

Discover Your Spiritual Gifts

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in ordinary time, January 18, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Christmas was nearly a month ago. We've taken our tree down. We've put away the wrapping paper and Scotch tape for another year. But we continue to enjoy the gifts we received. And whenever I use one of the gifts I received I remember with gratitude the one who gave it to me. Saint Paul reminds us of all the spiritual gifts God has given us. When we receive Christ as our Savior we receive a Savior whose arms are laden with spiritual gifts for each one of us to unwrap and use. "There are a variety of gifts," Paul writes, "but the same Spirit.... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." When Paul wrote those words he was facing the problem of a group of Christians who imagined themselves to be a spiritual elite. They were proud that they could speak in tongues. They looked down on other Christians who didn't have the gift of tongues. Paul confronts them head-on. Every Christian has spiritual gifts. Nobody can look down on another Christian who has a different gift. Furthermore, Paul says, "The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all."

This is one of the most important passages in the New Testament for understanding the nature of the church. Two points. First, there's equality within the church. We *all* have particular gifts of the Spirit. We're *all* needed to do particular jobs. No one should think they're more or less important than someone else in the life of the church. *All* members of the church are equal and *all* share responsibility for its life. Secondly, it follows that *by definition* every Christian is an *active* Christian. Professor James Dunn puts it like this: "At no time does Paul conceive of two kinds of Christians - those who minister to others and those who are ministered to. There's no such thing as passive membership. To belong to the body is to have a contribution which a member must make, otherwise the health of the whole suffers."

Let's move from ancient Corinth to modern Oxford. The good news of the New Testament is that every member of our Church has a spiritual gift. Ask yourselves, "What gifts has God given me to use in the service of God of his church?" Imagine a small child playing with Christmas toys given to her by her father and mother. Her parents enjoy watching their child playing. The child, unknowingly, is giving a gift to her parents, the gift of joy. But imagine that the child turns from the toys her parents gave her - wants nothing to do with them. The parents will probably feel very sad. Nothing hurts a parent worse than to hear their child complain about a Christmas present, "That's not what I wanted. And throws the gift down." I'm sure that all sins grieve God. But I imagine that nothing grieves God more than to see his children rejecting his gifts. Presbyterians are great for debating what sin is but, probably, the most prevalent sin in the Presbyterian church today is the way we reject the spiritual gifts God gives us. We bury God's gifts. We deny God's gifts. We complain that God hasn't really given us any gifts. But - what if everyone here this morning discovered and began to use the spiritual gifts God has given each one of us?

We have so many different jobs to do as a Church. We need to tell people the good news of Christ. We need to teach the Bible. We need to help people who are lonely, depressed, sick, or have other problems. We need to visit shut ins. We need to bind up the brokenhearted and proclaim liberty to captives. Yesterday at the Elder/Deacon retreats a lot of us felt overwhelmed with all the things God has called us to do as a Church. We need to show hospitality by preparing coffee and tea before and after the church services. We need youth leaders. We need peacemakers. We need people who have a heart for justice. We need creative people who dream dreams. And we need practical people who know how to use hammer, nails, and a paint brush. Sometimes we feel like nothing's getting done. But if everybody did something, a whole lot would get done that's not being done. The Holy Spirit gives each one of us gifts. None of us should ever be overworked in the ministry, and none of us should be inactive.

C. Peter Wagner writes, "If spiritual gifts are as important to God and to the church and to individual Christians (as Paul indicates) something better be done about them in a practical,

personal way. One of the primary spiritual exercises for any Christian is to discover, develop and use his or her spiritual gift.” Wagner goes on to lists five things we can do to discover our spiritual gifts: 1. Explore the possibilities; 2. Experiment with as many gifts as you can; 3. Examine your feelings; 4. Evaluate your effectiveness; 5. Expect confirmation from your fellow Christians.

My experience has been that church members who don’t discover and use their spiritual gifts drop out of church altogether. My experience has also been that some people work so hard in the church to make up for what others aren’t doing that they end up getting burned out, depressed, and also drop out. If everybody discovered and used our spiritual gifts we’d really be jumping. We’d really be alive! People would know we’re alive spiritually.

A friend visited the famous Madame Tussaud’s (*too SOH’s*) waxworks in London, England. He noticed some children who couldn’t decide whether the attendant at the foot of the stairs was wax or a real person. So one child dared the other, “Poke him in the ribs and see if he moves.” Response was the test that would decide whether or not the attendant was real.

Response is also the test of whether we’re spiritually alive or dead. Presbyterians have always stressed that we’re saved unconditionally by God’s grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ. We don’t repent in order to be saved. We don’t receive Christ as our Savior in order to be saved. Rather, our repentance and our faith are a response to God’s saving grace. Our response to God’s grace indicates if we’re real Christians, if we’re spiritually alive. In our study of the book of Revelation the Risen Christ says to the church in the city of Sardis, “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you’re dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death!” It’s possible for a Christian to be like a wax statue in Madame Tussaud’s wax museum. It’s possible to be a nominal Christian, a Christians in name only. A name on the membership roll. A name on the baptismal register. But only a name. A name without any response. Without any real spiritual life.

A couple looking for a church dropped in on a minister unexpectedly and expressed interest in joining his congregation. The husband said he wanted to join but he was really busy

and wouldn't be able to attend the worship service or sing in the choir or attend a Sunday School class or help rake leaves for a service project. The wife added that she also wouldn't be able to attend the worship services or be very regularly in any church activity or ministry. And, although they were pretty well off, and they both had good jobs, they told the minister they couldn't pledge but would give whatever they could when they were in church. The minister thought for a moment and replied, "I think you have the wrong church. The church I think you want is down the street about two blocks on the right hand side." The couple got in their car and drove slowly down the street. There they found the other church. Abandoned! Boarded up! A dead church! Gone out of a business!

But listen to what God says about the church where every member has responded to the grace of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ, and where every member has discovered their spiritual gifts and uses them for building up the Body of Christ: "You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her."

Let us pray: Eternal God,
your Son, Jesus Christ,
now exalted as Lord of all,
pours out his gifts on the church.
Grant us that unity which your Spirit gives,
keep us in the bond of peace,
and bring all creation to worship before your throne;
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.