

An Audience of One

Divine Design – Finding Your Fit in the Body of Christ – Part IV

Romans 12:6-7a

Introduction

In an article entitled, “This is a Puzzling World,” I read that it was an Englishman who created the more popular word game in the world – the crossword puzzle.

Thus far in this series, we have talked about puzzles with interlocking pieces and puzzles with moving parts, puzzles that stack and puzzles that fly, but this is a puzzle with interconnecting words.

Less than one hundred years ago, the *New York World* Sunday newspaper published Arthur Wynne’s little crossword puzzle – the first to ever appear in print. It was shaped like a diamond and gave clues for thirty-one words.

The article I read reprinted this original 1913 puzzle and offered a free download. So I copied it off and tried my hand at it. The only word that was already supplied by Mr. Wynne, near the top of the puzzle, was the word “fun”.

It wasn’t.

Who would know the fiber of the gomuti palm?!

Frustrated, I finally surrendered to the inadequacies of my vocabulary and discarded the puzzle in a nearby cylinder – the contents of which are destined for a crushing amalgamation at some outdoor compilation. I spent a lot of time on that, but I still could not finish the puzzle!¹

It is one thing to not discover the words that fit into a crossword puzzle. You can throw it away or stick it in a drawer to be forgotten. It is another thing to half-heartedly attempt to find your fit in the body of Christ. Or worse yet, not even care to try.

In a crossword puzzle, there are words waiting to borrow from other vowels and consonants in order to be completed. In the same way, the church family is inter-related and inter-dependent on one another. We complete one another as a local, living manifestation of the body of Christ.

The way we complete one another and contribute to the body of Christ is through the discovery and operation of a special, spiritual gift. So let me give a short definition of a spiritual gift.

A spiritual gift is a God given ability whereby you serve the body of Christ with effective ministry.

Did you know that there were three elements of the Christian life that Paul was particularly concerned about? In fact, when Paul introduced these three subjects, he included the idea that he did not want his hearers to be ignorant of them. The three elements of Christian living that Paul did not want ignorance of were:

1. the scheming wiles of Satan and the underworld (II Corinthians 2);
2. the fact of life after death and the future rapture of the church (I Thessalonians 4);
3. the critical subject of spiritual gifts.

I would imagine that the average believer knows something about Satan and can probably rattle off some of his schemes. Most believers know about life after death and probably have an opinion on the rapture and other future events. However, the average Christian might be absolutely unaware of his

own spiritual gift and how it fits him into the body of Christ.

It is no wonder that Paul spent time repeating to the churches in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, of this critical issue of Spirit gifting.

Spiritual Gifts

When the apostle Paul revealed this concept of spiritual gifts to the Corinthians, he wrote,

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware [ignorant]. . . . Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Corinthians 12:1, 4-7)

From this passage, three things are clear:

1. there are a lot of different kinds of spiritual gifts . . .
2. which create a lot of different kinds of ministries . . .
3. which produce a lot of different kinds of effects in and through the body of Christ.

So it becomes altogether critical that you discover your fit in an effective ministry. The crossword puzzle of the body needs your consonants and vowels to complete its words too.

In our last discussion of Romans, chapter 12, we talked about the process of discovery. There were two key words involved in discovering your spiritual gift: exposure and experimentation. We need:

- exposure to God in prayer;
- exposure to the word of God for insight;
- exposure to the people of God for counsel;
- experimentation in anything you would like to do.

That fits within the context of Paul's teaching in this chapter.

Follow God and refuse to be squeezed into the mold of this world system. Have your mind and heart transformed and renewed by the word of God. Seek above everything to please God. Pursue holiness with passion. Then, as you are doing those things, do whatever you want to do.

Do whatever you would like. Just do something, right?!

Perhaps at this point in time, you are tempted to say, "But who am I that God would ever use me? You don't know my limitations; my background; the sin my Savior forgave."

