

Why You Have a Crucial Ministry Role to Play

“You can’t believe in all that Spirit mumbo-jumbo!” my friend Kevin said. We were having an intense conversation over whether the Holy Spirit was real or not.

“Just seems like a bunch of nonsense,” he grouched, rolling his eyes and folding his arms.

Now, Kevin wasn’t a hardened atheist or a confused agnostic. He was a self-identified believer in Jesus who went to church with his family on occasion. He had no problem relating to God as a heavenly Father or believing that Jesus died for his sins. But the notion that God is presently at work in us by the person of the Holy Spirit sounded like religious jargon to him.

We may be tempted to chalk this up as an extreme case. Regrettably this example is the rule, not the exception. The Barna Group found that only 25 percent of American Christians believe in the *existence* of the Holy Spirit! Barna also found that younger generations were less likely to believe in and engage with the Spirit. This statistic is alarming when we consider the mass exodus from church life among 18- to 34-year-olds in America.

This means that for most professing Christians the Holy Spirit is nothing more than a symbol of the faith—a dove on a stained-glass window. This “Spirit-less” version of Christianity is dangerous for several reasons:

First, it compromises biblical truth. Jesus told Nicodemus that unless he was born again by the Spirit, he would never enter God’s kingdom (John 3:3, 5-8). The church was born on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God baptized and filled every believer (Acts 2:2). The Christian faith is a lot

of things, but it is *nothing* without the Spirit. We may engrave His Name in the bedrock of our historic creeds, but without His presence we are not of Christ at all.

Second, Spirit-less Christianity jettisons our mandate. Christianity is not a nice family religion. It is a living, active and missional enterprise. God did not send Jesus so that you and I could inherit a harmless delusion that makes us feel better when we're sad. If we make the mistake of treating the Spirit as nothing more than a theological abstraction, an amorphous concept or a vague idea, then we will utterly fail to disciple the nations and the next generation. This is why Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Father's promise—God's empowering presence (Acts 1:4-8). Take the Holy Spirit away from the church, and all we're left with is a grace-deficient, family-based cult.

How did we get here? I suggest that the widespread incredulity of the next generation is the fruit of the previous generation's marginalization of the Spirit. We've ignored Him as a present reality in our midst even while insisting that parishioners learn rightly *about* Him. In effect, we've barred would-be worshippers and ministers of the gospel from the fullness of the Spirit's experience while teaching them the Apostles' Creed.

Though the reasons for this are multifaceted, a prominent culprit is a particularly faulty paradigm that dominates American churches today. Somehow we've bought into the idea that there are superstar ministers who are gifted by the Holy Spirit to do God's "real" work—and then there's the rest of us.

Let me explain.

Red-Shirt Christians

As a kid, I was mesmerized by the classic TV show *Star Trek*. I wanted to be Captain Kirk and command the starship *Enterprise*.

I wanted to spend my life as an intrepid explorer, voyaging through space, going on away-missions, meeting new aliens, killing Klingons—all with inspiring theme music playing in the background.

After watching the first 20 episodes of *Star Trek*, I began to notice certain patterns in the show. Almost every episode had a crisis of cosmic scope where the spaceship *Enterprise* was threatened with destruction and Kirk and Spock had to figure out an ingenious solution. And no episode would be complete without an away-team beaming down to the planet surface. The away-teams usually consisted of Kirk in a khaki shirt, Spock and McCoy in blue shirts, and a couple of security guards in red shirts. I noticed the red-shirt security officers almost never came back from away-missions but would get killed by the bad aliens. The main characters always seemed to be smart enough or fortunate enough to cheat death. But those poor red-shirt guys just couldn't keep up. At some point the show's creators decided that the red-shirts were expendable. These disposable extras existed to prop up the stars. In fact, the red-shirt guys usually didn't even have names.

In the same way the Christian church is rife with this kind of red-shirt mentality. Somehow we've gotten in our minds that the masses exist to prop up a few, fortunate and gifted stars so they can accomplish the miraculous or achieve big things for the kingdom.

Paul actually forbade this undue regard for human leaders in his letter to the Corinthians. Now obviously, it's OK to give leaders their due honor, and Paul recognizes this elsewhere. But when it comes to the issue of giftedness, Paul made it clear that no one is expendable in God's household.

God has given all believers Spirit manifestations, or gifts, and all believers now participate in the building of the kingdom of God on Earth. The word for *gifts* in the New Testament is *charis*, which is the Greek word for "grace." We

receive Jesus' grace at salvation, but then the Spirit gives us extra grace to empower us for service. This is the kingdom agenda.

This program for humanity is called "ministry." Contrary to the popular use of the term, "ministry" is not for a select group of people. Ministry is for all believers. Paul told the Ephesians that the preacher's job is to outfit all believers for ministry in God's kingdom (Eph. 4:11-12). But before Paul encouraged the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome to discover and deploy their spiritual gifts, he spelled out the qualifications for every believer in chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans. Though there are some specialized requirements for certain ministries, the following are Paul's qualifications for all believers in discovering their spiritual ministry in the body of Christ.

