

CHAPTER FOUR

All God's Children Have Gifts

Many people think that the incarnation of Jesus Christ began at the first Christmas and ended when Jesus was taken up into the clouds. But in fact, that was only the *beginning* of the incarnation of Christ. The process of the incarnation is still going on.

God's program for reaching and healing a broken world has always involved incarnation. The word incarnate means "to take bodily form." When God chose to demonstrate to mankind His love and the new life He offered us, He did so by incarnating Himself--by taking on our form, sharing our human experience, and living among us. God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God, the God-man, God in human flesh.

But we make a great mistake if we think the incarnation ended with the earthly life of Christ. The life of Jesus is still being manifested upon the earth--but no longer through a single physical body, limited to one geographic location. Today, the body of Christ performs the work of Christ around the clock and around the globe. It is a corporate body, comprised of millions of individuals like you and me.

This body is called the church.

Open the book of Acts in the New Testament and you'll find that the writer of Acts, Dr. Luke, tells a certain young man named Theophilus that he had previously set down in his first account (the Gospel According to Luke) "all that Jesus began to do and teach." In Acts, the sequel to his Gospel, Dr. Luke continues the record of Jesus's work among mankind--*yet Jesus Himself only appears in the first eleven verses of Acts!*

In verse 11, Jesus ascends into heaven. Yet the story of His work on earth continues for twenty-eight more chapters. How can that be? Because the rest of Acts is the story of the work of His new body, the church! When it lives in and by the Spirit, the church is nothing less than the physical extension of the life of Jesus to the whole world. The physical life of Jesus began at the moment a Jewish virgin named Mary conceived, and has continued without interruption right up to the moment you are reading this page--roughly two thousand years!

That is an amazing and all-important concept! What happened on a small scale in Judea and Galilee twenty centuries ago continues on a worldwide scale today, permeating every level of society and every aspect of human life. Once Christians discover and lay hold of this amazing truth for their own lives, their outlook on life is powerfully transformed. Their relationship with God becomes dynamic and exciting. Their lives become powerfully effective for God.

It is a thrilling adventure to rediscover the pattern by which God has designed His church to influence the world. On the other hand, there is nothing more pathetic and barren than a church which does not understand God's program for operating the body of Christ on earth. The church which fails to grasp this amazing concept is doomed to substitute business methods, organizational procedures, and pressure politics as means to influence society. Such a "church" is not really the church as God intended it to be; it is merely a religious-sounding extension of the dead systems of this world.

A new capacity for service

So let's examine and explore the amazing pattern of operation which the apostle Paul describes as God's way of touching and changing the world. Let's look at God's "operating manual" for the new body of Christ on

earth, the church. In Ephesians 4, Paul now turns from his description of the nature of the church to the provision made by the Holy Spirit for its dynamic, effective functioning in the world. He writes, "But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph. 4.7).

In that brief sentence there is a reference to two tremendous things: (1) *the gift of the Holy Spirit* for ministry, which is given to every true Christian without exception, and (2) the new and remarkable *power* by which that gift may be exercised. We will look carefully at both of these in due order, but let us begin with the gift of the Spirit, which Paul refers to as a "grace."

The word "grace" in the original language is *charis*, from which the English adjective, *charismatic*, is derived. This "grace" is a God-given capacity for service which we have received as Christians, and which we did not possess before we became Christians. This "grace" is given to all true Christians, without exception.

Paul himself, in Ephesians 3:8, refers to one of his own gifts or "graces" of the Spirit: "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace [*charis*] was given." What was the grace? He goes on: "To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Clearly one of his gifts was that of preaching--or, as it is called in other places, the gift of prophesying. When Paul writes to his young son in the faith, Timothy, he uses a closely related word and says to him, "Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift [*charisma*] of God that is within you" (2 Tim. 1:6).

There seems little doubt that this is where the early church began with new converts. Whenever anyone, by faith in Jesus Christ, passed from the kingdom and power of Satan into the kingdom of God's love, he was immediately taught that the Holy Spirit of God had not only imparted to him the life of Jesus Christ, but had also equipped him with a spiritual gift or gifts which he was then responsible to discover and exercise. The apostle Peter writes, "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Pet. 4:10). And again, in 1 Corinthians 12:7, Paul writes: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

It is significant that in each place where the gifts of the Spirit are described in Scripture, the emphasis is placed upon the fact that each Christian has at least one. That gift may be lying dormant within you, embryonic and unused. You may not know what it is, but it is there. The Holy Spirit makes no exceptions to this basic equipping of each believer. No Christian can say, "I can't serve God; I don't have any capacity or ability to serve Him." We have all, as authentic followers of Christ, been gifted with a "grace" of the Spirit.

