

Chapter 25

Gifted lives

At least in most of the western world birthdays are traditionally a time for presents. This is especially true for young children who eagerly look forward to their special day, often with increasingly heavy hints. My brother once remarked that the older we get the more birthdays we have, but the other side of that truth is that the older we grow the fewer the remaining friends and the smaller their gifts. In any case, enough is enough.

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is sometimes spoken of as the birthday of the church and the amazing gifts given to the young church then have stayed on offer ever since, the selection and distribution depending on the Holy Spirit. Fruit-bearing will take time but both gifts and fruit are the result of faith in the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ and a relationship with him kept fresh through his Spirit.

Naturally gifted

Perhaps most of us have known people whose particular skill has made us exclaim, ‘What a gifted surgeon, mathematician, athlete!’ and so on. Natural talents seem to be distinct from spiritual gifts in that they can be evident early on, as with a child I knew who showed when she was about six years old that she was a born and determined organiser. Another Ugandan schoolgirl loved to share what she had learned that day by teaching other children whose parents could not afford school fees. Although aptitude for administration, teaching, leading and helping others are also found among the gifts of the Spirit, the natural gifts are enriched when a gifted person asks God to use for his glory what in any case came as *his* gift in the first place.

What are spiritual gifts?

The Holy Spirit’s gifts to believers are sometimes recognised better by others than by the gifted people themselves. Whereas the *fruit* of his

Spirit should be growing in each life dedicated to God and in relationship with him through his Son, the *gifts* of the Spirit are given 'just as he determines', suggesting that not all receive all, but each will have one or more of them.¹ In three of his letters, the apostle Paul gives several overlapping, possibly incomplete, lists of more than twenty gifts of the Spirit.^{2,3,4,5} They include the more spectacular but intermittent gifts that we have already seen demonstrated at Pentecost and used by the apostles and some disciples since, namely speaking in a previously unknown language and miracle-working.⁶ Some will have the ability to interpret the new language or to deliver a direct message from God by prophesying (that is speaking out a revealed truth from God).⁷ Gifts of teaching, encouraging, giving generously or just being helpful and merciful are less conspicuous but more usual gifts. Paul points out that all these are truly *gifts*. It is for the Spirit, the Giver, to decide how to distribute them. Gifts will differ, but that is their beauty.

The purpose of gifts

The purpose of spiritual gifts is to prepare God's people for works of service and to be used for the common good as they work together and support each other.^{8,9} 'God's people' means a company of believers, his 'church', whether or not they meet in a special building. Obviously, works of service will be much more effective if everyone is pulling together, acting as a healthy, united body.

Less obvious gifts are still vital to the wellbeing of the whole

Church members have sometimes made one gift of greater importance than another, some even teach that speaking in an unknown tongue is the passport to joining the fellowship at all. In one of his letters to a young church, Paul taught otherwise by stressing the unique but important and integrated functions of the different parts of our physical bodies.¹⁰ I once heard an African preacher comment on this passage suggesting that if we all went around with our brains or livers on display, vital as they are, that would not just be unsightly but in Paul's blunter word it would be to reveal something 'unpresentable'.

Able-bodied people with more obvious gifts need to realise that the frail little old lady in her wheelchair can still function as a gifted member of the body of believers. Whatever the more obvious gifts she might once have had she may now have been given the powerful but inconspicuous gift of encouragement, or of one-to-one teaching about the spiritual life. In turn she should be encouraged as a loved and valued church member. Paul says that, whatever they look like, the different parts of Christ's body should have equal concern for each other. We should humbly remember that the Spirit is the one to decide which gifts to give and when to give them.

Working together like parts of a body

Medical or physiotherapy students who study anatomy and physiology learn how the human body is made up of many parts, all working together in a balanced way under the direction of nerve centres in the brain. The system fails badly if messages from the brain cannot get through. To maintain balance, some muscle groups normally act in the opposite way from each other, so that a finger or arm can bend or extend, though not at the same time. This gives a picture of the way that each member of God's church, his body on earth, is designed to work together, united in acknowledging the Lord Jesus as the Head, submitting to his central and essential control for their individual and different functions.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he explains how different parts of the church should find their different gifts interacting in peaceful harmony. The final goal is for the body of believers to become as mature and complete as Christ himself. By definition, maturity takes time to develop but will come as we trust in the Son of God and learn more about and from him. He must have possessed all the gifts as well as the fruit of the Spirit in order to give them to us.¹¹

