

Why Does a Church Need Spiritual Gifts?

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When you stop to think about it, the idea of a church is rather preposterous, especially in our high-specialty age. North America is a pastiche of precise markets and interest segments: golfers don't try to associate with racquetball players; classical radio stations don't throw in a little rock 'n' roll each hour for flavor. Everybody has his own slot.

And the businesses, groups, and organizations that prosper are those that stick with the one audience they know best.

So what's the church doing trying to be all things to all ages (infants to grandparents), all income levels (welfare mothers to executives), all education levels (dropouts to PhDs), both sexes, all races and ethnic backgrounds? How can these be mixed into one pot each Sunday morning?

Did Jesus really know what he was doing in establishing the Church as "one body... fellow citizens... and members of God's household" (Ephesians 2:16, 19)? Was he realistic in asking all his followers to do more than practice a private religion the way most Buddhists do? They gather occasionally at a monastery, but each person is basically on his own to work out a balanced Karma. How can the wide variety of Christians feel at home and receive usable spiritual help while in a group?

God thought of that problem—and designed the Church in a unique way to compensate. His plan, as explained by the apostles, is that our various needs be met by a variety of input. Church is not just one voice using one tone, one approach. It is intended to be a many-splendored thing.

Not everything comes through the clergy. Granted, the ordained leadership of the church plays a crucial role in guiding the entire congregation. Pastors and other leaders are the primary conduit for truth.

But part of their assignment, says Ephesians 4:12, is "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." First Corinthians 14:26 is specific: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn,

or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church."

Not everything comes in the same format. Just as the most effective teachers in school were those who used a variety of techniques, so God gets through to us from the front, the "blind side," the "back door," and a number of other angles.

Here are some of his tactics, or spiritual gifts, to his body, the Church: serving others, showing mercy, healing the sick, teaching, miracles, prophecy, public speaking with tongues, interpretation of those tongues, leadership, an utterance of wisdom, an utterance of special knowledge, discerning the true source of spirits, giving to those in need, celibacy, even martyrdom! The New Testament doesn't give us an official roster of the gifts; instead it provides several informal "for-example" lists from which the above was compiled (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Peter 4).

The point of all the gifts, however, is "that the church may be edified" (1 Corinthians 14:5). By using this cornucopia of gifts, the Holy Spirit is able to cover the many bases of need in a congregation, no matter how varied it may be.

The person who needs information about God can receive teaching.

The person who is out of a job can receive money and encouragement.

The person who is trying to hide something from God may have his deception exposed.

The person who is ill can receive healing.

The person who is skeptical about God's power can be confronted with something beyond his power to explain—a miracle.

The person who needs his attention drawn to a particular truth can be captivated by one of the vocal gifts (teaching, prophecy, tongues with interpretation).

The many people who have a willing spirit but aren't sure how to proceed can be mobilized by someone with the gift of leadership.

And so forth.

Christians sometimes get nervous about gifts they don't fully understand, especially if they sense the Holy Spirit nudging them to be the channel of such a gift. It is important to remember that the Spirit doesn't give white-elephant gifts. His presents are not useless, like the thing you dragged home from the last group Christmas party. We are wise not to turn up our noses at his gifts, for he knows what he is doing. And the Church is waiting to benefit from our participation.

What if we don't sense anything stirring? Have we been left out? Not according to 1 Corinthians 12:7 ("To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good") and 1 Peter 4:10 ("Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its varied forms").

So, experiment! Say yes to opportunities that come along, if for no other reason than to see if God has gifted you along a particular line. Try things. Stay open-minded. See what brings results. Don't fall for Cornford's Law, which

says, "Nothing should ever be done for the first time."

Instead, opt for the perspective of Charles Schulz, creator of Peanuts: "Life is like a ten-speed bicycle. Most of us have gears we never use."

If we could scan a congregation with God's radar, we would probably spot dozens of unused gifts—spiritual capacities lying dormant in the lives of many Christians. Meanwhile, the Church as a whole is poorer.

Leonard Ravenhill tells a story about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village. When they came to an old man by a fence, one of the tourists asked, "Were any great men born in this village?"

The old man leaned on his cane and replied, "Nope, only babies."

A frothy question brought a profound answer. Nobody starts out great. God has no instant giants of the faith. The most gifted Christian you know began tentatively, serving the Lord with butterflies inside, not sure if he or she would ever make an impact for the kingdom of God. But availability turned into ability. The Holy Spirit's gifts were welcomed and then released to help change the world.