



THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

1 Corinthians 12

Dan Claire

August 24, 2014

In 1 Corinthians 12 (and elsewhere), St. Paul talks about spiritual gifts, one of the most misunderstood concepts in the Bible. Understanding the gifts, however, ought to be really simple for us—as simple as the *gift* of a great job with a great company, a great boss and a great team.

For example, when John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison were recording the first Beatles' album in 1962, they were in need of a drummer. They invited Ringo Starr to join them, and as the band was propelled into superstardom over the next year, Ringo enjoyed the wonderful *gift* of being a member of the Fab Four.

In 1968, NASA administrators appointed Neil Armstrong commander of the Apollo 11 mission. Armstrong then chose Buzz Aldrin to pilot the Lunar Module, adding Aldrin to his team. Both Armstrong and Aldrin enjoyed the amazing *gift* of being on the first team of astronauts to land on the moon.

In a similar vein, God appointed all of us—you and me—to become part of a particular missionary outpost of the risen Lord Jesus known as the Church of the Resurrection. Rez serves as an embassy of the Kingdom of God on Capitol Hill. God has chosen and gathered Rez members for an important mission: to love Him and to serve our city as a growing community of disciples. Consequently, if you're a Christian and a part of Rez, then God has given you a special gift by making you part of TeamRez. You have a special place on this particular team of Christian ambassadors “seeking the welfare of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7). Your role or roles in the mission are your spiritual gift(s). It's like having a great mission, a great boss, a great job, and a great team.

WE'VE BEEN GIVEN A GREAT MISSION. 1 CORINTHIANS 1-11

As we consider what St. Paul says about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, we must keep in mind that he has already written 11 chapters and had much to say about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. For example, as the Rev. David Sandifer explained to us on Aug 10, Paul writes in 1 Cor 3 about the Spirit's ministry in supplying us with God's wisdom. Everything Paul says about spiritual gifts builds upon this concept of godly discernment mediated by the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the most important thing Paul says about the Holy Spirit in prior chapters is that the Spirit enables, empowers and inhabits the church's mission to the city. In particular, he describes our ministry as ambassadors to the city in terms of being the *temple of the Holy Spirit*.

GATHERING SUNDAYS AT 5 PM AT 801 NORTH CAROLINA AVE. SE, WASHINGTON, DC 20003
2000 P ST NW, SUITE 410 WASHINGTON, DC 20036
REZCHURCH.ORG | INFO@REZCHURCH.ORG | 202.573.8586

You may have heard it said that the church is not a building, but it's people. This is true. Yet it's also true that Christians are built together into a building. The Bible describes us as living stones, built together on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. And we're not just any kind of building; we're a portable temple, an interface between God and the world. In the old days, when people wanted to meet with God, they would have to make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. But ever since the first Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church, Christians have become portable temples of the Holy Spirit, connection points between God and the world. The Church of the Resurrection, together with the other church families in Washington, is the interface between Washingtonian and God. We're not a bricks-and-mortar building, stuck on embassy row. Rather, we're a living, breathing, dynamic, spiritual embassy. Wherever we go, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bring the city to the Lord, and represent the Lord to the city. That's our great mission.

There's nothing new about this mission. It's the same mission described elsewhere throughout the Bible, e.g. like in Jeremiah 29:7 where we're told to seek the welfare of the city. What is new, though, is the idea that together we comprise the living, breathing temple of God. This is something we ought to celebrate!

Perhaps you have had the privilege of getting a "backstage tour" of some special building in Washington, like the West Wing or the Pentagon. It's an exhilarating feeling to get an insider's view of where all the action takes place. But for those who report to work there every day, it's easy to take it for granted. In the same way, I fear that we've forgotten how wonderful it is to be gathered together as God's temple. We need to experience afresh the exhilaration of being together as God's temple. What a great privilege it is to have been given this great mission!