It is vitally essential that you discover the gift or gifts which you possess. The value of your life as a Christian will be determined by the degree to which you use the gift God has given you.

Varieties of gifts

The most detailed passage on the gifts of the Spirit is 1 Corinthians 12. There is another briefer list in Romans 12, and a still shorter list in 1 Peter 4. In these passages certain gifts are referred to by more than one name. In comparing the passages it seems evident that there are sixteen or seventeen basic gifts and these may be found in various combinations within a single individual, each cluster of gifts opening the door to a wide and varied ministry.

Perhaps the most helpful way to become acquainted with these gifts is to allow the apostle Paul to teach us concerning them from the great explanation he gives to the church at Corinth: "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 everyone" (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

Notice the three divisions of the subject of spiritual gifts. There are *gifts*; there are *ministries* (called "service" here); and there are *workings* (or *energizings*). Gifts are linked to the Spirit, ministries are linked to the Lord Jesus, and workings are linked to God the Father. Thus, as in Ephesians 4, the triune God is seen dwelling within His body, the church, for the specific purpose of ministering to a broken world (see Eph. 4:3-6).

A gift, as we have already seen, is a specific capacity or function which is given to us directly by the Spirit of

God. This is critically important to understand. We do not generate these gifts by ourselves; they are implanted in us by the Spirit Himself. Because we have been gifted by God, we can not think *highly enough* of ourselves to have confidence in carrying out the ministry He has given us. We know we can accomplish His will, because He has given us the spiritual ability to do so.

But we also know that we should not think *too highly* of ourselves, because the Spirit of God is the source of the gift, not we ourselves. Properly viewed, spiritual gifts elevate us and keep us humble at the same time!

A *ministry* is the sphere in which a gift is performed, among a certain group of people, or in a certain geographic area. It is the sovereign right and prerogative of the Lord Jesus to assign a sphere of service for each member of His body. You can see Him exercising that right in the John 21. There, after His resurrection, He appears to Peter and three times bids him, "Feed my sheep." That was to be Peter's ministry. He was to be a pastor (or elder), feeding the flock of God. (Peter refers to himself in this capacity in 1 Peter 5.) When Peter expresses curiosity as to what the Lord would have John do, the Lord says to him, "What is that to you? Follow me!" (see John 21:15-23).

The Lord is still exercising this right today. He sets some to the task of teaching Christians. He sends others to minister to the "worldlings," those who are outside of the church. To some He gives the task of training youth and to others a ministry to older people. Some work with women and others with men; some go to the Jews, others to the Gentiles. Peter was sent to the circumcised (the Jews), while Paul was sent to the uncircumcised (the Gentiles). They both had the same gift but their ministry was different.

Then there are *workings*, or energizings. These are the responsibility of the Father. The term refers to the degree of power by which a gift is manifested or ministered on a specific occasion. There are varieties of workings, the apostle says, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone (1 Cor. 12:6).

Every exercise of a spiritual gift does not produce the same result each time. The same message given in several different circumstances will not produce the same results. What is the difference? It is God's choice. He is endlessly creative and does not intend to produce the same results every time. He could, but He does not always desire to do so. It is up to the Father to determine how much is accomplished at each ministry of a gift.

The Scriptures record that John the Baptist did no miracle throughout the course of his ministry. Yet he was a mighty prophet of God and Jesus said of him that there is no man born of woman who is greater than he (see Matt. 11:11). There are those today who suggest that if we cannot do miracles it is a sign of weakness in faith and of little spiritual power. But John did no miracles. Why not? Because there are varieties of workings, and it was not the choice of the Father to work through John in that way.

Twin gifts

Now, in 1 Corinthians 12, we come to the list of specific spiritual gifts: "To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit. ..." (v. 8).

Here is a pair of gifts: the gift of wisdom and the gift of knowledge. These often appear together in a single individual, for they are related to the same function. They are concerned with "utterance"--or as it is in the original, "the word." The gift of knowledge is the ability to perceive and systematize the great facts which God has hidden in His word. A person exercising this gift is able to recognize the key and important facts of Scripture as a result of investigation. The gift of wisdom, on the other hand, is the ability to apply those insights to a specific situation. It is wisdom which is capable of putting knowledge to work.