1) Ministry starts with right living.

Paul asserted that the Roman Christians' first task was to align their priorities and their lifestyle with kingdom values as they surrender to God in well-reasoned worship. He stated, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1, ESV). After establishing that mankind is altogether lost (Romans 1-3), he makes his case for justification by grace through faith alone (Romans 3-5). This salvation experience is an empowering grace, which has severed our ties to sin, broken sin's power over us (Romans 6-7) and has now enabled us to walk in the newness of life by the Spirit (Romans 8). This salvation is the gospel to both the Jews and Gentiles (Romans 9-11). And now both people groups must continually walk in the newness of Spirit life, empowered to serve the body of Christ through Spirit graces, or what we call "spiritual gifts" (Romans 12).

2) Ministry involves costly obedience.

Believers today have no grid through which to understand the importance of sacrifice in the ancient world. Paul calling our lives a “living sacrifice” was truly a novel idea. Ancient sacrifice was a messy enterprise, and worshippers were required to bring their best offering. Moses commanded the Jews, “You will be accepted only if your offering is a male animal with no defects. It may be a bull, a ram, or a male goat” (see Lev. 1:1-3, NLT).

This commitment to pure sacrifices was engrained in their Jewish culture. Bringing blemished or diseased lambs or weak and scrawny cattle to be slaughtered at the temple was unthinkable in the first century. Whether you brought the offering or bought the offering, either way, sacrificing the “best” would cost you something. It wasn’t cheap.

But “cheap” is a deeply rooted American value. Even the word *value* has been hijacked and has become a synonym for “cheap.” I love to take my wife out for the occasional splurge on an expensive meal. But most of the time I’m content with a dollar hot dog at Costco. I also occasionally break the budget for a nice article of clothing, but I usually shop at discount stores. And I confess that even in discount stores I’m looking at the clearance rack. (I told you I was cheap.)

I believe frugality is a virtue not a vice. But my obsession with value at a low cost to me, the consumer, is inherently at war with my life of spiritual sacrifice. Paul expected us to view our very bodies, and our very selves, as the living, realized temple of God (1 Cor. 3:10; 1 Cor. 6; 2 Cor. 5). This involves extravagant worship as we give ourselves completely to Him. God is not the least bit interested in the chump change of bargain-basement offerings.

Before Paul jumped into the issue of Spirit gifts, he wanted to make sure the Romans knew that they all, Jew and Gentile alike, had received the Spirit, and this means they were to be walking, talking, living sacrifices.

3) Ministry flows from a transformed heart.

Paul continued, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2, ESV). Perhaps the single most frequent question believers ask is how to discover God's will for their life. Yet few turn to this passage, partly because it doesn't seem particularly impressive. No apocalyptic dreams or mountaintop revelations are needed for discovering God's will—just the homespun advice of trial and error—you test and approve God's revealed will in your particular circumstance. Paul did not tell the Romans to "discover" the will of God for their lives. Instead he told them to "test and approve" the already revealed will of God. It is God's will for you to be holy. And it is God's will for you to engage with your spiritual gifts in ministry. Until you are doing that, don't bother asking God for your dream spouse or your dream job. Live holy and plug in to your local church; then seek Him for the specifics.

God is omnipresent, meaning His presence is everywhere all the time. There is nowhere He isn't. But a temple is a place where God's *manifest* presence rests. The Hebrew word for this idea of a deity resting in a temple was *shevat*, where we get the word *Sabbath*. That's what deities did in the ancient world—they rested in their temples.

The temple is also where that deity displays his power through his priesthood. But Paul taught that every believer and the church corporately are the living temple of God. That temple is the place where God's Spirit dwells among men. That's where God displays His power. That's where God shows His stuff and reveals what He can do in an ordinary human life.

We are the place where heaven and earth overlap. We are the nexus between two worlds. N.T. Wright puts it this way in his book, *Simply Christian*: "Those in whom the Spirit comes to

live are God's new temple. They are, individually and corporately, places where heaven and earth meet." So what kind of behavior ought to accompany a person who is a living holy place indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Naturally, it is holy living as the Spirit transforms you into the image of Jesus.

4) We discover our ministry through accurate self-assessment.

Paul goes on to say to the Romans, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Rom. 12:3). No one is less self-aware than a drunken fool. When you're half-lit, you're way out of touch with your limits. You think you can drive, yet you can't even find your keys. You imagine yourself to be hot stuff, when in reality you are a drunken, stinking mess who needs to go sleep it off and take a shower.

Paul told the Romans that they needed "sober judgment," or accurate self-assessment. This means we need to be in touch with our levels, with our limits and with our passions. Simply put, know thyself.

