

## What is your Gift?

by Ray C. Stedman

I have a sense of quickening anticipation and of enthusiasm in approaching this passage of Scripture again. It is somewhat akin to the feeling I had when I watched a surgical operation for the first time. It was with a mingled sense of awe and uneasiness that I stood behind the surgeon in an operating room and watched him preparing to do a surgical appendectomy. I watched him draw the scalpel and lay the wound open, and saw his assistants catch the blood vessels to tie them and stop the flow of blood. I watched him open the abdomen and expose the inner organs of the body to my gaze. As I saw them throbbing and pulsating I realized this was a living body being opened before me. I cannot describe the mixed feelings of wonder and excitement, and a bit of sickness, I felt. So in this text of Scripture the Apostle Paul is exposing to us the inner workings of the body of Christ.

It is challenging and exciting to discover how God designed his church to influence the world. There is nothing more pathetic and abortive than Christians who totally miss the understanding of this exciting program for the operation of the body of Christ, and substitute business methods, organizational proceedings and pressure politics as the church's means of influencing society. When we return to what God intended, the church becomes a very wonderful, challenging, exciting thing. The church is not an organization or a religious club. It is a functioning, living organism designed to penetrate society at all levels, and to declare and demonstrate in our world a new kind of power. That power is otherwise totally unknown to men. It is not easily recognized for what it is because it works very quietly. But it is an exceedingly mighty power, the power of resurrection life, the power that is able to bring life out of death.

If there is anything our society is characterized by today it is that it is permeated with a kind of

living death, a death that is part of our daily existence and manifests itself in a sense of despair, of depression, of emptiness, of the futility of living. It is seen in the humdrum of existence, in boredom and the frustration of lives that are longing for a sense of satisfaction and do not know where to turn in the restlessness of our age. It is in the midst of that kind of death that the life of the body of Christ is to be manifested. But this is an exciting day in which to live because in our day and time, in this decade of the 20th century, the Spirit of God is healing a sluggish, ill, and faulty church.

That process of healing is most interesting to watch. I find it happening everywhere. The Holy Spirit is breathing new life into old bones that have lain there so long they have begun to rattle. He is pouring new wine into new wineskins today. There is breaking out in the midst of old established forms of church life new exciting manifestations of the Holy Spirit at work among men. You can sense this everywhere. It is being accomplished by a return to these fundamental principles that the Apostle Paul outlines here in the epistle to the Ephesians concerning the intention of God for his body.

The human body is an amazing arrangement of many quite different functions. We are astounded at the smoothness with which the body articulates a great many functions. There are the major senses of seeing, hearing, speaking, etc., all functioning as a unit in one body. The various organs all work together sharing in a marvelous harmony and yet each one doing something different. That is the characteristic that is so remarkably evident in God's intention for the body of Christ. In the human body every organ is a distinct and peculiar thing, having a function different than anything else in the body. You cannot substitute one organ for another. Did you ever see a surgeon try to replace a defective stomach with a pair of lungs? It cannot

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be done. Every organ must exercise its own function. So every truly converted Christian has a special gift or gifts from God called *charismata*, graces, that God gives him when he becomes a believer in Jesus Christ. That gift is your privileged function within the body of Christ. No one else can do it. Others may have similar gifts but they cannot do what you can do. No one else can do what you can do in the body of Christ.

The Scriptures are very explicit about this. In the passage that is before us, we read in Verse 7, "But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift," {Eph 4:7 RSV}. Each of us! In First Corinthians 12, the apostle reminds us again that it is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to divide these gifts among his people severally, i.e., to each one, according as he will. So if you are a Christian you have a gift. You do not have to question that, there is no doubt about it. You have a least one, and perhaps more. If you have genuinely come to know Jesus Christ by receiving him as your Lord and Savior and the Holy Spirit of God has taken up his residence in your heart, you have a gift that is your privilege to exercise within the body of Christ.

