

UNDERSTANDING YOUR GIFT

by Ray C. Stedman

Recently I listened to two radio programs, both religious.

One was a panel of pastors and laymen discussing the subject, "Religion in the Space Age." The members of this panel were obviously educated men, suave, cultured. They spoke, with obvious understanding of the times in which we live, about the effects of technology on daily lives, the appeal and challenge of the exploration of the frontiers of science to young people particularly, and the need in this kind of world for faith and morals. But during the entire program of half an hour there was not one mention of Jesus Christ or of the good news of God's plan to give man a new start in life by wiping out the past and beginning with a fresh page. When the program ended I found myself thoroughly angry -- angry that there could be a presentation on religion in the space age and nothing be said about the most revolutionary message the world has ever heard and which the church is to proclaim in this day.

The second program consisted of a radio preacher. This man spoke about nothing but Jesus Christ and the good news of the gospel. He had nothing to say on the problem of human life or modern living. But everything he said was delivered in a preachy, whining, half-shouting voice, interspersed with pious exclamations of, "Hallelujah!" "Bless the Lord!" and "Precious Jesus!" His preaching rose and fell in a regular pattern of delivery that sounded like a tobacco auctioneer's chant. I turned off the program, half-sick.

Both these programs were avowedly Christian, both were certainly sincere, both were attempts to confront the world in this mid-twentieth century with the need of faith, and both were horribly misleading and distorted.

Now, admittedly I encountered two extremes in this respect, but both these types of programs are widespread today and their existence reveals something startling and provocative. They reveal the extent to which the church has been brainwashed. We normally attribute brainwashing techniques only to the Communists, but the original brainwasher was Satan and he has been busy at it ever since creation. He is an expert at infiltrating wrong ideas into the human mind, and so distorting and twisting the truth, that it comes out quite different than it really is. Through the centuries this has happened to the church. We have departed from "the pattern of sound words" {2 Tim 1:13 RSV} recorded by the Scriptures. The church has become something less than God intended it to be. We have followed our own ideas and our own approaches to the world in which we live, and have distorted the pattern God has devised. Therefore we have come up with something far astray from the original blueprint of the Word of God.

The church is still the church, still the body of Christ, but it has become affected by this brainwashing technique to the point that it has forgotten the divine method for reaching the world. If anything good should come out of this "God is dead" movement we are hearing so much about today, it will be the realization that the church has failed to convey to the world the striking, remarkable, transforming message of the good news of Jesus Christ. That is the reason people think God is dead. They have looked at the church where they would expect to find clear evidence that God is alive, but they have not found it. They have found instead the same kind of problems that beset their own lives. They have found the same critical attitude toward difficulties and hardships. They have found in the church the same biting, carping, judgmental unloveliness toward one another that is so characteristic of the world. They have said, "If that is Christianity, then it is no different from what we already have. If this is supposed to be the sign that God is alive, then we can only conclude that God must be dead." We can listen understandingly, and even with a sense of personal condemnation, to these extreme ideas that are circulated today in the realm of theology. It is no good pointing the finger at these people and saying they are off base. Obviously they are, but the question is, "Why are they off base?" Is it because the church is also off base?

It is with this problem the Apostle Paul comes to grips in Chapter 4 of the epistle to the Ephesians. We are looking at this chapter together and rediscovering the pattern of God's intended working through the church,

which is Christ's body. In particular we have come to Verses 11 and 12 which concern the gifts Jesus Christ has given to the church. We read in Verse 11,

... his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints unto the work of ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ. {Eph 4:11-12 RSV}

We are focusing our attention primarily on the greatly neglected matter of equipping the saints. It may come as a shocking surprise to many of you that it was never God's intention for pastors to visit all the sick, comfort the bereaved, preach to the lost, or teach the newly converted. All these are part of what is called here "the work of the ministry and the building up of the body of Christ." We shall spend some time demonstrating that this is the case, from the Scriptures.