Perhaps you have been in a meeting where some problem was being discussed and there is a seeming impasse--no one seems to know what to do or what the answer is. Then someone stands up and takes some great principle of Scripture and apply it to the problem in such a clear way that everyone can see the answer. That is the gift of wisdom being exercised.

These twin gifts of wisdom and knowledge are also related to the gift of teaching, which is explored in Chapter Eleven. Teaching deals with communication. It is the ability to impart the facts and insights which the gifts of

knowledge and wisdom discover, and to pass them on to others in learnable form. The man or woman who possesses all three of these gifts is a valuable person to have around indeed!

Then Paul mentions the gift of faith. This faith is again different from what we discussed in Chapter Three. All Christians have faith; faith is the prerequisite to salvation. But some Christians have the gift or "grace" of faith. What Paul means here is essentially what we call today the gift of vision. It is the ability to see some thing that needs to be done and to believe that God will do it even though it looks impossible. Trusting that sense of faith, a person with this gift moves out and accomplishes the "impossible" task in God's name. Every great Christian enterprise has begun with a man or woman who possessed the gift of faith.

Some years ago, in the Taiwan Republic of China, I met a remarkable woman named Lillian Dickson. Clearly and unmistakably, Mrs. Dickson had the gift of faith. When she saw a need, she moved right in to meet it, regardless of whether she can see an adequate supply of funds or resources. She became concerned about certain poor boys on the streets of Taipei who had no homes. They were orphans, cast adrift by their families. Her heart went out to them because of the pressures that forced them into a life of crime. Because she had the gift of faith and a faithful vision of what God could do, she started an organization to rescue those boys. From all around the world, God moved people to send her money for that project and many others which she ran. As a result of this one woman's faith and vision, the lives of hundreds of Chinese street boys were transformed. That's the gift of faith in action.

Healing at every level

Next the apostle mentions "gifts of healing" given by the same Spirit. That word in the original Greek is in the plural form: "healings." I take that to mean healing at every level of human need--physical, emotional, and spiritual.

In the early church there were a number of instances where this gift was exercised on the physical level. Throughout church history there have been others who had this gift of physical healing. There are some today who call themselves "healers," but it should be noted that none of the apostles ever made this claim for themselves. However, there is abundant evidence in the New Testament that the Spirit of God worked through the apostles and other believers in bringing physical healing to the sick, just as He does today.

Some claims to healing today are based on spectacular but temporary improvement as a result of strong psychological conditioning, and the healing fades away within a few days. But God does heal today, sometimes quickly and permanently; this fact is too well attested and documented to challenge. We only note here that such healing does not necessarily indicate that the gift of healing is being exercised.

If someone asks, "Why is this gift so infrequently manifested today?" the answer is given in 1 Corinthians 12:11--"All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills." The spiritual gift of physical healing is not seen often today 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.

The gift of healing is, however, frequently bestowed today on the emotional and spiritual level. Many Christians, laymen and professional ministers alike, are equipped by the Spirit to help those with damaged emotions and with bruised spirits, who have become sick or disordered in these areas. They make excellent counsellors because they are able to exercise the patience and compassion necessary to help such wounded souls.

The purpose of miracles

Along this same line with the gift of healing is the gift of miracles. This is the ability to short-circuit the processes of nature by supernatural activity, as the Lord did when he turned water into wine or multiplied the loaves and fishes. Some may still have this gift today. I don't doubt that it can be given; but again, I have never met anyone who had the gift of miracles, though perhaps some have exercised this at times in the history of the church.

The gifts of physical healing, miracles and tongues are given for the initial building up of faith, as a bridge to move Christians from dependence upon things they can see to faith in a God who can work and accomplish much when nothing seems to be happening. The history of missions will substantiate this. So does the flow of the book of Acts: In the beginning of Acts, we see a number of miraculous events being worked by various apostles. But as the church grows and is established in the faith, the miraculous events of the book of Acts wane and taper off. The implications of this flow of events are clear: God wants us to walk by faith, not by sight. As faith grows, we have less need of visible demonstrations of God's power. He wants us to become mature enough that the "battery" of our faith no longer needs to be repeatedly "jump-started" by miracles.

