

## Title: The Unifying Gifts of the Spirit

One of the great disappointments of my childhood was learning that the spiritual gifts I had read about in the scriptures were not the same as superpowers. “Gifts of the Spirit” sounded, to my boyhood ears, not unlike the power to fly faster than a speeding bullet that Superman enjoys. But despite dreams of becoming Captain of the Working of Miracles, I was forced to acknowledge that the blessings of the Spirit are many, but the power to perform daring deeds while wearing a dashing cape is not one of them. There's simply no two ways about it: the interpretation of tongues is not the same as the Spider Sense.

If my adolescent misunderstandings were easily corrected, I continue to find it hard to define exactly what it is we mean by "spiritual gifts," largely because it is hard to distinguish "spiritual gifts" from other worldly notions like talents, abilities, and privileges. In today's parlance, we tend to use the word “gift” to refer to, first and foremost, a personal benefit, an object to satisfy our interests, or a tool for achieving wealth or fame. When we say someone is "gifted," we generally mean that they have the right mixture of genetics and parenting that destines them for high achievement and worldly success. "Gifts" become synonymous with "superior abilities," skills that distinguishes us from everyone else. We also expect gifts to conform to our desires, to satisfy a personal craving. When people want to know about our Christmas presents, they ask if we "got what we wanted," or "got what we asked for."

But when this selfish notion of "gifts" becomes mixed with our notion of "spiritual gifts," we're in deep trouble. This blurring between the selfish and the spiritual is the problem that Paul faced in his first epistle to the Corinthians, a community of saints divided by the

gift of speaking in tongues. Those Corinthians who held that gift felt that it was the most important gift of all, and they believed that being able to speak in tongues elevated them over the rest of the saints. Naturally, this attitude left everyone else wondering bitterly: why am I not as blessed, or as special, as they are? The Corinthians had fallen into the trap of treating gifts as a benefit to the receiver above all else, a view of gifts that exalts the individual above the community. When we make gifts about the receiver, we not only lose sight of the giver, but we also forget the people around us whose gifts might be different or fewer than our own. We forget that gifts can be a means of blessing of other people, and we instead focus on how gifts can bless ourselves.

Paul's challenge, then, is to find a way to not only correct this individualistic view of gifts, but to help the Corinthians see how spiritual gifts can actually unite a body of Saints. Unity, as the Doctrine & Covenants teaches us, is a commandment for Christ's church, but unity can be difficult to achieve in a church filled with many different people bearing many different spiritual gifts. To create unity, some groups demand strict discipline or conformity in look or behavior. They try and bring people together by stifling difference and making people look, act, or think the same. But the difficulty of forming unity around spiritual gifts is that there is no single expression of the Spirit.

Spiritual gifts come in all shapes and sizes. Paul writes, in v. 8-11:

To one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues. But all

these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

Paul is teaching us an important lesson here: Spiritual gifts, like all true gifts, come without our approval or our decision. Like life, we awaken to circumstances, abilities, and personal limitations that are given to us freely and beyond our control. We are born into a family we do not choose, to a physical body we did not select, and hampered by weaknesses we may have never wanted. And yet life is a gift for all this: not only because it is precious, but because it is freely bestowed from God. Gifts are not only spontaneous, but they are also various. The Spirit bestows gifts abundantly in all different fashions. Like the Thanksgiving dinner we just enjoyed, the banquet table of the Spirit is overflowing with dishes of different tastes, textures, and pleasures. No single experience, no single spiritual attribute, can capture the range of God's bounty.

The problem which the Corinthians faced, and which we face, is that whenever prides creeps in, variety quickly becomes hierarchy. Difference in gifts no longer becomes a marker of abundance, but a determinant between "better" and "worse." We tend to look at the ability or gifts of others and compare them to our own not to appreciate their unique qualities, but in order to judge them against our own, fretting that their difference might indicate some measure of superiority. Paul counteracts this attitude not by denying spiritual difference, but by referring us back to the source of these spiritual gifts. In v. 4-7, "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit," Paul teaches. "And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." The Spirit does not act

in a single way, but works through us individually according to our personal circumstances and attributes. Personal revelation is just that—personal. We might assume that the way we feel the Spirit is the same as everybody else, but to the contrary, the same Spirit that speaks to all of us also speaks to all of us distinctly. So it is with spiritual gifts. The Spirit is various, bountiful, and prodigal in pouring out gifts upon all of us individually.