Perhaps no concept has been more damaging to the effectiveness of the church than the idea that the business of Christian people is to get non-Christians to come to church. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is not what they are expected to do. The business of Christian people is to take the good news of Jesus Christ out to where people are, and once they become Christians out there, then they are to come to church. Now this does not mean that we shut the doors of the church to anyone who comes in as a non-Christian. They are perfectly welcome -- but they should come with the understanding that they are coming into a Christian gathering to hear what Christians believe, and learn what Christians find in Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church.

Every local church is expected to give itself to the task of doing two things -- evangelizing outside the church and building up the body of Christ within by teaching and living in fellowship one with another. In line with that, I would like to call your attention to the statement on the back of our bulletin, the last paragraph of which says,

This church advocates *both* evangelism *and* edification. People must be saved by grace through faith, but, having been saved, they must be faithfully helped to grow in grace. The two-fold task of every church is evangelism *and* edification. Not a lopsided stress on one but the consistent practice of both.

That statement reflects clearly the truth of the passage we are now considering.

Let us now look at what the Word of God reveals on this problem of how the church should reach the world. The answer of the Holy Spirit to this question is to give every Christian, without exception, a special gift of ministry -- a capacity for service which he never had before he became a Christian. Along with this, the Holy Spirit provides certain trained leaders to help recognize those gifts, develop them, and teach the people how to draw on the power within them (the Holy Spirit) to employ their gifts effectively. These leaders are to help each Christian enjoy to the utmost the excitement and pleasure of doing what no one else can do in the body of Christ today.

Briefly, this is essentially a process of incarnation. When God chose to visit this earth to set before us the new kind of life he was offering to men, he did so by incarnating his life in a body. God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God -- God in human flesh appearing among men. But that was only the beginning of the process of incarnation. We make a great mistake if we think incarnation ended with the earthly life of Jesus. The incarnation is still going on. Open the book of Acts, and read the opening words, and you will find that the writer of it, Dr. Luke, says that he has set down in the Gospel record "all the things that Jesus began to say and to do," {cf, Acts 1:1b RSV}. In Acts he continues that record so the church is nothing more or less than the extension of the life of Jesus into the world even to the 20th century. It isn't the church that does the work alone. No, it is Jesus, still working through his body, which is the church.

Now that is an all important concept. What happened on a small scale in Judea and Galilee 1900 years ago is intended to happen on a large scale throughout the whole world today, permeating every level of society and every aspect of human life. As Christians today discover this to be a live possibility, life becomes gripping, exciting, the most revolutionary thing that could possibly be experienced. It is then the world becomes aware that God is not dead but very much alive.

Now, we must take time to look more closely at the special gifts which the Holy Spirit gives to his people. We must begin here, for everything will find its ultimate focus at this point. You have a gift. It doesn't make any difference whether you are a young Christian or an old Christian, whether you are a new Christian or a mature Christian. If you are a Christian at all, if you have come to know Jesus Christ as your Lord, if you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit by faith in Jesus Christ, and have passed out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of Christ, moved from darkness into light, from death into life, then you have also received a gift of the Holy Spirit. That gift may be lying dormant in you, inchoate, unformed. You may not even know what yet it is, but it is there, for God has said that without exception all Christians are given a gift or gifts for their ministry. But that is not the whole story. You must learn how to fulfill that gift in the power of the Holy Spirit and not in the power of the flesh.

There are only two forces by which human life can be lived. One is what the Bible calls, *the flesh* -- the self life. Each of us started life on that basis and have been living by it up to the point we became Christians and much of the time long after that. That is the basis on which the world lives. There is also the power of the new life in Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit. That is quite a different thing. It manifests itself in wholly different ways -- in giving oneself instead of wanting to center everything in self. We need to learn that we can exercise our gifts, even though they be spiritual gifts, in either the power of the flesh or the power of the Spirit.

