SMALL GROUP ToolBox

DISCOVERING YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS

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CWR

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years the subject of spiritual gifts has stirred both interest and disagreement. During more recent decades there has been a wider acceptance across the Church of the ongoing importance of spiritual gifts, which are given by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of expanding the kingdom of God and building the maturity and wellbeing of members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Because you have chosen to use this book, clearly you have an interest in this important topic.

The world is going through a period of dramatic and unpredictable change. There is evidence of rapid expansion of the Christian Church in many areas of the world and worrying signs of its contraction in other areas, particularly the Western world. And this is just one feature of the global upheaval that is occurring during the first decades of the twenty-first century. In the developing world particularly, astonishing accounts of God at work through ordinary individuals are reported regularly. There is clear evidence that God is still pouring out His gifts on His people today. In fact, as we look carefully at the biblical texts we discover that each one of us has been given spiritual gifts which God wants us to use as He directs us.

Despite opposition, misunderstanding and human failure our God continues to release His Spirit powerfully into the lives of ordinary people all over the world to fulfil His purposes. Whether we live in the Western world or in another nation, it is important that we explore Scripture to understand the nature of our spiritual gifts. We need to be clear concerning the reason God, in His wisdom, planned long ago to entrust these special gifts to people like you and me.

This Bible study resource is based upon four key New Testament passages that provide insights into the apostle Paul's and the apostle Peter's teaching concerning spiritual gifts:

EPHESIANS 4:1–16
1 CORINTHIANS CHAPTERS 12–14
ROMANS 12:1–21
1 PETER 4:1–11

My prayer is that this resource will provide a helpful framework for your journey of discovery, both for you as an individual and for your group, as you consider questions such as: What are these spiritual gifts? What gifts do I have and how can I use them wisely?

There are three parts to this resource: First, there is an individual focus, guiding personal study and reflection. The second provides questions and suggestion for study of the Bible passages within a small group context. The final section offers some thought-provoking questions regarding the use of spiritual gifts in your Christian group, local church and in the wider community.

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR PERSONAL USE OF THIS BOOK

- There are many books on spiritual gifts available today that provide a more thorough (and more varied) look at this topic. This resource is designed to help individuals and small groups investigate what the Bible teaches on this topic and to consider how to exercise your spiritual gifts in ways that will bring honour to God, blessing to His people and benefit to those outside the church community.

- This booklet aims to give you greater confidence that God is interested in you, that He wants you to partner with Him in the work He is doing. It will be wise to set aside quality time for prayer and meditation on what comes to the surface as you read.

- If you are confused or unclear concerning your unique gift mix, it is often helpful to take some time with one or two close friends and discuss the matter with them. Of course, in small groups, this discussion can take place there.

- At the end of this booklet you will find an additional resource that was written by Selwyn Hughes on this topic (see the Appendix). Both individuals and groups may find that his insights stimulate helpful thought and discussion.

- In addition to the spaces provided in this study book, you may find it useful to have a small journal or notebook to record your discoveries or your thoughts or, perhaps, any questions you would like to raise in the group.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUPS WHO USE THIS BOOK

- If you plan to use the book in a small group, it is recommended that group members read all the relevant background notes, and spend some time in personal preparation. With our busy lives, this will be quite a challenge for many but the preparation will help to give maximum benefit to the group members.

- Spiritual gifts are not simply an interesting topic to be discussed; they are God's provision for His people. We should approach the topic humbly, and seek the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit as we draw near to the outworking of God's mighty power.

Turn to page (37) for Notes For Group Leaders.

SETTING THE SCENE

WHAT ARE 'SPIRITUAL GIFTS'?

The words 'grace' and 'spiritual gifts' in the New Testament come from the same basic root word and that word means to rejoice or be glad.

In the passages of this study various terms are used to describe what we call 'spiritual gifts' in our English translations of the Bible. On occasions the word is simply 'spirituals', meaning spiritual matters. In Romans 12:6 and in 1 Peter we have the familiar word *charismata*. What we can be sure of is that these gifts are expressions of God's favour and empowerment, not just on those who carry them but on those we are called to serve with these gifts.