When I first recommitted my life to Jesus as a teenager, I thought for sure God wanted me to be a healing evangelist like Reinhard Bonnke. Bonnke's fiery preaching seemed to be touched by heaven itself. I thought for sure that was God's will for me. However, the Spirit had other plans. As I prayed and sought the Lord, the Holy Spirit revealed Himself in an unusual way.

That's putting it mildly.

As a teenager, one Friday evening I knelt on the floor of my room and opened my NIV Study Bible on the bed. I began singing and worshipping God, and that's when it happened. God's presence invaded my space. I fell on the floor, unable to move. The presence of the Spirit was so powerful in those moments that it felt like the spatiotemporal world had zipped

open, allowing God's glory to flood the room. It was a feeling of awe, wonder, bliss and terror all rolled into one. I sensed that I was in the presence of a Being who could command the very elements of nature—a Being who could speak and the very cloth of the natural world would respond instantly to His sovereign will. This experience inspired a wondrous dread in me.

In that moment, as I lay stunned under the power of the Spirit, suddenly God poured into my soul a rapacious hunger for His living Word. The more I worshipped, the more this hunger filled me. I wanted to know His truth so badly that I thought I would burst. It was in that moment that God birthed in me a desire for what I believe is a scholarly knowledge of His Word.

Now, God isn't too impressed with scholarly knowledge. For that matter, God isn't too impressed with rocket science or quantum theory, either. I'm sure God is pleasantly amused at all of our "advanced" sciences and disciplines.

But that is the moment when a gift and hunger for wisdom and godly knowledge entered me. And I have never been the same since. It is an unquenchable fire in my very self. I want to help believers experience a love that overflows as they grow in knowledge and depth of insight into God's truth (Phil. 1:9). Before that moment I was a high-school dropout. I entered college on academic probation. But I went on to get four post-secondary degrees, graduating magna cum laude with all four of them. Before I received the gift, I had no desire for learning, no hunger for knowledge growth. After I received the gift, I couldn't turn it off. I still can't.

As it turns out, I haven't preached in foreign lands that much. And I haven't performed many physical healings at the direction of the Lord either. Not that I didn't try. In my earlier days I had to help a lot of crippled people back into their wheelchairs after praying for them.

My desire to be a healing evangelist was not answered. God had another path for me. And I am serving Him with those gifts. Now, my gifts and calling aren't any less important than those of Billy Graham or Reinhard Bonnke, which leads us to our final observation about Spirit gifts from the Romans passage. After Paul told the Romans they needed to view themselves with sober judgment, he wanted every believer to discover their unique spiritual contribution to the body of Christ.

5) Every believer is gifted for Spirit ministry.

Paul continues his argument: "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them" (Rom. 12:4-6, ESV). Notice that last phrase, "Let us use them."

We see in this passage that the Spirit gifts have a functional purpose (v. 4), are of varying types, like different body parts (v. 5), and they should be employed not forbidden. My favorite word in those three verses is the word *function*. This is because I have seen a lot of dysfunctional Christianity in my day. Paul used this term together with the analogy of a body with many functioning parts.

Marriages and families implode and relationships self-destruct because the members of that family are not performing their function. Paul taught that husbands and wives are to submit to one another out of reverence for Jesus (Eph. 5:21). Men are supposed to submit to their wives by sacrificing themselves the way Jesus did for the church (v. 25). Women are to submit to their husbands by voluntarily serving the way the church gives itself for Jesus (v. 24). But when men don't perform their function, they ruin their marriages. When they're selfish, lazy, lustful and refuse to submit through sacrifice, then they blow up their relationships. And when women don't submit through service and mutual respect, then they fail to

fulfill their function. The result is malfunction.

The same is true for children. When kids are allowed to run roughshod over their parents in disrespect, when children become indulged little terrors, families suffer for it. It's because parts of the family aren't functioning; they're not performing their intended roles. Again, this always leads to dysfunction. This is why Paul tells the Romans that every person needs to operate according to their gifts. Because this is the only way the body, the family of Christ, can operate as it was intended.

You're Not Expendable

So when, for example, you see a church that is dominated by one charismatic superstar who treats everyone else like expendable "red-shirts," then you are witnessing a glitchy, fatally flawed church paradigm. Conversely, whenever you see a congregation without godly leaders who prophetically speak into the lives of the church, then again you're witnessing a dysfunctional church family. Though there are varying degrees of gifts in each local body, and though there are some gifts that are more helpful in building community than others, *everyone* has something to contribute. *No one* is expendable in Jesus' household. All believers play a critical role in the expansion of God's kingdom message into the world.

God doesn't have any red-shirts on His team. You aren't disposable, and you're not an extra in God's kingdom plan. You have great worth and value to God. But the prerequisite to discovering and deploying your gifts is a pursuit of holiness resulting in inner transformation, sober self-assessment and an open heart.

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