Without the Spirit's fruit, the gifts could cause division, not unity, but the intention is for us to be bound together by Jesus' self-giving love. As we speak the truth in love, each of us can encourage others to practise gifts that they might not have known were theirs, so helping the whole body to work more effectively together. A company of

believers, despite their differences, should act like the body of Christ on earth, more widely available than the earthly Jesus could be when limited by time and space.¹²

Gifts are not status symbols and they differ. By remembering that the Lord Jesus Christ remains at the head of his spiritual body on earth¹³ each member of that body should learn to be humbly responsive to him so that our gifts can work together to his glory. As with spiritual fruit, there is no place for conceit or envy.¹⁴ This will still hold in the workplace, for his fruit and gifts are not left at the church door when we leave for home. His Spirit goes with us everywhere, helping us not to be like children, jealous of other people's gifts, or even like members of certain committees who join battle with those of other departments, thinking that the others have been granted more privileges than they have.

When things go right with the body

When the Olympic Games are celebrated and we watch the performance of a trained gymnast, it shows how the different parts of our natural bodies can work together as one. Yet to reach this standard has taken many years of hard work with a professional trainer or coach. The Holy Spirit is ready to act as coach to believers, keeping us one in spirit and functioning well as the united body of Christ on earth. Any success will not gain us an earthly gold medal but should bring glory to God. On his last night on earth, Jesus prayed for us to be united in that goal.¹⁵

When things go wrong

Sadly, it is all too evident that Jesus' prayer for unity is not yet answered. God's intended work of witness is spoiled as a result and the root cause is likely to be loss of connection with the Head, our spiritual nerve-centre. Self-importance cuts off an adequate supply of the selfless love that only comes from him.¹⁶

Years ago there was a popular advertisement for a certain make of shoe. It read, 'If your feet aren't happy, you aren't happy, so walk the

Barratt way'. Similarly, any imbalance within the body of the church spoils its walk, work and witness, acting like a sore heel or dragging leg. When this is happening it would be wise for members of the local fellowship to meet to pray, asking whether some in that body need more help to keep in step with the Spirit. Silent suffering should not be necessary in a loving church family. Christians known to be isolated, or forbidden to gather together, need much prayer support and often practical help, even from afar.

Use and abuse of gifts

God's gifts are given in love and are to be neither abused nor neglected but we need to know that, sadly, false claims are sometimes made about them. Mass rallies to witness the exercise of someone's supposed healing powers can leave behind disillusion and even loss of faith among those who had been led to expect a miracle but were disappointed. Sometimes sufferers with ills based on emotional hurt do receive a boost to their spirits that relieves their symptoms at least for a time but we also need to remember Satan's way of pretending to be other than he is and that he will always try to spoil any work of God.¹⁷

There is, though, a great difference between the obvious need of a self-proclaimed 'miracle worker' to see results and the gentle, prayerful response to the Spirit's prompting by some who have been given the genuine gift of a healing ministry. They exercise their gift much more quietly and personally and use it entirely for the glory of God, not for self-promotion. Even then, the healing can be inner rather than the total cure of an advancing disease but because we are made up of minds, emotions and spirits as well as bodies, to bring relief to one is likely to ease all.

We should remember that a successful response to medical management is as much God's work as ours. Skill and wisdom are also his gifts and whether consciously or not, a medical team is in partnership with him. Although not always acknowledged, the glory of success is not primarily theirs but God's, for he allows and encourages the discoveries that promote health and healing. Best of all is when medical therapy and prayer go together

Do genuine miracles still happen?

We sometimes hear people say, 'It was a miracle that I found it,' or, 'You've really worked miracles on that old thing,' using the word in a much more casual way than is meant when speaking of supernatural intervention. Jesus' miracles were what first drew the crowd's attention to him but we are told that this was not his main reason for doing them. He was always moved by infinite compassion but also expressed two main purposes for his miracles. Firstly, he showed that he really could forgive sins when some doubted. After assuring a still paralysed man that his sins were forgiven, well aware of the watchful doubters he went on to heal him physically so showing his divine authority to act in both areas of need.¹⁸ Secondly, his miracles revealed his divine glory and encouraged people to trust him.¹⁹ Any miracles reported today in largely secular societies should share these two effects.