It may be a surprise for some to realise that spiritual gifts were not only given after the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit released His power on the band of believers. Earlier, the biblical accounts of the commissioning of a number of the prophets, such as Isaiah (Isa. 6:1–13); Jeremiah (Jer. 1:1–19); Amos (Amos 7:10–17) provide us with examples of God at work through the Holy Spirit in Old Testament times. We can then add the extraordinary spiritual endowment for the artisans involved in the building of the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1–11). Additionally, and interestingly, we have examples of people exercising a spiritual gift but only for a limited time, for example, Saul (1 Sam. 9–12). It appears that in Old Testament times spiritual gifts were given to a limited number of selected people.

The Day of Pentecost changed all that. Many Bible commentators identify the coming of the Holy Spirit in such a dramatic fashion (Acts 2) as the beginning of the fulfilment of the prophecy in Joel 2:28–32 where Joel prophesied that the Holy Spirit would be flooding the lives of all people, without regard to their status, gender or race.

'Then, after doing all those things,
I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.
In those days I will pour out my Spirit
even on servants – men and women alike.
And I will cause wonders in the heavens and on the earth –

blood and fire and columns of smoke.
The sun will become dark,
and the moon will turn blood red
before that great and terrible day of the LORD *arrives.*
But everyone who calls on the name of the LORD
will be saved,
for some on Mount Zion in Jerusalem will escape,
just as the LORD *has said.*
These will be among the survivors
whom the LORD *has called.'*
New Living Translation

Peter (Acts 2) began with a defence of their behaviour and then broke out into a Holy Spirit inspired gift of preaching/evangelism. How powerful and effective this was!

JESUS AND SPIRITUAL GIFTS

A close examination of the Gospel accounts shows that Jesus operated in many of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the later writings of the Early Church. We can readily recognise gifts such as prophecy, insight (knowledge), healing, wisdom, teaching, pastoring and miracles, in the records of His life on earth. It is worth adding that we also see clear evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) in His life.

It was the power of God at work in Jesus that authenticated His teaching. His miracles pointed to God and went hand in hand with His inspired teaching.

If Jesus is the pioneer, the forerunner, of those who follow Him, we are called to imitate Him and, in some ways, exceed His actions (John 14:11–14), all to the glory of God. The gifts or endowments of the Holy Spirit become channels through which the presence and power of God can be felt and identified by believers and non-believers alike even in our times.

THE APOSTLE PAUL AND SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The apostle Paul did not set out to write a theology of spiritual gifts. Likewise, his aim was not to provide a 'how to' guide on spiritual gifts. In his letters to the Roman and the Corinthian Christians, and those believers in the church in Ephesus, he was addressing current issues of understanding and practice that were relevant specifically for believers

in those important cities. The issues for Rome were different from those in Corinth and Ephesus, but each has provided us with very helpful insights into the apostle's understanding of the nature and functioning of spiritual gifts. When we study the various passages today, we do need to keep the culture and contexts of the original churches in mind as we study the text in his letters and as we apply what we find in our own situations today, so many centuries later. The same warning applies to our understanding the writing of Peter.

WHY SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE IMPORTANT TODAY

Non-believers are blessed by spiritual gifts

In the Western world particularly, truth has become very fluid. This is especially true in the area of values. People do not have a problem if your 'truth' is different from their 'truth', but they may become defensive when you claim that yours is the only truth. For many, truth has become a point of view rather than anything solid or absolute. Beliefs concerning God and faith are treated exactly the same way. As a result, the best arguments in the world may leave our listeners stimulated but unconvinced and certainly uncommitted.

People of the twenty-first century are also very pragmatic. They want to know if something works and if it is good for them. As we have just noted, a strong argument may win a debate regarding faith or truth and yet leave the person unimpressed or even antagonistic. Yet if a sceptical person sees or hears evidence of God at work, this can be very attractive, opening the door of their lives for a more thoughtful consideration of the possible benefits of faith in God.

When Christians exercise their spiritual gift(s) for the benefit of others in the wider community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, people are blessed and indifferent hearts can become warm.

Added to this desirable outcome, let's not forget that Jesus exercised gifts of healing and miracles to bless people who never responded to Him by becoming disciples, though of course we do not know what occurred later in their lives. There is a strong argument that Jesus blessed needy people simply because He expressed His Father's heart of compassion for needy people.

I have friends who regularly set up a booth in New Age festivals in capital cities in Australia. God works through them in healing, prophecy and words of insight. They have told of times when they have had queues outside

their booth with people waiting to get in, some wanting explanations for their dreams, others wanting prayer for physical healing. For me, the most interesting comments are those of people who say that their booth has a different 'feel' from any of the others. The Christians at work there understand the culture, and give of their time, gifts and money freely, simply because God loves these people. A few come to faith but many are simply blessed with an intimate contact with the Holy Spirit of God at work through God's people. Who knows what will be the eventual outcome of the seed that is planted there? As in New Testament times, the *work* of God can open up the way for the *Word* of God.

