

THE JOY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

SERIES: "NOW CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS..."

by Ron Ritchie

This last Christmas I realized more than ever how much Anne Marie and I love to receive our holiday mail. As soon as we brought the mail into the house, we would sit at the dining room table and divide it up. Then with joy and anticipation we would begin to open up the many colored envelopes. The first cards we would open were the ones from lifelong friends. They have a yearly tradition of sending us not only a holiday card but also a recent photo of their whole family or their children. As soon as one of us found a card with a photo, we would immediately stop what we were doing and share it with each other, with ahs, ohs, and my, my's over how wonderful they all looked. Each year the parents look more mature, and we are always especially delighted with the physical growth of the children and the beauty of their youth.

This Christmas some of our old friends and their children came by the house for a visit. The photo came alive then; you could see that these wonderful friends and their children over the year had matured intellectually and emotionally, and some were growing spiritually. And of course our friends whom we have not seen for awhile confirm in a variety of ways that we seem to be maturing also. There is joy all around! But all that joy is a mere shadow of the joy our Lord Jesus Christ feels when he sees the spiritual growth of his children in their love for him and for one another.

A great part of our personal and corporate spiritual maturing is rooted in the understanding that...

Grace has been given

Ephesians 4:7-10:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

"When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men."

(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

Let's take a moment to look at the context. On Paul's third missionary journey (53 AD) he arrived in Ephesus, on the western shores of Turkey, and over the next three years he built a church. He then headed back to Jerusalem, visited the temple, was arrested, and was almost killed by a mob of religious zealots. The Romans took him to the port city of Caesarea, Israel to stand trial. There he was detained for two years until he appealed to Caesar and was shipped in chains to Rome to face Nero. In 60 AD Paul began to write letters of encouragement from his Roman cell to a friend named Philemon and to the Christians in Philippi, Greece and in Colosse and Ephesus, Turkey.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers, his desire in part was to help them mature spiritually by reminding them of the characteristics of the mystical body of Christ, the church. Some of those characteristics have to do with our spiritual calling in relationship to Christ and to one another. Paul sought to once again guide the Ephesians along the path of spiritual maturity: "...I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (4:1-3). He emphasized the importance of diligence in

this because it illustrates a foundational truth that we all know: "There is one body and one Spirit---just as you were called to one hope when you were called---one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (4:4-6). That is one of the early doctrinal creeds of the Christian church.

At the same time there is diversity of gifts. Paul continues, "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." At this point he quotes Psalm 68:18:

"When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men."

He is showing how Christ fulfilled this prophecy in his incarnation and resurrection. But Paul also understood that just as God was the Warrior King who delivered his people out of Egypt and defeated their enemies in the wilderness and in Canaan, so Jesus is our Warrior King who defeated Satan and his kingdom at the cross. As a result of that victory, Jesus is able to give grace-gifts to his people. (The first of these is the spiritual gifts our risen Lord has given us by His Spirit. The second is the very presence of our risen Lord Jesus who lives in us. Because of his resurrection he is able to empower us by his Spirit to use our spiritual gifts.) These spiritual gifts are to be used by his spiritual children to build up his church, and so the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers are to equip the saints within the body of Christ for the work of service and to help bring them to maturity. This in turn will bring the church as a whole into the maturity of Christ Jesus. All this is to be done in order to fill the whole universe with his presence, power, and blessings.

Last weekend Anne Marie and I were teaching for a few hours at the Mount Hermon couples conference. This was going on there at the same time as the PBC women's retreat. We had the privilege of slipping into the back row of one of the morning teaching sessions of the women's retreat and listening to Dr. Pamela Reeve, Associate Professor and Women's Ministry Advisor at Multnomah School of the Bible. This most delightful woman of eighty-two was using her spiritual gifts of teaching and encouragement in the power of the Holy Spirit to help our women in their spiritual growth toward maturity in Christ Jesus.

A great part of our spiritual maturing is rooted in the reality that grace has been given to each one of us in the form of spiritual gifts. These spiritual gifts are designed by God to function properly when believers trust him to provide the resurrection power necessary for them to be used in our serving one another. This is all possible when the following four gifts are functioning.

Christ gave gifts to his church

Ephesians 4:11:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers....

At this point Paul doesn't open up a discussion of all the spiritual gifts with the members of the Ephesian church, for he has already taught this truth during his three-year visit. But he wants to use these four foundation gifts to illustrate the principle that a believer who is working diligently to preserve the unity of the Spirit can also enjoy the diversity of the spiritual gifts, as they are used by God to help the other members in the body of Christ grow toward spiritual maturity. Paul already wrote in 2:19-20, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone...."