Your gift may fall in one of the two major divisions within the body. There are certain gifts which might be called general support ministries, from which the whole body receives benefit. There are four of these. Then there is another division of gifts which might be called specific working gifts. We can only take a rapid survey through these now but I want to return to this and go through these carefully and particularly in order that we might understand better what these gifts are, how to recognize them in ourselves and in one another, and how to put them to work.

The support ministries fall into four major categories which are given to us in Verse 11. The apostle says that

**his [Christ's] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.** [The last is one gift and should be hyphenated, as pastor-teacher, or teaching pastor. These are given] **for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood** [Is that

not what you want? Maturity? Manhood? Womanhood? As God intended human life to be lived? This is not talking about something religious, it is talking about the fulfillment and satisfying of human life.], **to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children [immature], tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, {Eph 4:11-15}**

In order to accomplish this, a definite pattern is prescribed. It is only as we understand and recapture that pattern that this church, or any other church, or the church as a whole, will ever become an effective, powerful, relevant, life-changing organism within human society.

Now let us look at these four functions, the general support ministries. These relate to the whole body very much as the major systems relate to the physical body:

1. First of all, there is in your body, as you know, a basic structure system of muscles and bones. From that the body gets its support. You would be nothing but a rolling mass of gelatine if it were not for that. Our bodies have ability to move because of the bones and the muscles.
2. Then there is another system, the nervous system, by which these bones and muscles are stimulated to activity, galvanized to action, the directive system.
3. Then there is what we call the digestive system, by which food taken into the body is assimilated and made available to the cells of the body. It is by this that the body grows, it is the system that propagates growth.
4. Then there is the circulatory system, the blood with the blood vessels and lymph glands. It is by this system that the body is fed and maintained.

Remarkably enough, the structure of the body of Christ roughly parallels these systems within our human bodies. This is not the definite teaching of

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the Scriptures but there is a rough approximation of the four gifts mentioned here to the four major systems of the human body.

1. There is first the apostolic ministry. “Some are **apostles**,” Paul said. He was one of them himself. It was the job of the apostles to lay foundations, to lay major frameworks, to build the basic support structure around which the rest of the body would be built. That is why the apostles wrote the books of the New Testament, for it is this apostolic ministry that forms the basic support for the life of the body of Jesus Christ. I shall say more about this in later messages for this is only a quick survey.
2. Then there are the **prophets**. A prophet is a man who speaks for God, who unfolds the mind of God. In the early church before the New Testament itself was written, prophets spoke directly by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uttering the truths that are now recorded in our New Testament. They were men who unfolded what God taught and thus the body was galvanized and motivated to work. This parallels the nervous system in our human bodies.
3. Then there are the **evangelists** by which the body is built up and grows, men with a special gift for communicating the gospel in relevant, compelling terms to people who are not Christians. There is a sense in which every Christian is to be an evangelist in that he speaks as a witness of his faith. But these evangelists are men and women with a specialized gift who have a wonderful attraction for and ability to speak to people. Billy Graham is outstanding in this field today. He is a true evangelist, for he compels people to listen to the good news of Jesus Christ.
4. Then there are **teaching-pastors**, and these, corresponding to the circulatory system in our body, are designed to maintain the life of the body, to feed it, to cleanse it and to maintain its life in vigor and vitality. The God who designed our human body is the same God who designed the body of Christ, which is to move out through society and penetrate the life of this age! God’s desire is to maintain that body

in health, and that is what the Spirit of God is doing today.

May I add one additional word about these four support ministries, these specialized gifts? We have such a strong tendency to think of these as professional Christians. These are what we call *the clergy* (horrible word) and *reverends*. Almost invariably we include in this class of people only those who have gone through some kind of specialized training school and spend their full time at this kind of work. It does, of course, include that kind of people but it is not limited to that. There are men who have an apostolic ministry today, there are men who have prophetic gifts, there are men who are evangelists, there are men who are teaching-pastors, but not all of them by any means are professional Christians, in full time service. In every church there are those who are engaged in secular work who have these gifts and who are to exercise them as well. I want to make that point clear even in this introductory survey, though I intend to return to it later.

