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Spiritual Gifts and the Work of the Kingdom

Albert L. Garcia

Recently there has been a reexamination of spiritual gifts for pastoral work in the Lutheran context. This is highly commendable, for the New Testament speaks of “spiritual gifts” for the purpose of building the Kingdom. We need, however, to enrich our understanding of spiritual gifts. This can only be accomplished if we place the biblical teaching of spiritual gifts within its proper theocentric perspective, allowing the whole of Scripture to speak. We can accomplish this goal if we study “spiritual gifts” under four themes: (1.) How does the Old Testament view the charismata? (2.) How does Jesus understand the work of the Holy Spirit in the Gospels? (3.) How does St. Paul explain spiritual gifts and their purpose? (4.) How are we to apply this doctrine in our pastoral tasks?

The Gift of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

Can we speak of “spiritual gifts” in the Old Testament? Indeed we can! If we read carefully, we will note how the gift of the Spirit is very much present in the Old Testament for the building up of God’s people. The anointing of David provides us with a clear example of these gifts (cf. I Samuel 16:1-14). At the time of Saul Israel needed a new king. Saul could no longer fulfill the work of the Kingdom. Thus the Lord anointed David with His Holy Spirit to replace Saul. It is interesting to see how David is chosen for the task at hand. Samuel thought that he could determine by human standards who would be the most likely candidate, the most qualified, to receive the anointing. Even Jesse, David’s father, thought that he could determine by human standards whom among his sons would be the one anointed to be king. Samuel should have understood right away the meaning of spiritual gifts in the light of God’s revelation. When Jesse presented his son Eliab as the most worthy candidate, the Lord spoke to Samuel: “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (v. 7).

From this biblical account a clear pattern for spiritual gifts begins to emerge. No one can tell in plain human terms whom the Lord chooses for His specific purposes of building the Kingdom. God does not use human standards. But when God does choose people as He has promised to do to provide for His Kingdom, His Spirit comes mightily upon them and equips them with His spiritual gifts to accomplish His purposes. We see this in the case of David (v. 13).

But human standards persisted in judging David's spiritual qualifications. In the next chapter David's gift was again misunderstood in the crisis with the Philistines. David was not taken seriously by Saul. How could David, a weakling, a light-weight, fight an experienced welter-weight, Goliath? But God had chosen this young man David not according to human standards. This is why David could face the mighty Goliath with a simple slingshot (cf. I Samuel 17:33-50).

Here we also find a tremendous insight that points to a *theologia crucis* over against a human theology of glory. No one can boast in the church of his own accomplishments. The Kingdom belongs to the Lord. He is King! He provides His people at specific times and places with the necessary gifts and talents to accomplish His purposes. Let us remember that our theology is Christocentric. All is related to the centrality of Christ for our salvation (I Cor. 1:22-25). David was a Christian. In him and through him God wanted to show that we ought not to search for "success" through apparent human perceptions. We should, instead, trust that for our time and situation the Lord will provide His gifts so we can glory in His power rather than our own. This leads us then to the revealing teaching of the Gospels concerning the gifts of the Spirit.

Jesus and the Gifts of the Spirit

St. John's Gospel, of all the Gospels, provides us with the clearest teaching concerning the gifts of the Spirit. Chapters 14, 16, and 17 offer the most detailed explanation of this doctrine that uplifts and builds the work of the church. In this context we concern ourselves with three important questions: (1.) Why do the gifts of the Spirit belong to the church? (2.) How are the gifts manifested? (3.) In what manner do the gifts enrich our pastoral theology?