I was sent this article a week ago. It begins, "The next time you think God can't use you, consider the following:"

- Noah got drunk and lost his credibility with his family,
- Abraham was too old to start a new nation,
- Isaac was a daydreamer,
- Jacob had trouble with telling lies,
- Leah was unattractive,
- Moses murdered his enemy,
- Gideon was fearful and faithless,
- Rahab had a past as a prostitute,
- Timothy was too young to garner respect,
- Job was bankrupt,
- John the Baptist did not know how to dress right,
- James and John were self-righteous and proud,
- Peter attempted murder and denied the Lord,
- The disciples fell asleep when they had been told to pray,
- Mary Magdalene had been demon-possessed,
- The boy with two fish and five rolls of bread was obscure,
- The Samaritan woman had been divorced four times,
- Zacchaeus was too small,
- And Lazarus . . . was dead.

No wonder Paul wrote this passage to the Corinthian church – a church that was filled with problems and problem people. Let me read Paul's words, paraphrased by Eugene Petersen in *The Message*,

Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that

the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these “nobodies” to expose the hollow pretensions of the “somebodies”? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have – right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start – comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 1:26-30)

No matter who you are; no matter what your past; no matter who your parents were; no matter which side of the tracks you grew up on, by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, you can have a place in the body of Christ. No child left behind . . . that is not original! God came up with that long ago. None of His children get left out of the puzzle.

Turn to Romans, chapter 12, verse 6, and take note of that as Paul writes,

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly . . .

Every Christian has received a gift and every Christian is to use their gift.

The word Paul uses for “gifts” is the Greek word “charismata (χαρισματα),” which means, “favor or gift”. “Charis” is the Greek word for “grace”. It has been transliterated “charisma or charismatic”. In fact, it has become a title for the Charismatic movement. But according to Paul, every believer has a “charismata”.

This might sound strange to you, but every Christian is a charismatic.

Stephen has become a charismatic!

In the biblical sense of the word – I became one at my conversion. I was given a “charismata,” a grace gift by God’s Spirit.

Now, obviously, the word (“charismata”) has been abducted by the charismatic community to refer primarily to the sensational gifts – the supernatural manifestations. However, every spiritual gift is charismatic; they are all the work of a supernatural, gift-giving God.

Every Christian, born of faith in Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, has been given a special charismatic gift – and it may have nothing to do with some public display of charisma. It might be:

- mopping the floor of a classroom in the basement of the church;
- taking a handicapped child to the park;

- changing the oil in the church bus or van;
- fixing a meal for someone who is ill;
- writing a letter of encouragement to someone in despair.

It is time we took that word back . . . and used it correctly. Every believer is charismatic.

Won’t that start the rumors flying. Our church has gone charismatic. I hope so. I hope and pray that as a result of this study, our teaching staff will have new recruits; our ushers will have a waiting list; the grounds crew will not have enough shovels and paintbrushes on work day.

I hope and pray that every space in this crossword puzzle is filled with a word – a person who has found their place.

“But,” maybe you are saying under your breath, “I appreciate the fact that God can and will use me and I hear the word saying the Spirit has enabled me in some special way, but I need a little more direction than that. Can you give me a clue as to what these gifts are like? Even the most difficult crossword puzzle at least gives you some clues.”

The apostle Paul responds in Romans, chapter 12, by saying, in effect, “I’ll give you seven clues, as a matter of fact.”

He gives seven words to steer you on your way. Circle these. They include the gift of:

- prophecy (verse 6);
- service (verse 7);
- teaching (verse 7);
- exhorting (verse 8);
- giving (verse 8);
- leading (verse 8);
- showing mercy (verse 8).

This list is not exhaustive. In fact, four times in the New Testament we are given a list containing a variety of gifts. In Ephesians, chapter 4, I Peter, chapter 4, I Corinthians, chapter 12, and here in Romans, chapter 12, there are lists of nineteen or so different gifts.

Categories of Spiritual gifts

Perhaps the easiest way to think of the gifts is by arranging them into three different categories. Let me give them to you.

Support gifts

1. First, there are the support gifts.

These include:

- apostle;
- prophet;
- evangelist;
- pastor;
- teacher.

This first category of support gifts could also be called the speaking gifts. They have to do with the ministry of the word. They carry with them a greater authority that brings greater accountability.

That is why the apostle James wrote,

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. (James 3:1)

The writer of Hebrews said,

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief . . . (Hebrews 13:17)

There is certainly nothing like the grief of having souls under your tutelage and care refuse to follow and obey and live out the truth, and there is nothing quite like the joy of having souls who do!

These are the support or speaking gifts.