WE'VE BEEN GIVEN A GREAT BOSS. 1 COR 12:1-6

In 1 Cor 12, Paul introduces the topic of spiritual gifts by focusing on God's active leadership of the church. In v 2, he reminds the Corinthians that before they came to faith in Jesus, they had been "led" by mute idols. At the end of v 2, Paul adds a note of sarcasm regarding "however you were led." Paul is referring back to his prior teaching in 1 Cor 10 on the true wizards behind the curtains of the idols of Corinth: demons. But then they came to faith in Jesus, so in v 3 Paul reiterates that the pioneering work of the Spirit in our lives enables us to give our allegiance to God by proclaiming "Jesus is Lord." We do so not in a detached, theoretical way, but as a statement of personal conviction. In other words, the Spirit enables me to say, "Jesus is *my* Lord. I give my allegiance to him."

When Jesus becomes our Lord, we receive a special gift. We're given a great boss! God takes charge of our lives. He gives us instructions, not just for you or for me, but for every Christian believer. God gives a symphony of instructions for everyone within our local church family. All of us are directed by God in such a way as to blend together in harmony. We're all under the leadership of the same great boss.

In vv 4-6, Paul takes the opportunity to identify our boss as none other than the Holy Trinity. Each verse says essentially the same thing, but using three Greek synonyms to describe our varied responsibilities.

- v 4, The same Holy Spirit gives different *charismas*, a Greek word we usually translate as *gifts*.
- v 5. The same Lord Jesus gives different *deaconries*, a word we usually translate as *ministries*.
- v 6. The same God the Father gives different *energetics*, a word we usually translate as *activities*.

We'll talk further about what spiritual gifts are below, but for now let's focus on the main point: *Our triune God is our team leader*. God gives us work to do within his organization, and of course this isn't a curse, it's a blessing, because work was something God created and gave to humanity before we fell into sin. It's part of how we were made in the image of God. It's part of our dignity as human beings. We work, because God works. And when we don't work, we tend to become bitter and discouraged, because we're not doing what we've been made to do, and what our great boss is asking us to do.

We've been given a great boss. Instead of being led by our own selfishness, or by stupid idols, or by the devil himself, we are led by the maker, redeemer, and king of all creation. He made us, and he knows us intimately. He loves us, and he knows what's best for us. In all the universe there's no one better for us to follow.

WE'VE BEEN GIVEN GREAT JOBS. 1 COR 12:7-11

Now let's focus on what Paul is saying about spiritual gifts, one of the most confusing and misunderstood concepts in the Bible. In v 4, Paul says that the same Holy Spirit distributes different *charismas*, which in English means *gifts*. So far, so good. Except that in English, *gift* has two meanings. First, it can refer to a present, or a favor bestowed, e.g. "Thank you for the wonderful birthday gift." Or, secondly, it can refer to a trait, or an ability, e.g. "You are a gifted writer." or "You have a special gift with children."

In biblical Greek, however, *charisma* only has the first meaning. It's only means *a present*.¹ So when Paul says "spiritual gift," we should be thinking of the wrapping paper and bows kind of gift. But this is especially challenging in 1 Cor 12 and other places where the larger context has to do with how individual Christians fit within the community of the local church. Whenever we English-speakers get to talking about where we fit inside organizations, we immediately want to talk about our abilities, i.e. how we're "gifted," which is precisely what *charisma* does not mean. So you see how easy it is for us to read these passages in a way that was never intended, assuming that what Paul means when he says *gift* is actually a special *trait* or *ability*.

¹ I am indebted to Kenneth Berding for this insight. For further development, see Berding, *What Are Spiritual Gifts? Rethinking the Conventional View*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006.

This is why I began by talking about the gift of being the drummer for the Beatles, or the pilot for Apollo 11. The gift is the invitation and the place on the team.

Unfortunately, our confusion is only compounded by pop psychology and a cultural obsession with personality tests. In the 1970s, someone had the terrible idea of developing a kind of Christian Myers-Briggs test to help you diagnose your own spiritual type. Today if you google "spiritual gifts test," you'll find that most every denomination has their own online test you can take that will tell you your special abilities. If you didn't already know that you were more administrative, or more empathetic, then this test may help you better understand how you're wired. But don't think for a moment that it's what Paul was talking about in 1 Cor 12. Here are three reasons why:

1. Spiritual gifts are given by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Everything Paul says about spiritual gifts follows from the basic distinction of vv 2-3: *each person who claims Jesus as Lord*, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is given a spiritual gift. Or consider how Paul says it in 12:7, that spiritual gifts are *manifestations* of the indwelling Holy Spirit. What this means is that while anyone of any religion can take an online "spiritual Myers-Briggs" test and get a print-out of strengths and weaknesses, only Christian believers are given spiritual gifts. Kim Jong-un can google "spiritual gifts assessment," take the online test, and learn according to the test that he has the gift of helps. But without the indwelling Holy Spirit, he simply doesn't have a manifestation of that Spirit. He doesn't have a spiritual gift.



