

JOHN WIMBER: Spiritual Gifts Ignite Diverse Gospel Expressions

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The idea of a second work of grace—a subsequent experience to salvation needed, to receive the Holy Spirit—is a major problem for many evangelicals. Evangelicals, through Scripture study, know that they receive the Holy Spirit when they are born again and therefore have great difficulty looking for a second work.

I maintain the evangelical position, that the born-again experience is a consummate charismatic experience. Any ensuing interaction between the individual and comes under the heading of “filling,” as emphasized by Paul. If I take this posture, then I must deal in some pragmatic way with what is meant by being born-again in the New Testament. If, as many evangelicals believe, the Acts 2 experience was the birth of the church, it is therefore connected with the coming of the Spirit and spiritual gifts. My question to any evangelical is: If that’s true, then why are not the gifts also in the church today?

I also emphasize the importance of expectation. If the experience of the Holy Spirit isn’t preached or seen by the people—which is true in most evangelical churches—they won’t expect these things to happen; therefore, they will not happen. When we see that there is more we can experience, we are willing to embrace the gifts and operate in them.

When I pray with evangelicals, I ask if they are born again and if they received the Spirit when they received Christ. If they answer yes, I tell them that all that remains is for them

to actualize that which the Spirit has—all that is required is for them to release the gifts. I then lay hands on them and say, “Speak in tongues or prophecy”—and they do. I always use those two gifts as initiatory because that seems to be the pattern in the New Testament.

Another theological barrier is what I call an incorrect interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12, verses 8-10 and verses 20-31, in which the gifts are frequently understood as given individually, and unilaterally to each member of the body. My perception is that we’ve wrongfully interpreted that text, that if we go back to 1 Corinthians 11, verses 17-18, where Paul says, “When you gather together there are divisions among you,” the emphasis in the entire section (from chapters 11 through 14) is that he is speaking to the church *corporately*, the congregation at Corinth. Therefore the emphasis on the gifts is that they are not primarily given to the individual but to the whole body.

Another way to understand this is to see them as *situational*—they are given in the situation, for the use of the individual and for the blessing of others. First Corinthians 12, verse 7, deals with the whole issue of the purpose of the use of spiritual gifts and teaches that the gifts are given “for the common good.” In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul emphasizes the multiplicity of gifting that’s available to the individual: “If you speak in tongues, pray that you might interpret.” Whereas in chapter 12, he says, “One interprets, and one speaks in tongues.” In chapter 14 he tells us *all* to prophecy, whereas he tells us in chapter 12, verse 29, that *some* are prophets and some are not.

The emphasis returns strongly in the 14th chapter on each individual having a multiplicity—or a potential for multiplicity—of expression of gifts, rather than for just singular expression. This means any individual Christian might prophecy, speak in tongues, interpret tongues and so on, but he should do it in the body, in good order and for the common

good.

Theological backing for practices. The evangelical feels that he must have a theological basis for all practice. Now in fact many do not. They argue from experience also. But nevertheless this is a commonly accepted idea. One of the things that makes what I'm doing unique is that, in our church and in the class I teach at Fuller Seminary, I too operate with that basic approach.

We move from the Scriptures to experience rather than vice versa.

When we first started teaching the "Signs, Wonders and Church Growth" course, I had several delegations from classic Pentecostal denominations come and visit. One class period when a delegation from a large Pentecostal denomination visited, a great deal of power came over the class. The presence of God was manifested in a very special way.

Afterward, the Pentecostals asked me if we had ever had a "visitation." I answered no. "You mean you haven't had an angel visit you?" Again I said no. "Were you healed of a major disease or disorder?" No. Their questions assumed that initiation begins by some sort of experience—a divine interaction. I told them that the way I started was by reading the gospel of Luke. I was teaching from it and after the third chapter every few verses dealt with healing or some other supernatural occurrence.

Once I saw that healing was a biblical norm, I had to deal with it in a practical way. At the Vineyard Christian Fellowship I taught for 10 months on healing, and we began praying regularly for the sick. But we did not see anyone healed for those 10 months! We grew desperate. We saw it in Scripture, but couldn't perform it. So more and more we called out to God, Then someone was healed and, like a trickle, it began. It has greatly increased since then, to where we now see healings

every week. The point, though, is that our practice is rooted in what we saw in Scripture.

