

DISCERNING AND EXERCISING SPIRITUAL GIFTS

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER]

The Holy Spirit gives each Christian a particular set of spiritual gifts, or a “gift matrix,” which can be used in a range of ministries that serve others in the Christian community and beyond.

Leadership is stewardship—the cultivation of resources for God. The Bible tells us one of the main resources God has given us is our gifts, aptitudes, talents, and abilities. Christian leaders faithfully steward the gifts they receive from the Holy Spirit, and they help those they lead to do the same.

WHAT ARE SPIRITUAL GIFTS?

According to 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

Every Christian (“to each one”) receives spiritual gifts. A spiritual gift is an ability (“working” or power) that comes to you freely (“gift”) for the purpose of ministering to needs (“service”) so as to build up Christian community in size and depth (“the common good”). This doesn’t mean gifts only meet needs of Christians. They meet needs “in Jesus’ name,” as a witness and sign of the coming kingdom. Ephesians 4:7–12 says that Jesus’ kingly power—which will eventually heal the world physically, socially, and spiritually—is now distributed into us. The bottom line is that every Christian is in ministry through the church. No one is merely a consumer of services; everyone is a distributor.

What, then, is service? Serving is putting the needs of others ahead of our own, or putting the needs of the community ahead of our individual needs. And the Bible says there are several reasons to do this. The first benefit is self-knowledge. Don’t think you know your real gifts and capacities until you do a lot of humble serving in many different capacities around the church. Only as you do that will you come to understand your own aptitudes.

The second benefit is community. When you approach the church as a consumer (that is, only to get your needs met), you are in a solitary mode of being, but when you reject the consumer mindset, serving will draw you out of yourself and into relationships.

The third benefit is the fulfillment and joy of seeing others touched through you, or seeing something great happen through the part you play in the body of Christ. Paradoxically, if you serve primarily for the benefits to yourself, then it isn’t really serving, and you won’t receive the benefits. The only workable dynamic for every-member ministry is Mark 10:45. Because Jesus served you in such a radical way, you have a joyful *need* to serve. It’s a form of praise¹ that doesn’t fully enjoy what it admires until it expresses itself in service.

HOW ARE SPIRITUAL GIFTS DISTRIBUTED?

In a word, diversely. Note the repeated use of “different” in 1 Corinthians 12:4–7. First, there is a variety of individual gifts, best categorized under three basic headings.

Prophetic gifts are abilities based on understanding and articulating truth. They represent God to others and are marked by boldness and clarity. Biblical examples of these gifts are evangelism (Eph. 4:11—*euaggelistês*), or the ability to help people believe; teaching (1 Cor. 12:29—*didaskalos*), to be a teacher, or the ability to help people learn; speaking (1 Pet. 4:10–11—*lalein*), or the ability to articulate in a compelling way, probably publicly; knowledge (1 Cor. 12:8); discerning spirits (1 Cor. 12:10), or insight, the ability to tell the authentic from the false; and prophecy (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:10—*prophetas*), or unusually dynamic and illumined truth-telling.²

Priestly gifts are abilities based on understanding and supplying basic needs. They represent others to God and the world and are marked by sympathy and sacrifice. Examples of these gifts are encouraging (Rom. 12:8—*parakaleo*), a cross between the prophetic and priestly, having to do with motivating and counseling; helping (1 Cor. 12:28—*antilempseis*), or the ability to give true assistance without usurping; healing (1 Cor. 12:28—*iamaton*), or facilitating emotional and/or physical healing; pastoring (Eph. 4:11—*poimenos*), or knowing and providing what a person needs to grow; serving (Rom. 12:7—*diakonia*), or the ability to meet practical needs effectively; sharing (Rom. 12:8—*metadidou en aplotati*), or discerning and refreshing others by giving; and mercy (Rom. 12:8—*eleon en ilarotati*) or ministry through deep empathy yet joy (literally “mercy in hilarity”).

Kingly gifts are abilities based on understanding direction and group needs. They represent Christ’s vision to others and are marked by wisdom and practicality. Biblical examples of these gifts are apostles (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28—*apostolous*), or a founder gift, plowing new ground; leadership (Rom. 12:8—*proistamenos en spouda*, literally “leading in zeal”), or uniting toward a vision; administration (1 Cor. 12:28—*kuberneseis*), or the ability to organize a task and get it done; wisdom (1 Cor. 12:8—*logos sophias*), or problem-solving, especially for personal or group guidance; and faith (1 Cor. 12:9—*pistis*), which is not saving faith, but the ability to envision a goal clearly.

