

Great Was the Day

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Great was the day, the joy was great,
When the divine disciples met;
Whilst on their heads the Spirit came,
And sat like tongues of cloven flame.

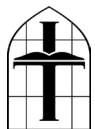
What gifts, what miracles he gave!
And power to kill, and power to save!
Furnish'd their tongues with wondrous words,
Instead of shields, and spears, and swords.

Thus arm'd, He sent the champions forth,
From east to west, from south to north;
"Go, and assert your Savior's cause;
Go, spread the mystery of His cross."

These weapons of the holy war,
Of what almighty force they are,
To make our stubborn passions bow,
And lay the lowest rebel low!

Nations, the learned and the rude,
Were by these heav'nly arms subdu'd;
While Satan rages at his loss,
And hates the doctrine of the cross.

Great King of Grace, my heart subdue,
I would be led in triumph too,
A willing captive to my Lord,
And sing the victories of His word.



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www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

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In the Nick of Time

A Primer on Spiritual Gifts

Kevin T. Bauder

The New Testament mentions three sorts of gifts connected with the three persons of the Godhead. First, in general, every good and perfect gift comes down from the "Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). Second, the ascended Lord Jesus Christ gives certain individuals as gifts to humanity through His church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph 4:8–11). Third, the *charismata* or *pneumatika* are given by the Holy Spirit to individuals. These last are usually spoken of as "spiritual gifts," and they are mentioned and even listed in multiple passages (Rom 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12: 4–11, 28–30; and possibly 1 Pet 4:9–11).

The remarkable thing about these lists is that, while they contain overlap, they also differ considerably. Leaving aside 1 Peter 4 (which does not really offer a list), each summary mentions at least one item that does not appear on any other list. In other words, none of these lists is intended to be an exhaustive inventory of spiritual gifts. Each provides only a sampling of the broader category of spiritual gifts.

Many Bible students have assumed that they could get an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts by simply collating the lists. The problem is that if each individual list is merely a sampling and not intended to be exhaustive, then there is no particular reason to suppose that a collated list would be exhaustive either. In other words, we can offer no real justification for claiming that the New Testament provides a comprehensive catalog of spiritual gifts. We cannot rule out the possibility that the Holy Spirit gives some gifts that the New Testament does not mention.

The common denominator shared by all spiritual gifts, whether or not they are mentioned in the New Testament, is that they are given by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:11). Yet the gifts appear to be given in different ways. Some of the gifts are clearly miraculous or revelatory (e.g. tongues, healing, prophecy, miracles). Other gifts resemble natural abilities shared even by unbelievers (e.g., helps, administrations, serving, teaching). Obviously the former involve some direct agency of the Spirit in bestowing supernatural ability. The latter are not so clearly supernatural, but may involve some indirect focusing and heightening of a natural ability by the Holy Spirit.

People who are gifted administrators or teachers in Christian enterprises are likely to be able administrators or teachers in mundane contexts as well.

Consequently, no clear line of demarcation can be drawn between spiritual gifts and natural abilities. The differences are most clearly seen with the miraculous gifts, which by definition do not resemble anything natural. The non-miraculous gifts, however, seem to involve some conjunction of native ability with giftedness from the Holy Spirit.

Since the purpose of miraculous gifts was to authenticate the apostles during the period when God was shifting His work in the world away from Israel and toward the Church (Heb 2:4; 2 Cor 12:11–13), those gifts stopped when the apostles were gone. The rest of the gifts, however, seem to have been intended for serving rather than as signs. These gifts most likely function throughout the church age.

Evidently every Christian possesses at least one spiritual gift (1 Cor 2:11). Some Christian leaders have suggested that it is important for believers to identify their gifts so that they will know how to serve. Several have developed long inventories of gifts, complete with descriptions of how each gift functions, what sort of person is most likely to be given a particular gift, and which strengths and weaknesses typically accompany the various gifts. A few have even developed instruments, resembling psychological tests, that are supposed to tell believers what gifts they possess.

The New Testament itself, however, does not provide a detailed description for most gifts. Students of the Bible can only guess at what some of them might, or might have, involved. Furthermore, the New Testament offers no procedure for helping Christians to know which gifts they have received. It would seem that this matter was rather less important to the apostles than it is to some noteworthy modern Bible teachers.

The New Testament emphasizes serving more than it emphasizes giftedness. In moments of weakness and trial our gifts will not be sufficient for us. Only our Lord will. But then, our Lord is always sufficient. Sometimes we find ourselves challenged to serve in areas where we do not believe ourselves to be particularly gifted. If so, we should not shrink from the opportunities that the Lord gives us. Under normal circumstances about ninety percent of ministry is a matter of just showing up—whether we are gifted or not.

I do not mean to deny that we might know at least some of our giftedness. I believe that I know some of mine. But we discover our giftedness in the process of serving, not by completing evaluative instruments. We also learn about our gifts as we see where God uses us in real ministry and as we listen to the counsel of those who know us well.

Too much talk about giftedness smacks of the effort to grant each person her or his own bespoke ministry. Under these circumstances, spiritual giftedness becomes a kind of ministry boutique in which expressions of service can be customized. Faced with this problem, we must avoid encouraging people to think of spiritual giftedness in terms of their own self-assertion and personal gratification. Let us remember that the needs of the body come first, while expressions of giftedness follow after.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