A gift exercised in the power of the flesh is a deadly thing. Perhaps you have heard preachers preaching in the flesh -- exercising the gift of preaching but doing so out of a self-centered desire for exaltation, for self-advancement, for praise or whatever. That preaching always has a ring of falseness about it. It may attract temporarily, but it ultimately produces death. Nothing is more tragic than a spiritual gift exercised in the power of the flesh. Therefore, nothing is more necessary than to learn how to take these gifts and use them in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But that is not easily learned. Here is where we need help. We need the help of the Scriptures in order that we might see what the flesh is, and who the Holy Spirit is, and how he operates in life. We need the apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastor-teachers, as well. We need to be planed and sandpapered and smoothed. God has several grades of sandpaper, running from extremely fine to extremely rough! We need to be honed and sharpened. We need to have the corners rounded off. We need a new outlook on old circumstances. We need new power with which to meet old problems. We need to be pushed out of the nest at times, and other times helped back in.

The place to start in this is the place where Paul begins in Ephesians 4. He says, "But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." Let us start with these gifts. The great passage on the gifts of the Spirit is First Corinthians 12. I would like to turn to that passage and go through these gifts with you.

The chapter falls into three divisions, beginning with Verse 4.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. {1 Cor 12:4-6 RSV}

Notice the three divisions of this subject. There are gifts, ministries (what is called "service" here), and there are workings. Gifts are linked with the Spirit; ministries are linked with the Lord Jesus; and workings or power is linked with God the Father.

A gift, as we have seen already, is a specific function to be performed.

A ministry is the area in which a gift is performed or the group among which it is performed. It is where the gift is utilized. It is the Lord Jesus' prerogative to determine that. He puts some to the task of speaking to Christians, others he sends to minister to the worldly. To some he gives the job of teaching youth. Some minister to older people. Some to children. To some he gives the job of speaking to women. Others to men. Some go to the Jews, others to the Gentiles. Remember in Galatians when Peter and Paul met together it was recognized that both had the gift of preaching, but Peter was to go to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. They

had the same gift but their ministry was different.

Then there are workings. A working is the power by which a gift is manifested or ministered. There are varieties of working, the apostle says, but it is the same God that inspires them all in every one. "Varieties of working," refers to the different manifestation of the power of God in any one ministry. Every time a Christian preaches or teaches or helps someone, it does not have the same results. The same sermon preached in several different circumstances will not always produce the same results. What is the difference? It is God's choice. He does not intend to produce the same results every time. He could but he doesn't always desire to. There are varieties of power and it is up to God to determine how much is accomplished by each ministry.

It is recorded in the Scriptures that John the Baptist did no miracles all his life, yet he was a prophet of God -- a mighty prophet of whom Jesus said, "No man born of woman is greater than he," {cf, Matt 11:11, Luke 7:28}. Then why didn't he work miracles? There are those today who tell us that if we cannot do miracles, it is a sign we are not very proficient in manifesting the power of God. We are only beginners. But John did no miracles. Why not? Because there are varieties of working. It was not the choice of God to work through John in that way.

Now we come to the list of specific gifts. I shall run through these rapidly, but I hope helpfully.

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, {1 Cor 12:8 RSV}

Here is a pair of gifts, the gifts of wisdom and of knowledge. The gift of wisdom is direct insight into truth. It doesn't make any difference what kind of truth it is. It may be spiritual truth, scriptural truth, or it may be secular truth, but to some is given the gift of insight into the truth and the ability to apply that insight to a specific situation. What a wonderful gift this is. Such are men and women who know what to do, and how to do it, in any given circumstance. Let a group get into trouble and it soon appears who has this gift among them. Let Christians become puzzled, bewildered, and they always turn instinctively to the one among them who has the gift of wisdom. Those with this gift ought to be elected to boards, they make excellent counselors.

Linked with this is the gift of knowledge. These two often appear in the same individual. Not always, but often. Knowledge is the ability to investigate and systematize facts. It is the ability to pick out the important facts in any investigation and to put them in manageable order. This sort of person is able to recognize key and important facts as a result of investigation. That is different from the gift of wisdom. Wisdom is direct insight into the meaning of facts. This is the ability to gather facts, the gift of knowledge. These people make wonderful exegetes of the Scriptures. They are thoughtful teachers, and this gift often accompanies the gift of teaching. They are wonderful to have on committees, and if you can get one as chairman, it is all the better.