John 14:16-17 provides us with a clear answer to the first question. Jesus sees a real need for the gift of the Spirit in the work of the church. Jesus knew that His apostles would feel useless, empty, and powerless at the time of His visible parting. Jesus fully understands human nature. At times we fail to understand the full implications of our

human nature. This is why we want to grant to the apostles some sort of perfect human state. But the apostles chosen by Jesus were real people—sinful and frightened people. They lacked the natural ability to do the work of the Kingdom. Thus, the gift of the Spirit would be very much needed at the time when Jesus could no longer be seen visibly. The apostles certainly needed the daily presence of the Holy Spirit to find comfort and courage in building Christ's church (John 20:21-22). What made the apostles effective was no particular hidden talent in their human reservoir that was ready to be tapped or discovered as spiritual gifts for the church. No! They were a group of odd-balls—tax collectors and fishermen. They were what they were, sinful individuals by nature. That they behaved the way they did during the Lord's crucifixion points to the continual reality of sin in us. Their apostolic call and their work must be measured, then, by other than human standards.

Jesus' understanding of humanity applies to every situation. The words spoken to Nicodemus carry a very complete understanding of the human condition. For "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). Many have the idea that this sinful condition ends after baptism, or at some point in the Christian life. This idea negates the clear scriptural teaching concerning original sin. If we are not to negate original sin as a present living reality, the reality of the flesh, then we must also maintain a proper understanding of spiritual gifts. The gift of the Spirit must be present, then, in each and every Christian called to live a genuine Christian existence.

In his early theological career, Martin Luther was very much aware of this need and tension. Even though at this time he had to struggle with the correct understanding of original sin, he did not fail to take into account the whole dimension of "flesh and spirit" in his theological work. For example, as early as his first lectures on the Psalms, the *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-1516), Luther perceived this living tension in the life of the Christian during this earthly existence. Luther comments accordingly in his *scholion* on Psalm 119 (118:122):

Who will boast that he is a pure spirit, now without flesh, the adversary of the Spirit, even if he presently finds in himself no part in or temptation to luxury, avarice or other manifest iniquities? . . . Therefore we always sin and are always unclean. And should we say that we have no sin, we are liars, for we deny that we have flesh in the face of the fact that, wherever flesh is, it has with it those evils, and thus fights against the spirit . . . one and the same man is spirit and flesh . . .¹

Since Luther understands the clear tension in the biblical anthropology of "flesh and spirit," he then relates this tension to the doctrine of spiritual gifts. He understands early in his career the constant role of the Spirit in building the Kingdom. He also understands how we are to obtain these gifts. He comments in an earlier *scholion* on Psalm 119 (118: 28):

Just as Christ is the end of the synagogue and the beginning of the church, so is every power, every act, all knowledge and understanding, an end and a beginning. But disgust creeps into this movement; the step we have reached begins to be distasteful and the one not yet attained incapable of coming to our aid. So the soul begins to sleep from weariness with the letter and the delay of the Spirit. In this interval nothing is more efficacious than the Word of God, which strengthens us in the present step and excites us to the future. . . . For the Word of God, more than anything else, has moving power. It is not only an illuminating, but also a heating fire. "The Word of God is living, more penetrating than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Therefore, in all moments of disgust, remember the Word of God, and you will be strengthened (or confirmed) in your purpose.²

Here Luther shows our great need for the gifts of the Spirit. Also we see how these gifts are obtained for the life of the church. His teaching at this point is in continuity with the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

First, we see because of the tension between flesh and spirit that the Holy Spirit must play an important part in the building of the church. Secondly, we see how this work is very important to us as believers. Our very actions as workers in the Kingdom occur in continuity with the work of Christ. But where is the power and gift to be found so we daily can do the work of the church? The Word of God is the very instrument that empowers us as believers. The Word of God gives us this dynamic power, that motivates us to complete all the tasks we need to accomplish in the future. To Luther, then, only the Word of God, could daily empower us with the necessary spiritual gifts. For Luther to find the gifts of the Spirit outside of this clear paradigm of Word and faith was to engage in synergism.³ That we still persist in these things suggests that we do not properly understand the doctrine of original sin.