The apostle goes on to mention the gift of prophecy. This is the greatest gift of all, as Paul makes clear by devoting an entire chapter--1 Corinthians 14--to this gift. We shall examine the gift of prophecy more fully when we return to Ephesians 4 and the ministry of the prophet. But here, in 1 Corinthians 14:3, the apostle says of this gift, "On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their up-building and encouragement and consolation." That is the effect of the gift of prophecy. When a man or woman has this gift it results in building, stimulating, and encouraging others. This is not a gift for preachers only. All the gifts are given without respect to a person's training. Many laymen and laywomen have the gift of prophecy and should be exercising it.

Then there is the gift of discernment of spirits. This is the ability to distinguish between the spirit of error and the spirit of truth before the difference is manifest to all by the results. It is the ability to see through a phony before his phoniness is clearly evident. When Ananias and Sapphira came to Peter, bringing what they claimed to be the full price of some land they had sold though they had actually kept back part of it for themselves, Peter exercised the gift of discernment when he said, "How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:4,9). Those who have this gift can read a book and sense the subtlety of error in it, or hear a message and put their finger on what may be wrong about it. It is a valuable gift to be exercised within the church.

Another pair of gifts is listed next: tongues and the interpretation of tongues. From time to time, there is a resurgence of interest in these gifts, especially in the Roman Catholic and other high liturgical churches. All such movements must be examined in the light of the Scriptures. Does the expression of these gifts glorify Christ? Is there ample biblical authority for the teachings of those who practice these gifts? Do these gifts promote unity in the body of Christ? Are these who practice these gifts characterized by Christlike holiness, humility and love? Do they bring permanent improvement to the individual and to the church?

These are the questions which must be answered affirmatively in order to verify and validate the expression of these gifts.

Distinctive marks

In Scripture, the gift of tongues always had at least three distinctive marks which are clearly described in the New Testament. First, as on the day of Pentecost, the gift of tongues consisted of known languages which were spoken somewhere on earth (see Acts 2:1-13). The description "unknown tongue" which appears in the King James Version has no support in the original Greek text. The tongues of the New Testament were not a torrent of unrelated syllables, but had structure and syntax, as any earthly language has.

Second, the biblical gift was characterized by praise and thanksgiving addressed to God. Paul wrote, "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God" (1 Cor. 14:2). The gift of tongues is definitely not a means of preaching the Gospel or of conveying messages to groups or individuals, but is--as it was on the day of Pentecost--a means of praising God for his mighty works.

Third, the gift of tongues was intended as a sign to unbelievers and not as a sign for believers. Paul is very precise about this. He quotes the prophet Isaiah as having predicted the purpose of tongues: "In the law it is written, 'By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.' Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers" (1 Cor. 14:21-22).

The appearance of this gift at Pentecost marked the fact that God was judging the nation Israel and turning from it to the Gentiles (see Acts 2:1-13). This is why Peter said to the Jews on the day of Pentecost, "For the promise is to you and to your children [the Jews] and to all that are far off [Gentiles], every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2.39).

Although it is not explicitly stated in Scripture as a distinguishing characteristic of the biblical gift of tongues, it is nevertheless a striking fact that the gift was everywhere publicly exercised and was evidently not intended for private use. We are told that the gifts of the Spirit are for the common good, and not for personal benefit. Each occasion with which tongues is connected in the New Testament was a public meeting. The setting for 1 Corinthians 14 is the assembly of Christians together for mutual ministry and worship.

When a Christian exercised the gift in prayer and thanksgiving to God it was valueless to the church unless it was interpreted, though the one exercising it received a certain degree of edification in his own spirit. Paul forbids its exercise in church unless there is a definite assurance of interpretation for the edification of those present.

Since the gift of tongues is the easiest of the gifts to imitate, there have been imitations of it through the centuries. Whether those manifestations are the true gift or not can only be determined by their agreement with the biblical marks. We should remember that the primary purpose of any gift of the Spirit is to minister to the body of Christ, to edify and strengthen the body, and to accomplish the specific aim of the Holy Spirit in giving the gift.

Gifted to help

At the close of 1 Corinthians 12 there is another list of spiritual gifts, some of which duplicate the gifts already discussed: "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" (v.28).

We shall reserve the consideration of apostles, prophets and teachers till a later chapter, for these belong to a special class of gifts. The gifts of miracles and of healings we have already looked at, but a wonderful gift is mentioned here for the first time: the gift of helps. In some ways this is one of the greatest gifts and certainly it is the most widespread. It is the ability to lend a hand wherever a need appears, and to do so in such a way as to strengthen, support, and spiritually encourage others.