Then the gift of faith is mentioned. As I said in an earlier message, this is essentially what we call "vision." It is the ability to see something that needs to be done, and to believe that God will do it, even though it looks impossible. Trusting that sense of faith, this person moves out and accomplishes the thing in God's name. Every great Christian enterprise has been begun by someone who possesses the gift of faith.

In Formosa a number of years ago, I met a remarkable woman. Some of you know of Lillian Dickson's work. Here is a woman who clearly and unmistakably has the gift of faith. When she sees a need she moves right in to meet it. I recently received a paper from her and learned she is concerned about the little lads on the streets of Formosa who have no homes. They are orphans, or have been cast adrift by their families. She was keenly aware of the pressures that force these boys to get involved in wrong things, to be pushed into a life of crime or immorality. Her heart went out to them, but because she has the gift of faith she doesn't just feel for them, she does something about it. She has moved in and started an organization to rescue these boys. All over the world people send her money for her projects, sometimes without her knowing them at all. It is obvious she has the gift of faith. Every great Christian organization has begun this way. Someone has a vision for what God can do and through the years carries it through. Others may help in accomplishing it, though they do not have the same vision themselves.

Then the apostle mentions "gifts of healing." This is clearly the supernatural ability to make sick people well.

Occasionally, in the record of church history, there have been some who had the gift of healing, but it is a rare gift today, infrequently bestowed. I have never personally met anyone who had the gift of healing. It is certain that none of these so-called faith healers of our day has this gift. An investigation of their ministry would make that crystal clear. They do not have the ability to lay hands on people and make them well, in spite of their pretentious claims to that effect. They are quick to record the instances when someone is seemingly helped, but they never record the thousands that are turned away without help, to whom nothing happens. To have the gift of healing is to be able to lay hands on the sick and they become well.

You ask, "Why is this so infrequently given today?" The answer is in Verse 11: "All these are inspired by the one and same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills." This gift is not given because it is not the will of the Spirit for it to be given in these days as widely as it was in the early church.

Along this same line is the gift of miracles. This is the ability to accomplish natural things in a supernatural way, to short-circuit the processes of nature, as our Lord did when he turned water into wine, or multiplied the loaves and fishes and fed the five thousand. Some may still have this gift today. It may be given. I do not doubt that it can be given. But again I have never met anyone who has the gift of miracles, though perhaps some in church history have had this gift.

When these spectacular gifts, (healings, miracles, tongues and so forth), are exercised, it is invariably the sign of an immature church. Gifts like these are only for the initial building up of faith, as a bridge to move Christians from dependence upon things that they see happening to faith in a God who can work and accomplish things when they don't see them happening. This is what God wants. We are to walk by faith, not by sight.

The gift of prophecy comes next. This is one of the greatest gifts of all. Chapter 14 of First Corinthians is given over to the praise of this gift, and the apostle urges the church to value this gift and to seek it. Verse 3 of Chapter 14 says,

On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. {1 Cor 14:3 RSV}

That is the gift of prophecy. When a man has this gift, his words have power to build, by stimulating and encouraging others. This is not a gift only for preachers. All these gifts are for any in the church, preachers and layman alike. Many laymen have the gift of prophecy.

Have you ever been in a meeting where a problem was being discussed and there is a seeming impasse -- no one seems to know what the answer is. There is a sense of discouragement because you can't seem to get anywhere. Then someone will stand up and speak, and, as he speaks, everyone knows that what he is saying is exactly the answer. That is the gift of prophecy being exercised -- the ability to speak with power, to build by stimulating and encouraging. What a wonderful gift this is. The church could never get on without the exercise of this gift.

Then there is the gift of discernment of spirits. It is the ability to distinguish between "the spirit of error and the spirit of truth," {cf, 1 Jn 4:6}. This is a gift I often wish I had. I'm glad my wife has it. It is the ability to see through a phony before his error is manifest to everyone by its ultimate results. When Ananias and Sapphira came bringing an offering of their land and put it before Peter, he exercised the gift of discernment when he said, "Who taught you to lie to the Holy Ghost?" {cf, Acts 5:3 KJV}. He knew this whole thing was a lie. This is the ability to read a book and sense the subtlety of error in it. It is a valuable gift, to be exercised both in the church and in the world.

