

John Owen: The Spiritual Gifts

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John Owen (1616–1683) was a Puritan theologian who went up to Oxford at the age of 12, received his MA at 19 and was made Dr of Divinity at 36. He became Dean of Christ Church and vice chancellor of the university, and produced a massive range of publications, including one on the Holy Spirit (1667-78). He was also heavily involved in the politics of his day. He seems to have one of the clearest minds I've ever read; sometimes almost scholastic in its rigour. This is an excellent, robust discussion of the gifts of the Spirit – even if he thinks not all remain available to us.



1. Spiritual gifts, their names and signification

‘By his work of *saving grace*.. he makes all the elect *living stones*; and by his communication of spiritual gifts, he fashions and builds those stones into a *temple for the living God* to dwell in. He spiritually unites them into a *mystical body*, under the Lord Christ as a *head of influence*, by faith and love; and he unites them into an *organical body*, under the Lord Christ as a head of rule, by gifts and spiritual abilities.’

‘The gifts are not saving graces.. yet they are that without which the church cannot subsist in the world, nor can believers be useful unto one another and the rest of mankind, unto the glory of Christ, as they ought to be. They are the ‘powers of the world to come’.’

The gifts of the Spirit are what make the difference between the old testament and the new – ‘where they are neglected, I see not the advantage of the outward worship and ordinances of the gospel above those of the law... As gospel gifts are useless without attending unto gospel institutions, so gospel institutions are found to be fruitless and unsatisfactory without the attaining and exercising of gospel gifts.’

‘although the spiritual life of the church doth not consist in them, yet the order and edification of the church depend wholly on them’. The neglect of them leads to superstition.

The spiritual gifts are promised in Ps 118.18, quoted by Paul in Eph 4.8. Without the gifts we have neither the right nor the power to perform the ministry of the church.

Terminology

- The name is *domata* (Eph 4.8, from Ps 118.18) from *dona*, gifts. The HS too is called gift – Jn 4.10, Acts 10.45 etc.
- The gifts are also *charismata* or ‘gracious largesses’ – undeserved – Rom 12.6, 1 Cor 1.7 etc, 2 Tim 1.6, 1 Pet 4.10. This differentiates them from other, natural gifts.
- With respect to their nature they are also called *pneumatika* – 1 Cor 12.1,14.1.
- With respect to the manner of their communication they are called ‘distributions’ – Heb 2.4. This is what makes the church an organical body. ‘were there no more but one gift, or gifts of one sort, the whole body would be but one member; as where there is none, there is no animated body, but a dead carcass’.
- They are also called ‘ministrations’, 1 Cor 12.5 – powers and abilities whereby some are enabled to administer spiritual things
- And ‘effectual workings’, 1 Cor 12.6
- And finally, ‘manifestations’, 1 Cor 12.7 – in them the HS manifests his power.

‘If we part with our interest and concern in them, we must part with no small portion of the NT; for the mention of them, directions about them, their use and abuse, do so frequently occur, that if we are not concerned in them we are not so in the gospel.’

2. Differences between spiritual gifts and saving grace

Spiritual gifts and saving graces have in common that:

- They both come from Christ. The spiritual gifts are 'the weapons of warfare which he furnished his disciples withal when he gave them commission to go forth and subdue the world. When men began to neglect the spiritual gifts, Satan was able to again erect his kingdom – though in a new way; a kingdom which looked like the letter of the word, but which actually was the opposite, a kingdom of papal antichristianism...
- They are both wrought by the power of the HS.
- They are both designed for the good, benefit, ornament and glory of the church. 'gifts are bestowed on the professing church to render it visible in such a way as whereby God is glorified. Grace gives an invisible life of the church, gifts give it a visible profession.' Where the church is organised by outward rules, it is but the image of a church. Where it's organised organically, through the orderly exercise of the spiritual gifts bestowed on it, it is strong.
- They are both freely bestowed by Christ

Spiritual gifts and saving graces differ in that:

- Saving graces are the fruit of the Spirit – Gal 5.22, Eph 5.9, Phil 1.11. Gifts are effects of the Spirit's operation upon men, not fruits of his working in them.
- Saving grace is the effect of electing love; it's permanent. Gifts are temporary and individual. 'No church hath either rule or right so to call or to set apart any one to the ministry whom Christ hath not previously called by the communication of spiritual gifts necessary to the discharge of his office.
- Saving grace is an effect of the covenant, spiritual gifts belong to its outward administration
- Saving grace comes from the priestly office of Christ, spiritual gifts from his regal office. They are 'the powers of the new world'
- Gifts may be taken away from those who neglect or reject them; 'there is no kind of them, no degree of them, that can give us any security that they shall be always continued with us, or at all beyond our diligent attendance unto their use and exercise'. Saving grace comes by covenant and cannot be lost in this way.
- Saving grace is given for the good of the recipient, spiritual gifts for the benefit of others
- Saving grace changes and transforms the soul into its own nature; spiritual gifts have no such power

A soul sanctified by saving grace is the only proper soil for gifts to flourish in.