Second, gifts often come in clusters, not just individually. By way of example, Ephesians 4:11 speaks of pastor-teachers, while 1 Corinthians 12:39 speaks of those who are simply teachers. Gifts that come together may modify each other. For instance, one preacher may have a public speaking gift (1 Peter 4:11) allied with exhortation, making the sermon more encouraging, while another preacher may be more “prophetic” and dynamic, and yet another’s preaching may be more scholarly with a higher teaching component. Counselors are the same. Thus a preacher or a counselor is almost never able to minister to even the majority of all needs or all people. We are better suited to minister to some than to others.

Third, there are different “kinds of service” (1 Cor. 12:5), which may mean your gifts are better suited to some venues and contexts than others. Some may work better with children than adults, or in a larger group setting than a smaller group setting, or in a blue-collar context than a white-collar context.

Fourth, there are different “kinds of working” (1 Cor. 12:6), which may mean there are different power-levels at which a gift is resourced. That means some people have a greater degree of ability than others.

1. Literally, liturgy (the Greek word is *leitourgia*).

2. A note on charismatic gifts: The nature of these “gifts”—prophecy, tongues/interpretation, healing and miracles—are obviously a point of division in the church today. Our church has never taken an official position on it, although our denomination (Presbyterian Church in America) holds that no spiritual gift brings new, extra-biblical revelation from God.

So what do we think of prophecy and tongues? Although this is too big a subject to thoroughly explore here, I suggest reading the following article, although it is not an easy read: “Modern Spiritual Gifts as Analogous to Apostolic Gifts” by Vern Poythress, available at www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1996Modern.htm. This view does not believe that the miraculous gifts described in the New Testament have continued, but it also sees modern versions of those gifts, as practiced in charismatic churches, as having value. For example, this view holds that prophecy with a “little p”—unusual insight, forceful forth-telling—continues, but not the infallible, God-inspired revelation of the Old Testament prophets or New Testament apostles.

In summary, every believer has an almost unique “gift matrix.” We have different gifts in different constellations. We have different gifts for different ministry venues and objects. We have different levels of ability. On top of this, there are different seasons in our lives, when the contexts we live in call the gifts out in us in different ways. Put these variables together and each person’s ministry may be as unique as a thumbprint. By implication, there are some deeds in life that only you can do! There are some people to reach whom only you can reach! Spiritual gifts fit you for your mission in life (see Eph 2:8–10).

IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS ABOUT SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Spiritual gifts must be distinguished both from spiritual fruit and natural talents.

GIFTS AND FRUIT

Spiritual fruit is something we are, but a spiritual gift is something we do. Every Christian should have all the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), but no one but Jesus has all the gifts of the Spirit. Gifts can therefore be honored ahead of fruit or be mistaken for fruit: you may touch lives through your gifts while your spiritual growth is in a downward spiral, but the gift-success is mistakenly interpreted by others and yourself as a sign of spiritual maturity (fruit). In fact, there have been unregenerated people (Judas and those in Matt. 7:22–23) who come into the church and whose natural talents God uses to convert and build people up, but who later show that they were never really born again (1 John 2:19).

The danger of being a Christian leader

In Christian leadership, character is primary because of the continual danger of hypocrisy.³ As a Christian leader, you have to point people towards God’s worth and beauty every day. You have to constantly tell people, “God is so wonderful!” This is not something you normally do in other walks of life. Your heart will seldom be in a genuine condition to say such a thing with integrity. Therefore you have two choices. Either you must watch your heart far more closely, continually warming it to God so you can preach to people what you are practicing, or you must put on a “ministerial” face and air and pretend to be something on the outside that you are not on the inside.

Abraham Kuyper said somewhere that Phariseeism is like a shadow—it can be deepest and sharpest closest to the light. Therefore, the ministry polarizes people. It makes them far better or far worse Christians than they would have been otherwise, but it will not leave you where you were! There are enormous pressures in the ministry on your integrity and character.