2. In order to receive a spiritual gift, you must be an active part of a local church community. As we see especially in v 12ff, gifts are variously distributed within the Corinthian church so that

they may fulfill their Christian ambassadorial mission to Corinth. Paul never envisioned that people would take an online gifts test, find out how they're gifted, and then choose a church body based on where they're needed. In fact, it's precisely the opposite. One must become an active participant in a local church community in order for the Holy Spirit to gift you with roles on the team of that church community.

3. Finally, as I've already mentioned, *charisma* doesn't mean a special trait or ability. Rather, it means *gift* or *present*, and it refers to one's particular place within the ecosystem of a local church. This is confirmed by the synonyms used for *charisma* in vv 4-6. Remember:

- v 4, The same Spirit distributes different *gifts*.
- v 5. The same Jesus distributes different *ministries*.
- v 6. The same Father distributes different *activities*.

Instead of describing special abilities, these synonyms point to different roles, ministries, or activities within a church family, in accordance with the unique mission of that church. Our church, for example, has a unique mission as a church plant that plants churches that plant churches. We often say that we would rather plant ten churches of 300 people than one of 3000, because the limitations and opportunities presented by an urban context demand smaller, more flexible parish churches that can adapt to the unique and varied characteristics of each neighborhood served. In other words, neighborhood churches have the freedom to incarnate the one, true faith in unique ways that meet local needs. This means that the spiritual gifts (i.e. ministries, activities, roles) required for each neighborhood church team will be different. They will be similar, because we follow the same Lord and we believe the same Gospel. But they will be unique because of the neighborhoods served.

By the way, in v 7, when Paul writes that each of us is given a manifestation of the Spirit "for the common good," the word used for "common good" is found very commonly throughout the ancient world in inscriptions referring to some good deed done by a civic-minded person for the welfare of the city. Again, we're not given special traits in order to help us stand out in the job market or the meat market or to improve our self-esteem. Rather, as living stones in God's temple, we're given particular roles in a particular church community in order that our church may serve the common good by seeking the welfare of the city.

So if you're a Christian and you're an active part of a local church, then you have a role to play in the mission of that church. *This role is your spiritual gift!*

EXCURSUS ON STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

In vv 8-10, Paul provides one of several representative lists of roles given to church members in the New Testament. In this case, these are some—but by no means all—of the roles that were given to the Corinthians. We know that it isn't a comprehensive list, because Paul goes on to mention more responsibilities at the end of the chapter, in vv 28-30. And this is only the tip of the iceberg. He could certainly go on to mention many, many more. But from what's in these lists, we can get an idea of the roles that were held in the earliest days of the church in Corinth.

There isn't time to go through each of these roles, but I do want to make an observation about how strengths and weaknesses relate to these roles. I have been arguing strongly that *charisma* does not mean special trait or ability. On the other hand, we know that some roles do require special ability. For example, think of Bezalel and Ohaliab in Exodus 31 who were tasked with the fabrication of the tabernacle. The Spirit of God gave them special abilities as craftsmen for this work. Or think of the countless examples of God doing miraculous works of healing or deliverance or supernatural discernment, both in the early church and today. Again, the Spirit of God empowers everything that we do, whether it is deemed miraculous or mundane. Or think of music leaders in the church. One can't simply play an instrument without having some musical talent. And of course, God is the source and giver of all our abilities, whether we acknowledge it or not. Regardless of your religion, if you can play the piano, then it is Almighty God who has gifted you with this musical ability. Nevertheless, as we've seen, it's not the musical ability that Paul identifies as the *charisma*, but rather the role of leading worship. God gives us tasks, and then he gives us the ability to do them.