A terrible failure has occurred in the life of the church right at this point. Through the centuries, the church gradually grew away from the simple system which made it such a powerful and compelling influence upon society in its early years, and there came in gradually a terrible distortion from which we are still suffering today. The church became identified with buildings, great massive cathedrals and imposing structures, and these were referred to as *the church*. The popular thinking fastened upon the building as the identifying symbol of the church, instead of the people. Along with that idea there came a gradual transfer of responsibility to do the work of the ministry from the people unto the clergy. Notice that, in the Scripture here, the apostle makes clear that the work of this general support ministry is two-fold. These four support functions exist. Paul says, for equipping the saints in two directions – “unto the work of the ministry” and “unto the building up of the body of Christ.” (In the RSV text the last two occurrences of the word “for” should really be translated “unto.”)

These four support ministries exist for the equipment of the saints unto the work of the ministry (that is contact with the world) and unto the building up of the body of Christ (that is maintaining the health of the church). Who is to do these

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two things? The saints, the people! That is God's intention. It is not the job of the pastors. Their work is something different. They are to train and equip, undergird and motivate the people to do this work. It is the people who are to do the work of the church. Anything less than this is a terrible distortion of what God intended the church to be like.

When this distorted idea crept into the church, it resulted in a terrible situation. The ministry was left to the professionals and the people came to church, not to learn what to do, but to listen, that is all. The pastor has to minister to them, talk to them, encourage them, and try to keep them spiritually healthy, and, at the same time, do all the work of contacting the world: There soon came into being a very destructive idea that the job of the people was to bring the world into the building to hear the gospel and the pastor's job was to preach it to them. Nothing has been more destructive of the life of the body of Christ than that concept. Soon Christianity became a spectator sport, very much akin to the definition I recently heard of football – eleven men down on the field, desperately in need of rest, and forty thousand people up in the grandstand desperately in need of exercise!

No wonder this awful burden (which pastors are largely responsible for in assuming) has exerted a terrible, unbearable pressure upon the pastors, the clergy. They have not been equal to this task and they were never intended to be. Any one pastor who honestly attempted it found himself involved in endless, frustrating, demands so that he cracked under it. That is one of the reasons why there have been so many emotional failures in the ministry.

We need badly to return to the simple principles of the life designed for the body of Christ. The result of its distortion has been a sadly impoverished body which has done little as far as the world is concerned, and has been largely an isolated section of life with a strong religious odor to it that has turned people away. The world holds the church in contempt because it is not doing anything relevant and meaningful in human society. Our need, therefore, is to return to the original pattern.

To turn now to the second class of gifts, the working gifts. I want to simply name them for you. We shall come back to describe them later on in detail, that we might all recognize what the Holy Spirit has done in our individual lives to make this church a working, powerful unit. There are several

lists of the spiritual gifts, the *charismata*, in the New Testament. You will find one in Romans 12, another in First Corinthians 12, and there are brief references elsewhere. When we put these together the list reads something like this:

- There is the gift of **wisdom**. That is the ability to understand how truth applies to specific situations, how to put truth to work.
- There is the gift of **knowledge**. That is the ability to categorize truth, break it up into manageable portions and thus to understand it better.
- There is the gift of **faith**. That is what some call today the gift of vision. It is an idea that grips a man, that some needed goal can be accomplished. He sees it while others do not, and he goes right ahead and does it.  
This week, in Washington, I talked with W. Cameron Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe Translators. What an outstanding example he is of a man with the gift of faith, the gift of vision for reaching the world through translating the Scriptures into the language of the isolated tribes of earth. What a great thing God has done through him with that.
- Then there are gifts of **healing**, including physical, mental, or emotional healing.
- There are gifts of **miracles**, and the gift of **prophecy**, which is something quite different than we usually think.
- There is the gift of **discernment**, the ability to see whether a person is a phony or not; the gift of **tongues**, the power to speak in other languages; and the gift of **interpretation of tongues**.
- There is the gift of **helps**, a magnificent gift without which the church would be nothing. (It is called in Romans 12 “the gift of **service**.”)
- Then there is the gift of **administration**, those who have a gift given by God to organize and administrate in spiritual matters. This is “the gift of **ruling**” in Romans 12.

