

GROWING TOWARD *Spiritual* MATURITY

HANDOUT B

Discovering and Using Our Spiritual Gifts

Chapter 8 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

By Gary C. Newton

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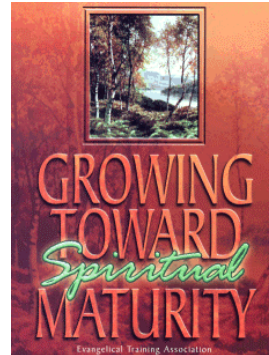
One of the first lessons we must learn as a growing Christian is that we are saved to serve. In contrast to the popular values in today's me-centered culture, we are not saved merely to satisfy ourselves. We are saved by a sovereign Lord to fulfill His plan for the world. We have not been simply given a fire escape from hell. We have received the unique privilege of serving the most High God. And what a tremendous privilege that is!

Our sovereign God needs absolutely nothing in order to complete His plan for this world. The same Lord who spoke the world into existence needs no mere human instrument to assist Him in this magnificent task of sustaining the world. Yet, that is exactly what He has done. As Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16).

Along with the general commission given to all believers, to make disciples and to be loving witnesses of Christ, the Lord has given specific ministry gifts to each believer. It is important to note that both the task of making disciples and the gifts to accomplish that task are given to the body of believers as a whole. A dangerous tendency, especially in our individualistic culture, may be to try to focus too much on developing and using our gifts rather than contributing to the unified ministry of the body of Christ.

Where Do the Ministry Gifts Come From?

Christ gave spiritual gifts to the church when He made His triumphal ascension into heaven after His victory over Satan on the cross. The analogy that Paul uses to describe this event comes from an ancient military practice. When a victorious army returned from winning a battle, they would parade their captives in chains through the city and give the residents of the city gifts taken from the conquered land. With this background the following Scripture makes a lot more sense: "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men'" (Eph.



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4:7, 8). Spiritual gifts are given by God because of His grace toward His people. In Scripture, all three persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—are mentioned as the givers of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-6). They began to be exercised by the church when the Holy Spirit was given to the church on the Day of Pentecost. That is why they are referred to as the gifts of the Spirit.

Who Are the Ministry Gifts Given To?

God sovereignly gives specific gifts to individuals and arranges them within the body of Christ to accomplish His purposes (1 Cor. 12:18). Since they are gifts of God's grace, we can take no credit for them. Yet each and every believer in the body of Christ is given a gift (Eph. 4:7). Not to acknowledge a gift from God Almighty is not a sign of humility but rather of ingratitude. For this reason we need to be careful not to downplay God's gifts of grace in our lives.

A common misinterpretation of Scripture has led to a major misunderstanding of the term "ministry" in the church today. The concept that the pastor is the only "real" minister has often squelched the passion for the ministry of the "lay" person. Yet Scripture teaches that one of the main roles of the pastor/teacher is "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). The word for service could also be translated as "ministry." The source of the erroneous understanding of the term "ministry" came from verse 12 of Ephesians 4. The early King James Version of the Bible translated the text as if the role of the pastor/teacher was three-fold: "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." Thus it could easily be inferred that the pastor's responsibility involved three distinct things: to perfect the saints, to do the work of the ministry, and to edify the church. This interpretation is radically different from the original intent of the text. In the Greek, the three phrases connect directly to one another. A much more accurate translation of the text would read: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:11,12). Pastors are not the only ones who do the work of the ministry. Their job is to prepare God's people to minister. The "real" ministers are the people in the pews. Church leaders minister by training and preparing the other ministers to use their spiritual gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10) so that the body of Christ is built up and grows towards "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Why Are the Ministry Gifts Given?

Ministry gifts are given to believers in the body to enable them to minister to others in the body and to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12, 13; 1 Cor. 12:7). As a result of Christians serving each other sacrificially according to their giftedness, the body grows stronger, becomes more unified, and becomes more mature (Eph. 4:13). Spiritual gifts were not given to elevate certain individuals within a local body. These supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit were given to the church and its members, to empower and fulfill the Great Commission. The gifts of the Spirit were at least part of what Jesus had in mind when He told His disciples that when the Holy Spirit came they would do even greater works of ministry (John 14:12). The supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit were given to build up the universal church as well as local churches for the accomplishment of its mission.

What Are the Different Types of Gifts?

In order to accomplish the task of world discipleship, God empowered the church through a variety of different spiritual gifts. This variety of gifts accommodates peoples' different needs, passions, personalities, and learning styles. Although extensive lists of different spiritual gifts can be found in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4, even these lists are not necessarily exhaustive. The lists of spiritual gifts included in the New Testament adequately explain how God gifted the early church to minister. There are many reasons to suggest God is not limited only to these gifts today. God gives gifts in every culture to supernaturally empower His people to minister effectively in that culture. It is important not to limit God's ability to give people supernatural gifts and abilities to minister in new ways within a rapidly changing world.

