

What You Need to Know About Spiritual Gifts

by Ronald L. Dart

What actually happens at the moment you receive a spiritual gift? Do you get a little buzz when it comes? Perhaps a rush? On the day of Pentecost, there was a sound like a rushing, mighty wind and the appearance of fire from the ceiling descending on each of them. Obviously, it can't always be like that, but should we expect a physical sign of the receiving of something that is not physical? Or is it possible that the moment God bestows a gift of the Spirit it goes entirely unnoticed? Is it possible that the gift only becomes apparent when it is at work?

There is a lot of conversation these days about spiritual gifts. Books have been published explaining how a person can discover his gifts and how a church can take inventory of the gifts of its people. But I can't help wondering if something spiritual can be so easily quantified.

What I will have to say in this essay will be based strictly on the Bible and my own 40 years of experience in the ministry. The Bible has some very important and revealing things to say on the subject. There were spiritual gifts in abundance in the early church and there is no reason to doubt that these gifts would be with God's people in all ages. So where are they? Who has them? And how can you tell? Maybe you have to know what to look for. And maybe the gifts are not in evidence at all times.

In the last letter of his life, Paul wrote to Timothy and urged him to "stir up the gift" that was in him by the laying on of Paul's hands.

The Greek for "stir up" means to "*rekindle*." Paul evokes the image of poking the embers of a fire and fanning them to get the fire going. The NIV translates this passage, "For this reason I remind you to *fan into flame* the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6).

A spiritual gift then can die down like a fire. Sometimes a fire appears to be out, with nothing but ashes left, yet there are embers present that, with air and fuel, can come back into flame. Even so, a spiritual gift can be present even when covered with ash. When a man sleeps, so does his gift. When a man hides in a cave for fear, so does his gift. When a man stands apart from the church and declines to participate, so does his gift.

So how then would you fan into flame the gift of God that is in you? The most obvious way to fan the flame of a spiritual gift is to use it. A gift unused is a gift invisible. A gift unused is a gift neglected. A gift neglected will slowly turn to ashes.

Here is what Paul said to Timothy in context: "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (2 Timothy 1:6-8).

It is hard to imagine Timothy being timid or fearful in the exercise of his gifts, but there had to be a reason why Paul said this. He was in prison when he wrote this, and he calls on Timothy to join with him in suffering for the Gospel. This was a hard time to be a Christian,

and evangelism could be dangerous. The very fact of Paul's imprisonment sent a chill throughout the church, and may well have dampened their evangelistic work. And it may have cooled the embers of the gifts God had given them for evangelism.

"Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord," Paul said. Is it conceivable that we do not work for God and exercise the gifts that are in us out of shame, fear, timidity, embarrassment? It would be a shame if timidity kept us from the service of God here at home, while Christians are losing their lives in other parts of the world because they are trying to evangelize in Arab countries.

It is hard to think that Timothy was in any way ashamed of the Gospel, but he was a young man. It is possible that he became more easily intimidated. Paul warned him about this.

"Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. *Do not neglect the gift that is in you*, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:12-16).

This is a highly informative paragraph. It reveals Timothy as a member of a community. It was not only Paul who had laid hands on Timothy, but the body of elders of a community, a church. As a younger evangelist, Timothy was expected to tend to his studies. *It was possible that his gift could be neglected*, that it could atrophy, become dull through nonuse, that the fire could die down to embers or even dead cinders. And this also means that spiritual gifts do not necessarily arrive full blown. They may well arrive as a seed that has to be watered and fertilized.

It was also important that Timothy's gift be evident to all. Spiritual gifts are, in the end,

validated by the church. It isn't enough to claim a spiritual gift. It has to be seen to be such by the elders and the church if it is to serve the community.

I taught speech at the college level for many years, and have had the pleasure of training a lot of men and women in the arts of communication and persuasion. I have taught people who had a spiritual gift, and people who did not. I was working with young men, and I was able to make progress with all of them. In most cases, they could be brought to a level of competent communication. But a few of these young men appeared to be truly gifted. In the process of teaching them, I noticed something very important: Everyone who had the gift also had the *talent* and the *desire*. I don't mean that they merely had the desire for the *gift* of teaching. I mean they had a *desire to teach*. There is a difference between a desire for the gift and a desire for the work.

