

1-1-2003

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Recommended Citation

Street, Jim (2003) "Talent, Gift, and Calling," *Leaven*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol11/iss1/5>

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Talent, Gift, and Calling

JIM STREET

A middle-aged executive asked to speak to me concerning some changes he wanted to make in his life after I presented a workshop on faith in the workplace. We walked over to one side of the room, and he told me how confused he was about “what God wanted to do with his life” and how he was tired of “living his life in pursuit of success” and instead wanted to live the remainder of his life “in pursuit of significance.”

“I don’t know exactly what I am being called to do,” he said. “I don’t know whether to stay in the business community and try to minister from the inside of that world or whether to get out and pursue some more formal type of ministry.”

We talked a bit about his desire and the number of people he knew who had cashed in their options and either gone into the seminary or used some earnings to create a ministry-related, nonprofit organization.

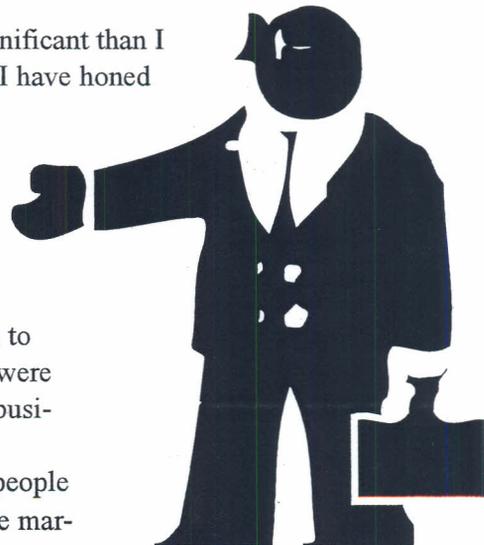
I felt pleased to hear him agonize over the decision if for no other reason than it was an agony borne of his desire to serve God. For years, he had been an active member of the body of Christ and had served his church in several ways. However, in midlife, he had begun to question the ways he used his time, especially in light of his growing awareness that no life on earth lasts forever. He was beginning to see a horizon, if even at a distance, and wanted to be sure he used the gift of life to further the purposes of God.

We explored the ways he perceived ministry, including the “where” of ministry. Did he see ministry as something done primarily from behind pulpits and in the confines of a church building, or could he see ways ministry could occur within the corporate marketplace? We also explored the “when” of ministry. I asked him whether he thought of ministry as something “out there” in the future for which one plans or something that occurs in the present on a moment-by-moment basis as one follows Christ throughout the day.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “I just want to do something more significant than I have been doing. I have a knack for strategic planning. I feel that I have honed some of my talents in the business world. Maybe God could use my gifts in ‘kingdom work.’”

We made an appointment to explore the topic more fully after the conference. After I left, I thought about the questions the executive raised in his struggle to move from what he perceived to be a life of success to a life of significance. I thought about how he used the phrase “my spiritual gifts,” how he seemed to equate them to talents, and how he had come to believe that they were somehow unearthed or forged through years of experience in the business community.

I have been thinking about those perceptions as I minister to people in the business community. Many of them, tired of the grind of the mar-



ketplace, long to discover ways to give their lives more fully to the work of the kingdom. During that process, I often hear them speak of their talents and gifts as if those are simply interchangeable terms, as easily applied in the marketplace as in the community of faith, the body of Christ.

I recall the numerous times I have heard people speak as if God “hired” in the same way the business community hires, in a straight line from one position to the next. I wonder whether, with all good intentions, we limit God by assuming that God is somehow unable to bring something new to bear in our lives as we move from one setting to another. With regard to my executive friend, what would he do if God did not have a need at present for “strategic planning?” Would my friend be “out of work” until God could find an opening for him?

For many people, calling seems bound to their talents, and their talents are somehow considered synonymous with their gifts. The logic is that if one conceives of gifts and talents as interchangeable terms, then one is bound to a particular kind of calling to the exclusion of all others. Those who equate dispositional

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terms—like talent—with gifts often assume a calling to a particular function is a lifelong endeavor. As a result, they often feel as if they have to set their course on a particular career rather than simply responding to whatever call emerges as they follow Christ in the course of the day.

But then, I also think about the ways in which churches tend to underwrite those very ideas by acting as if success in the business community is the

predominant measure of giftedness for service in the body of Christ. I ponder how such assumptions often skew the work of leadership boards toward maintenance and administration and away from pressing relational and pastoral concerns.

I am thrilled to meet people in the business community, or any community, who want to give their lives more fully to serve God. In no way do I wish to contribute to widening the gap that already exists between pulpit and pew. However, I do think it’s important to explore this supposed relationship between talent, gift, and calling.