Social barriers. Most of the models of spiritual gifts to which the evangelical community has been exposed are immature Christians—persons not formed in godly character. What put me off for years as a pastor was the steady stream of people who would come to me after having been baptized in the Holy Spirit, who were now operating with an elitist attitude, telling me that. I was not as spiritual as they were. Of course, I measured them on the basis of their family life and character—what I think are sound bases for judging growth and maturity of individuals—and I often saw very immature people.

But this was a false basis for judging the validity of spiritual gifts because the gifts aren't given only to mature people—they're given to willing people. It took several years for me to realize that these people had become barriers rather than bridges to my experiencing and understanding gifts. When I came to Fuller Seminary I became aware that some of my colleagues spoke in tongues. I recognized in them a mature character and lifestyle. I then dealt with the gifts.

The Western worldview. Western Christians often hold a worldview that inhibits their ability to interpret and submit to Scripture correctly. This is a deeper problem than the philosophical issue of secular humanism; it is the ever-increasing domination of Western materialism. By that I mean that we have come to a place where our worldview is more empirical than cosmic.

Most Western Christians hold a cosmic perception of Scripture. We believe that Jesus really did interact with demons, spirits and angels. Yet at the same time many deny any possibility of that kind of experience today because they have been affected by a materialistic worldview in which anything experienced outside of our five senses is suspect. In this sense, much of the church today is secularized—at least in the West.

Missionaries leaving Western culture and entering the Third World or Eastern society are introduced to a different worldview than we have, one that makes room for the supernatural. They are frequently overwhelmed by what they experience. They are not trained to deal with this well, and very little that they're trained in has effect there. Consequently there is a turnover of 80 to 90 percent of all first-term missionaries.

Chuck Kraft tells about going to Nigeria and trying to teach the book of Romans to the Nigerians. After a few months, they came to him, very politely, and said that they appreciated his teaching but it was not relevant to their needs. What they needed was wisdom for dealing with spirits that plagued the villagers every night, something that Chuck was not trained to deal with.

Our worldview controls our theologizing, but more importantly it controls our practice. Our missionaries come back from their jaunts and, except in private circles, never tell stories about the supernatural interaction that occurs in the field because they know that their constituency would resist them. Since they're financially dependent on the constituency, they cannot risk disrupting their money flow. So they say nothing.

Supernatural gifts represent a disruption to the Western worldview. Speaking in tongues and prophesying create a major tension for our basic assumption about how things are supposed to operate in the Western world.

Evangelicals and the gifts. Charismatics can be generalized in this sense: They have a preoccupation with exploring the new horizons that have been opened to them as a result of the gifts and, many cases, entering into authentic Christian community (what is called Christian body life) rather than an emphasis on evangelism. Although they do witness, I believe charismatics' preoccupation isn't with the winning of the

lost. The evangelicals' passion is evangelism.

Many evangelicals take the attitude: Yes, we acknowledge there is a theological basis for the practice of the gifts, and we acknowledge that there is a possibility that they do exist today, but in fact, we prefer that no one actually practice them among us. That position is something that may be carefully scrutinized, because if we acknowledge that something is valid, then we are in disobedience to God and His Word if we aren't willing to act on it.

What often happens in evangelical circles is that "non-gift" evangelicals, looking at those who are moving into the gifts, treat them like weak-minded second cousins and isolate their activities. "Well, you can speak in tongues as long as you do it at home," is what they frequently say, "but don't be bringing it into the congregation."

At the Vineyard Christian Fellowship there are three categories of people that we pray for. We have a large number of new converts. They're very easy to work with. When we lead them to Christ, we lay hands on them and release the gifts at the same time. So the same day or night that someone is born again, they speak in tongues and begin prophesying. From the very outset they're operating in the gifts.

The second category is people from mainline churches who have a nominal church history, lacking in theological background. They are fairly easy to initiate and get moving, much as the new converts are.

The third and most difficult group is people who have come from staunch evangelical or fundamentalist backgrounds. They must be re-educated, and that is a slow process. They frequently have been taught to be fearful of anything outside of their normative experience. They also usually come with a sense of personal inadequacy. Often they've left the church they were in because of major difficulties such as the pastor

having run off with somebody, or some other kind of immorality.

These people come from a wide spectrum. Some are looking for magic, while others are looking for methods. Those seem to be the two poles.