3. Of gifts and offices extraordinary

'Wherever power is given by Christ unto his churches, and duties are required in the execution of that power .. there is an office in the church.. And these offices have been of two sorts; - first, extraordinary; secondly, ordinary.'

Extraordinary offices involve:

- Calling (eg as an apostle, evangelist, prophet)
- Empowering (the ability to perform the role)
- Gifts
- Labour

The ministry of evangelist is subordinate to that of apostle – evangelists were guided by apostles to the particular places where they were to exercise their power and discharge their office for a season. The work of an evangelist is to preach the gospel, to confirm it through miraculous operations, to settle and complete churches whose foundations were laid by apostles until local elders were appointed.

Prophets had a temporary, extraordinary ministry in the church. The word prophets/prophecy are used in different ways in the NT:

- Extraordinary office + Extraordinary gifts – 1 Cor 12, 28, Eph 4.11
- Extraordinary gifts only – Philip's daughters Acts 21.9; Acts 19.6, 1 Cor 14.29-33 (occasional revelations)
- Ordinary office + ordinary gifts – Rom 12.6, which must refer to teaching or preaching, for it must be done
- Ordinary gifts only – which comes from human ambition

The extraordinary gifts are: immediate revelation/directions in things belonging to the present duty of the church; foretelling things to come.

4. Extraordinary spiritual gifts, 1 Cor 12.4-11

Spiritual gifts are of 2 sorts:

- Such as exceed the whole power and faculties of our souls, not consisting of an abiding faculty within those who received them, but granted so that they could produce their effects by virtue of an immediate extraordinary influence of divine power – miracles, healing etc
- Such as consist in extraordinary endowments/improvements of the faculties of the soul – wisdom, knowledge, utterance etc

1. The word of wisdom

The Gk logos is the equivalent of a Hebrew word often used to signify a thing or matter, so a word of wisdom is nothing but wisdom itself.

Jesus promised his disciples a mouth and a wisdom before their adversaries – Lk 21.15. Seen in Acts 4 (Peter & John) and 6 (Stephen). This is one kind of wisdom – a spiritual skill and ability to defend the truths of the gospel when questioned, opposed or blasphemed. Another is the spiritual wisdom for the management of gospel truths for the edification of the church of Christ – 2 Pet 3.15 Peter says Paul's letters were written according to the wisdom given him. Bezalel & Aholiab were given wisdom for the building of the tabernacle; so are we for the church.

A peculiar spiritual skill and ability wisely to manage the gospel in its administration unto the advantage and furtherance of the truth, especially in the defence of it when called unto the trial with its adversaries.

To receive/exercise this gift we need : a sense of our own insufficiency (2 Cor 2.16); earnest prayer for its granting (James 1.5, Solomon); meditation on Jesus and the apostles; management of speech and time; seeking after humility, patience, constancy.

2. The word of knowledge

1 Cor 8.1 Paul says we know that we all have knowledge; but here he means knowledge concerning things sacrificed to idols. It's also a peculiar gift additional to that required of all Christians: *'a peculiar and especial insight into the mysteries of the gospel, as whereby those in whom it was were enabled to teach and instruct others'*. Particularly needed by those who first preached the gospel – Col 1.9, Eph 1.15-20, 3.14-19; Col 2.1-2.

3. Faith

Not the saving grace of faith common to all Christians, but rather the faith of miracles, 1 Cor 13.2 faith to move mountains. Coming as it does just after wisdom and knowledge, it is *'a peculiar confidence, boldness, and assurance of mind in the profession of the gospel and the administration of its ordinances'*.

- 1 Tim 3.13, freedom, confidence, boldness in the faith
- Heb 3.14, confidence

When God stirs up anyone for some great work in his church, he gives them the gift of faith.