In Luther's understanding of the Gospel, to find some unique talent in each and every individual as the guiding principle in the work of the church is to deny the powerful priority of Word and faith. To expect a special transformation of the Spirit or a special perfectionist

power is also to negate the biblical, realistic dimension of flesh and spirit. This denial is a clear denial of the power of Law and Gospel in the building of the Kingdom. If the reader has some problem in discerning these important theological perceptions, he should read Professor Lowell H. Zuck's article, "Spiritual Renewal in the Radical Reformation Tradition."⁴ This article reveals the candid perceptions of a theologian that disagrees with Luther's theological perception. Yet Zuck fully understands how and why Luther disagrees with the radical reformation tradition of spiritual renewal. This difference is what is at stake here in this discussion of spiritual gifts.

Once one attributes to an individual in our present history some special gift unique to his person because of the transforming power of the Spirit, then one has clearly denied the Lutheran and biblical Word-and-faith model in theology. (Today this Spirit-transformation model is the proper model for doing theology in the current "charismatic" movement.⁵) That this perspective is quite alarming in our present theological circles can be seen in the radical outcome of the left-wing of the Reformation. For in this model special gifts of prophecy can be assigned to current "prophets." In Luther's day one such prophet arose in Thomas Muntzer. Zuck is quite perceptive in showing the differences from a systematic perspective between Muntzer and Luther. He supports Muntzer but he is aware of the consequences. Zuck observes, against Luther, "Thus, the Lutheran dialectic of Law and Gospel is done away with by Muntzer, who replaces it with a gradualistic work of the Holy Spirit."⁶

It is frightening to note that, as Zuck points out, even in Luther's day, the Word-faith model was being replaced by the Spirit-transformation model. This is important for our whole perception of spiritual gifts. We need to realize that people who follow a Lutheran model of theology are, for the most part, standing alone against the current prevailing model of the contemporary Spirit-transformation theology. But, as we shall see, this Spirit-transformation model does not match Jesus' clear teaching concerning these matters.

The Doctrine of Inspiration and Spiritual Gifts

The Lord as Head of His church is very much concerned that His church grow and prosper. For this reason He established in New Testament times the clear meaning of biblical inspiration grounded in apostolic authority. The office of apostle was very much needed by Jesus to give a proper foundation to His Church. Jesus selected men to this office for a particular function—to preserve and spread His

Word of salvation in the world. The gift of the Spirit in this interrelationship serves one function—to “remember” and “recall” Jesus’ witness to the Father in the world (John 15:26-27 ; 14:25-26). There is no human rhyme or reason why these particular apostles were chosen for the task. There is only one clear basis for the choosing. This is theological. In such an undistinguished group the Lord’s only requirement was that under His authority and power they would be eye-witnesses and proclaimers of His Word. This is why He chose His apostles.

Jesus gave to His apostles the gift of a special revelation so that they would be witnesses in and through the Spirit of the mighty acts and words of God. The Spirit’s role is to aid in the very purpose for which they were sent—to testify and to spread the redemptive message. Thus, the role of apostle is reserved, as other gifts are reserved, for that particular authoritative function that builds the church. This is to point with authority to the words of Christ. The Spirit’s function within this office is to uplift the role of the apostle for one purpose only—to establish the very foundation of the church. This foundation is grounded in the words of Christ. The role of the apostle and the function of the gifts of the Spirit is one and only one—to express the one foundation for the building of the church under the one authoritative Gospel of the incarnate Word.

The New Testament paradigm of the establishment of the church is clearly established here. We have Christ’s proclamation—the apostolic authority in the testimony of the Spirit—for the one purpose of building the church. The sanctification aspects of the apostolic office are grounded in the proclamation of Christ. The gifts of the Spirit also fall within this paradigm and dimension. All is subjected to the proclamation of Christ (John 17:14-26). To build a different paradigm is not to build the proper framework to understand our spiritual gifts. For the very power of individuals, even of the apostles, is grounded in the proclamation. From there follows the dynamic power of the Spirit, creating new opportunities, so that God’s Word may be preached to the salvation and edifying of God’s people.