Christians too are blessed by the appropriate exercise of spiritual gifts

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul clarifies the purpose of spiritual gifts for the Church. They are 'for the common good' (1 Cor. 12:7). Evidently there were difficulties in the Corinthian church both in their understanding and use of spiritual gifts. These difficulties, whatever they were, did not lead Paul to tell the church to stop welcoming or exercising spiritual gifts when they met. To do so would have hindered the work of the Holy Spirit in some measure and the church would have been impoverished as a consequence.

There is no doubt over recent decades that spiritual gifts have been a blessing to many. Sadly, there are also examples of gifts being wrongly used or abused, but this should not cause us to 'write them off'. For my wife, Jeanette, and myself, spiritual gifts exercised by others have blessed us personally. At other times the spiritual gifts we have been given by God have provided us with opportunities to be channels of God's grace to others.

'NATURAL ABILITIES' OR SPIRITUAL GIFTS?

Many of us will have grown up in a family with other children, or perhaps we have children of our own. We understand that even with the same mother and father every child is unique. Individual uniqueness shows itself very early in life because this is part of God's plan and design. For a variety of reasons, some of us never uncover or appreciate all our unique qualities and potential. Yet God knows how He shaped us as His **works of art** (in the Greek, *poema* – see Eph. 2:10) and how He has prepared us for His unique purposes for each one of us. As we have already observed, this 'natural' potential can remain dormant, like a seed in the ground, but

it springs to life when it comes in contact with the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit's presence and power. The gifts we are born with (which some may call 'natural gifts') become supernatural when they are energised by the Holy Spirit. Sadly, many people are unaware of their God-given potential, or simply write their gifts off as insignificant or unimportant. Life itself is a wonderful gift from God and every one of us has God-given potential that the Holy Spirit desires to release. I believe it was Abraham Lincoln who said something like, 'God must love ordinary people. He made so many of them'. You may like to consider Selwyn Hughes's thoughts on this topic. He wrote:

> *According to the Scriptures, before we were born, God's sovereignty was at work preparing us for our emergence into this world. The Psalmist said, 'You were there while I was being formed in utter seclusion! You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your Book' (Psalm 139:15–16, TLB). God shaped Jeremiah for his ministry saying to him, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I set you apart' (Jeremiah 1:5). According to these and other scriptures (see Luke 1:16, Galatians 1:15) a Sovereign God is at work preparing us to contribute to His universe in certain well-defined ways. In each one of us God builds into our personalities at the moment of conception (so I believe) certain aptitudes and abilities which later, through growth and development, become observable. Once we become Christians, however, a spiritual transformation takes place in which the Holy Spirit regenerates our dead human spirits (see Ephesians 2:1) and brings us to new life and a new identity. Immediately we are converted at least one of our basic abilities (sometimes more than one) is harnessed by the Holy Spirit to become our specific contribution to the ministry of development in Christ's Body, the Church. There takes place within us, whether we feel it or not, an inner thrust, or if you like, a distinct motivation, which leads us towards a specific form of ministry in Christ's Body. This inner drive is what constitutes a basic gift. It is the heightening and intensification, or as some prefer to call it, the 'Christianising' of a natural ability in such a way that an individual finds himself or herself inwardly motivated to play a certain part in building up the Church.*
>
> *A basic gift then is a spiritual urge or motivation, produced by the Holy Spirit, alighting and impinging on a natural ability so as to sanctify it,*

and transfigure it so that it becomes the potential for a significant contribution in the ministry of the Church. It does not mean that every natural ability is taken up by God in this way but one, at least, most certainly is, enabling believers to play their part in the most wonderful ministry in the universe – maintaining the health and vitality of Christ's Church here on earth.

5 Insights to Discovering Your Place in the Body of Christ
(Farnham: CWR, 1982, 2001), pp.20–21.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN PERSPECTIVE

The nature and purpose of spiritual gifts can be summed up in this simple diagram:



Over recent decades many Christians have shown a renewed interest in spiritual gifts. On the whole, this is a very healthy attitude. However, if we view these gifts as something that builds our status and self-esteem we have missed the point badly. As the diagram above explains, we are God's agents; His fellow workers (1 Cor. 3:9).