Which leads to another important observation. Every spiritual gift is a role, and some of these roles require special talent. Sometimes we possess this talent when we're called. But there are also many, many times when God gives us roles for which we aren't especially talented. Whenever God puts us on the team in a role we didn't expect and we serve him in it faithfully, he gets all the glory, and we're pleasantly surprised to discover what he does through us and in spite of us. For example, I'm not especially gifted as a public speaker. It takes me forever to prepare a sermon, and most of the time I tend to read my sermon manuscripts word-for-word because I can't remember them otherwise. I'm also not especially gifted in pastoral care. I can be pretty nerdy and introverted, lacking in bedside manner. But I'm confident that I've been called to this role, and I'm so thankful that God still uses me in it. Whenever I preach or provide pastoral care, I still marvel that any of it was at all helpful. To the degree that it is, then to God be the glory, and thanks be to God. After pastoring Rez for more than a decade, I'm thankful that God is using me in spite of what appears to be some significant deficits in raw talent.

All of this to say that you mustn't be surprised if God gives you a role that you weren't expecting, and then works through you in spite of your own weakness. It's actually one of the most common themes in the Bible: in our weakness, he is strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

WE'VE BEEN GIVEN A GREAT TEAM. 1 COR 12:12FF

In v 12, Paul moves on to describe how we as individuals fit within the larger body of the church community, each of us being an integral part. Every part is important and necessary, and the body is sorely hindered when parts are missing. We've considered this section together on other occasions as a church, including in the Rez Essentials course. In the interest of time, I won't explain this section further, except to say that *an individual spiritual gift is meaningless apart from the larger team in which that role is exercised*. We ought to praise God that he ordered the Christian life in this way, such that we aren't independent operators. Think of the seemingly infinite number of tasks that lie before us as we seek the welfare of the city. The ways in which our city is broken and in need of God's healing touch are almost infinite. Thank God that all of that responsibility isn't

solely on your shoulders, or mine, or even our little church. Each of us has a role to play on a great team, TeamRez, and we're part of an even greater team, which is the greater body of Christ here in Washington. What a privilege it is to be part of this movement, and what a relief that we have boundaries and a limited stewardship.²

CONCLUSION

So how do we discern our spiritual gifts? Perhaps you're thinking, "You've deprived me of the online test, so then how should I figure out where I fit here at Rez?" The answer is that you'll have to figure it out the old-fashioned way, through life together in the church community, talking and working alongside one another. It's inefficient and that's ok, because relationships are inherently inefficient. The more people you know in the church and the better you understand our particular mission to the city, the more roles you will see that need filling. As you see these opportunities, take them to the Lord in prayer, and ask God to fill them. You may be called to help by praying, or you may be called to help by doing, or perhaps both. In any case, ask the Lord to show you his *gift*, in terms of your role within our church family.

Incidentally, most of us have several responsibilities within our particular role in the church. It's entirely normal to be involved in teamwork in all four elements of the Gospel life of our church, namely worship, discipleship, community and mission.³

Finally, I want to reiterate what this is all about, and the importance of bathing our work in prayer. As I've mentioned throughout this series, the overall trajectory of the Holy Spirit is outward and missional, for the sake of the world. Spiritual gifts aren't given for our own identity and self-fulfillment, but rather for the welfare of the city.

Our call to prayer is primarily so that our church family as a whole would fulfill its mission in seeking the welfare of the city. So pray that God would awaken within us a vision for the church as the most exciting venture, the most important institution that any of us could be part of. Pray for eyes of faith to believe what the Scriptures teach, that each of us is critical to the success of the larger mission of the organization. Pray for discernment not just for yourself, but every person at Rez, that each of us might be the person God intended, and fulfill the role God has given to us. The Lord loves to answer such prayers.

² Healthy boundaries protect us from burnout. If you're tired and burnt out, check and see whether you believe in this fourth point, i.e. that we've been given a great team. If you don't believe in the team, you may be tempted to be take on more roles than you have been given. It's time to pray and ask God what he would have you give up, and what he would have you do.

³ We talk about these four elements in further detail in the RezEssentials course, offered regularly through the Church of the Resurrection.