Service gifts

2. The second category is service gifts.

If all the lists are combined, this category of gifts includes:

- administration;
- exhortation;
- encouragement;
- leadership;
- faith;
- giving;
- helping or service;
- mercy or compassion;
- hospitality.

Sign gifts

3. The third category can be called the sign gifts.

These gifts had a specific, temporary function. They had a function that preceded the completion of the New Testament.

Paul wrote that the gift of speaking in tongues was temporary. He wrote that it was a sign, not to the believing Jew, but to the unbelieving Jew, that the nation Israel had rejected the true Messiah. In fact, the speaking of other languages previously unlearned by the speaker was prophesied centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah. It would come to the nation Israel, Isaiah prophesied, because One came promising rest, but they would not listen.

In I Corinthians, chapter 13, Paul clearly said that three gifts were temporary. Turn to I Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 8 through 10.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge [word of knowledge], it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

In other words, “when the perfect comes, the need for partial truth through prophecy, tongues and knowledge will be unnecessary.”

Paul is clearly stating that these three gifts will cease because something perfect is coming.

Many would say, “Well that is obviously a reference to the second coming of Christ, or at least the rapture of the church.”

And look at verse 12,

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face . . .

Face to Face – that is the title of a hymn that talks about seeing Christ. Obviously Paul was singing Fanny Crosby’s hymn.

There are those who would say the perfect thing that is coming is obviously Christ and when Christ comes, the partial things of prophecy and tongues and knowledge will cease.

That sounds right, but I believe it is absolutely wrong.

First of all, the word “perfect,” in verse 10, can be translated “complete”. Paul is saying that there is something to be completed and when it is completed, these gifts that communicate revelation, bits and pieces at a time, will no longer be necessary.

Furthermore, the word “perfect” in these verses in I Corinthians, chapter 13, is the same word used by James in chapter 1, verse 25, to describe the scriptures – the “perfect law of liberty”.

It is a description of the scriptures.

When Paul was writing these letters, the scriptures were not yet completed. And God continued to give His revelation through a variety of means and methods.

Did you notice in I Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 8, that all three temporary gifts had something in common? They all were connected to the principle of receiving revelation from God.

You might say, “But doesn’t Paul say in verse 12 that I’m going to know fully as I’m fully known? That sounds like heaven.”

No, that sounds like the work of God’s word, which is,

. . . living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

You want to fully understand your motives and thoughts and heart? Study the scriptures.

The sign gifts were for the believer before the revealed completed canon of scripture was totally exposed.

One more point on this. To say that prophecy and tongues and the word of knowledge cease when Jesus comes again is almost humorous.

What gifts will not cease?!

- Where will you exercise your gift of evangelism? No one is winning any converts in heaven.
- How will you use your gift of teaching? Do you think you will go up to the Lord and say, “Listen, You’ve been teaching for three straight weeks, why don’t You let me fill in – something.”?
- Where will there be the need for the gift of mercy? We will all be confirmed in eternal joy.
- Where will you use the gift of giving? We are all inheritors of Christ’s glory.
- What need will you have of the gift of faith? We will be in His presence.

When we enter the gates of heaven, it is not just the gifts of prophecy and tongues and the word of knowledge that will cease, but most of the gifts in our New Testament lists will be unnecessary.

In the meantime, those gifts of revelation, singled out by Paul as temporary, ceased when the scriptures became a completed revelation, sometime before the end of the first century.

The Gift of Prophecy

Now, having completed my introduction, turn back to Romans, chapter 12. You will see immediately why I spent time dealing with this issue of revelation. You will see in that the first gift Paul lists, in verse 6, is this gift of prophecy.

When Paul wrote this text, prophecy was still a means of receiving and communicating revelation from God. So, it is a fitting inclusion in the list.

When used of Old and New Testament prophets, prior to the completion of scripture, there was the ability to predict the future and communicate truth from God – and a genuine prophet was never wrong. In fact, if someone claimed to be a prophet and prophesied something that did not come true, they were stoned to death. So they not only lost their job, they lost their lives. This kept the occupation of prophet from being advertised on too many web sites.

If you are tempted to think, “We’ve been ripped off! You mean to tell me that Old Testament saints, up to the apostles, got to have prophets and we don’t? This is a bum deal.”