The gifts listed in the New Testament may be categorized under speaking, serving, and signifying gifts.

Speaking Gifts

1. **Apostleship** (Eph. 4:11)—the present day missionary or church planting gift.
2. **Prophecy** (Eph. 4:11)—foretelling and/or proclaiming (forthtelling) in a demonstrative way the truth of God.
3. **Evangelism** (Eph. 4:11)—special abilities in communicating the gospel to unbelievers.
4. **Teaching** (Eph. 4:11)—a unique ability to help people to learn and obey the Word of God.
5. **Exhortation** (Rom. 12:8)—counseling, encouraging, and challenging others.
6. **Knowledge and wisdom** (1 Cor. 12:8)—the ability to gain deep insight into the Word of God and share its application to the problems of life.

Serving Gifts

1. **Helps** (1 Cor. 12:28)—the ability to serve others in a supportive role.
2. **Hospitality** (1 Pet. 4:9, Rom. 12:13)—the special ability to provide an open house and warm welcome for those in need of food, lodging, or companionship.
3. **Giving** (Rom. 12:8)—more than tithing, this is the gift of generosity towards the cause of Christ.
4. **Administration** (1 Cor. 12:28)—the special gift of leadership and administration.
5. **Mercy** (Rom. 12:8)—a gift of empathy and compassion toward those who are needy.
6. **Faith** (1 Cor. 12:9)—the ability to envision what God wants done and persevere through obstacles to completion.
7. **Discernment** (1 Cor. 12:10)—a special ability to distinguish between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Signifying Gifts

1. **Miracles** (1 Cor. 12:10)—the ability to draw on God’s supernatural power to accomplish God’s purposes.
2. **Healing** (1 Cor. 12:9)—a supernatural ability to be instrumental in curing illness and restoring health.
3. **Tongues** (1 Cor. 12:28)—3 positions are debated; (a) emitting ecstatic utterances, (b) using a previously unknown language. or (c) both. Some believe interpretation is included with this gift. Others believe the interpretation of tongues is a separate gift.

Although some theologians disagree as to whether or not all of the signifying gifts are applicable today, we must be careful never to limit God by our own theological systems.

How Do We Find Out Which Gifts We Have?

Unfortunately when God adopted us into His family, He did not give us our birthday gift wrapped up in a fancy package. He realized that in the process of discovery we tend to appreciate the things we learn much more.

To discover our spiritual gifts we must do four things: identify our strengths and weaknesses, evaluate our spiritual passion, get feedback from Christian friends, and use the process of trial and error to identify what area our gifts are in.

Identify our Strengths and Weaknesses

The first step in determining our spiritual gifts is to identify our strengths and weaknesses. God can certainly give people spiritual gifts outside their natural abilities, but our natural affinities are a good place to start. The question we need to ask ourselves is, “What things that I do for others has God blessed and used in building up other people and the ministry of the church?” On the other hand, “What sorts of things have I done that have been frustrating or counterproductive in ministering to others?” As we uncover these successes and failures, evidences of effectiveness and ineffectiveness, or strengths and weaknesses in your ministry attempts, a pattern will emerge which will reveal those gifts that God has given us.

Evaluate our Spiritual Passions

When we sense the spark of passion for a particular ministry, it indicates at least a leaning toward a particular spiritual gift. Too often Christians downplay passion in the Christian life. Strong emotional feelings are a valuable part of a Christian’s experience (Ps. 37:4).

Get Feedback from Christian Friends

Since spiritual gifts are given to the body of Christ as a whole, it is important to look to the people we are close to for feedback related to what we perceive our gifts to be. Sunday school teachers, mentors, elders, family members, pastors, and close friends can give us valuable feedback.

Use the Process of Trial and Error

We have all heard the expression: “We learn by doing.” This principle is even truer in the process of discovering our spiritual gifts. People often are not even aware of their gifts until they get out and do ministry. For this reason it is a good practice in the church to allow people

the opportunity to serve in different types of ministries. It is also a good practice to allow people to fail gracefully as they test out their gifts and abilities. Sometimes the best lessons in ministry come from failure rather than success.

In addition to these four principles on how to discover our spiritual gifts, there are many well developed inventories to help us discern what our gifts, passions, and ministry interests are.

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Summary

Identifying our ministry gifts is an important part of our continued maturing in Christ. By using our Spirit given gifts to minister to others, we contribute to the building of the body of Christ and glorify God. The wide variety of gifts identified in the Bible are an indication of the diversity of people's needs and temperaments. A thoughtful examination of our life and consultation with other believers within the context of the church will help us to discover our ministry gifts. After identifying these gifts, we need to develop and use them faithfully in serving the Lord.

For Further Discussion

1. What is the difference between ministry gifts and talents?
2. What guidelines should you follow in determining your gifts?
3. What are some ways in which you can develop your gifts?
4. What other gifts do you think God might add to the biblical lists if He were writing to us in this culture?
5. Why must we be careful not to focus too much on our "individual" gifts?

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