

CHAPTER FIVE

Discovering and Using Your Gift

You are unique, unreproducible, and irreplaceable. In all the universe, there is no one who looks exactly like you, thinks your thoughts, or feels your feelings. Above all, there is no other Christian in the world who is equipped and gifted like you. Within you, permeating your being, is a uniquely designed pattern of spiritual gifts. The body of Christ needs you and the gifts which the Spirit has uniquely bestowed upon you.

The church is primarily and fundamentally a body designed to express through each unique, individual member the life of the indwelling Lord. Every member of the body is equipped by the Holy Spirit with gifts designed to express that life. Once you become fully aware that God Himself has uniquely equipped you with spiritual gifts, and that He has strategically placed you exactly where he wants you in order to use those gifts, then you enter a whole new dimension of exciting possibilities! In all the world there is no experience more satisfying and fulfilling than to realize that you have been the instrument of the divine plan which God is working out in the world, in human history, and in the lives of the people around you. Such an experience awaits any true Christian who is willing to discover and use the spiritual gifts which God has given.

Discovering our spiritual gifts is not something we do by taking a self-test, like one of those true-or-false quizzes in a magazine. It takes time. It takes thought. It takes Scripture study. It takes interaction with other Christians. Above all, it requires that we submit ourselves to the authority of the Head of the body, Jesus Christ, who reserves to Himself the right to coordinate and direct its activities.

The deepest level

One common area of confusion--and one fact we must clearly understand--is that a spiritual gift is not the same as a natural talent. It is true that talents such as musical ability, artistic skills, athletic coordination, and the like are also gifts from God. But they are not spiritual gifts. They are gifts on a physical or social level only, given to benefit mankind in the natural realm.

Spiritual gifts, on the other hand, are given to benefit mankind and the church in the realm of the Spirit, the realm of an individual's relationship to God. The effect of a spiritual gift is to enhance a person in his own spirit's enjoyment of the life and love of God--to bless him, in other words. Moreover, since the spirit is the most fundamental part of person's being, from which all other relationships flow, it is clear that the exercise of spiritual gifts operates at the deepest level of human existence, and strikes right at the root of all human problems.

Talents deal more with the surfaces of life. Though useful or entertaining, talents do not permanently affect and change people as spiritual gifts can do. Talents, obviously, are distributed to men and women quite apart from any reference to their spiritual condition. Non-Christians as well as Christians have talents, and both can find many opportunities for useful expression of their talents in both religious and secular ways. Only Christians have spiritual gifts, because these gifts are given only to those in whom the Spirit of Christ has come to dwell (1 Cor. 12:7).

It is quite possible, therefore, for a Christian to have a talent for teaching, for instance, but not to have the spiritual gift of teaching. If that is the case and he were asked to teach a Sunday School class, for example, he would be quite capable of imparting considerable information and knowledge of facts to his class--but his teaching would lack the power to bless and advance his students spiritually. This fact helps to explain the many qualified secular teachers who do not do well at all as Sunday school teachers. On the other hand, many school teachers also possess, as Christians, the spiritual gift of teaching and are greatly used of God in Bible classes

and Sunday school teaching.

It is also quite possible to exercise a spiritual gift through the channel of a natural talent. This is frequently seen in the ministry of Christian singers. We have all heard Christian soloists with great voices whose musical talents would have pleased secular audiences anywhere. But in addition to their talent, they possessed great power to impart spiritual enrichment through their singing, leaving their audiences spiritually refreshed and strengthened. Most often it is the gift of exhortation that the singer is exercising, but it is being carried by his or her musical talent just as a telephone wire carries a human voice.

Of course we have all been treated also to the disappointing experience of listening to a Christian performer sing without exercising any spiritual gift. It may have been a virtuoso performance, a triumph of technical artistry, yet we find our hearts are left cold and unmoved. The lesson is clear: Don't try to use your natural talents alone to accomplish the work of God, for talent alone cannot operate in that sphere. But if you use your talents as channels or vehicles for your spiritual gifts, then you will find they dovetail beautifully, just as you might expect they would since both talents and gifts come from the same God.