I have known men whose job was the ministry, whose job was to stand and teach the Scriptures, but who did not enjoy doing it. They did not have the gift, either. Some were competent, even talented, but none were gifted. I have never known a truly gifted preacher or teacher who did not enjoy doing it, who did not almost live for it. (This is not always true in the learning process.) I have known men who did enjoy speaking, but who were not gifted. It was a chore for them and their audience. I learned over my years of teaching speech that I could teach technique, I could improve methods, I could knock off rough edges. But I was never able to impart *desire* to someone who did not have it. In a way, that may be tantamount to saying that I could not give them the gift of teaching.

In my experience, those who want the gifts for the sake of having the gifts never get them. They may pretend to have the gift, they may fake it, they may even believe they have it and perform, but the gift is not there. There is a difference. And the difference is something we sometimes call charisma. There is an analogy here with the performing arts. There is a

difference between highly competent performers and those who have “star quality.” Some people have a gift that transcends the craft. One doesn’t rise to the level of a Mozart merely by trying harder. I believe that God gives non-spiritual gifts (for want of a better phrase) to some people for his own purpose and glory. Mozart may have had such a gift.

By analogy, you don’t get a spiritual gift from God merely by trying harder. When it comes to spiritual gifts, it is my observation that spiritual gifts are bestowed on those people who have a *passion* for work of the gift. The gift then is a form of empowerment to accomplish that for which they have found a passion. In other words, spiritual gifts are *goal oriented*. They are given with an objective in mind. Now it is possible that the desire itself is a gift, but that doesn’t change my equation. If you don’t care deeply about the *objective* of a spiritual gift, you aren’t very likely ever to have the gift. A person who is not moved with compassion for the sick and dying is unlikely ever to have the gift of healing. The person most likely to have that gift is the person who cares, who visits the sick, who prays from the heart for the infirm. The gifts of the Holy Spirit will tend to follow the passion.

Spiritual gifts will also tend to follow talent. Common sense should tell us that, but Jesus says it plainly. You will find it in the parable of the talents: “For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; *to every man according to his several ability*” (Matthew 25:14-15). The gifts of the Holy Spirit seem to be an empowerment of natural talents to far exceed what a man could naturally do.

But I have noticed in religious organizations an unfortunate tendency to, in Paul’s words, “quench the Spirit.” From God’s perspective, is it better to give a gift to someone who has a passion for the work, or someone who has the talent but doesn’t care so deeply about it? Too often, organizational bureaucracy fails to take

any consideration of the working of the Spirit and may not even be looking for it. They can have a person who is out of the loop and who comes up with a great idea and begins to pursue it with a passion. Then along comes the church bureaucracy that says, “That’s a good idea. We’ll take it over now.” They take it under their wing and give it to a bureaucrat who may have the talent to do the job, but none of the original passion. The result is that the project will end up in mediocrity, and the person who was moved with the passion to do the project in the first place will be crushed. The organization has quenched the Spirit.

What should have happened? The bureaucracy should have asked the person with the original idea one question: “How can we help?” At the very least, the organization should get out of the way and let the person with the desire go for it. If he fails, he won’t be able to blame someone else for his failure. And God is able to make him succeed. Spiritual gifts tend to follow the passion.

It is impossible to talk seriously about spiritual gifts without referring to two important chapters in the New Testament. The first, 1 Corinthians 12, is all but titled, “About Spiritual Gifts,” and is written for the express purpose of dispelling ignorance on the subject. And the very first point that Paul makes is that there are diversities of gifts, but that these gifts all share the same objective: they must work together in the community. “Now there are diversities of gifts,” said Paul, “but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all” (vv. 4-6). Out of this comes one point with stunning clarity. The gifts are not given to us so we can compete. With all their diversity, they should create synergy, not division.

But what does Paul mean by “the manifestation of the Spirit”? The Greek word for manifestation means, “*exhibition*” or “*expression*.” What Paul is talking about is the actual, visible working of the Spirit in the lives of people. Work is being done. If a person has

the gift of helping the poor, the manifestations of that gift are the obvious passion for helping poor people and the actual help being given to poor people. The manifestation of the Spirit is a bag of groceries being delivered to the front door of a poor family. People who do this work should be encouraged and helped to do their work.