Jesus and the apostles brought about total and remarkable healing of body as well as mind and spirit. This is still sometimes seen, predominantly (though not solely) in places where there is inadequate medical aid. As in the days of the early church, healing then is 'in the name of Jesus Christ', to give glory to God.²⁰ The healing can sometimes be total, but may be of someone's attitude to their failing powers rather than complete disappearance of the disease itself. We can confidently take our requests to the Father, but it is up to him how he answers.

Inventions or discoveries? - God's other gifts

Inventiveness is not often seen as one of God's gifts to mankind, although the universe speaks of an imaginative Creator and we are made in his image. Yet the honour for successful human inventions usually goes to the inventors, not their Maker. Some even claim that their discoveries make it unnecessary to believe in him at all, not asking who had first created what they have now discovered! The finding of the Higgs boson particle in 2012 was celebrated as a great scientific breakthrough, as indeed it is. Yet to call it 'the God particle' because it is thought to hold mass together does not exclude a divine creation, it just reflects the truth expressed in God's inspired word.

Speaking of the Son of God, made in his Father's image, Paul writes: '...all things were created by him and for him...and in him *all things hold together*' (emphasis mine).²¹ Our creator still has secrets to be discovered, and some receive the gift of enough intelligence to find them, his Spirit inspiring human creativity of many kinds.²²

Giving God the glory

In the mid 19th century two new practices transformed the progress of surgery from then on. The first was general anaesthesia. Chloroform was especially favoured by James Simpson, professor of surgery in Edinburgh, and also by Queen Victoria for its use for her deliveries. The other advance was reduction in post-operative infection. Joseph Lister, from the Glasgow chair of surgery, introduced carbolic acid as an early form of surgical asepsis and immediately cut the post-operative death rate (even though he operated without gloves and in his street clothes!). Clearly, more refinements have followed both these advances and although each pioneer is still celebrated it is rarely acknowledged that both men were professing Christians. At a public lecture about anaesthesia Sir James Simpson was once asked what had been his greatest discovery. He humbly replied: 'I discovered that I have a great Saviour.'

All who rely on God's Spirit will learn to think God's thoughts after him without always knowing that this is what they are doing.

Gifts are given in love and should be exercised in love

Failure to develop an intended gift is as limiting to God's service as when a gift is misused. Yet at the end of one of Paul's gift lists a whole chapter is used to make clear that it is worthless to practise any gift without love, the essential first aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. Gifts will no longer be needed when we meet the great Giver, but love will outlast them all.²³ Although we have not yet seen him, we love him and nothing, not even death itself, will separate us from his love.²⁴ Love will reach its pinnacle when we meet our Lord face to face and are made like him, who is self-giving love in person.²⁵

For further thought

- Be thankful that Christ remains Head of his body, the church, and that both fruitfulness and giftedness come from his Spirit.
- Have you recognised anyone's spiritual gift – including your own?

References

1. 1 Corinthians 12:11
2. Romans 12:6-8
3. 1 Corinthians 12:7-10
4. 1 Corinthians 12:27-31
5. Ephesians 4:11-13
6. Acts 2:6, 43
7. Acts 21:10-11
8. Ephesians 4:11-16
9. 1 Corinthians 12:12, 14
10. 1 Corinthians 12:16-26
11. Jesus had gifts of revelation: knowledge (Matthew 12:25); wisdom (Luke 5:22-25); discernment of spirits (Mark 5:2-8); speaking gifts: prophecy (Matthew 24:29-34); doing gifts: his many acts of healing (Mark 5); and his miraculous power over nature (Mark 4:37-39). I owe this classification to notes prepared for his congregation by Rev Nigel di Castiglione. Other examples await your own study.
12. John 14:12
13. Colossians 1:18
14. Galatians 5:26
15. John 17:20-23
16. Colossians 2:18-19
17. 2 Corinthians 11:14-15
18. Mark 2:9-12
19. John 2:11
20. Acts 3:6-10
21. Colossians 1:16-17
22. Exodus 31:1-6
23. 1 Corinthians 13:13
24. Romans 8:35-39
25. 1 John 3:1-3