4. The gifts of healing

Plural, because of their free communication to many persons. Perhaps they are distinguished from miracles because:

- Healing is a peculiar sign of the coming kingdom, a sign that Christ had borne and taken away our sin, Is 63.5 and 1 Peter 2.24; see also Mt 8.16-17. Healing of diseases was a sign and effect of his bearing our sins, without which healing would have been a false witness

- Because it carries a particular evidence of love, kindness and compassion. Men may have their bodies cured by miracles when their souls are not cured by grace.
- Because it was done in a certain way, eg by laying on of hands (Mt 9.18, Lk 4.40), anointing with oil (Mk 6.13, James 5.14-15)

Healing belongs to miraculous operations but is a distinct gift, perhaps communicated especially to elders of churches (James 5)

5. Miracles

‘Effectual working of mighty powers’, or ‘powerful works’. It’s not an inherent power or faculty of the mind, but a gift given for every miracle. This faith was not a strong fixing of the imagination that the thing should be done, or a faith resting merely on the promises of the word; it always had a peculiar, immediate nature. No one could work a miracle without it. Some received the gift who would not then work the miracle. It’s not given just to officers of the church. Miracles were needed because the gospel was a new and strange thing, and miracles confirmed the message. Miracles were not however enough by themselves – faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom 10.17). So if the word was not preached the miracles were useless.

6. Prophecy

A faculty of prediction, or foretelling things future upon divine revelation, or an ability to declare the mind of God from the word, by the especial and immediate revelation of the Holy Ghost.

It had a double use – the conviction and conversion of non believers present in church assemblies; the exposition of the word by virtue of an extraordinary assistance of the Spirit of God. See earlier discussion.

Acts 13.1-2 prophets at Antioch; 1 Cor 14 prophets in Corinth.

7. Discerning of spirits

The ability and faculty of judging of spirits. See earlier discussion.

The problem is false prophets – 2 Peter 2.1, 1 John 4.1-3.

‘And whereas the communication of these gifts is ceased, and consequently all pretences unto them, unless by some persons phrenetical and enthusiastical, whose madness is manifest to all, there is no need of the continuance of this gift’.

8-9. Tongues and interpretation

Acts 2.1-4. The gift was given for 2 reasons – to indicate that the grace and mercy of the covenant was now to be extended to all nations, tongues and peoples; to show that the kingdom of God would be built and maintained by the preaching of the word, and not by might. Tongues of fire are the outward symbol of this. So although the gift began with the apostles, it spread to other believers – Acts 10.46, 19.6; 1 Cor 14.

Its main purpose is to praise God; on the specific occasion of Acts 2 it was used to declare the gospel, but this was normally done in ordinary words.

5. The original, duration, use and end of extraordinary spiritual gifts

The gifts given to the apostles were commensurate unto their lives; none retained power after their death.

‘Nor have we any undoubted testimony that any of those gifts which were truly miraculous.. were communicated unto any after the expiration of the generation of them who conversed with Christ in the flesh, or those who received the Holy Ghost by their ministry.’ Doesn’t mean God could no longer put forth his power in miraculous operations, but the superstition of those who have claimed miracles since then has been an open door for Satan to delude Christians.

But though the gifts have ceased in some respect, something analogous to them has continued: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are still appointed and spiritually equipped. The gifts of the Spirit were the beauty of the church, her golden clothing and raiment of needlework; now neglected and lost, they are replaced with 'the meretricious paint of pompous ceremonies, with outward grandeur, wealth, and power'. These are the gifts of another spirit. This was not the life of the primitive churches; their life consisted in the grace of the Spirit, and their glory in his gifts. All churches should endeavour to reduce themselves unto the primitive pattern. It was through the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit that the Lord Christ erected his empire over the souls and consciences of men, destroying both the work and the kingdom of the devil. It's the word of the gospel that is the rod of his strength, but the hidden power which makes the word effective consists in the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

- Those chosen by Jesus to do this work were enabled to do it by the gifts – the individuals concerned had nothing else going for them, perhaps precisely in order to ensure that they did indeed depend on the gifts rather than on their own abilities – they were unlearned, poor, and fearful. All these impediments went as the gifts came: they became wise (whereas before they'd been unable to understand a plain parable); their poverty made them totally committed to the work (whereas before they'd been looking forward to status roles in an earthly kingdom); and their fear turned to boldness, courage and constancy (Peter denied Jesus 3 times, then spoke in power Acts 4.8-12, 5.28-32)
- The gifts made their preaching effective – it wasn't their own oratory which did it; 2 Cor 4.3-4
- The world couldn't help noticing there was something out of the ordinary in a sermon accompanied by a miracle: for some this led to torment and dis-ease as they struggled against the inevitable, for others it prepared them for reception of the truth, for others it dealt with the scandal of the cross.