This doesn't mean that you have to be involved in every project going on in your church. That can be exhausting. But there will be people whose hearts are in a given task, who organize themselves around the task and go to work. They call this a "self-organizing ministry team." This team will go forth and carry on their ministry for whatever time they are led to do so. We don't all have to be on that team, but we certainly should not get in the way. We need to have the flexibility and the courage to allow the Holy Spirit to organize our church and coordinate our efforts. We need to be more careful in our organizations to see that we do not quench the Spirit, something that, in practice, is very easy to do. Not a few people can testify to having their spirits dampened, their idea rejected, all in the name of organizational objectives.

"For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom," Paul continued, "to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit." For many years, I had the privilege of working on the staff of a Bible college where a number of other ministers and teachers formed a ministry team. Candidly, when I was very young in the ministry, I needed that. I felt I had certain gifts, and I knew I had a passion to teach. But that passion needed tempering, training, experience, direction. It needed to be coupled with wisdom and knowledge and experience with other ministers. A college was the perfect environment for me because there were men who were older than I was, who had more experience than I had and who could call into question some of my more marginal ideas. I was a bit of a firebrand in those days. I contributed a lot of energy and fire for the

older gentlemen and they provided a lot of balance for me. We all taught one another in that environment. One teacher had the gift of knowledge but frankly lacked the gift of wisdom. Another had the wisdom to temper that knowledge. What was lacking in one, another provided. We did a good work. We turned out the best collection of young speakers I have seen anywhere, and they knew the Bible pretty well when they left our tutelage.

I can say this from my experience. In my lifetime, I have given very little thought to what my own gifts are in the ministry. In fact, I have been mostly informed by other people about my own gifts. Whatever gifts I have, have come unbidden. They have not come as a result of seeking the gifts of the Spirit. They have simply appeared in the work that I do. I learned to teach by teaching. I learned to write by writing. I had a desire to do a radio program, but it was only when I finally did one that I found I had a gift for doing that as well. When you think about it, how could I possibly know until I put myself to the test? The gifts of the Holy Spirit are fanned into flame by the using of the gift.

When you have a passion and you pursue it with zeal, and you find yourself interfering with or being interfered with by someone else's passion, it is time to stop and take stock. The leadership of the Holy Spirit should not create a confused or competitive environment. It will happen from time to time, because we are human. We will have problems, and that is why Paul wrote these letters trying to sort out the problems. But when conflicts arise, they must not be papered over. They have to be dealt with.

As Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 12 to develop his catalog of gifts, healing, miracles, discerning of spirits, prophecy, tongues, he comes to a vital point: "But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will." It is not our will that determines the distribution of the gifts of the Spirit, but the sovereign will of God. And they are distributed with God's goals in mind. *The gift of God does not arrive here looking for*

something to do. The gifts of God are goal oriented, they are given for his purposes, not ours. We find the gifts of God in the pursuit of his objectives. We may even stumble over them. The gift of God is stirred into flame, not by working on the gift, but by working at the objective of the gift.

What happens when there are other churches working in the same field? Conflicts are possible just as they are possible in a local church. But those conflicts must not be allowed to hinder the pursuit of the objectives. Whether we like it or not, Paul said: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many” (1 Corinthians 12:13-14). The field before us is huge. If you find yourself in conflict with another servant of Christ, go work in another part of the field. Don’t compete with another ministry.

Paul continued with an important concept: “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.” One thing is certain. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and he distributes these gifts according to his own will and purpose. That is nobody’s business but God’s.

There is a curious conclusion to Paul’s dissertation on spiritual gifts. He seems to speak of gifts in terms of offices of the ministry: “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers. . . ” (v. 28). Perhaps that is a natural thing to assume, since some gifts of the Spirit tend to create leaders. But is it Paul’s intent to create a hierarchy of gifts or offices in the church? He continues to summarize the gifts available: “. . . after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” These are far too general to represent an organizing principle for a hierarchy in the church.