Christ’s testimony is the foundation that builds and enlightens the work of the church. This New Testament testimony also takes very seriously our reality of sin. For the reality of the Spirit is expressed within the flesh-and-spirit tension of the redeemed individual. This is, in my opinion, the proper starting point for a Lutheran understanding of spiritual gifts (at least for the one expressed by Luther). God creates, preserves, and sustains through His Word the function of the church. Our mighty testimony in that Word creates and illuminates

those functions appropriate to the building of the Kingdom. It can also empower each and every individual to perform the needed tasks that the Lord deems necessary for the continual spreading of His Kingdom. We shall see how this understanding prevails in the Pauline teaching concerning spiritual gifts.

Paul's Teaching concerning Spiritual Gifts

Paul clearly delineates the place of spiritual gifts for the work of the church in Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and I Corinthians 12. A clear pattern emerges in Ephesians. This epistle, which offers to us the clearest statement concerning ecclesiology, gives us some directions to understand our spiritual gifts. The priority of the Word is found here in relationship to these gifts. It is necessary, if we read Ephesians correctly, that everyone come to a living understanding of the Christian faith. This is the final goal and intention that we find in 4:13. Thus it is necessary that through His Word God provide the necessary talents to build the "body of Christ" (v. 12). The Word works mightily, challenging the whole people of God in the Spirit. This is God's choosing. In spite of human frailty God provided apostles and prophets at the right time to proclaim the greatness of His Kingdom. This is the only correct explanation of this text if we view it in relationship to the pertinent texts in the Gospel of John. Today also, in continuity with God's purpose, other heralds are called to witness as evangelists, pastors, and teachers to His authoritative apostolic Word. This was also the marvelous result in the days of Paul. At the center of the works of the Spirit is the realization that the spiritual gifts spring forth from the Word so that the Word may have free course in the edifying of God's people.

We must relate Ephesians 4 to the rest of the epistle. Ephesians 2 shows the centrality of the message as the only power and basis for the work of the church. Unity and reconciliation, we can clearly perceive, are related to the power of the proclamation of the Word. This powerful Word, is the Word of reconciliation under the cross (Ephesians 2:14-17).

Turning to Romans 12, we find a similar perspective. Here, however, the context of the message dictates another important concern in reference to spiritual gifts. Since it is God who offers through His Word the gift of the Spirit to build His church, and since this work does not depend on human abilities but only on God's particular measure of grace (Romans 12:6) given to accomplish His purpose, such as exhortation and service (vv. 6-8), then we ought "not to think

more highly” of ourselves. The gifts or talents listed here are really not human gifts or talents. Again, if we take seriously original sin and the tension between flesh and spirit, then we cannot look upon our apparent human talents as the foundation to discover our *spiritual* gifts. Rather, God has provided these gifts for His specific time and purposes. This is found within the context of Romans 12 in relationship to Jesus’ intention. What the text urges us to do is use those gifts that the Lord, through His proclamation, has urged us to use. If God calls others to specific tasks and purposes, then we should be happy with this too since there is only one goal—to proclaim the message of salvation and to build the Kingdom under this Word.

The very key to the understanding of Romans 12 is the word *faith*. Faith is the foundation of our spiritual gifts (v. 2). Our very usefulness and the very overflowing of spiritual gifts are only the specific call of God under the paradigm of His New Testament Word and faith. Here we are called to serve not by our worth, but by the very tasks assigned under the living Word. The call at the specific time, under the Word, equips us for this. There is no human perception that can help us determine this. But God empowers in the midst of inability and powerlessness. This is New Testament teaching at its best. This should also give us some food for pastoral reflection.

Our Pastoral Task in Discerning Spiritual Gifts

Recently there has been a number of pastors within our theological context that have decided to search for special “spiritual gifts” among the brethren entrusted to them for pastoral care. They earnestly believe that if we search for those gifts which are present that our church can grow beyond bounds. To accomplish this purpose spiritual questionnaires have been formulated to discover such gifts. But can we really discover the “spiritual gifts” around us through mere human tools? If this was the way that God had intended, most apostles and certainly King David would have never been discovered. This approach places into a secondary role Luther’s pastoral model of Word and faith. Also this approach invalidates or hinders present mission growth.