In the church, the gift of helps is often manifest in those who serve as ushers and treasurers, in those who prepare the Communion table or arrange flowers and serve dinners. The gift of helps is not a very flashy gift, and many people with this all-important gift function in obscurity and anonymity--but God sees and knows the contribution of these humble, helping servants. More than most people realize, the exercise of this gift makes possible the ministry of the other, more evident, gifts. Every church is deeply indebted to those who exercise the gift of helps.

In the twelfth chapter of Romans is another partial treatment of spiritual gifts: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. If prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (verses 6-8).

We have already touched briefly upon the gift of prophecy and shall study it further when we return to Ephesians 4. The gift of serving seems to be identical with the gift of helps just examined. The word for serving is the same Greek word from which the word "deacon" comes. A deacon, then, would be anyone who uses the gift of helps to perform a service on behalf of, or in the name of, the church.

Exhorting, giving, leading

The gift of teaching we have already discussed as having to do with the realm of communication of truth. The next gift in this list is that of *exhortation*. This is a word which means to encourage or comfort another. Its Greek root means "to call alongside" and gives us the picture of someone calling another to come alongside for

strengthening or reassurance. It is the same root from which a name of the Holy Spirit is derived: the Comforter, or in the RSV, the Counselor. Those who have this gift are able to inspire others to action, awaken renewed spiritual interest, or steady those who are struggling, stressed, or faltering.

Another gift mentioned for the first time here is that of contributing, or of giving. This gift is essentially concerned with the giving of money, so Paul's exhortation is that those with the gift of giving should do so with generosity. It may surprise many to learn that the Holy Spirit gives such a gift as this, but many Christians possess it, both the wealthy and the poor. It is the ability to earn and give money for the advancement of God's work, and to do so with such wisdom, humility, and cheerfulness that the recipients are immeasurably strengthened and blessed by the transaction.

A person with the gift of giving does not give with the idea of getting back or of using his donation as leverage to control the use of the gift or other aspects of the church's agenda. I have often had the experience of Christians coming to me with an offer to finance a certain ministry at considerable, sacrificial cost to themselves. They do so because they have the gift of giving, because it is their joy and reward to give, and because they seek the commendation of their Lord: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

The next gift listed by Paul is widely misunderstood because it is poorly translated. The RSV says that the Christian who "gives aid" is to do it with zeal. Phillips is closer to the sense of the original: "Let the man who wields authority think of his responsibility." And the New English Bible is right on, rendering this phrase, "If you are a leader, exert yourself to lead." This might best be called the gift of leadership. The Greek word is literally, "one who stands in front." It is clearly evidenced in facilitating meetings, conducting seminars and panel discussions, chairing boards and organizations, and the like, and it speaks to the fact that those who exercise the leadership function should do so in a way that edifies and helps others spiritually.

The final gift mentioned in Romans 12 is that of doing acts of mercy. Its distinctiveness is indicated by the meaning of the word "mercy." Mercy is undeserved aid, aid given to those who most people find repugnant and offensive--the sick and deformed, the unwashed and foul, those with unpleasant personalities and vile habits. It differs from the gift of helps by being directed to those who are either undeserving or who (like a child with AIDS or a mentally disordered individual) is an innocent victim, treated as an outcast by much of our society.

I have seen many people at Peninsula Bible Church who have this gift, and who use it to work among retarded children, or in the AIDS ward of Bay Area hospitals, or in prison visitation ministries, or in service to the homeless and the immigrant poor, or in twelve step ministries to alcoholics and drug addicts. The love and patience exhibited by those with the gift of mercy is beautiful to watch.

These, then, are the "graces" which are distributed by the Holy Spirit to each member of the body of Christ as the Spirit chooses. There are no exceptions, and no one is left out. This is the fundamental provision of the Lord for the operation of his church. As a physical human body consists of numerous cells exercising various functions, so the body of Christ consists of many members, each possessing a specific function that is absolutely essential to the effective, healthy functioning of the body.

It is obvious that there can be no hope of ever getting the church to operate as it was intended to until each individual member recognizes and begins to exercise the spiritual gifts he or she has received. So fundamentally important is this issue that we shall take an extra chapter to look at the gifts from a wider point of view. In the next chapter, we will examine practical ways to discover and use your spiritual gifts.

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