

The Gifts of the Spirit: How can I make a difference in this world?

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 6 November 2005

A mission from God

John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd once starred in a movie called, *The Blues Brothers*. They played a couple of ex-convict-wanna-be-musicians who were trying to raise money for an orphanage. Anytime they were asked about their work, they had a standard response: "We're on a mission from God." They always said it as if they believed it. We're on a mission from God. The very idea that two inept, unworthy human beings could be on a mission from God was, of course, the central joke of the whole film. Well let me tell you something. You are on a mission from God. Inept and unworthy as we all are, if we have said "yes" to Jesus, then we are on a mission from God. Jesus has commissioned us to continue the work he started, the work of redeeming this world, rescuing God's lost and orphaned children. The idea that we could do this in our own strength is laughable. To make a difference we need a power beyond ourselves.

Last weekend I took our little Emma to see a stage production of C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The story is a fairy tale about some young school children who one day clamber through an old wardrobe into the magical land of Narnia. The land is ruled by a wicked witch, but it is about to be rescued by its true king, the great lion Aslan. The amazing thing, as the story unfolds, is that Aslan has for some reason decided to accomplish his mission through these four young children. To help them, he assigns to each of them a special gift. To Peter, the eldest, he gives a shield and a sword – just the right size and weight for him to use. To Susan he gives a bow and arrows and a little ivory horn that she can use to summon help whenever it is needed. To little Lucy he gives a small dagger and a vial of magical cordial, a few drops of which will heal any wound. Each of these gifts, it turns out, will be crucial to their ultimate victory over the white witch and the powers of evil.

The Bible says that God, by his Spirit, has given to us – his children – special gifts for our conflict with the powers that enslave this world. Take a look at 1 Corinthians 12 (p.1113). This is the fullest discussion in the Bible on the issue of spiritual gifts.

¹Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. ²You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people.

⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

Few subjects have caused more confusion or division in New Zealand churches over the last thirty years than this one: spiritual gifts. Yet, if we are to complete the mission that God has given us, it's so important that we understand how the Spirit of God has gifted each one of us. So what I want to do this morning is to simply ask – and hopefully answer from this text – three basic questions: What? Who? Why?

- *What* are spiritual gifts?
- *Who* gets them?
- *Why* are they given?

1. What are spiritual gifts?

So firstly, what are spiritual gifts? The word for "gifts" that Paul uses in v 5 is the word *charismata*, from which we get the word "charismatic." But *charis* simply means "grace." In one sense, a spiritual gift is just any expression of God's grace, any word or action or service that exposes people to the goodness of God.

Paul gives here a list of nine such spiritual gifts. Many of us on a quick reading probably couldn't claim to possess any of these. But it's important to realise that this list is just one of five such catalogues of spiritual

gifts in the New Testament. There's another list at the end of chapter 12. And then there are lists in Romans 12:3-8 and Ephesians 4:7-12 and 1 Peter 4:10-11. If you compare these five lists, they're all different. No single gift occurs in all five lists. Thirteen of the gifts occur in only one of the five lists. There's no discernible pattern. The lists are haphazard and random, as if to suggest that they are just representative selections of a much wider range of gifts. There's no reason to believe that there aren't other spiritual gifts besides the ones mentioned here in the Bible. In fact, shouldn't we expect that? When you look at the rich diversity in the natural world, what's to say that God hasn't been just as creative with spiritual gifts?

In fact, when you study the different lists, the thing that strikes you – besides their haphazard and random nature – is their incredible variety. Some gifts appear to be quite supernatural – the gift of healing or speaking in tongues – while others appear to be quite ordinary, even mundane. For example, in Romans 12 Paul says that some people have the spiritual gift of encouraging others or giving money away. Ever prayed for that gift? In the list at the end of this chapter, Paul says that the ability to teach others or the gift of administration can be a spiritual gift. Now what is spiritual about administration? I know non-Christians, people without the Spirit of God, who possess the gift of administration. They were born with it. But the implication here is that when people come to faith in Jesus, and offer their natural talents to God, the Spirit may choose to transform those talents into spiritual gifts through whom God's grace is poured out on a needy world.

It can happen. It happened to a young girl born in 1910 in what was Yugoslavia. As a youngster, she joined a youth group and by age 17 she knew that she wanted her life to be guided by God's Spirit. She became a geography teacher and was promoted to school principal. But in 1948 she had to leave that job because she contracted tuberculosis. In 1948 she started an unofficial school for young children in the slums, providing medical care to those who were sick. In 1950 she rented a house with her own money for people dying in the streets, that they could die with dignity. She was one of the pioneers in treating people with AIDS before people even knew what AIDS was. She has touched thousands of lives. In 1979 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Her name? Mother Teresa. An ordinary lady who offered what natural talents she had to God.

