

11. God's gifts and the church

December 9, 2012

Here is a gift bag. For guys, this kind of fancy gift bag just gets in our way to the gift itself inside. Ladies, when you give gifts to your hubby, son, uncle, nephew, or boyfriend, don't waste money on wrapping papers, bows, or bags. Just give them gifts and the money you would spend on those decorative stuff. Right, guys? Can I hear Amen?

Anyway, back to this gift. Now I walk over here and give this gift to you, did you know that I was going to give you this before you came to church? You didn't. OK. Is there any reason why you should receive this gift from me? Nothing you can think of, OK. That is exactly what a gift is. It has nothing to do with the gift recipient. It has everything to do with the gift-giver. If it has anything to do with the gift recipient, that would be called 'wage', not 'gift'.

By the way, you can keep that gift. It is from my wife Karen.

If you've been a Christian for some time, you probably have heard the words "spiritual gifts". And if you come from the charismatic denominations, such as the Assembly of God, the Four Square, or Pentecostal, you know that they put a lot of emphasis on the spiritual gifts.

At the other side of the spectrum, the main denominations, such as Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Evangelical Free, and Episcopal don't want anything to do with spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, and prophecies. They even teach their congregation that those gifts are no longer existing. We will talk more about it later.

God has given each believer at least one spiritual gift, and this gift is to be used for the unifying and building up of the body of Christ. To use our spiritual gifts effectively, we first need to understand their source of power and how Christ made that power available to us.

A. THE GIFTS OF ENABLING GRACE

Ephesians 4:7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

The source of power behind all spiritual gifts is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. His power to overcome sin and death is at work in every believer, granting us access to God and enabling us to serve Him effectively. And the switch that activates that power in our lives is God's grace.

We must make a distinction between "spiritual gifts" and natural abilities – a.k.a. talents. I do believe that the Lord gave me the gift of teaching, the gift of being a pastor and the gift of administration. I also received natural ability of pencil drawing from Him.

Let's take a look at the gifts we received from our Savior Jesus Christ:

Five sections in the NT list about twenty gifts God has given us – Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:11.

Before we go much further, we should define "spiritual gift." It is a supernatural ability Christ gives to His believers that enables them to perform functions in the church with effectiveness and skill.

As I said before, these gifts have a specific purpose: to serve and edify Christ 's people, the church. They are meant to draw our eyes to Christ, which means we get joy in using them, but God gets the glory, not ourselves.

Here are a few other facts about spiritual gifts:

- Every believer has at least one gift, but almost always more than one. – 1 Cor . 12:7; 14:1
- Spiritual gifts are given when we're saved and are used to fulfill God's calling for us. – 1 Cor. 14:26b; Ephesians 4:12; 1 Pet. 4:11
- The gifts are varied and fill different roles. Some are more visible than others, but all are equally important. – 1 Cor. 12:12-25
- All the gifts derive their power from the same source, the Triune God. – 1 Cor. 12:4-6. And they give glory to the One who so lavishly bestows them. – 1 P et. 4:11b.

I probably will anger some folks from the Charismatic denomination background by saying this, but I am gonna say it anyway. The way they exercise their spiritual gifts is done in unbiblical manner and out of context. God is the God of order , not confusion.

For speaking in tongues, some churches allow all the people to speak in tongues out loud in the middle of their services. This is not biblically correct.

1 Corinthians 14:27-28 If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. 28 But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God.

Now, I am going to anger the other group of people who have the background of Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and other main-line denominations. By declaring that the controversial spiritual gifts such as, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, and prophecies are no longer available is also biblically incorrect. They use these verses from 1 Cor. 13:

1 Corinthians 13:8-10 Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

Paul says when that "which is perfect" has come, then the gifts will stop. But what is that "which is perfect"? Though some who believe the miraculous gifts ceased with the apostles say it refers to the completion of the New Testament Scripture, they are wrong. They took it out of context to make it fit with their denominational guide lines which are standing the opposite end of the Charismatic denomination 's unruly use of some of the spiritual gifts.

Though I absolutely respect and admire the sound teachings and biblical knowledge of Pastor John MacArthur, Pastor Chuck Swindoll, and J. Vernon McGee, I believe that they are using an out of context method to stand against the Charismatic way .

You may say, "Do you dare to say that you know better than those biblical scholars?" No, I don't. But the Word of God does. This "which is perfect " is when we are in the

eternal presence of the Perfect One, when we are with the Lord forever either through the rapture of Christ or our death.