I do so, not as a means of questioning the value that members of the business community bring to the church, but as a means of clearing some of the clutter around this particular topic—thereby opening the possibility of a more dynamic understanding of calling. Such clearing may enable businesspeople and others to serve in ways their churches have not considered because of the tendency to expect members to bring to the church precisely what they bring to the marketplace.

GIFTS AS POSSESSIONS

My executive friend used the phrase “my spiritual gifts” to describe the value he believed he could bring to the work of ministry. His choice of words revealed an underlying assumption that gifts can somehow be possessed.

Paul uses the language of gift to suggest that God gives gifts to each member for the purpose of serving others and building up the body of Christ in love. However, I do not believe Paul intends for us to assume that the gifts are given *to* us, to be *possessed* by us. Paul writes, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (I Cor 12:7). To be sure, Paul *sounds* as if the gifts are given to individuals. Indeed, the common use of the word “gift” suggests that the gift is a gift because it has been given *by* God *to* someone. However, a careful reading of the text suggests a gift is a gift not to the individual member who bears the gift but rather to the whole body of Christ.

One of the problems faced by the church in Corinth was that the members of that chaotic assembly over-identified with “their” particular gifts (12:14-22). At least part of the conflict in that church can be attributed

to people making the gifts a matter of ego identity and prioritizing their contributions to the body based upon their particular gift (I Cor 12:14-26).

A gift is a gift not so much because God has given it to an individual but because God has given it *to* the body *through* an individual. To the extent that gifts are given to individuals (if, indeed, they are), they are given only to be passed along for the benefit of others. So, rather than considering a gift something an individual possesses because God has given it to that individual, the church would be well-served to think of gifts as what God gives to pass through individuals. The individual no more possesses the gift than a pipe possesses the water that moves through it. A gift that one seeks to possess ceases to be a gift and becomes a property.

GIFTS AS TALENTS

My executive friend also seemed to equate a gift with a talent. Although no commonly accepted definition of talent exists, talents, whether they are seen to result from one's genetic predisposition or from one's life history, are understood to be part of the person, inherent to who one is and how one acts. A talent is a knack, something that one is seen to *have*.

Perhaps my friend's way of thinking about the interchangeability of talents and gifts can be understood in light of the way popular Christian literature addresses this topic. Some of the popular literature on gifts and calling attempt to differentiate talents from gifts. One popular book on the topic characterizes talent as something given at our "natural birth" while gifts are something given at our "spiritual birth." However, that same book muddies the water because its author claims talents often *become* gifts as they are applied to the edification of the body.

For example, in relating talents to gifts, the author suggests that if a person has a talent as a salesperson he or she may be gifted for evangelism. The author suggests that the two are connected because he seems to assume that if one can close the deal in a sale, she or he can also close the deal in leading a person to follow Jesus.¹

Such an approach fails to take into account the ends served by these various abilities. While certain features of being a good salesperson (e.g. being personable) may serve people well in their functioning in the body, we cannot ignore how the differing ends of business and church exert a powerful influence on the meaning of talents and gifts. Selling seeks to create an exchange of value such that the seller in the transaction obtains a profit. Evangelism can hardly be conceived in the same way. The salvation offered through the proclamation of the gospel is a gift, freely offered and freely given. Equating "sales talent" with "evangelistic gift," creates an anemic understanding of evangelism as little more than an exchange of goods between two parties. One gives to get. Such a way of conceiving of things makes the *gift* of salvation into a *commodity* to be bought and sold in the marketplace of exchange.

Further, a close reading of scripture does not seem to indicate this interplay between "natural endowment" and "spiritual endowment." Whereas talents and gifts can both be understood as divine endowments, gifts seem not to be overly related to talent. Because gifts are characterized as "manifestations of the Spirit" (I Cor 12:7) and given as the Spirit determines (12:11), one would be hard pressed to find some natural endowment that would bear any relationship to any of the gifts Paul lists (12:8-10).

After all, it is not as if an optimist is particularly gifted with faith, that someone with a good bedside manner is particularly gifted for healing, or that someone with a knack for languages is suited to interpret tongues. Even if one considers the "functionary" gifts of Eph 4:11, I do not believe it would be legitimate to equate entrepreneurial talent with the apostolic gift or the talent for public speaking with the gift of prophecy.

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Although talents may become gifts when used toward the ends that gifts serve, to understand gift solely as an extension of talent carries the danger of believing that gifts are somehow transportable from one setting to the next because they are attached to the individual who transports them. After all, if talents belong to the individual by means of natural endowment or life experience, then they should go with that individual wherever he or she goes. The gift shows up wherever the individual shows up. The freedom of the Spirit to manifest and dispense gifts toward the end of building up the body of Christ is compromised.