2. Who gets spiritual gifts?

Let's move onto the second question: Who gets spiritual gifts. To whom are they given? Paul says in v 7: "To *each one* the manifestation of the Spirit is given." Then again in v 11: "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit. And he gives them to *each one*, just as he determines." There are no such things as first-class Christians and second-class Christians – those who have the Spirit and those who don't, those who have spiritual gifts and those who don't. At Pentecost – the day when God poured his Spirit out on the church – tongues of fire rested on every person. If you have said "yes" to Jesus, his Spirit indwells you. That's what Paul says here in v 13: "we were *all* baptized by [or "with"] one Spirit into one body ... and we were *all* given the one Spirit to drink." So every Christian has at least one spiritual gift, however dormant and unused it may be.

Paul reinforces this from v 14 onwards by likening the church to a human body. Think about your body for a moment. You have a brain, right? Did you know it can store up to 100 trillion facts? It can handle 15,000 decisions a second (as in the case when your digestive system is working). Your nose can smell up to 10,000 different odours. Your hands can touch and detect an item 1/25,000th of an inch thick. Your tongue can taste one part of quinine in two million parts of water. Your body is made up of many different parts, and each part has an important function to play. In the same way, every member of the body of Christ is gifted to perform a unique function. If you have said "yes" to Jesus, you have been gifted by his Spirit to play a unique role in his body. Don't compare yourself with other people and say, "I have nothing significant to contribute." You do. Look at v 21: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." Most of you knew Gordon Smith, a long-standing member of this church community, who died last month. Gordon had Downs' syndrome. In a sense he was one of our weaker members. There was much he couldn't do. But he could smile, and he could hug. And with those simple gifts of warmth and hospitality, he transformed this church and touched the lives of many people.

3. Why are spiritual gifts given?

There's a third question, the "why" question. Why does God give us spiritual gifts? Answer: To serve each other. In v 5 Paul says that gifts are just opportunities for "service." In v 7 he says: "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given *for the common good.*" The implication is that as each of us plays our part, and serves one another with the gifts that we've been given, the body of Christ is built up (14:12), people far from God will be drawn to Jesus, the world will be transformed, our mission will be accomplished.

But one of the major problems in most churches is that so few people are exercising their gifts. The church growth expert Eddie Gibbs once said, "The level of unemployment in the nation pales into insignificance in comparison with that which prevails in the church." As a result, a few people are left doing everything and are totally exhausted, while the rest are under-utilised. That's why the church has been likened to a football match in which thousands of people desperately in need of exercise watch twenty-two people desperately in need of rest. The church will never reach its full potential, never accomplish its God-given mission, until everyone of us is playing our part, using our gifts for the common good.

So let me ask you a question: Do you know your spiritual gifts? Do you know how to discover them? There are questionnaires you can use to assess the different ways in which you are gifted. In fact, there are some free spiritual gift assessment packs available in the foyer this morning. Feel free to take one. But it's also important when assessing your gifting, to ask other people for their candid opinion. Spiritual gifts are usually confirmed by others. If you think you are gifted to be a singer and no one else does, guess what? Any good gift assessment pack will require feedback from those who know you. This one does. But the best way to discover how God's Spirit has gifted you for service is to just start serving. Experiment. Try something new. Grab the *Situations Vacant* column in the church newsletter and pick a job. Until you try something, you're not going to know what God's gifted you to accomplish. Unless you take a risk, and respond to the need in front of you, you'll never know the thrill of God's Spirit energising you in ways you never imagined.

Back in 1983 John Scully quit his post at PepsiCo to become the president of Apple Computers. He took a huge risk leaving his prestigious position with a well-established firm to join ranks with an unproven little outfit that offered no guarantees, only the excitement of one man's transforming vision. When he was asked why he made the risky move, Scully says he made the move after Apple cofounder Steve Jobs goaded him with the question, "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?" The truth is you're on a mission from God. You've been given a chance to change the world. Take the risk. Sign up. Discover the gifts God's given you. And change the world.

Questions

1. How many spiritual gifts do you think there are?
2. What's the relationship between spiritual gifts and natural talents?
3. Are spiritual gifts permanent possessions or can they be taken away?
4. What does it mean to be baptised with the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13)? To whom does God give spiritual gifts?
5. You may have heard people say, "No one is indispensable." When it comes to the church, what would Paul say? See 1 Cor 12:21-22.
6. What is the purpose of spiritual gifts?
7. In what ways has God's Spirit gifted you?
8. What are some practical ways to discover your spiritual gifts? (Why not use in your small group the spiritual gift assessment pack to help identify your gifts?)
9. "The Christian life is not so much about first identifying your spiritual gifts and then utilising them, as it is trusting and obeying and following Jesus wherever he leads, and then experiencing his Spirit empower you." Discuss.
10. Albert Schweitzer said, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve." Do you agree?