Then there is another pair of gifts, the gift of various kinds of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. What is this? This is the ability to praise God in a language that was never learned and also to interpret a language that was never learned. This gift is never for the purposes of preaching the gospel. In the Scriptures it is always and clearly for the purpose of praising God. It is not for private use, for we read that all the gifts of the Spirit are given "for the common good" {1 Cor 12:7 RSV}, and are not to be exercised in private. However, it is useless in church without interpretation. There are many modern claims that this gift is being revived. But

the question that always needs to be asked in investigating these claims is whether the manifestation being exercised is the same as the gift of tongues in the New Testament. The gift of tongues was a definitely known language and it had a specific purpose in the early church. It marked the fact that God was judging the nation Israel and turning from them to the Gentiles. Therefore, it is very unlikely, it seems to me, that the gift of tongues would be manifested today. Certainly it is the easiest gift to imitate. Because of this, imitations abound on every hand. Whether they are the true gift or not can only be determined by careful comparison with the Scriptures.

At the close of this chapter, in Verses 28-31, there is another list of the gifts, some of them duplicating gifts in the first list.

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. {1 Cor 12:28 RSV}

I wish to reserve the consideration of apostles, prophets and teachers till a later message because these belong to a special class. We have already looked at the gift of miracles and the gift of healing. But here is a wonderful gift that is mentioned for the first time. The gift of helps. This is perhaps the greatest gift of all, and it is the most widespread. This is the gift of lending a hand whenever a need appears. In church, it is often manifest in those who serve as ushers and treasurers, those who prepare the Lord's table, or arrange the flowers and serve the dinners. In the world, it is manifest in those who help the weak, read to the blind, nurse the sick, and in any way minister to someone. This is the ministry of a definite gift of the Spirit. In Romans 12 it is called the gift of showing mercy. That is a wonderful title for it. The church could never operate without this gift of helps.

Then there is the gift of administration, those who organize and execute. These are the men to be elected to church boards and head programs. They know how to organize and direct, in the Spirit.

In Romans 12 there is the mention of two other gifts beside those mentioned here, the gift of teaching (of which we will say more later), and the gift of contributing. The latter is the gift of making money and supporting Christian work by such gifts. Not only the wealthy have this gift. Some who are very poor also have the gift of making contributions.

I think of a dear lady in New York City who worked as a scrubwoman in the skyscrapers of New York for many years, earning money to send out young men into the mission field. In the course of her lifetime she sent out over thirty young people into the mission field. She had the gift of contributions, and she exercised it.

The range of these gifts is absolutely tremendous. They are not only for use in the church. They are for out in the world as well.

- Some of you who have the gift of teaching ought to be exercising it in your home.
- Some of you who have the gift of helps ought to be exercising it in your office or shop or wherever you are.
- Some have the gift of wisdom and you ought to be exercising it wherever you touch people.
- Likewise the gifts of knowledge and administration.

All these gifts are intended for all of life. As Christians exercise their gifts in the power of the Holy Spirit, the world will realize that God is not dead.

I would like to urge you to seek and find, before the face of God, the gift that you have, and begin this month to put it into operation.

Will you seek the mind and will of God as to how your gift can be manifested?

Remember the words of the apostle to Timothy, "Stir up the gift that is in you, which was given unto you," {cf, 2 Tim 1:6}. Only by that means will the church come alive with a vitality it has never had before.

If you say "No!" to this call, then you will discover what the Lord Jesus meant when he said, "He who saves his life shall lose it, but he who loses it for my sake and the gospel, will save it," {cf, Mark 8:35}.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for this look together at these gifts. Strengthen us as we minister in thy name with the gifts thou hast given to us. Teach us Lord to be spiritually alive in the midst of the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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