

ARE WE ACCIDENTAL CONTINUATIONISTS?

By Dave Harvey

Charles Spurgeon's first encounter with spiritual gifts came in a manner that seemed pretty random, maybe even 'accidental'. When Spurgeon was a boy, his family gathered at 6:00 a.m. for family worship. On one occasion, they were joined by a house guest named Richard Knill. After the morning prayers had shaken the slumber from the Spurgeon clan, Mr. Knill moved to leave. Suddenly he stopped, and reached over to lift young Charles. The 10-year-old Spurgeon remembered it this way:

"In the presence of them all, Mr. Knill took me on his knee, and said, 'This child will one day preach the gospel, and he will preach it to great multitudes. I am persuaded that he will preach in the chapel of Rowland Hill.'"¹

Years later, as an established London pastor and young "phenom" as a preacher, Charles Spurgeon ascended the pulpit at Rowland Hill's chapel as a guest preacher. Looking out over the crowd, he recounted the words of Richard Knill spoken over him as a young boy. Astounded, a current of excitement rippled across the meeting space as people realized that this very moment had been foreseen and announced. Overwhelmed by God's goodness, tears streamed down Spurgeon's face as he opened his Bible to preach.

The result? God was glorified as both Spurgeon and the people encountered the active presence of God in a unique and memorable manner.

Yes, spiritual gifts in the hands of the immature can result in epic fails. Just ask the Corinthians. But a spiritual gift employed by a doctrinally astute believer is a thing of beauty. In Spurgeon's case, the impact came not through eloquence, but prescience — a God-inspired foresight of the prophetic variety (1 Corinthians 14:4b). Apart from the power of God, how could Richard Knill have known that a particular 10-year-old boy would grow up to preach at one of England's most prestigious churches? The Spirit of God used spiritual gifts to exalt the Savior and edify the church (1 Corinthians 14:3). Spurgeon wept, awe filled the people, the Transcendent One became preciously immanent — I suspect this was one of those meetings everyone remembered.

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography*, vol. 1, *The Early Years, 1834-1859* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 27.

Now a question. When you read this account, what's your instinctive response? Does the story raise the spiritual credibility of Charles Spurgeon, as if great experiences only happen to great preachers? Maybe your mind moves towards Mr. Knill — this dude had a gift that qualified, at least on that occasion, as extraordinary. Perhaps it stirs a desire in you to find a church where you can share these kinds of experiences. If you can relate to any of these impulses, it would be pretty understandable. But it might surprise you to discover that it is also a pretty Corinthian way of thinking about gifts and power.

But there's another option; a different way of understanding spiritual gifts that Paul addresses. It's where stories like this draw us to the nature and character of God. It's where the use of spiritual gifts helps us marvel at the relevance and immediacy of his Word. It's where we actually encounter the active presence of God without being distracted from Jesus.

It's where we come to terms with a reality that consistently escaped the Corinthians. It's where we move away from being afraid of spiritual gifts because of their hyper-charismatic abuses and stop expecting to accidentally stumble into a robust pneumatology. It's what Paul makes clear — spiritual gifts should exalt the Giver, not the gifts.

The Error of Misguided Spirituality

The Corinthian church came with some serious spiritual cred — every spiritual gift available to believers was featured within that congregation (1 Corinthians 1:7). But because of their immaturity, the Corinthians saw their gifts — particularly glossolalia (the gift of tongues) — as a sign of God's divine approval; an earthly fist-bump from the Heavenly King. Tongues, in particular, were a sign of God's supreme validation; earthly evidence of celestial approval; an undeniable marker of their immeasurable maturity. The Corinthians had bought into a spiritual Ponzi scheme where Step One was to embrace a dangerous lie: Spiritual gifts make people spiritual.

It's why they were a little gift-goofy. In the mind of the Corinthian Christian, gifts reveal growth.

Not according to Paul. He said, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:1). Why the downgrade from 'spiritual' to 'infants in Christ'? Because their gifts had become an end, not a means. They didn't understand that abused gifts are unhelpful gifts. In fact, the use of gifts got so creepy among the Corinthians that at one point Paul said, "Your meetings do more harm than good!" (1 Corinthians 11:17).

When gifts become an end, meetings do more harm than good. The gifts become big, the Giver becomes small, and the meetings become strange. I know. I've been the recipient of prophecy gifts that scintillated with authenticity, and I've seen displays of prophecy that

pollute the soul. I've led meetings where the gifts were used wisely, and led some meetings where it would be completely justified for spiritual gifts to be outlawed. Most of the occasions where I got it wrong, it was because, somehow, the gifts replaced the Giver.

The Essence of True Spirituality

Paul had a plan that went way beyond just laying some kind of fundy, anti-charismatic head-trip on the Corinthians. His goal was to guide them out of the chaos, to keep charismata from becoming Charismania. But to get there, he had to replace the Corinthians' sense of 'true spirituality' with something superior, "a more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31). So Paul delivers the essence, God's ultimate explanation of true spirituality.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:1-7).

God's vision of love does not arrive as a syrupy feeling or vague emotional force. Love is first embodied by a Person who has a name — Jesus. "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). Love's compelling description in 1 Corinthians 13 is not the result of a global compilation of the best virtues we can find. It's simply a day in the life of our Lord.

If you want to see the essence of true spirituality, look for true love. If you want to see true love, look to Jesus.

