

SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN THE CHURCH

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I still remember the first symphony I attended. I was in middle school on a field trip that I was not excited about. My 7th grade posse mocked it the whole way there. We joked about “needing a nap anyway” that day. Why couldn’t we go to a football game for a field trip, or better yet, wrestling! We filed in, took our seats, and waited with grumbling hearts for it to start.

When the first note struck something changed. I was mesmerized. It took my breath away. I couldn’t comprehend how all those different instruments could come together in perfect unison to play a piece of music so thrilling. I studied each one, tried to pull it out from the group, but I was drawn to the overall sound. Violins and cellos, trumpets and tubas, bass drums and crashing cymbals, though all playing different things came together in perfect unity.

That is how spiritual gifts are to work in a local church. The variety of “instruments” playing their part, each one coming in at the right moment. The unity this produces is a beautiful work of art. And it’s all conducted and arranged by the Holy Spirit.

This is the message of 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11.

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 activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good ...

All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

This passage (and almost every spiritual gifts passage in the New Testament) addresses two distinct yet simultaneous realities occurring when we use spiritual gifts: unity and diversity.

The Unity of the Holy Spirit

Wayne Grudem defines a spiritual gift as “any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.”⁶⁹ Paul emphasizes to the Corinthians that these abilities come from the “same Spirit” and “same Lord” and “same God.”

Imagine an orchestra where every member was playing from a different sheet of music, each one wanted to be heard above the other instruments. Now, imagine this in the Church of Jesus Christ. If you’ve ever studied Corinthians, you know the church loved the gifts of the Spirit, but they also misused them. It seems spiritual gifts were used for self-promotion and competing to see who was most “spiritual.” The result was division. While zealous for spiritual gifts, the Corinthians lacked an appreciation for all the ways God’s Spirit was manifesting himself around them.

The main point is not individual expression but corporate edification. It is not primarily wondering “what is my gift?” The point is to ask the question “what is the Spirit doing in the church?”

The Holy Spirit does many powerful things in our lives. For all those in Christ, the Holy Spirit has regenerated you and given you new spiritual life (Titus 3:5). The Holy Spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are a child of God (Rom. 8:16). The Holy Spirit has set you free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2). The Holy Spirit is sanctifying you to be more like Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). The Holy Spirit is making you wise (Eph. 1:17), guiding you into truth (John 16:13), helping you (John 14:16), bearing fruit in your life (Gal. 5:22-23), pouring out God’s love (Rom. 5:5), helping you pray (Rom. 8:26), and empowering you for evangelism (Acts 1:8).

The same Spirit that does these mighty works also empowers us with spiritual gifts. They are not given to us so that we might appear powerful, impressive, important, or extraordinary. They are given so that we might build one another up, and so that Christ may be glorified by his Church. He is glorified when we proclaim his gospel, care for his people, and serve his body. The Holy Spirit is empowering us for that very purpose.

A Diversity of Spiritual Gifts

Just as there is one Spirit empowering these abilities, there is also a diversity of gifts the Spirit is empowering. There are “varieties of gifts,” “varieties of service,” and “varieties of activities.” This is essential for a healthy church. An orchestra of tubas is not the goal! We need all the instruments playing their part.

The New Testament has several passages listing spiritual gifts.

⁶⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 396.

I encourage you to take a minute and review them: 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:6-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11.

You'll notice the diversity in these lists: prophecy alongside serving, healing alongside administration, helping alongside miracles. And it continues: giving, teaching, acts of mercy, leading.

The gifts are so diverse within the body of Christ that theologians do not believe we have an exhaustive list in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit knows exactly what each church needs to accomplish the purpose God has set for it. Spiritual gifts are not a "set it and forget it" Holy Spirit work. The Spirit is continually manifesting himself in the life of the church by empowering us to serve others. Just as our needs change, so does the gifting the Spirit provides to meet those needs.

You might not think of yourself as being prophetic. But as your small group is praying, God might give you a picture or word that encourages the weary, builds up the faint hearted, or consoles someone suffering. The Spirit can do that. You might not think you have the gift of healing, but your heart might be breaking for someone who is sick and you might pray for them and God might heal them. The Spirit can do that.

You might not think you have the gift of helping, but then you see a family with sick kids and you have the idea of going to their house and cleaning, doing laundry, or bringing them a meal. Where did that idea come from? God! Who empowers you to do that? God. The Spirit can do that.

If we want the church to be healthy and strong, others to be encouraged and edified, the gospel to be proclaimed and lived out in our midst, then we should "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts" (1 Cor. 14:1). We don't have the option of admiring gifts from a safe distance. We are called to pursue them, because they are not really about us; they are about God, the church, others. They are "for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

God is at work building his church. The Holy Spirit is manifesting himself all around us. The orchestra is tuned. The conductor is taking his place. The crowd is quieting. Are you ready to play your part?