Imagine a parcel courier boasting about the valuable parcel he was delivering to a wealthy individual. We would most likely say to him, 'What are you talking about? You are only a courier. You didn't buy this gift and it won't belong to you when you deliver it.'

A similar attitude to our Christian gifts can keep us humble and balanced in our understanding of this great treasure with which God has entrusted us. Whether natural abilities or unique miraculous spiritual gifts, they are a trust from God and we carry them for the benefit of others – for God's people and for other individuals to whom God chooses to send us.

How many spiritual gifts are there?

Over time Bible students have tallied up the spiritual gifts they can see mentioned in the New Testament and if you read the findings you will discover discrepancies in their totals. I believe a good argument can be made that there are many more spiritual gifts operating among Christians than are listed in the New Testament. Additionally, individual Christians have an even more numerous **mixture** of spiritual gifts, so agreement on the exact number of spiritual gifts is probably unlikely and unwise.

Christians may be inclined to identify certain gifts such as prophecy, healing and performing miracles, as the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Yet this view is a misunderstanding. It fails to recognise how much God rests on the less spectacular gifts also and, in so doing, can lead to a two-tier idea of spiritual gifts. Every individual has the innate potential to cooperate with God through His gracious gifts. When we fail to see God's hand in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary gifts we possess, we may feel so insignificant or unimportant that we sideline ourselves.

Whether our gifts are those that have been with us from conception or we have received them at a later stage of our Christian walk, God is the Giver of them all. His gifts are the way He has chosen to express Himself through us. These gifts equip us for *every* part of our daily lives. There is no sacred and secular life with God. All of life is the same to Him. We are reminded in Peter's second epistle that we have everything we need to achieve what God has in mind for us. How encouraging is that!

> *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*
>
> 2 Peter 1:3

IN SUMMARY

The number of spiritual gifts in which we operate is not what is important. What matters is that we acknowledge that God is the giver; that we are called and equipped with all we need to be His fellow workers; that those who benefit from these spiritual gifts are blessed; and that the glory goes to God and not us.

PRAYER OF PREPARATION

Thank You, Lord, that each one of us who follows You has been blessed with Your gifts that we can share generously with others. During our journey through the Scriptures and this book, give us further insights into our unique gifts and how You desire to pour out Your favour on others through us. Help us, like the young boy prophet Samuel, to always pray, 'Speak, for your servant is listening' (1 Sam. 3:10).

PART ONE:

SPIRITUAL GIFTS OF LEADERSHIP

FOCUS PASSAGE: EPHESIANS 4:1–16

PREVIEW



Over recent years there has been much spoken and written concerning the leadership gifts mentioned in Ephesians chapter 4. The apostle Paul recognised the essential function that leaders play in the life of the Church. There are three important consequences of effective spiritual leadership that Paul underlines in this chapter:

1. God's people are prepared for works of service
2. The Body of Christ (the local gathering of believers) is unified *(that is: perfectly integrated, linked together, and completely equipped for God's purposes)*
3. The followers of Jesus will grow in spiritual maturity through their knowledge of Jesus Christ

Plainly the function of the leadership gifts is to promote the health, spiritual growth, harmony and maturity of those the leaders serve. There is an ongoing tension here for those of us who have leadership roles in the Church. Gifted leaders attract people who want to identify with the leader's character or perhaps his/her vision or teaching. Some will seek to imitate their leaders, believing that they set a healthy example of how they should live. This is not wrong in itself but it can cause problems for both unwary leaders and their followers. Some common areas that Christian leaders need to guard against are:

- a sense of pride (in their leadership status or achievement)
- a dictatorial attitude, as though leadership makes them somehow superior to those they lead

Jesus warned His disciples of these leadership traps on a number of occasions. Here are some examples you may like to investigate further:

MATTHEW 20:20–28; 23:1–12; MARK 8:31–39;
LUKE 9:46–48; JOHN 13:1–17

Just as children need caring parents if they are to grow up healthy and balanced, so younger Christians need sensitive, effective leadership and pastoring if they are not to go astray in their Christian journey.



PERSONAL EXPLORATION

1. Which Christian leaders (local, national, international, historical or biblical) have inspired you most by their giftedness, character and influence?

2. What qualities of these leaders have impressed you the most?

3. Do you consider that you fit one of the leadership descriptions in Ephesians 4:11–13? If so which one?