But it doesn't end with Jesus, because he sends us into the same mission. As Christians, we are called to the spirituality that includes the more excellent way of love. Paul's not just inserting some random thoughts on love that were inexplicably triggered by all the gift-talk. He's also not creating a competition where we must choose love over gifts. "Thus it is not "love versus gifts" that Paul has in mind, but "love as the only context for gifts;" for without the former, the latter have no usefulness at all — but then neither does much of anything in the Christian life."²

Spiritual gifts are important to the church, but they don't outlast nor outweigh love. Love is eternal, infinite, timeless, immortal — it never ends (1 Corinthians 13:8). The true spirituality of love is not abstract or subjective, like a piece of modern art whose beauty is in the eye of

² Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 197.

the beholder. The more excellent way comes with specific, identifiable marks, seen first in the glorious words and work of the Savior.

The most excellent way is wrapped up in love.

The Evidence of True Spirituality

I was converted into a church that cherished charismatic practice. We were continuationists way back in the early 80s, back when it was called ‘charismatic’ and was very uncool. There are things I treasure from those days; memories of moments when spiritual gifts edified God’s people. But as wonderful as spiritual gifts can be, they are not as spectacular as a patient mom with small kids, for love is patient. As inspiring and awe-striking as it may be to see a miracle, it’s not as excellent as a kind teenager, because love is kind. When the Spirit truly works upon a man or woman, the best evidence is the fruit produced (Galatians 5:22-25). How do we respond when we don’t get our way? What do we say when we feel sinned against? How do people experience us when we are disappointed? These are the marks of true spirituality.

The other day I became angry with my daughter. Rather than loving her, I pasted her with hasty words. God visited me with sweet conviction and we got things patched up. But the exchange revealed that I was not only unloving in the way I spoke, but unspiritual.

Only Corinthians find the highest spirituality in gifts. With God, true spirituality is evidenced by love. And the best spirituality uses gifts to love and serve others. True spirituality doesn’t use tongues or healing or prophetic words to boost a bank account; it uses gifts to boost the joy and encouragement of God’s people.

The Expectation of True Spirituality

Having a robust understanding of God’s empowering presence should result in a believer encountering God in ways defined and evaluated by Scripture. And I want this, both for me and for the people I lead. Once while I was under the diverting spell of a particular preoccupying problem, I opened a letter from an acquaintance in another city. Though written two weeks earlier, the letter described some startlingly specific details of my day’s conundrum, along with some glorious promises from God’s Word that would comfort me. I sat dumbstruck, as the words spoke ‘peace’ to the wind and waves cascading over my soul.

I want the “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Corinthians 14:3) that comes from biblically governed, elder-led, truly gifted, prophetic ministry. I want spiritual experiences where I am enjoying the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). I want biblically defined spiritual encounters of the same variety that, according to Sinclair Ferguson, John Owen expected: “Owen is not against subjective experience of divine power, but, he argues, on a scriptural and theological basis, that experience should

be the fruit of faith, and faith rooted and grounded in the spiritual realities to which Scripture bears testimony.”³

We shouldn't throw spiritual gifts out with the trash, as though they're the old-school models of the Christian experience of God's power. But spiritual experiences, even when extraordinary, are not more important than the Giver's work in conversion. This is unquestionably the greatest spiritual experience that happens to the believer. In our appeals that God empower us, we must always remember that the most decisive and permanent act of his power has already happened in our conversion.

Spiritual experiences are also not superior to Christ's conforming us to his character. If given a choice between a leader who can speak in tongues and a leader who knows how to love, I'll take the loving leader every time (...but, then I'll exhort him to “earnestly desire spiritual gifts” — more on that in a moment!). Paul understood this. It's why he never boasted about the whole Third Heaven thing. He knew how quickly Christians would assign authority and leadership credibility to his spiritual experiences. So Paul started with “I know a man...” (2 Corinthians 12:2). Was this some kind of false modesty at work? On the contrary, Paul's goal was, “...that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me” (2 Corinthians 12:6).

You know biblical love is at work when you are more worried that people think too much of you rather than too little. That's why Paul diverted attention to the gospel (2 Corinthians 2:15-16) and never sought to impress others with his spiritual experiences. After all, love does not boast.

The Eagerness of True Spirituality

Biblical love becomes the motivation for spiritual gifts. Love becomes the tracks upon which the gifts move forward. Biblical love pursues the activity of the Spirit. This is why Paul returns to the discussion of gifts in 1 Corinthians 14. He urges us to diligently and passionately pursue these gifts, “Eagerly desire the greater gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31). “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1). “Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12). “Be eager to prophesy” (1 Corinthians 14:39).

True spirituality — the kind that experiences and enjoys love-fueled gifts of the Spirit — never happens accidentally. Spiritual gifts that edify are linked to biblical leadership that initiates. This is precisely what Paul is doing with the Corinthians.

Let's not become so analytical, so preoccupied with detecting incipient errors or imbalances, that we fail to pursue and practice spiritual gifts. Nothing neutralizes the pursuit and use of gifts more than the misguided notion that they can somehow be

³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 130.

employed perfectly. The gifts we receive may come from a divine source, but we will never, ever be able to use them with divine reliability. Not in a fallen world; not through fallen people. Each spiritual gift comes from God, but they are given to us — to sinners. Face it: To use spiritual gifts, there will be risks; things will get messy. But we must be willing to make mistakes. We need to accept that, right now, so that we can seek to exercise spiritual gifts. This teaches us to learn dependence, not upon the gifts, but upon the Giver who gave them.

God doesn't want us to be preoccupied with results. He wants us to be faithful with our gifts, and to trust him with the refining process. Who knows, maybe one day we will find ourselves using our gifts to encourage a young Charles Spurgeon. Mr. Knill did not know that this child would one day be the Prince of Preachers. He was just taking a risk and looking to serve. He was less concerned about his own perfection or others' perception, and was more concerned with serving and encouraging a young man.

May God inspire us by Knill's example. And may he grant us many spiritual gifts, that we may boast less, love more, and learn to be truly spiritual!

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