6. Of ordinary gifts of the Spirit – the grant, institution, use, benefit, end and continuance of the ministry

'Ordinary' because distinct from extraordinary gifts like healings, miracles, tongues; and because of their continuance in the church. This is clearly set out in Eph 4. These offices are a gift of Christ; 'and it will hence follow, not only that offices in the church which are not of Christ's giving by institution, and offers that are not of his gift, grant, by provision and furnishment, have indeed no place therein, but also that they are set up in opposition unto his authority and in contempt of his care and bounty... And if an examination might be admitted by this rule.. some great names now in the church would scarce be able to preserve their station. Popes, cardinals, metropolitans, diocesan prelates, archdeacons, commissaries, officials, and I know not what other monstrous products of an incestuous conjunction between secular pride and ecclesiastical degeneracy, would think themselves severely treated to be tried by this rule; but so it must be at last'...

'It will one day appear that there is more glory, more excellency, in giving one poor minister unto a congregation, by furnishing him with spiritual gifts for the discharge of his duty, than in the pompous instalment of a thousand popes, cardinals or metropolitans. The worst of men, in the observance of a few outward rites and ceremonies, can do the latter; Christ only can do the former'. 'Nothing at all can be done without these spiritual gifts, and therefore a ministry devoid of them is a mock ministry, and no ordinance of Christ'.

'The Lord Christ giveth and continueth this office by giving spiritual gifts and abilities unto men, to enable them to discharge the duties and perform the work of it... To erect a ministry by virtue of outward order, rites, and ceremonies, without gifts for the edification of the church, is but to hew a block with axes, and smooth it with planes, and set it up for an image to be adored. To make a man a minister who can do nothing of the proper peculiar work of the ministry, nothing towards the only end of it in the church, is to set up a dead carcass, fastening it to a post, and expecting it should do you work and service'.

God calls men into the office of the church by giving them spiritual gifts; the acting of the church is just an instituted moral means of recognising this.

7. Of spiritual gifts enabling the ministry to the exercise and discharging of their trust and office

- Jesus promised to be with his church till the end of the world.
- It's his presence which makes the church what it is. He is present by his Spirit. If his presence is acknowledged only in word and sacrament, whatever else remains to be done lies wholly in ourselves, and we will have nothing that the Jews and Moses didn't have.
- The presence of the Spirit is secured by an everlasting covenant, Is 49.21.
- The gospel is called the ministration of the Spirit, and its ministers are ministers of the Spirit, 2 Cor 3.6-8
- The end for which the Spirit is given is the preservation of the church in the world
- The communication of spiritual gifts to the ordinary ministry of the church is asserted in scripture – Matt 25 (talents), Rom 12.4-8 (body), Eph 4, 1 Pet 4.10-11 et alia
- The spiritual gifts are necessary to the administration of the gospel – the Roman church shows us 'what various, extravagant, and endless inventions the minds of men will put them upon to keep up a show of worship, when, by the loss of spiritual gifts, spiritual administrations are lost also'
- The Spirit continues to offer his gifts to those called into the office of the church

8. Of the gifts of the Spirit with respect unto doctrine, worship, and rule – how attained and improved

The ministry of the church depends on 3 gifts:

- wisdom (comprehension of the scope and end of the scripture)
- knowledge (skill to divide the word aright) – requires knowing the state of your flock, understanding how grace works on the minds and hearts of men, understanding the nature of temptation, and understanding the nature of spiritual diseases, distempers and sicknesses with their proper cures and remedies
- utterance, 1 Cor 5.2, 2 Cor 8.7

'I had rather have the order, rule, spirit and practice of those churches that were planted by the apostles, with all their troubles and disadvantages, than the carnal peace of others in their open degeneracy from all those things.'

How do we get the gifts?

- They don't come suddenly, as miracles and tongues did to the apostles
- They don't come through our own efforts
- They are attained and increased by grace and preparation – humility, meekness, teachability; prayer; diligence in study of the word of God
- Faithful use
- Natural endowments improved by reading, learning, study, set off, enlarge and adorn the gifts once received

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