The writer of Hebrews did not think so. He wrote,

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son . . . (Hebrews 1:1-2a)

I want the prophets, but I revel in the fact that God has allowed me to live with a perfect law – a completed canon of scripture – the whole story that reveals how to live now and what to expect in the future. We have been given the revelation of the rapture, and the tribulation, and the anti-Christ, and the battle of Armageddon, and the kingdom, and the new heaven, and the new earth. We have been given the details of the final battle between the dragon and the Lord’s army. We have even been told what heaven looks like with fruit trees and rivers and golden streets.

We have not been given a bum deal. We do not have less, we have more.

Two thoughts on the gift of prophecy

Let me give two thoughts in closing, on the gift of prophecy.

While new revelation of truth from God has ceased, the repetition of truth has not

1. While new revelation of truth from God has ceased, the repetition of truth has not.

There is no new revelation from God, you hold in your hands a completed word from God. You are not waiting to hear God speak, God has spoken.

However, the great need of mankind has not really changed – we need the word of God. The primary purpose of preaching and teaching in the church is to deliver what God has said.

There is a full-fledged movement in the modern church today, to actually remove, as much as possible, all explicit references to the Bible from the sermon. In addition, people are not asked to turn to a passage of scripture, take notes, mark in their Bibles, because that will make unbelievers uncomfortable. I have read that some churches are actually discouraging the members from bringing Bibles to church, lest the sight of so many Bibles might intimidate the unbeliever.

The modern movement among so called evangelical churches is to remove the expounding of the scriptures.

I had a seminary student, from another seminary, not the seminary at our church, come up to me a few months ago and say that everything I had just preached had been explicitly discouraged in his seminary class. His class was being told to basically “dumb down” the gospel and never ever use theological terms. He said, “I can’t believe you were up here this morning using words like inspiration, justification, and you even used the word ‘theology’.” He went on to say, he *knew* his professor was wrong all along, and that day’s message had proved it.

If we do not preach and teach at this church from the word of God, we will forfeit the only true source of wisdom.

Jeremiah wrote,

The wise men are put to shame, they are dismayed and caught; behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, and what kind of wisdom do they have? (Jeremiah 8:9)

Let me say this a little differently in a second way.

While the gift of prophecy has ceased, the need for Christians to speak for God has not

2. While the gift of prophecy has ceased, the need for Christians to speak for God has not.

One author wrote,

Whether a preacher boldly proclaims the Word of God or not is ultimately a question of authority. Who has the right to speak to the church? The preacher or God? Whenever anything is substituted for the preaching of the Word, God’s authority is usurped.

Not to mention that it robs people of their only true source of hope and healing; encourages indifference to the Word of God and divine authority; elevates the feelings of people over commitment to God’s truth, and on and on and on.ⁱⁱ

No wonder the apostle Paul told Timothy,

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God . . . preach the word . . . (II Timothy 4:1-2a)

In other words, he tells Timothy to communicate; to expound – on what? The word!

I love that context – Timothy, I charge you in the presence of God! In other words, “I know there are preachers watching you; I know there are people watching you; just don’t forget, the audience that matters is not really them, it is God. Timothy, I charge you in the presence of God – God is watching you – preach the word.”

The minute you remove the word of God from your lesson or your sermon or your message, you might think that you are not going to offend anyone, but you have offended God.

Who would you rather offend?

I realize my message today will be offensive. There will be people who will not come back. I have explained the temporary nature of prophecy, the cessation of tongues speaking, the wrong usage of the term charismatic by that community, the error of the modern church movement into entertainment and away from exposition – I am going to offend someone.

I am simply overwhelmed with the truth that God happens to be watching, God happens to be listening, and I want to please Him more.

May I add, whether you are a preacher or a teacher or an usher or a helper or you happen to cut the front lawn, we need Christians who serve the Body of Christ as if they really believe God is watching. And we need more Christians who believe that if God was the only one watching, He would be enough; He would be enough of an audience for them to deliver the truth of His word, no matter what.

That kind of living not only pleases God, but it effectively serves the church and it impacts the world by giving it what it truly, desperately needs.

I would like to be a little more like Jim Elliott, the missionary who was martyred several decades ago. He wrote this profound prayer in his journal,

Father, bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork in the road, that men must turn one way or another when they face Christ in me.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/22/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ www.crosswordtournament.com/more/wynne.html.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Fool's Gold (Crossway Books, 2005), p. 39.