Perhaps the question most pressing upon you right now is, "How do I discover my spiritual gifts? If they are the doorway to a new world of fulfillment and challenge, then I surely want to know what mine are! But where to I begin to discover them?" The answer is really very simple. You discover a spiritual gift just like you discovered your natural talents!

A special appeal

How did you find out that you were musically talented? Or artistically endowed? Or able to lead, to organize, or to compete athletically? It probably first began with some kind of desire. You simply liked whatever it is you are talented at, and found yourself drawn toward those who were already doing it. You enjoyed watching those who were good at it, and came to appreciate something of the fine points of the activity. That is the way spiritual gifts make themselves known at first too.

Many Christians today have somehow gotten the idea that doing what God wants you to do is always dreary and unpleasant, that Christians must always make choices between doing what they want to do and being happy on the one hand, versus doing what God wants them to do and being completely miserable on the other. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The exercise of a spiritual gift is always a satisfying, enjoyable experience though sometimes the occasion on which it is exercised may be an unhappy one. Jesus said it was His constant delight to do the will of the One who sent Him. The Father's gift awakened His own desire and He went about doing what He intensely enjoyed doing.

Here is a practical, workable, step-by-step plan for discovering your spiritual gifts:

1. Start with the gifts you most feel drawn toward. Study the biblical lists of gifts and try exercising those gifts which most appeal to you.
2. Watch for improvement and development. Do you get better at it as you go along? Do you find your quite understandable initial fears subsiding and a growing sense of competence developing? Remember, that's the way it was in discovering your talents, too.
3. Ask trusted Christian friends to observe your life and tell you what gifts they see in you. Often, others can see our lives more clearly than can, and they can help to affirm gifts in us which we cannot clearly see as yet. (The mutual affirming of spiritual gifts is one of the many reasons Christians need to be in close koinonia-fellowship and community with one another.)

In fact, the observation of other Christians provide us with a good "reality check" for our spiritual gifts. Many Christians wonder, "Do I have a certain spiritual gift, or don't I?" Here's a final test: Do others recognize this gift in you? When someone says to you, quite unsolicited, "We'd like you to take on this ministry, we think

you have a gift for it," then you can be reasonably sure you have that spiritual gift. It may well be that others will see that gift in you long before you do!

One of the best things you can do for another Christian--and for the life of the body as a whole--is to help another Christian discover his or her spiritual gifts. It is much better for others to affirm authentic gifts in you than for you to lay pretentious claims to gifts you might not actually have! One great Bible teacher used to say, "It's such a pity to see someone who thinks he has the gift of preaching--but no one in his congregation has the gift of listening!"

Gifts need to be exercised just as talents do. Practice tends to make perfect, whether in the use of talents or the use of gifts. As Paul wrote to young Timothy, "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you" (2 Tim. 1.6). As skill in the exercise of a gift develops, the spiritual blessing it brings will become increasingly evident. You will find yourself seeking more and more occasions in which to use your gift. But remember: that gift was not given to you for your own personal, worldly advancement, but as a means to spiritually enrich you and others. As Paul reminds us, "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

It is helpful, also, to realize that hardly anyone discovers all his gifts at the beginning of his Christian experience. Gifts, like talents, may lie undiscovered for years, then emerge when a certain combination of needs or circumstances brings them to light. It is wise, therefore, to always be ready to try something new. Who knows but what the Spirit of God has put you on the doorstep of a new endeavor for the express purpose of helping you discover gifts you never knew you had!

Should we seek specific gifts?

Many Christians wonder, "Is it proper to pray for a certain specific gift to be given me?" Bible teachers differ on the answer to this one. Some feel that the pattern of gifts you possess are all determined by the Spirit at the moment He takes up residence within you. It may take you years to discover your gifts, but they are all there from the beginning, from the moment of your salvation, and no new ones are ever added.