The ones looking for magic want us to lay hands on them and change their character. They are looking for something that will happen instantly. The ones looking for methods assume that safety is in structure: Give me 10 reasons, 10 steps, nine things, eight points—something that will organize my life so I won't have to think, I won't have to be vulnerable, so I can control my Christianity. We have tried to thread between those two extremes and teach them intimacy in relationship with God and vulnerability with one another. We strongly emphasize the importance of a relationship with God and with God's people.

Christian character and spiritual gifts. The gifts are adornments to our Christian life, adornments of a loving God to His bride. They are important and precious, but peripheral. That is, they are not the main means of Christian living.

Too many Christians today focus on a cosmetic view of Christianity in which they see themselves in self-improvement programs. Come to Jesus and get your marriage fixed. Come to Jesus and become prosperous. Come to Jesus and get this or that blessing or thing. We emphasize strongly to come to Jesus because He is worthy to be worshipped—whether or not He fixes our marriages or heals our bodies or gives us new cars. We may go through life with a marriage partner who for one reason or another is never going to come to Christ or relate in a proper way, but Jesus is still worthy of our loyalty.

The call is to commitment to Christ and the community of Christ—the church—and learning to love people we normally wouldn't like. This means learning to relate in community with

people in a variety of settings—everything from living together in small groups to living independent of one another but interacting as community once or twice or three times a week in various kinds of meetings and personal relationships.

Eight out of 10 people who attend our church weren't living in California five years ago. We have people—perhaps 40 percent of the church—who are so mobile and transient that they move at least once a year. So when we talk about community, we use the term “kinship,” a word coined by Lyle Schaller; it has to do with developing kin or family. Community for us is family—the family of God.

It provides a social network for people who are dislocated from their immediate relatives and who are socially isolated in a major urban area. Kinship provides a form of extended family in which people are taught to be intimate, supportive and accountable to one another.

We have not had long-term experience with living together in community. We are a young group. Community in our church operated within the context of weekly meetings and the interaction outside of those meetings in small units of twos, threes, fours. We have some of our people living together—especially singles, but occasionally several married couples. Southern California Christians tend to be isolated, insular, resistant to intimate involvement, which creates special problems for developing the kind of committed relationships described in the Bible.

It is absolutely essential that Christian groups develop a community mentality when they begin to experience the gifts, because it is the only environment in which it can be OK to fail. If we, do not have communication undergirding the exercise of the gifts, then there is no place to begin learning how to exercise them. It is the foundation of community life that provides a nurturing base for new experience.

We're trying new things. We are learning how to do them, often through our failures. Of course, it is also OK to succeed. That's our goal.

The gifts may generate evangelism. The gifts may operate in any setting, any time, any place. I will illustrate this with two stories, one from my own experience. One of our young people was in Huntington Beach, California, recently and walked by a bar that is frequented by motorcycle bikers. A biker walked out of the bar past the young man, toward his motorcycle. As he passed, the Holy Spirit revealed to the young man the biker's sins and fears. So he approached the biker and described these things to him. The biker began sobbing and turned to Christ right there, in front of all his friends. He is now in our church.

We've had numerous situations like this, where God has revealed sins of people either through a word of knowledge or a combination of that and a word of wisdom or prophecy. For example, I was once on an airplane when I turned and looked at the passenger across the aisle to see the word "adultery" written across his face in big letters. The letters, of course, were only perceptible to spiritual eyes. He caught me looking at him (gaping might be more descriptive) and said, "What do you want?" As he asked that, a woman's name came clearly into my mind I leaned over the aisle and asked if the name meant anything to him. His face turned white, and he asked if he could talk to me.

It was a large plane with a bar, so we went there to talk. On the way the Lord spoke to me again, saying, "Tell him to turn from this adulterous affair or I am going to take him." When we got to the bar I told him that God had told me he was committing adultery, the name of the woman, and that God would take him if he did not cease. He just melted on the spot and asked about what he should do. I led him through a prayer of repentance, and he received Christ. This was in front of a stewardess and two other passengers, who were shocked but then

began also to cry.

My point in telling you this is that the spiritual gifts can be the main generator for all kinds of evangelism, yet there is not a single evangelistic training method of which I know that teaches this. I know of no one who has written, "Ask God to show you the secrets of people's hearts."

But, we do it all the time here at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. It is normative.