The Greek word for “perfect” is “telos.” Considering the way the NT uses “telos” in other passages, it certainly seems to be speaking about the ‘coming of Jesus’ – 1 Corinthians 1:8; 15:24; James 5:11; Revelation 20:5, 7; 21:6; 22:13, as well as ‘perfection of God’ – Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 9:11; James 1:17; 1 John 4:18.

So am I going to split the body of Christ for this spiritual gift argument? Nah, they can be wrong. We move on.

B. AN IMPORTANT PARENTHESIS

Ephesians 4:8-10 Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.” 9 (Now this, “He ascended”--what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

Apostle Paul was quoting Psalm 68:18:

Psalm 68:18a You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts among men,

Did you notice three changes? Two of them are only slight: a transfer of person from the pronoun of “you” to “he” and a purely stylistic transformation of a finite verb into a participle – from “have ascended” to “ascended”.

The more important change is from “received gifts among men” to “gave gifts to men.” The best explanation is that the apostle was drawing on an ancient oral tradition reflected in the Aramaic ‘Targum’ on the Psalter and the Syriac Peshitta version, both of which read, “You have given gifts to men.”

I know what you are about to say, “Whatever.” But I explained this to you guys, just in case some of you cannot go to sleep tonight because of this tiny biblical translation discrepancy.

But seriously what does it mean in v9 and 10? Does it mean that Jesus descended to somewhere lower parts of the earth before he ascended to heaven? And what does this “led captivity captive” mean?

I am glad that you have that inquiring mind. If you use a cross-reference Bible or the Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, it explains to us easily:

This refers to Jesus’ preaching to the spirits in ‘hades’ described in 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6.

1 Peter 4:6 For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

Where do you think that the spirits of Abraham, David, Daniel, Isaiah, Elisha, and other God-believing and God-fearing OT saints were before the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? They couldn’t be in heaven. They all were in hades, a.k.a. Sheol waiting for the Messiah to set them free and take them to heaven.

Luke 16:22-26 So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and

Lazarus in his bosom. 24 Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' 25 *But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'*

But did you also notice from what Abraham said to the rich man in v26? Those who rejected God while they were alive could not go to heaven from hades. In other words, this is not the purgatory that Catholic theology wants their people to believe that it exists.

When these captive in the captivity of hades heard the life -saving message of Jesus Christ which they already believed in faith while they were alive on earth, they received Jesus into their hearts and Jesus led their spirits to heaven as He ascended.

Only when Christ returned to the Father could He send His Spirit and His Spirit's gifts. The Ascension, then, is central, which is why Paul took the time to explain it more deeply.

C. FOUR OFFICES FROM CHRIST TO THE CHURCH

Ephesians 4:11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

Paul describes four offices.

1) Apostles

This office is closed, no longer available to anyone. As I mentioned it before, apostle means "Sent one." This group includes the original 11 disciples and Paul, formerly known as Saul from Tarsus.

2) Prophets

Prophets, who speak forth words from God in total consistency with the foundation of the Old and New Testaments. Sometimes they speak in a predictive sense, but not necessarily so, and they are always subject to the discernment and judgment of the church leadership according to 1 Corinthians 14:29. But modern prophets do not speak in the same authoritative sense that the first century prophets brought God's foundational word.

Ephesians 2:20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone,

3) Evangelists

Evangelists, who are specifically gifted to preach the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ to help hesitant people take the step of faith.

But all of us, whether we have this specific gift or not, have the privilege of sharing Christ's Gospel with others. While those gifted in evangelism are to lead out in proclaiming the Gospel, we all share in realizing the Great Commission. So don't leave it to the "experts". Christ wants to use each of us to spread the message of His love and grace to a hurting world.

4) Pastors and teachers

The two terms pastor and teacher are linked grammatically in the Greek text and refer to a single office, often called pastor-teacher.

Pastor means “shepherd,” indicating that the local church is a flock of sheep, and it is his responsibility to feed and lead his congregation with the Word of God, the food that nourishes the sheep. The Word is the shepherd’s staff that guides and disciplines the sheep. The Word of God also is the local church’s protection and provision, and no amount of entertainment, good fellowship, or other religious substitutes can take its place.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) The gifts of Christ are for the glory of God and the edification of the believers of Christ, not for individual boasting .

2) No amount of entertainment, good fellowship, or any other religious feel-good programs should replace learning the Word of God at church, because it is our spiritual food and protection.