

Identifying—and Exercising—Your Spiritual Gifts

The Holy Spirit is not only the gift to every believer, He's also the bestower of many spiritual gifts. Here's why it's important to identify those gifts and exercise them within the body of believers.

A young man in my last church cut off three of his fingers while cutting a piece of paneling in a van customizing shop. As he was being rushed to the hospital, he was asked, "Where are the fingers?" A man rushed back to the shop with a bowl of ice, grabbed the three digits and then rushed them to Birmingham in the ambulance along with the young man.

Nineteen hours of microsurgery reattached those fingers to the young man's hand. Had they been left in the sawdust of that shop, the fingers would have been useless. They were only good to him if they were attached to his body.

It's the same way when it comes to our attachment to the body of Christ, both globally and locally. We are members of the body—whether a finger, an ear, an eye or a spleen—and we need the rest of the body in order to live. We cannot make it on our own.

What's more, being a member of the body of Christ means we have a unique gifting the rest of the body needs too. We need one another and the giftings of the Spirit we each bring to the thriving of the body. Let's explore why.

The Singular Gift

First, it's important to understand the difference between the "gift" of the Spirit and the "gifts" of the Spirit. Much

confusion abounds in many churches because of a failure to understand the difference.

The gift of the Spirit to the church was given after the ascension and glorification of our Savior. (See John 7:39.) The Holy Spirit had been in the world before then, but now He had come to live in the hearts of His people in a new and special way. He came to dwell permanently within us (John 14:16-17, 26).

In Acts 2:38, the sinner is commanded to repent, after which we are told the gift of the Holy Spirit is given. The word is singular here: **gift**. In Acts 10:45, this gift is discovered to be given to non-Jews also.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to every believer at the moment of conversion. In that moment, you are **baptized by the Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:13). This means that you are immersed in the Spirit and He in you.

Once we are saved and have the indwelling Spirit, then we may be *filled* with the Holy Spirit. The filling of the Spirit is God's controlling presence in our lives. He will fill only what we yield to Him. This means we may *have* the Spirit and yet not be *filled* with Him.

The Multiple Gifts

Now, all of this so far has to do with the gift—singular—of the Spirit. He comes into our lives to save us, sustain us and strengthen us. But the Holy Spirit is also the bestower of gifts—plural—to the believer (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12). These spiritual **gifts** are endowments of power from God given so that we might fulfill the calling of God on our lives.

To understand the importance of these spiritual gifts, we must first understand the church as the body of Christ. Paul describes and compares the unity and diversity of the human body to the church body in explaining the purpose of spiritual

gifts. Through this metaphor, we learn three important truths:

1. They are divine gifts. The gifts of the Spirit come from the same source. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, we see the source as the triune God. Verse 11 sets forth the fact that these gifts are sovereignly bestowed. God not only gives the gifts, but He also decides who gets which gifts. Verse 18 supports this by declaring that God sets the members into the church as it pleases Him.

Spiritual gifts are not natural talents or abilities that you are born with—those are your natural gifts. Rather, spiritual gifts are the supernatural gifts of God.

2. They are different gifts. The New International Version's translation of 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 uses the word *different* three times. In the verses that follow, three categories of gifts are listed: motivational gifts, ministry gifts and manifestation gifts. The important thing to note is that different gifts are given to different people.

The symbolism of the body holds true here. Every member of the body is different. Paul uses the foot, the hand, the ear, the eye and the nose as examples. How ridiculous it would be if we were all one foot, eye, ear, hand or nose! A body is made up of different members, and God has so designed the human body that each member is necessary for it to function properly.

Each church, then, has different members with different gifts. When will we learn that we are not all alike and that it is in that diversity—both in our spiritual and social abilities and strengths—that we are best able to function as the body of Christ?

Most church problems come because we are intolerant of others who have a different motivation than we do. Many quit the church because they can't respond to the differences of others. But we must learn that all should not be alike. God

made us and gifted us differently on purpose.

3. They are dependent gifts. Christ's body is unified but not uniform, and the value of a member is in its attachment to the body. First Corinthians 12:25-26 describes this dependence we ought to have on each other.

Suppose my stomach sends a signal to my brain of hunger. My feet carry me to the place where my eyes and nose tell me there is food. My hand grasps a fork and a knife when I see that steak. My hand carries a piece of that steak not to my ear or foot or eye, but to that convenient opening in the middle of my face called the mouth. There, enamel grinders called teeth chew the food and keep me from choking to death. Glands provide liquid so the food can be conveyed safely to my stomach, where the bloodstream will carry the food's nutrients to the rest of my body.

Just as the body cares for itself, so church members are to care for one another, hurt with one another and rejoice with one another. We are the body of Christ, and He is our head. We must move as He directs us. We are not to be divided but unified.

Dangers Associated With the Gifts

When it comes to the church and its exercise of the Holy Spirit's gifts, I see some interesting but dangerous trends in our day. Let me list them for you and explain. They are:

1. The neglect of spiritual gifts. God has provided gifts so His church will grow, yet very few churches operate on the basis of God's gifting. This neglect is one cause of the anemic growth of the Western church.

2. The fear of spiritual gifts. Some are afraid of the gifts, especially the manifested gifts such as tongues, healing and miracles. This fear is rooted in control issues. Certainly excesses can be dealt with in love, but the church

must not fear the graces of the Holy Spirit.

3. The clustering of like gifts. Many churches have incomplete ministries because they have attracted those with like gifts. For instance, a pastor with a strong teaching gift attracts others with the teaching gift. You can end up with a group of well-fed, well-studied teachers while other ministries go neglected.

While we're on the subject of like gifts gravitating toward like gifts, you may need to hear the following: It may be time for you to share your gifts with the greater body of Christ. If you are constantly complaining of not being "fed," you may actually be a teacher who needs to be teaching. Babies need to be fed, but mature Christians should be feeding themselves and others.

4. The lack of balance in the body of Christ. Suppose my hands suddenly grabbed a pencil and wrote my eye a note and said, "I am cutting myself off. I am tired of you sitting up there in the head." Why, it would mean a crippling of the body and the death of the hand, just like in the example of what could have happened to the young man from my church.

Instead, we must learn some practical facts about the body of Christ. In summary, these facts are:

- One part cannot function as the whole (1 Cor. 12:14).
- The task of one cannot be given to another (vv. 15-17).
- There are no self-made members (vv. 18-20).
- All members are to be directed by the head, which is Christ (Col. 1:18).

That is why you, as a Christian, need to be in a local body of the church. You need to be exercising your gift to the glory of God and the benefit of believers. I encourage you to get and stay connected to your local body today.

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Ron Phillips explains the difference between the 'gift' and the 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit at