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GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

By David Phillips

The works of God

The providential works of God can be referred to as ordinary, natural or normal. They occur in ordered and regular ways in what might be thought of as the ordinary pattern of nature, but they are always acts of God.

The miraculous works of God are extra-ordinary, they appear to be contrary to the normal course of nature. They too are acts of God.

It is often impossible for human beings to clearly determine whether an event is an ordinary or an extra-ordinary work of God. Some healings appear to us to be entirely ordinary, some are extraordinary, but sometimes we simply cannot tell.

The gifts of God

If there are ordinary and extra-ordinary works of God then the same can be said of gifts. Some gifts are ordinary. They might be referred to as natural talents and abilities, but they are God given, and can be used in the goodness of God to do remarkable things. Other gifts appear to be extra-ordinary, what might be called super-natural. Such gifts can be spectacular or they can be mundane, but they are contrary to the normal course of things.

Again, it is not always possible for human beings to know whether a gift is a natural talent or a super-natural endowment. Yet, whether ordinary or extra-ordinary they are still gifts of God.

The first mention in the Bible of such a gift is Exodus 35 when the Lord commands Moses to build the tabernacle. Bezalel is chosen to head up the team of craftsmen. The crafts involved seem to be ordinary, yet we are told "*the Lord has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts*". In addition, Bezalel, together with Oholiab was given "*the ability to teach others*". These are ordinary gifts given in an extraordinary way for a particular purpose. These men had ordinary gifts and extraordinary gifts, but all were gifts.

Gifts in the New Testament

The New Testament makes mention of many gifts: prophecy, serving, teaching, administration, encouraging, giving to others, leadership, showing mercy, words of wisdom, words of knowing, faith, healing, miraculous powers, discerning spirits, speaking in other languages, interpreting languages, apostles, evangelists, pastors, speaking. In many instances we do not know for certain what they involved but some were clearly extra-ordinary (e.g. miraculous powers), others seem quite ordinary (teaching, and serving) and yet clearly can be given to people who do not appear to have a "natural" talent.

Gifts are given

Whilst we can pray for gifts and are encouraged to 'desire' them, they are gifts, given by the sovereign will of God. It is better to concentrate on using and developing the gifts God has given, what we might call natural talents, rather than worrying about why God does not give us more.

If God has called us to serve Him in a particular way then we should never seek to excuse ourselves from obedience by saying that we do not have the gifts. It is tempting to excuse ourselves from sharing the gospel because we say we do not have a gift for evangelism. Some people clearly have

a gift in this area, but we are all meant to be a light on a hill and as we do what God commands we may find we have more of a gift than we imagined.

Gifts glorify the giver

The fact that someone has a particular gift should not become a cause of boasting or jealousy. This can be quite difficult. We all like to be affirmed and complimented but it is easy for this to become a source of unhealthy pride and a cause of jealousy. The best way to protect against this is not to stop affirming and complimenting but to ensure that we give glory to God in doing so.

Sadly, gifts, whether ordinary or extraordinary, can be a source of division. This was apparent in the Church in Corinth and for this reason it is unwise to give gifts too great a focus. Paul, having addressed in 1 Corinthians 12 some of the issues that had arisen concluded by saying: *“Set your hearts then on the more important gifts. But I will show you a more excellent way”*. He then launches into his famous words on the theme of love, reminding us that love is far greater than any gifts, even the most spectacular. Likewise, any gift exercised without love, is worthless.

It follows that the fact of having a gift tells us nothing about the spiritual state of a person. The magicians of Egypt copy the signs done through Moses, and Balaam was a genuine prophet, but they were not right with God. There were false teachers who seem to be good at teaching and false prophets who claimed to speak from God, but all were deceivers. Other religions also claim miracles and spiritual experiences. The gauge of spiritual vitality is not the exercise of gifts, but love and faithfulness to Christ.

Did the gifts stop?

The exercise and place of the “extraordinary gifts” is a matter of disagreement in the modern Church, and it has torn apart many congregations.

Not long after the time of the Apostles the exercise of the extraordinary gifts appears to have largely stopped. Some writers make reference to them, but they appear to have become rare exceptions rather than the norm.

Through history some groups have laid claim to extraordinary gifts, most often prophecy, but they have often been associated with heresy and the claim to prophecy a cloak to disguise error. Others have used the language of particular gifts without claiming to be doing the same thing. So too some today liken preaching with prophecy, and there are similarities, but clearly in Scripture they were not the same.

There have been instances of miraculous healing and extraordinary works of God through Christian history, but very few claiming, for example, a gift of healing. The absence of such gifts can hardly said to be a weakness because the Church, though not without setback and error, expanded dramatically, transformed society and endured great persecution.

The modern focus on the extraordinary gifts began around 1900 with the claim that the gift of tongues should accompany baptism. This gave rise to the Pentecostal Movement but had little impact on mainstream churches until the second half of the 20th century. The gift of tongues is not a necessary accompaniment to baptism in Scripture. Moreover, “tongues” would be better translated as “languages” and in Acts 2 it is evident that the disciples did have a gift of speaking other definite languages. Paul mentions the “tongues of angels” but this too suggests genuine language rather than ecstatic utterances which have been much more associated with pagan religions.

It is not stated in Scripture why the extraordinary gifts should drift into the background but it does

appear that it was related to the fullness of Scripture. In those areas of which it speaks the Bible tells us all we need to know, for example in relation to salvation. Indeed, the Bible spans the whole of history from creation to new creation. Thus with the fullness of scripture there is not the same need for some gifts, such as apostles and prophets. God can and does work in extraordinary ways today but the extraordinary gifts seem to have been rare through Christian history.

The modern focus on gifts has positively encouraged Christians to think about how they can serve God. Indeed many churches use the language of gifts without really focusing on the extraordinary gifts or implying that all Christians should seek these. What they are encouraging is really the development and use of ordinary, God-given, gifts and talents.

In other churches there has been a definite focus on the extra-ordinary gifts and on particular religious experiences. This marks a break with the past and some have therefore claimed that it is evidence of God doing a new thing today. Some even suggest that the bridging of the divide between Protestant and Catholic is evidence for a new work. Others, however, have seen it as a capitulation to worldliness and have witnessed with dismay the way in which Bible based churches have sometimes been torn apart. They see it as a triumph of experience over truth that has often left churches floundering when confronted by error.

God can and does work in extraordinary ways, but some of the particular gifts given in the age of the Apostles have been rare, if not altogether absent, since. Nevertheless, all our gifts are God given and are to be used in accordance with His will and to His glory.

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