It was Luther’s pastoral concern to search out the spiritual gifts of each and every Christian. However, his approach was theocentric, for it was centered in the Word-and-faith model. Under this model he sought to motivate each and every Christian to live a genuine Christian existence. But how did he search for these gifts? “The Freedom of a Christian” provides us with an excellent case study of Luther’s pastoral concern.

This treatise is very important for it pinpoints the responsibility of every Christian. The responsibility is to be “a dutiful perfect servant to all.” Luther goes on to show how Christians become genuine servants. Here again he realizes the very realistic biblical anthropology of “flesh and spirit.” He cites II Corinthians 4:16 and Galatians 5:17 to support his claim.⁹ He then proceeds to search for the way that a Christian person can become a servant of all. Luther’s approach is completely theocentric. He regards the whole issue from the perspective that each and every Christian has the potential to become a complete spiritual person. The question is not, “What shall we become?” Rather Luther states: “First, let us consider the inner man to see *how* a righteous, free, and pious Christian—that is, a spiritual, new, and inner man—becomes what he is.”¹⁰

To Luther the first and most important question is the one how one becomes and lives as a spiritual person. Again, here Luther is consistent in his use of the Word-and-faith paradigm. To Luther the Word is essential to lead a person to a living faith and to Christian service.¹¹ The German text expresses more clearly what happens to a person that lives at all times under the Word and in faith. It speaks of a “joyous exchange” (“*der froelich Wechsel*”).¹² This joyous exchange is the true realization that Christ’s righteousness replaces our unrighteousness. Luther realizes here that all of our spiritual gifts are related to Christ’s presence in our lives.

If we understand Christ’s daily presence in us through the constant testimony of the Word, the whole dimension of spiritual gifts acquires a different perspective; spiritual gifts become more democratic and at the same time a real and complete source of power. Each of us has Christ in us for the purpose of building His Kingdom. The same Christ, who is also God, dwells and works in us by the testimony of the Spirit. Thus it is possible for all of us to accomplish His purposes.¹³

Luther discusses the whole dimension of spiritual gifts in relationship to Christ’s office of priest. Christ as our High Priest intercedes for us before the Father. He teaches and communicates the value of this office to each and every believer by means of His Holy Spirit.¹⁴ It is from this vantage point that Luther shares one of his most significant Reformation concepts—the priesthood of all believers (I Peter 2:9).¹⁵

The Reformer at this point uses the same image that he employed to explain the joyous exchange, the *admirabile commercium*. This image is the one of marriage. In a marriage “the wife owns whatever belongs to the husband.”¹⁶ Thus, we too possess the royal priest-

hood by our Spirit-filled union with the incarnate Christ. His priesthood is an intricate part of every Christian, for His living reality under the Word is ours. From this realization comes the most enabling principle for the work of each and every Christian. Wherever we are as believers, whatever God wants us to do, there, by the call of the Word, we can do all things, for He is part of our living reality. He is the Priest and we are His royal priesthood.

Luther, then, finds in each believer the possibility to accomplish all things needed for Christ's Kingdom. He discerns our complete spiritual gifts:

Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. These are the functions of priests, and they cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in Him, to be His brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-priests. Therefore we may boldly come into the presence of God in the spirit of faith (Heb. 10:19,22) and cry "Abba, Father," pray for one another, and do all things which we see done and foreshadowed in the outer and visible works of priests.¹⁷

Thus, in providing for a clear pastoral perspective, I do not think that it is possible to discover specific spiritual gifts by questionnaires or any other human pretention. Wisdom and ability come from God. God shaped David for His purposes. He also called the apostles for His specific tasks. Today also, because we are Christ's royal priesthood, His power and possibilities are ours for the purpose of building His Kingdom.