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- There is the gift of **exhortation**, the ability to get people moving, to say things in a way that will motivate people, exhort them.
- Did you know there is a gift of **contributions**? Every believer is to contribute but there are some who have a special gift for this, the gift of making money.  
I met a man like that this week, a man who glories in the fact that God gives him, as a business man, the gift of making money, and he has set aside \$20,000 as a special foundation to be used wholly for the training of young men for the work of the ministry. That is a gift.
- There is a gift of showing **mercy**, of visiting a sick room and putting some flowers on the windowsill and making up the bed or cooking a dish, etc., the gift of showing kindness.

There is a wide diversity of gifts, a panoramic range of them.

“Well,” someone is saying, “how do you find the gift that you have, how do you identify your gift?” The answer is: You find spiritual gifts just as you find natural talents. You musicians, how do you know that you have the gift of music? You athletes, how did you ever discover that you had an unusual physical coordination and were able to do athletic exploits that others could not? How did you discover that? Well, you discover spiritual gifts in the same way. Usually you are attracted by seeing certain people exercising a gift, and that draws you to them. You like what you see. Then you try a few different things. You soon discover you do not have a gift for some things at all. With others, you say to yourself, “Perhaps I can do this.” You enjoy some activities more than others, and this is a possible indication. What you enjoy doing is usually what God gives you the privilege of doing, for the exercise of spiritual gifts is a joyful thing to do. People take great pleasure in exercising these gifts, for they are fulfilling and satisfying.

Then you feel a continuing desire to exercise one line of endeavor more than another, and you long to find out more about it. You desire to do this more frequently, and that is an indication. One very important indication is to see if others recognize the gift in you, and encourage you to do it.

Those of mature experience may say, “Look, we feel you have a gift along this line and would like you to take on this job. Would you do it?” It is very important that others recognize your gift. (I remember Dr. H. A. Ironside used to speak of the pathetic situation of those who felt they had the gift of preaching, but no one had the gift of listening!)

Now, most of these gifts are manifest right here in this church, as they are in other churches. The Spirit of God has given them. Not all the gifts, perhaps; that is his choice. He gives as he will, not as we will. We want to see this church a body at work, not only here, where we are ministering to one another and building one another up (that is part of it), but also out there in a quite desperate world. Men do not live lives of quiet desperation anymore, but of open despair – not knowing where to turn or what the answers are. But the ministry of the body is the ministry of Jesus Christ at work in human society. Christ loves this world. He loves the men and women of it. He loves the poor, pathetic, homeless bums that stumble up and down the streets of our big cities in increasing numbers, victims of narcotics, drink, sex, LSD, and perversions of all kinds. He loves hard-driving, hard-headed businessmen who have made a god of success, and have fallen for the illusion that success in life is the great goal, and who ruthlessly ride over anyone who stands in their path. And when they reach that goal and have all their luxury and their big homes, they still have empty hearts and nothing to satisfy them with. He loves them and wants to reach them through us. That is his goal, that is the purpose of the body of Christ.

Someone has said there are 81 million Christians in the world today. Not all of them know all that it means to be a Christian, but there are, perhaps, 81 million Christians. Do you know what that means? That means 81 million opportunities, scattered throughout the world in all levels and classes of society, to manifest the same wonderful life-changing power as was manifest in Jesus of Nazareth in Judea, or Galilee, 1900 years ago. Do you think if that were really happening, that there were 81 million places in this world today where that kind of a life, in quietness, unostentatiousness and yet in power, was being manifest, that this old world would be the same place it is today?

I leave you with that question.

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**Prayer:**

Our Holy Father, what a gold mine of opportunity we have stumbled on here. What a magnificent plan and program for this world to be helped, changed, and delivered in its utter need. God grant to us to catch something of the excitement and the chal-

lenge of this in our lives. That we might have a part in this, the most revolutionary concept ever given to men. Make us to come alive, Lord, and to realize that you have a place for us that we alone can fill and no one else can do, as a part of this program. Help us then, to learn more about it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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