"It was he who gave some to be apostles...." (in Greek *apostolos*, one who is sent forth). Jesus, in his prayer to his Father in the garden of Gethsemane, said, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). As the Father sent Jesus into the world with the good news of salvation, our risen Lord sent his apostles into the world with the good news of salvation (see Acts 1:8). In Hebrews 3:1 the word apostle is used of the Lord Jesus after his resurrection to describe his relationship to us now. He is called "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession."

The apostles of Jesus Christ were not just glorified UPS messengers. They were men whose hearts were so changed by the message of salvation in Jesus Christ that, once they placed their faith in God's Son as their Lord and Savior, they couldn't stop sharing God's love and his gracious gift of salvation to them. Whenever they were able to share the good news of Jesus Christ, they would establish local churches in that community. Then they would be moved by the Holy Spirit to the next "open door."

From the days of our Lord and the early church up to this very moment in church history, the landscape has been filled with false apostles (see 2 Corinthians 11:13-15). In light of that reality, we need to look closely at the definition of a true apostle of Jesus Christ:

1. The credentials of an authentic apostle are found in the words of Peter as the disciples sought to replace Judas: "Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22).
2. The apostles were personally commissioned by the risen Lord to go and make disciples of all men (see Matthew 28:16-20) and witness of him throughout the whole known world once the Holy Spirit came to empower them (see Acts 1:8).
3. Apostles were given universal authority in matters of church doctrine. This doctrine was then recorded into what we now call the New Testament revelation, which was inspired by the Holy Spirit (see John 14:26; 16:13). (The additional writings of James, the brother of Jesus; Mark, the nephew of Barnabas; and Luke, the fellow missionary of Paul were approved by the apostles and later introduced into the sacred canon of Scripture.)
4. The authority of an apostle was confirmed by signs and miracles (see 2 Corinthians 12:12).
5. Apostles will one day sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (see Luke 22:29-30).
6. The names of the apostles will be inscribed on the twelve foundations of the new Jerusalem (see Revelation 21:14).

But what about the apostle Paul? Shortly after Paul's conversion outside the city of Damascus, our risen Lord Jesus appeared in a vision to a disciple named Ananias who lived there. He told Ananias to find Paul and lay hands on his eyes so that he could regain his sight. Ananias was afraid, based on all the rumors he had heard about this Christian-basher. But Jesus said, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Paul understood very clearly that he was not one of the twelve (see 1 Corinthians 15:5-7), and he respected their position in the plan of God and held them in high esteem. He stated of himself, "...He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain...." (1 Corinthians 15:8-11.) He did signs, wonders, and miracles; and most of his writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit and accepted as Scripture by Peter and the church fathers (see 2 Peter 3:15-16). Paul became a prime example of a man who wrapped his life around his spiritual gifts when he wrote to Timothy, "...I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher" (1 Timothy 1:11).

What was the ministry of these apostles? As stated above as well as in Ephesians 2:20, they became the first building blocks to be placed on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ. They were called out by Jesus to (1) carry the good news of the kingdom to the known Roman world, (2) establish new churches, and (3) establish doctrine. They were also given the responsibility to (4) equip the saints for the work of ministry, which we will see in Ephesians 4:12-13.

Was and is there any need for new apostles? We know that in a secondary sense the title of "apostle," one sent by the Spirit with the message of Jesus Christ, was given to Barnabas (see Acts 14:14) as well as Silas and Timothy (see 1 Thessalonians 2:6). But these godly men were never recognized to have the same authority as

the chosen twelve apostles or the appointed apostle Paul. I believe that Paul was the last apostle to be placed on the foundation of Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15:9), which then would eliminate, in the primary sense, any need for new apostles today. For in reality they are still with us in their writings, and we submit to our Lord's word and his apostles' word each time we open the pages of the New Testament.

In the secondary and broader sense of the term "sent one," some Christians consider our modern missionaries as apostles of Jesus, as they are sent through one open door after another, establishing new churches. The Greek church is of this opinion. And certainly we can see that reality when we think of our own missionaries such as Eli Fangidae in Timor, Indonesia; Vince Costa in Siziano, Italy; and Dudley Weiner, formerly in Paris, France (now in Menlo Park, California), to mention but a few.

