

A Lutheran Approach to a Biblical Picture of Spiritual Gifts

After nearly forty years of ministry, I am starting to go through the files in order to discard quite a bit of information that will no longer be needed; and to identify a few articles that have enduring value and to share the gems contained therein.

One of those quality articles was written by Dr. Walt Stuenkel back in the 70s in response to a request extended to him from the Synod's Board of Evangelism, asking him "to look at the total concept of the gifts as they are given by the Spirit of God to build the church."

Here is a summary of that 45 page paper...

1: introductory comments

- + the Scriptures, Old and New Testament, affirm the deity of the Holy Spirit...He has divine names and divine attributes...He does divine works and is accorded divine honor and glory
- + the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person in the trinity with the distinctive characteristics of personality: knowledge, emotion, and will...works and actions are ascribed to Him that only a person can perform, such as speaking, leading, prohibiting, choosing, etc.
- + although the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son; He is equal with the Father and the Son in all respects
- + God promised and gave unique blessings to Abraham and his seed, but always for the sake of making Israel a blessing to all the world
- + the Holy Spirit singled out individuals in the Old Testament to whom special charismatic gifts were given, some temporarily for specific tasks, others as "long term" charismatics such as Moses, Joshua, David
- + the prophets are presented as men who spoke by the Spirit of the Lord...they prophesied that the Spirit of the Lord would rest upon the Messiah (Isaiah 11:1-3) and He would sanctify the New Testament Christians (Ezekiel 36:26)
- + although certain individuals had charismatic gifts, their life reflected either no or weak sanctification by God's Spirit – Samson, Jephthah, Balaam, Saul
- + even though the Holy Spirit is pictured as dwelling in believers, He is not their property nor their tool...the Christians do not possess or control the Holy Spirit; He, by grace, possesses them

2: summary of Jesus' discussion about the Holy Spirit

- + Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life...therefore, the major objective of the Holy Spirit is not to direct attention to Himself but to Christ and His life and death and resurrection for our salvation
- + the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace, the Gospel and the Sacraments
- + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are presented as three distinct Persons in the one undivided Deity, the Triune God
- + what we know and believe about God and about our salvation in Christ we owe to the Holy Spirit, not to any desires, decisions, or efforts of our own
- + any fruit pleasing to God in our hearts and in our lives is produced in us and through us by the Holy Spirit...the best and greatest of this fruit is self-sacrificing love for God and humankind
- + the Holy Spirit guides and leads Christians in the truth and He judges the world by the Word
- + the Holy Spirit brings us into an intimate relationship with the Triune God so that we confidently face life and death in a spirit of victorious peace which the world cannot understand or appreciate

3: summary statements concerning the fruit and gifts of the Spirit, based upon several New Testament texts: Galatians 5:22-25 (fruit of the Spirit); 1 Corinthians 12-14; Romans 12:1-11; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Peter 4:10-11

- + there is a distinction between "fruit of the Spirit" and the "gifts of the Spirit"...the former is the outgrowth of every vital relation that exists between the new creature in Christ and the Holy Spirit...the latter are given in great variety to individual Christians according to the purpose and will of the Holy Spirit
- + the "fruit of the Spirit" shows what Christians have become and now are by the power of the Holy Spirit...the Holy Spirit is responsible both for the initiation and completion of the working of God's will in God's people
- + the New Testament writers use a number of different terms to designate spiritual gifts but the most common one is "charisma" which is derived from the root stem "char" which includes an emphasis on "rejoicing" and "gratitude"
- + the word "charis" includes the thought of undeserved and unearned favor and kindness of God in and through Christ Jesus

- + the listing of spiritual gifts – “charismata” – in the Scriptures is illustrative of the type of gifts bestowed and is not exhaustive in naming every possible gift
- + it is the Holy Spirit’s will, not any merit or compelling force in man, that determines the type or the number of gifts each Christian receives
- + amidst all the diversity in spiritual gifts there is still a great unity because all people who receive gifts are members of one body serving one another for the common good
- + all gifts have as their ultimate purpose the furtherance of the proclamation of the Gospel and the salvation of sinners...that purpose must govern the use of the gifts
- + no Christian is self-sufficient...each needs the sharing of spiritual gifts
- + if, in using our charismatic gifts, we are not motivated and guided by love, all our gifts are worthless to us
- + Paul places tremendous emphasis on the fact that spiritual gifts are given “to edify the church” and must be used for that purpose in self-sacrificing love
- + the gift of prophecy – proclaiming the Word of God – is definitely a superior gift to being able to speak in tongues
- + Paul is very concerned that “all things be done decently and in order”
- + every Christian has at least one spiritual gift which may be given for “vocal” ministry or for “silent” ministry...it is incumbent upon him or her to use every spiritual gift as a good steward

4: Biblical and Lutheran principles and propositions in reference to spiritual gifts

- + the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person in the Trinity...although He proceeds from the Father and the Son, He is equal to the Father and the Son in all respects
- + the Holy Spirit singled out individuals in the Old Testament to whom special charismatic gifts were given, some temporarily for specific tasks, others as “long-term” charismatics...He can do the same today
- + even though the Holy Spirit dwells in believers, He is not their property nor their tool...believers do not possess or control the Holy Spirit; He, by His grace, possesses them
- + Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life...therefore, the major objective of the Holy Spirit is not to direct attention to Himself but to Christ and His life and death and resurrection for our salvation...any gift of the Spirit that does not exalt or confess Christ does not serve its purpose

- + the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments
- + what we know and believe about God and about our salvation in Christ we owe to the Holy Spirit, not to any desires, decisions, or efforts on our part...Luther's dictum – sola gratia – applies to every aspect of the Christian life
- + any fruit pleasing to God in our hearts and in our lives is produced in us and through us by the Holy Spirit...the best and greatest of this fruit is self-sacrificing love for God and others
- + the Holy Spirit endows Christians with various spiritual gifts – charismata – so that all Christians must view themselves as “charismatic”
- + “being filled with the Spirit” is not a one-time act but takes place repeatedly and cannot be identified with what some of called “baptism in the Spirit”
- + the Holy Spirit is received in connection with water baptism and, as a result, the Holy Spirit grants each baptized believer at least one spiritual gift
- + God's “charismata” to individuals differ...Christians are to expect variety and diversity in spiritual gifts and not to compare the gifts of one with those of another...the differences rest with God and do not indicate inferiority or superiority in the recipient...whatever “charisma” or “charismata” God has given us are to be used for the common good and are not to be abused, neglected, or despised
- + neglect of spiritual gifts may stem from: ignorance of God's provision for equipping the church with spiritual gifts...from lethargy concerning God's working in our lives...from lack of the use of the means of grace...and from unwillingness to respond to God's grace and call
- + Scriptures warn us: “grieve not the Holy Spirit” and “quench not the Spirit”...every Christian retains the Satanic power to do this
- + there is no biblical warrant for claiming that all Christians either may or should speak in tongues...the primary object of the bestowal of any gift is the edification of the church...we ought, therefore, to desire and pray for those gifts with which we can edify the church the most
- + the gift of prophecy – proclaiming the Word of God – is the only gift listed in every biblical catalog of spiritual gifts...it is definitely superior to being able to speak in tongues
- + no Christian is self-sufficient...each needs the sharing of spiritual gifts...Scriptures place tremendous emphasis on the fact that spiritual gifts are given to edify the church and must be used for that purpose in self-sacrificing love