WHAT MAKES A GIFT A GIFT?

A gift is a gift when it meets three criteria: the *purpose* for which the gift is intended, the *source* of the gift, and the *basis* upon which the gift is given. A gift becomes a gift by virtue of the ends to which it is applied. A gift, as the word *charisma* suggests, is a grace given by God for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. This “for-others” character of gifts is clearly discernible in the principal texts in which Paul discusses gifts.

In Rom 12:3-8, Paul follows his call to present our bodies as living sacrifices with an appeal to the members of that church to exercise their gifts for the benefit of others. Those through whom the gifts come are to use them in ministries of teaching, serving, encouraging, contributing, mercy, and diligence in leadership.

In 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, Paul indicates that gifts are to be ordered to provide the members with strength, encouragement, comfort (14:1), and so that the church may be edified (14:5). Although none of the gifts are to be rejected as less needful for the building up of the body (12:14-31), all of the gifts are to be offered as gifts of love (1 Cor 13). Rather than using gifts to achieve one’s own ends or to maximize one’s own interests or advantage, each of the gifts is given for the “common good” (12:7).

In Ephesians 4, Paul lists various functions including apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service so the body of Christ may be built up “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (4:13). Even a cursory reading of these texts reveals the purpose of God’s gifts to the church as serving the end of building up the body of Christ. A gift is a gift only when it serves that end.

In addition to understanding the nature of gifts in terms of their purpose, one must also understand the nature of gifts in terms of their *source*. Rather than seeing gifts as emerging from within the genetic and experiential makeup of an individual, one views gifts as provided by the Godhead.

A gift, as the word *charisma* suggests, is a grace given by God for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.

In Rom 12:3-6, Paul encourages his readers to avoid thinking more highly of themselves than they should. He challenges them to think with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith that God has given them. Gifts differ “according to the grace given us” (Rom 12:6). In 1 Cor 12:7, Paul

characterizes the gifts as manifestations of the Spirit. In 12:8 and following, he lists several gifts as being “given through the Spirit” and writes that each of the gifts is the work of “one and the same Spirit” who “allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (12:11). He summarizes the priority assigned to functionary gifts as “appointed” by God (12:28).

In 1 Cor 14:1, Paul writes that the members of the body can desire particular gifts, implying that one can manifest a gift that one does not currently display. He claims the gift of tongues is a sign for unbelievers and, in so doing, suggests that it signifies something beyond some talent possessed by the individual beforehand. In Eph 4:7, Paul introduces his teaching on gifts by implying that they are a matter of grace apportioned to each of us by Christ. For Paul, the Christ who made “captivity itself a captive” (4:8) gives the gifts.

Whereas one may argue that talents—like every aspect of the created order—are given by God, it would appear that gifts are uniquely given by the Godhead, whether through the working of grace, the dispensation of the Spirit, or the apportionment of Christ.

Gifts also become gifts as determined by their basis. Gifts are given on the basis of God's freedom to give them. God gives them as God sees fit. That one bears a gift through himself to the body of Christ depends neither upon natural endowment nor personal experience. Put another way, neither natural endowment nor experience constrains a member of the body from receiving a gift to pass along to others for their encouragement and edification. Because gifts are given out of the love and freedom of God as needed for the ongoing health of the body, any believer can potentially display the gifts God deems to give. God is not constrained by human genetics or experience when God decides to manifest a gift through someone for the benefit of the body.

GIFTS AND CALLING

Although God may choose to transform a talent into a gift, God is not bound by our natural endowments or our years of experience when He calls us to a task and chooses to manifest a gift through us to accomplish that task. God manifests gifts to build up the body of Christ on the basis of God's freedom to do so. As a result, one could find oneself called to fulfill some function by manifesting an ability that is not traceable to one's natural endowments, personal history, or habit.

Calling is as dynamic as gifts. Although God may choose to manifest a gift through someone over the span of a lifetime and thereby limit that person's calling to some specific task for life, God may also choose to manifest a gift for a particular time and place. I encouraged my executive friend to trust this God who will not be bound by our own natural proclivities and to attend to the many ways that God could call him in any given place and time. The issue is not whether we have talent or experience for some calling. The issue is whether we will be submissive to God and pliant enough for God to manifest his gifts—whatever they are—through us for the good of the body.

JIM STREET

Mr. Street serves as minister of the North River Community Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bruce Bugbee, *What You Do Best in the Body of Christ: Discover Your Spiritual Gifts, Personal Style, and God-Given Passion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 64.