"It was he who gave...some to be prophets...." (*prophetes*, one having the spiritual ability to speak forth the mind and counsel of God [*pro* = forth, *phemi* = to speak]). Prophets are the mouthpiece of God, called to speak his message in his name. They are able because of direct communication with God, visions, revelations, or dreams to see spiritual realities others cannot see. They are placed on earth by the hand of God to speak his word and reveal his heart concerning present or future events, blessings, or judgments.

Prophets in the Old Testament were used by God to speak to Israel and at times the surrounding pagan nations about past, present, or future issues or events. These spokesmen for God were called to awaken the mind, care for the soul, and instruct the heart. They were called to warn God's people to remain true to their covenant relationship with him, obey his revealed laws, and beware of false prophets. These characteristics can clearly be seen in the lives of Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, among others (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:15-22).

Moses told the people of Israel that the Lord told him, "I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18). Some fourteen hundred years later Jesus became that prophet of God, according to Peter's second message to the people of Israel (shortly after he healed the lame man at the gate of the temple [Acts 3:22-23]). Many over the generations and up until this time have wanted to keep Jesus a prophet as opposed to the prophet of Deuteronomy 18:18 (see Matthew 21:11). Jesus also warned his disciples to be aware of false prophets, especially in the last days (see Matthew 24:11).

We first hear of the spiritual gift of prophecy in the message Peter preached on the day of Pentecost after the Holy Spirit arrived. In that message he quoted the prophet Joel, who had written eight hundred years earlier (Acts 2:17-18):

"In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy."

Keep in mind that from the day of Pentecost in 33 AD, while our risen Lord was going to choose some of his apostles to begin to put together the holy Scriptures under the inspiration of the Spirit, when Paul arrived on the scene he heard oral histories of the gospels, and there was only the book of James (49 AD) and the Jewish Didache.¹ The New Testament took some seventy years to be written and accepted as holy writ. So the prophets of Jesus Christ were very important in the foundation of his church. They were called to speak forth the word of God as revealed to the Old Testament prophets, the words of Jesus as revealed in the gospels, and the word of God as revealed in dreams, visions, and revelations. Some of those direct revelations had to do with present and future events (see the discussion of Agabus below). The men and women gifted with prophecy also spoke for God using the words of the twelve apostles and of the latecomer to the body of

Christ, the apostle Paul. These New Testament prophets were also called upon to equip the saints for ministry; edify, comfort, and encourage believers; and reveal the secrets of men's hearts (see 1 Corinthians 14:3).

Agabus is one of the first prophets mentioned by name. He came to the Antioch church and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the Roman world (see Acts 11:27-30). Some years later Agabus showed up at the home of Philip the evangelist where he lived with his four virgin daughters who all were given the gift of prophecy. At that time he prophesied that Paul would be arrested if he went to Jerusalem, and it came true (see Acts 21:10-11). We also discover some prophets leading the church in Antioch, north of Israel in the land of western Syria in Acts 13:1. After the Council of Jerusalem in 45 AD, Paul sent a good-news letter to the Gentiles in the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia by the hand of two prophets, Silas and Judas, telling these Gentiles that they did not have to become Jewish Christians by the rite of circumcision. We also know that there were prophets in the church of Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 14:29).

This church is filled with prophets from every walk of life, every race and color and age, both male and female. These are godly persons who by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit are able to take God's word and make it shine, giving the listeners the heart and counsel of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Most prophets now use the Scriptures to tell us the heart and mind of God, because the Scriptures are complete. But it has recently been reported that Islamic Arabs in Morocco and Algeria have been receiving visions of Jesus Christ and accepting him without any guidance from Scripture or other Christians at all. So we should never say that visions, revelations, and dreams are over; the Holy Spirit can do anything he wants at any time in the body of Christ.

"It was he who gave...some to be evangelists..." (*euaggelistes*, one given the spiritual ability to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ's redemptive story to a dying world lost in sin, shame, and guilt). The foundation of the life and ministry of Jesus was evangelism. The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph before he married Mary and told him that he should call her Son whom she had conceived by the Holy Spirit Jesus, "...for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Jesus was the model evangelist when he came face-to-face with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He confronted this religious man with the need to be spiritually "born again," and then he shared the heart of his Father toward all of fallen humanity: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17).

Evangelists are called of God to preach the good news of Jesus Christ and use those opportunities to boldly invite their listeners into a personal relationship with Jesus, the Savior of the world. For it is Jesus who is the only one who can save them from their sins, give them eternal life, and give the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:38-39). But evangelists are also called upon by God to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Evangelists train younger evangelists in how to move out into the world with the good news of Jesus.

