being mentioned; whereas, Paul means to stress identity.

Paul is singling out “The Spiritual”—that group of Corinthians who classed themselves as such. This is not an original view on my part. Dr. Dunn in the same article mentioned above notes; “The

Corinthian situation and the way in which Paul introduces the subject of chapters 12-14, strongly suggest that 'the spirituals' is the word preferred by many Corinthians, emphasizing perhaps thereby the more ecstatic characteristics of their spirituality."

Moving on into chapter 12, Paul begins with a warning: As unbelievers you were always being led to dumb idols (v.2). But not now; the Spirit of God is never quiet. It can indeed be determined who is spiritual. The litmus test is confession. It is "creed," not "deed" (v.3).

Verses 4-11 contain the much touted listing of gifts. The main question to be resolved is if Paul is intending to let us know of the different types of gifts or is he telling us that the Spirit distributes many gifts. The differences are not inconsequential. In the former case the variety of gifts is the focus; in the later, the distribution of gifts. The majority of our English translations translate Διαρέσεις as variety. Lenski and Kittle favor distribution. Since διαρέσεις occurs only here in the New Testament, we must look at the context to determine its meaning. Lenski points out that there would be no need to refer to the variety of the gifts since that point would be obvious from what follows. The point Paul is trying to make is that there are many gifts but these are distributed by the one Spirit. This one Spirit works through the many gifts in the one body without destroying the oneness of the body. This is the thrust of Paul's analogy of the human body to the Body of Christ in verses 12ff. He is not trying to focus on the giving of gifts to every individual in the body, but on the Spirit as the Giver of all gifts, whatever they may be, for the common good, the good of the one Body.

What in Paul's eyes makes a person a member of the body? Knowing your gift? Using your gift? Nope, Baptism (v.13). Just like Israel mentioned in chapter 10, all the Corinthians were baptized, all drank of Christ, all were spiritual; therefore, they were all members of the one Body.

Now then, let's jump back to the present for a moment; if less than 50% of a congregation will participate in the search for their spiritual gifts, doesn't this tend to divide rather than unite a congregation? Are the ones who refuse to participate any less a part of the body (v.16)? Indeed, could these be the weaker members who are more necessary for the functioning of the body (v.22)? Aren't these weaker members suffering (v.26)? Are they suffering because they don't know about their spiritual gift or because they don't understand what it really means to be spiritual, that is, Baptized?

Back to chapter 12. In verse 18, we have a wonderful promise: "God has placed the members each one of them in the body, just as He desired." God is the active force not man. I believe this happens each year during congregational elections. As individuals or as a group we are not to look down on whom God places where. And we most certainly aren't to exalt our position. What we are to do is fill our position.

In verses 20, 21 Paul again emphasizes that all members are a part of the body, and that all are

interrelated to one another. Therefore, one part of the body cannot cast off another without making itself deformed. This principle makes even the weaker ones necessary (v.22). In other words, those weak in faith (delinquents), or in abilities (non-workers), or in compassion (complainers) are necessary (*ἀναγκαῖά*) indispensable, closely connected.

The end of chapter 12 contains one of the most comforting sections in all of Scripture. In verse 28, Paul states, “God has placed (same word as verse 18) in the Church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, etc...” Church has the article here. Paul is speaking of the *una sancta*. This passage is comforting because if God is the One placing we can be assured He does so where needed. This is not a guarantee that the Church of every age will have all these, but that the Church of every age will have all it needs. Furthermore this passage should not be used to support the inclusion of the gift of apostles and prophets (in the Old Testament sense) in spiritual gift discovery tools. Yes, God did give His Church apostles and prophets, and these serve as the very foundation of the Church through their Writings which are centered around Christ the Cornerstone. But while every building can be added to, no foundation is, unless of course the old one cracks. The Church’s cannot.

Finally we come to the last 3 verses of chapter 12, and Paul’s sincere admonition to desire the greater gifts. The “greater gifts” cannot be apostle, prophet, teacher, miracles, healing, or tongues because all don’t have these (v.29). But all baptized believers do have a place, a position, the Spirit. All members can build the church. The important thing to have is not a particular gift but the right way of using the gift. Love is the way (ch.13). The greater gifts are gifts used in love.

In conclusion, I Corinthians is an argument for a right understanding of spirituality. The correct understanding is union not division. Those causing division, no matter what their gift, are not spiritual. The focusing on spiritual gifts is not the point in this letter; it is the problem the letter addresses. It is a problem which Paul tries to correct but not bluntly.

IV. The current emphasis on spiritual gifts discovery and deployment is not the rediscovery of some lost theological truth but an application of a different administrative principle.

That God’s people are gifted goes without saying. That the Holy Spirit makes all things new—able to serve Him—including my abilities is obvious. That God raises up people to do certain jobs is exemplified time and again in Scripture. But does God tell people what He wants them to do through “spiritual” nudges, urges, and opinions, or do they find out through their placement (laity) in the

church or their call (clergy) through the church?