It is important to notice in passing that no one has all the gifts. They are distributed among the brethren in the best way to create a team:

“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” The obvious answer to these rhetorical questions is no. And it is underlined by an important omission. There is no distributed “gift” of prayer because prayer is the obligation of every saint.

The other major statement about spiritual gifts is found in Ephesians 4. This statement of Paul’s poses a real problem for churches that are struggling with unity. Paul calls for humility and patience as the first elements in the endeavor to maintain what he calls, “The unity of the Spirit.” Paul says plainly enough, “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

In Ephesians 4, Paul is addressing a local church, an assembly that meets together regularly. He isn’t trying to address the problems of modern, centralized church organizations with churches on different continents. Paul had no way to foresee the problems some churches face in the modern world. And yet, there is no avoiding his “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body and one Spirit.” And it is especially in the one Lord and one Spirit that we must consider spiritual gifts. The overall objective of God is the same everywhere. And yet, we have to accept the fact that God does not work with every man the same way. The Spirit of God will have the same objective in Africa that it does in Asia, but the peoples and cultures are very different. God may work with them in different ways. But it will not be a different Spirit at work. It will be “One Lord, one Spirit.”

Then Paul adds a crucial element: “But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” That means that each of us will have his gift. No one is left out. The list of gifts that follows is different enough from the list in 1 Corinthians 12 that we can conclude this is not a divinely

ordained hierarchy. But the work, the objective of the gifts is the same.

And Paul's letter to the Ephesians is much more definitive when it comes to defining the objectives of spiritual gifts. They are: "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:13-16).

Like many of Paul's statements, this is a mouthful, but it says nearly everything that can be said about God's rationale in giving spiritual gifts. The objective is a change in all of us, "Till we *all* come in the unity of the faith," said Paul. Along with Paul's acknowledgment that the gifts are given to each and all of us, comes the statement that the work of fitting the church compactly together is finished "by that which every joint supplies." It is in the effectual working of *every part* that the church is increased.

So the desire for the gift is not enough. One has to desire, not the gift, but the work. And one has to have the talent to do the work. As Paul put it, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work" (1 Timothy 3:1).

From all of this, I can offer a bit of advice. If you have a passion for something, pursue it. Do something about it. Otherwise you may never know if you have the gift to do it. Spiritual empowerment may well follow. At the same time, keep an eye out for people who

have the same passion. You probably can't do what you want to do by yourself. And you probably will not be able to generate this passion in people who don't have it. For all we know, the passion itself may be a spiritual gift. Just because you have a passion for it doesn't mean that everyone will have the same passion, nor does it even mean they should have it.

What it does mean is that you should watch for and pray for people who share the same passion. What about those who do not share your passion? Don't worry about them. How they feel about your project is really not any of your business. Leave them alone. They may have another calling.

Watch for people who have talents that match your passion. Connect with these people and don't worry about people who don't share your passion. They may have a passion of their own. If you have a passion, go for it. If it doesn't work, accept it.

There is one more thing that I learned as a teacher. If you have a talent, train it. Even a spiritual gift needs development and discipline. A fire burning out of control is destructive. Even so, a passion without direction can do more harm than good. In my years of teaching both gifted and ungifted speakers, it became plain that gifted men need to be taught to effectively use the tool God placed in their hands.

But then, what do you do if you don't really have a passion for anything? Watch carefully for people who do have a passion and watch to see if the fruits of the Holy Spirit are present in their work. Not every enthusiastic person bears good fruit. But if the passion is there and the fruits are there, support those people. Help them. Encourage them. Pray for them. For there are those whose calling is to lead, others are called to work, others are called to follow and help. If you are a person with talent, look around to see where your talents fit and join the team.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians and cautioned, "Quench not the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). This is not merely about

not quenching the Spirit in yourself. He was primarily talking about quenching the Spirit in other people who are trying hard to do something, to accomplish a work for God. Don't throw a wet blanket on these people. And don't think the Spirit can't be quenched. It is done all the time in religious organizations. There is an old saying, and it was never more

apt than in the church: "Lead, follow, or get out of the way."

And whatever you do, don't forget the greatest gift of all: "But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet show I unto you a more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31) ". . . And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity"(1 Corinthians 13:13).

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