Others point to the verse which says, "But earnestly desire the higher gifts" (1 Cor. 12:31), and feel that the Bible encourages prayer for specific gifts. It should be noted that this exhortation is in the plural and is closer to a Southern "y'all" than to a singular "you." It would then mean that the apostle wanted these Corinthian believers to pray that God would manifest the best gifts in their midst by sending among them individuals equipped with these gifts--but it was not meant for individual encouragement to seek specific gifts.

However, in 1 Corinthians 14:13, Paul does say, "He who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret." Whatever else is meant by these verses, it is clear that certain gifts are more useful and profitable than others, and every church is to be concerned that the best ones are in evidence in their midst. Certainly the final choice is left to the Spirit, for Paul says that the Spirit "apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:11). Hebrews 2.4 also speaks of "gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will."

Infinite variety

In the preceding chapter we mentioned the fact that the gifts, though only about seventeen or eighteen in number, are given in clusters or combinations which make possible an almost infinite number of varying ministries. Someone once computed the number of potential combinations or permutations that this number of gifts makes possible, and the number has so many digits it is impossible for me to comprehend!

Every human face is made up of the same basic components--a pair of eyes, a nose, a mouth, two cheeks, a chin, a forehead, all held in by a pair of ears. Yet no two faces in the world are exactly alike. In the same way, no two Christians have exactly the same pattern of spiritual gifts. God gave you your face because it is exactly right for the expression of His life where you are. Likewise He gives you the precise combination of gifts you possess because that combination is exactly what is needed for the Lord's ministry. Be open to His leading, and He will show you where and how He wants you to use your gifts.

Do you see what this means? It completely eliminates all competition within the body of Christ! No Christian

needs to be the rival of any other; there is a place for all in the body, and no one can take another Christian's place.

In fact, Paul goes on to say as much in the latter half of 1 Corinthians 12. There are two attitudes, he says, which are completely eliminated by the existence of spiritual gifts. One is self-depreciation:

"If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body" (1 Cor. 12:15,16).

This completely destroys the argument of the Christian who says, "There's nothing I can do; others have gifts and abilities but since I can't do what they do I must not be of much use in the church." Paul's conclusion to this line of argument is: "But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (v. 18).

On the other hand, there is no room for arrogance or self-sufficiency either:

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.' Nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require" (verses 21-24).

No member of the body has the right to look down on the ministry of another Christian. We desperately need each other in the body of Christ. No Christian, or group of Christians, can do the task alone. No denomination constitutes the whole body, and no Christian organization possesses all the gifts in the variety of combinations necessary to do the work God wants done today. We are members one of another and it is time we took these words seriously and began to act like one harmonious body again.

The gifts of the Spirit are not only for use within the church. They are for the world as well. Some who have the gift of teaching ought to be exercising it in their homes. Some who have the gift of helping ought to be using it in the office, the shop, or wherever they are. Some who have the gift of wisdom should be putting it to work wherever they touch people. These gifts are intended for all of life.

Remember that the ministry of the body is the ministry of Jesus Christ, His continuing ministry in human society. Christ loves this world and the men and women in it. He loves the homeless, the street derelicts, the drug addicts, the alcoholics, the sexaholics, the prostitutes, the gang members and graffiti taggers, the down-and-outers on Crack Street, the up-and-outers on Park Avenue, the businesspeople enslaved by the god of Success, the Generation Xers who have given up on the future, the Baby Boomers who have achieved their career goals and status goals and still feel hollow inside. Jesus loves them all, and He wants to reach them and enfold them into His body.

Our job is to go to them, tell them about the Savior who has given His life for them, the Father who gave His only Son for them, and the Spirit who wants to empower them and indwell them. Our job is to exercise our gifts in order to urge, draw, and love people into the kingdom of God and the body of Christ. That is why God has equipped us with gifts, and filled us with His life. As we discover and use the gifts He has given us, we become His hands, His mouth, His feet, going out into the world, telling His story, doing His work, sharing His love, completing His eternal plan for the redemption of this broken world!

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