Philip began his ministry as a deacon (see Acts 6:3-6). He then was led by the Holy Spirit to go and preach the gospel to the hated Samaritans, and many placed their faith in Jesus as their Messiah. On the way back to Jerusalem with Peter and John, an angel asked Philip to go south to a road that went from Jerusalem to Gaza and then into Africa. It was on that road that he met the Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace; and by explaining to him that Jesus was the Servant about whom Isaiah was writing, he led him into a personal relationship with Jesus as the Messiah, baptized him, and then was snatched away by the Spirit to the port city of Caesarea on the west coast of Israel (see Acts 8:4-40). We find him still living and ministering in the city of Caesarea some twenty-five years later, when he was known as Philip the Evangelist (see Acts 21:8).

Our risen Lord Jesus instructed his disciples and all who love him, "...You shall be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8). We are to take every God-given opportunity to speak of Jesus and his relationship to us. We were once his enemies drowning in our sin, shame, and guilt, until we turned to him as the only One who could save us. We need to share the good news about how he not only forgave us of our sins but then gave us the gift of salvation and the Holy Spirit to begin our new life with him as our Lord. All Christians are to be witnesses of the love Jesus has for them and the love they have for him as their Lord and Savior. But not all Christians are evangelists. When a man or woman with the gift of evangelism depends on the Holy Spirit to open the minds

and hearts of those all around them who are in the process of being saved, they are led to not only witness about Jesus but to invite their listeners to place their faith in Jesus to become their Lord and Savior.

"It was he who gave...some to be pastors and teachers...." (*poimen kai didaskalos*, shepherd-teachers). This gift is the spiritual ability to shepherd the flock of God (guard, guide, encourage, warn), to feed them the word of God, and equip them to find and use their spiritual gifts so they too can do the work of ministry. Jesus called himself the good shepherd (see John 10:11). And Peter called Jesus the Chief Shepherd (see 1 Peter 5:4). Note that Paul wrote "some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers," not "some pastors and some teachers." This omission of the article "some" leads many scholars to believe Paul is speaking of one spiritual gift called pastor/teacher rather than two gifts, pastor and teacher. Peter was not only an apostle, but he was also called to be a pastor/teacher by our risen Lord at the sea of Galilee after his sin of denial was forgiven. Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs...Take care of my sheep...Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

We bring great joy to the heart of Jesus when we step out in faith and obedience and choose to allow him to help us in our spiritual growth in the knowledge of him and in love for one another. There is also great joy when we submit to the love and teachings of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers. The joy becomes even greater when we trust the Holy Spirit working through them to help us discover our spiritual gifts and then to equip us to do the work of ministry.

Enabling us to be equipped

Ephesians 4:12-13:

...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

The apostle now explains to the Ephesian Christians that Christ has gifted his church with apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers for two purposes: (1) The preparation of God's people for works of service. These gifted people accomplish this by helping God's people to grow in their knowledge of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, through the study of God's word. They also teach God's people about the body of Christ and about the many spiritual gifts within that body, which, once discovered, are to be developed and used to serve the members of the body and the surrounding community. (2) The building up of the body of Christ. As we mature personally, so the body of Christ matures together. The more of us there are who find our spiritual gift(s), the more mature, healthy, and able to serve the body of Christ will be.

This equipping of the saints and the spiritual maturing of the body of Jesus Christ will continue until we all reach unity in the faith at the second coming of Jesus for his church. At that time we will finally all have the same set of doctrines, the oneness of faith in Christ. We are called to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3) while we struggle to come to the unity of the faith and continue to grow in the knowledge of the Son of God. Paul cried out to the Philippians, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...." (3:10).

The goal of our life in Christ is spiritual maturity. The more we learn about our Lord Jesus Christ, the more we will love him, and our hearts will be filled with a desire to preserve the unity of the Spirit within the body of Christ, as we are growing in the unity of the faith. This love that we have for Jesus will also overflow into the lives of our brothers and sisters as we express our spiritual gifts within the body of Christ as well as in the world of fallen humanity. The more we are available to allow our invisible Lord Jesus to become visible through us, the more we will spiritually mature into the image of Christ, and one day at his second coming we will experience final spiritual perfection. Meanwhile be patient, God is not finished with us yet!

Note 1. *Didache*: The teaching of the twelve apostles. A treatise filled with instructions on how to live a godly life. Addressed to the new Gentile Christian community.

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