The variety of spiritual gifts reminds us that there are countless ways we can serve and lift up one another. What's important is to be open to the Spirit so that he can guide us and work through us to serve those that need our personal attention the most. Even the variety described here in Corinthians does not encompass all the possible manifestations of spiritual gifts. I believe we can fairly assume that the gift of tongues might refer as much to the art of speaking kindly and warmly as to a knack for learning foreign languages. The gift of the interpretation of tongues, whatever its implications for missionary work, certainly also includes the ability to listen carefully to those desperate for someone to turn to, for a shoulder to cry on. The individual gifts that each of us bear, distinct to ourselves and our circumstances, does not, or should not, divide the talented from the mediocre. Instead, they soberly remind us that the blessing of receiving gifts entails the opportunity to share them; “because I have been given much, I too must give.” Think on this for a moment: because of our individual circumstances and gifts, every one of us here can touch the lives of someone around us in a way that absolutely no one else in the world can. Whether it be a friend, co-worker, brother, sister, grandparent, spouse, the person sitting behind us in class, the person slumped wearily in front of us, or some one whom we don't even know yet, we each stand in a place that no one else does, with

spiritual gifts unique to ourselves, and can thus help others in a way totally unique to ourselves. Individual spiritual gifts do not offer us a way to elevate ourselves over others, but an opportunity to bless others with our personal touch.

The variety of these spiritual gifts reminds us that the gospel is much larger than any of us, that we need other saints around us to live and understand it more fully. Each of us live within the confines of our body and our own experience, but through the spiritual gifts of others, we can taste the richness of the gospel more deeply. Joseph Smith revealed this important aspect of spiritual gifts more directly than Paul in D&C 46: "For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby." The revelation lists off spiritual gifts, but this time as unifying pairs: to some it is given to know through the Holy Ghost that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, while to others it is given to believe on that testimony. To some it is given the gift of knowledge; to others, the gift of wisdom. To some it is given the gift to heal; to others, the gift of faith to be healed. This litany reminds us that spiritual gifts are not given in isolation or for personal benefit: spiritual gifts are given to us that we might bestow them on others. The marker of whether we have truly received a spiritual gift is expressed in our willingness to share that gift with others.

I personally have felt the blessings of the unity that comes through spiritual gifts, and I am reminded of this whenever I read in D&C 46 of the gift of testimony and the gift of believing on testimony. As someone who tends to be more skeptical by nature, I find it harder than others I know to see the hand of God in all things and in all places. Where some would see miracles, I tend to see coincidence. What some would call spiritual

promptings, I'd probably chalk it up to very strong emotions or instinct. I don't know that spiritual experiences come as frequently and or as poignantly to me as I think they do to those I know. And yet in moments of darkness and doubt, when I sense the limits of my faith or charity, I try and think on the people to whom I am indebted, whose testimony--whether over the pulpit or in private or by example--reinforces my dedication to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the path of discipleship. I am grateful to those close to me--from back home, from my mission, from this ward--whose valiant testimony resonates with me, inspires me and reminds me of the goodness I have known in my life. I have needed them and their testimony, and I am grateful to those who have shared it with me. Yet even with Paul's forceful call to treat all gifts equally, our reflex is to wonder: surely some gifts are more important than others? Surely some members are more valuable than others, if not for any inherent difference then simply because they seem closer to God than we do? Whom among us hasn't looked critically at ourselves, and wished that we were as caring as Bro. Such-and-Such, or as scripturally insightful as Sister So-and-So? Or perhaps our thinking runs in the opposite direction: surely if Bro. Such-and-Such or if Sis. So-and-So would only live exactly as we do, or experience the gospel the way we have, they would be all the better for it. Paul criticizes such thinking, reminding us once more that in the grand body of the church, everyone has a place, and no one's role trumps anyone else's. He compares the diversity--and unity--of the body of saints to the human body, reminding us, in v. 14-20:

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, 'Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body;' is it therefore not of the body?  
And if the ear shall say, 'Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body;'

is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him...now are they many members, yet but one body.

In fact, Paul goes even further and argues that those amongst us whose needs are greatest, who are the weakest amongst the body of saints, either spiritually or physically or materially, deserve most of our care and attention: v. 23-27:

And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour...God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.

We dedicate ourselves and our spiritual gifts to those who need our service the most, tempering the body of Christ by bestowing greater honor on those with the greatest struggles. There is no such thing as spiritual meritocracy in God's church--only spiritual equality. When one member suffers, all members suffer; and when one member is honored, everyone rejoices with them. We are united not because we are identical--we are still "members in particular." Instead, we are united because through our individual gifts, we work together towards the common cause of equality.

This is ultimate end of our spiritual gifts--not to bring personal fame or personal gain to ourselves, but to forge the bonds of charity, to bridge the chasm of individualism and unite ourselves in one body of Christ. The "more excellent way" that Paul writes of reminds us that no spiritual gift is more powerful or important than charity. Like spiritual gifts, charity does not come immediately, exactly when or how we want it. Nor is it something that we can demand or contort to our purposes. The power to love is a gift given from God as we give of ourselves. The more we turn over to Him our will through dedicated service and prayer, the more we are given a new heart brimming with the pure love of Christ. Through charity, our hunger to use gifts for personal gain melts away in the concerns and needs of those around us.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Unless our spiritual gifts are graced with that perfect gift of charity, unless others can see the love of God in our dedicated service, we are nothing. Charity, on the other hand, is everything. "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up...Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth." *I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.*