Even when we have effective results in ministry, we have to examine ourselves deeply. Is our prayer life dead? Do we struggle with feeling slighted? Are our feelings always being hurt? Is there anxiety and joylessness in our work? Do we find ourselves being highly critical of other churches or ministers or co-workers? Do we feel a lot of self-pity? If so, our ministry may be skillful and successful, but it is hollow, and we are probably either headed for a breakdown or doomed to produce crowds and funds but only superficial long-term effects.

GIFTS AND TALENTS

Every human being has talents and aptitudes to do work that serves the human community, but Christians have both natural talents as people in God’s image and spiritual gifts as new creatures in Christ.⁴ This means Christians not only must determine how their talents equip them for a certain range of work, but also how their gifts equip them for a certain range of ministry in Christ’s name.

It is not always easy or necessary to make distinctions between “natural talents” and “spiritual gifts,” since ultimately they are all from the Spirit of God (Ex. 31:1–11; Isa. 45:1–7; and James 1:17). God may adopt a talent

3. For an expanded discussion of this topic, see Timothy Keller, “Ministry Can Be Dangerous to Your Spiritual Health” (2007), redeemercitycity.com.

4. See also Timothy Keller, “Vocation: Discerning Your Calling” (2011), redeemercitycity.com for more on the topic of vocation, natural talents, and service.

and use it spiritually to build up others or the church; then again, he may not. As J. I. Packer points out, sometimes a very mediocre talent/ability can somehow be adapted by God into a spiritual gift, while at other times, a great talent in a Christian never seems to be used as a spiritual gift or ministry.

As we exercise our spiritual gifts, we also need to avoid two great problems: “gift cop-out” and “gift projection.” Every single one of the gifts is also a task, or assignment, given to all Christians. Not all are evangelists, but everyone is a witness. Not all are deacons/deaconesses, but all are to serve. “Gift cop-out” is saying, “Since I’m not gifted at that, I don’t have to do it at all!”

“Gift projection” works in two opposite ways: Making yourself feel guilty that you aren’t as gifted or good as someone else is, and making others feel guilty that they aren’t as passionate or as good at what you do as you are. It is all too easy to try to make the whole church over into your image—making it strictly an evangelistic church, or a justice church, or a cultural center, or an intense discipleship community.

HOW SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE DISCOVERED

Remarkably little appears in the Bible about the process by which someone “discovers” his or her spiritual gifts. Problems abound with almost any prescribed, definitive set of “steps” toward this end. The traditional approach leads people to test themselves in ways similar to secular aptitude tests. The problem with this approach is that it assumes you know yourself quite well, but many of us do not. Also, the jobs in a church often don’t line up perfectly with one or two gifts. Someone may be a good preacher or counselor, but several different gifts could equip a person for those roles. The same goes for most of the jobs in the church.

We can discern God’s calling when three factors come together for us: *Affinity* (What human needs do I “vibrate” to? What interests me? What are my passions?); *Ability* (What am I good at? What do people say I am effective in?); and *Opportunity* (What doors for service are open? What needs to be done?). When all three factors come together, you can see God has equipped and called you to do something or to move in a certain direction.⁵

This process can be applied to finding a job and making major life decisions, but how do we apply it to service in the church? I propose that in the church you start with the third aspect—*Opportunity*. In other words, find the jobs in the church that need to be done and then do them. Just serve. Don’t ask too much about whether it fulfills you.

Why? First, the only way you will ever really come to know the kind of ministry that you are best at is if you do a lot of different things; then you will know what God blesses. Don’t look first at your proven *abilities*—at your day job or natural talents—to determine what you do in the church, because as mentioned earlier, God may not use that. Likewise, don’t look first at your deepest *affinities*—the things that excite and interest you. If you gravitate too quickly to those areas, you may miss latent gifts that you aren’t aware you have. Just serve—plug the gaps in the church and help out. Go through the door of opportunity in the church, doing what needs to be done, and then as time goes on you can check your affinities and abilities and begin to specialize. If you are in a church with many opportunities, you may be able to specialize earlier on in the process.

Copyright © 2007 by Timothy Keller, © 2011 by Redeemer City to City. This article is adapted from a leadership training session at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in 2007.

We encourage you to use and share this material freely—but please don’t charge money for it, change the wording, or remove the copyright information.

5. Ibid. These categories are derived from the works of John Newton.