If a task needs to be carried out for the purpose of building His Kingdom, the Lord can certainly use earthen vessels in whatever capacity He wants. He is strong, but we are weak. Our only role is to be faithful hearers of the Word. We only need to find the needs and opportunities in which God wants to accomplish His purposes. If the Goliaths of indifference, secularity, and difficult cultural situations seem ready to devour us and to stifle the growth of the Kingdom, God will provide from among us the gift of many Davids. If there are needs, the Gospel will open many doors mightily. People who seem weak and incapable could be through the Word the very powerful tools of God unto salvation. This is again a proper understanding of our theology of the cross.

All missionaries in very difficult situations have found clear evidence of the truth of this theology. When one begins work in an im-

possible missionary situation, there are not too many people on whom one can count for the purpose of spreading the Kingdom. But the Lord has provided without measure for our many needs when we ask in the name of Christ and reflect on the Word of the Gospel. His call under the Gospel is enough to develop and to find the many spiritual gifts needed!¹⁸

I know that many of my colleagues and I have found the same reality in our tenures as seminary professors. Often we have wondered whether a particular individual could meet a specific challenging missionary task. Yet the Lord pointed beyond our human expectations. For when the Lord called for His purposes, the royal priesthood met the challenge. The Lord time and time again has provided for His most specific and arduous tasks in this manner. If we had judged otherwise our function as professors would have been less productive and rewarding. But the Lord in His Word calls us to faith and to His purposes.

Endnotes

1. WA 4,364,5ff. Here, however, Luther is still a Roman Catholic at heart in terms of the doctrine of justification. He refers to justification here as something that occurs in human beings. He refers to a "semper iustificandi" as a conventional activity in human beings. However, here throughout the context he is very dedicated to the "flesh and spirit" tension. See also *Luther's Works, II* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976), 495-496.
2. WA 4,321,26ff. Cf. LW 2, pp. 437-438. I owe a great deal to Steven E. Ozment. He provides us with a detailed study of Luther's *Dictata* concerning these matters in his *Homo Spiritualis (A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson, and Martin Luther (1509-16) in the Context of Their Theological Thought)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969). Cf. especially Part Three, pages 87-214. We can also find an excellent discussion of these matters in Heiko A. Oberman, "Simul Gemitus et Raptus: Luther and Mysticism," in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven E. Ozment (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971). Cf. especially pages 228-229; 234-236.
3. I point the reader to Luther's "On the Freedom of the Christian." Here we clearly find the dimension of the Word of God, Law and Gospel, as the basis of a genuine Christian vocation. This is how we always live in Christ in a "joyous exchange." (LW 31, 327-377.)
4. Lowell H. Zuck, "Spiritual Renewal in the Radical Reformation Tradition," *Brethren Life*, 26 (Winter, 1981): 18-30.
5. I use the word "charismatic" here to refer to current movements that claim special and direct gifts of the Spirit and those who uphold a perfectionist theology of the Spirit.

6. Zuck, p.22.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
8. *LW* 31, 344.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 345-350.
12. *WA* 7, 25, 30.
13. *LW* 31, 351-352.
14. *Ibid.*, 354.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 355.
18. After the present article was written I came across an essay by Malcolm O. Tolbert that supports many of my conclusions ("The Place of Spiritual Gifts in Ministry," *The Theological Educator* (Fall, 1983): 53-63). Dr. Tolbert makes these observations about "spiritual gifts": (1)they are given by God for specific tasks(p.53); (2)they are given to build the church (pp. 56-57); (3)they are anchored in the Word (p. 58). Tolbert, a professor of the New Testament and one-time missionary to Brazil, warns that we should not "make the mistake of confusing natural ability and talent with spiritual gifts" (p. 58). To do so not only places human works over the work of God (p. 58), but also changes the context of the Pauline teaching, which is clearly within the realm of the doctrine of redemption rather than creation.