God's call, used either in the broad sense to include lay positions or in the narrow sense, is mediate not immediate to the individual. How does a pastor know he's called to such and such a church or into the ministry for that matter? He has a call document from a church. The inner urging is never conclusive proof of being called into the ministry. A regular call by a body of believers is.

Now then whom God calls or places in a particular position, him He gifts. The task that needs doing proceeds the realization of the gift(s). For example, did Paul wake up one day and say I've got the ability to be an apostle? No, first he was called to that office by the risen Lord, then through the carrying out of the office he used the gifts provided to accomplish the Lord's task.

Rick Yohn in his book Discover Your Spiritual Gift and Use It writes, "Could you imagine the blessings that would result from electing men to office on the basis of their gifts?" Theoretically this is what should have been happening all along: Article VI, 9.2 of our constitution reads as follows: "Voting members are to serve faithfully according to their God-given talents, in any capacity in which they may be called on to serve."

It hasn't been because we lacked a spiritual gift discovery analysis that the above didn't work. Nor has it been because totally ungifted people have been elected. It has failed either because we lacked the courage to believe that who the Lord selects for an office through His church, him He also equips or because the person selected has thumbed his nose at the office. We would do well to heed the advice of Luther in this matter. He wrote in a sermon on 1 Peter 4:7-11 in a section speaking to the proper functions of church officers as follows: "As the Scriptures teach in many places, there is no work nobler than being obedient to the particular calling and work assigned of God and satisfied therein."⁵

The current spiritual gifts manuals are more than just harmless administrative tools seeking to accomplish what most churches always have tried to do. They are dangerous to our churches. They take the placement of people in the church out of the objective realm of the Church Body and place it in the subjective realm of human opinions. Interestingly enough this is also what happens when a person declines an office of the church which the church selects them to fill.

I would suggest that the switch from the objective to the subjective strikes at the heart of Lutheran theology. Although Luther is writing about justification in the quote which follows, it is not hard to see how it also applies to the current discussion. "This is the reason why our theology is certain; it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works, but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God."

V. While matters of polity and methods of organizations are not dictated in Scripture, the current wave of emphasizing spiritual gifts seems counter productive

On the surface, spiritual gifts administrative principles work better. It certainly gets more people involved. In this respect, it is like the popular fund raising techniques which involve 30-40% of the congregation through their ad nauseam number of boards, committees, and positions.

Although a higher percentage of people get involved, churches are unavoidably divided into those who will take the time to go through a spiritual gift study and those who won't. This is a shame because the housewife at home with 3 kids, a dog, and dirty dishes may indeed already know the Lord has gifted her to be a housewife, and mother. What this woman needs to hear from the church is not "find more time in your schedule to find out your spiritual gift," but "the Lord regards the dirty diapers and dishpan hands of yours as marks of a truly worthy occupation because they're done out of love for your Savior."

Yes, indeed more people are involved; however, they are also more involved with themselves. They are asked to engage in extensive introspection. They are pointed to the subjective not the objective. This even is warned against in the Formula of Concord, S.D.,II,55: "For concerning the presence, operation, and gifts of the Holy Ghost we should not and cannot always judge (ex sensus) from feeling as to how and when they are experienced in the heart because they are often covered and occur in great weakness."

Any pastor knows the danger of subjective evaluations. Just ask them who's the 2nd worst critic of their sermons? They would, more than likely, answer their wife. The first of course is themselves. For that matter ask any layman if they would want just one other Christian to decide his/her place in the church? Why should we then trust ourselves?

The spiritual gifts discovery tools I have looked at encourage the dive into subjectivity. For example in the Texas District program, one notes the use of verbs of feeling rather than verbs of thinking. Whether or not you have a particular gift depends on the word "seem" 16 times, the word "feel" 10 times, and the word "great" 25 times.

The final reason I believe the use of spiritual gift administration tools is counter-productive is because it does not take into account that Christians are both saint and sinner, both old and new man. According to our old Adam which is self-centered, self-willed, and self-loving can anyone answer these questions objectively: "It seems easy to perceive whether a person is honest or dishonest."; "It seems

that people generally follow my advice.”; “I can judge well between the truthfulness and error of a given theological statement.”

Now answer the following according to your new man: (Can the new man which is created after Christ Jesus in true holiness and righteousness do anything else but strongly agree with questions such as these?) “I look for opportunities to assist people in their work.” “I find real joy in giving a generous portion of my money to the Lord.” “I feel a burden to share the Gospel with people.”

I would like to offer one concluding remark. Let us continue to study and restudy what the Scripture has to say about spiritual gifts, their discovery, and use. Let us not emphasize them solely because it appears to work.

Paul R. Harris,
Bethlehem, North Zulch
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Notes

1. Personal Renewal Study, Leader's Guide, p. 18.
2. Ibid..
3. Meyer, p. 275.
4. Lana & Mantey, p. 138.
5. Sermons of Martin Luther, p. 323.
6. LW, 26, p. 387.

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