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Presentation Transcript
Spiritual Gifts Today #20071122
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The title of this presentation is *Using the Gifts of the Spirit in the Church Today*.

About three years ago I bought some Web-building software. This software is reputed to be the most powerful software of its kind. And after I installed it and started playing with it, I realized how powerful it was. I was really impressed with everything that it could do. But it was so complicated that I still haven't really learned how to use all the features. With all the power that was in that software also comes difficulty and complication. Life is like that, isn't it? Sometimes the biggest blessings are also some of the most difficult to use or take advantage of.

I was thinking about marriage. When two people fall in love, it's really easy for the girl to respect the man the way the Bible says, and it's really easy for the man to love the woman as God tells us to. It's really easy until the *new* wears off the relationship, and then they start to see all the faults of the other person. God needed something really *powerful* to keep people together, so He created sex. But with that powerful experience also comes powerful complications, if it's not used correctly – complications like pregnancy out of wedlock, disease, heartache, hatred, anxiety, depression, grief. The list just goes on and on. It's almost always true that anything that's powerful, by it's very nature, if it's misused, can also be a big problem. You can probably think of lots of examples of that, can't you? Nuclear power. It's great when it's in the box, but if it gets out, look out!

Well, in this regard, I was thinking about one of the greatest blessings that God gives us. It's in Romans 12:4, where we can read about it. Paul said in Romans 12:4:

Rom. 12:4 – *Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, who are many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve. If it is teaching, let him teach. If it is encouraging, let him encourage. If it is*

contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously. If it's leadership, let him govern diligently. If it's showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

So, we're told here that God gives everyone of us a gift, so that we can contribute in some way to the church. What an incredible blessing that is! A lot of people feel like they're a fifth wheel, or like they don't belong. There's really no need for that, because God has given each one of us a gift, so that we can make a contribution and have a place in our congregation. So that's powerful, isn't it?

So what's the down side? Well, almost everything. There's nothing easy about any of this, if you stop and think about it. You know, it's really hard to stop and figure out what our gift is, first of all. And if we are fortunate enough to find it, then it's hard to get off our dead backsides and put it to use. It's hard to have the courage to step out in faith and offer it. It's hard to know how to best use it. It's hard to use it without getting the big head over it. It's hard not to be envious of others who have gifts we would like to have.

When I was in high school, I used to run the two-mile, the mile and the half-mile. And I always wanted to be a sprinter. I thought that was where the glory was. So I tried to sneak off and go work out with the sprinters sometimes. And sometimes the sprinters would come out and work out with us, because they thought we were the guys that were really doing the work. You know, nobody's ever satisfied, right? They wanted to be like us, and we wanted to be like them. It's just kind of interesting, how the grass is always greener on the other side. That's just a human thing. If somebody has the gift of evangelism, they'd probably rather have the gift of administration. It's hard. It's hard *not* to be envious of others who have gifts that we would like to have.

If we're in leadership positions, it's hard not to block others' efforts to find and use their gifts. There was a reason why Paul was saying, "If it's serving, *let* him serve, and if it's teaching, *let* him teach," because there are always people who don't want to let people do those things. And yet, for all these difficulties, the gifts that God gives us is the only way the work is going to get done.

A chain saw is an amazing tool. If you think about cutting wood with an ax or cross cut saw, it becomes immediately apparent what a powerful tool a chain saw is. But it's really of no use if you don't know that you have to pull the cord.

Christian Schwartz, with *Natural Church Development*, has a graphic of these guys trying to push a big wagon with square wheels. And *in* the wagon are four perfectly round wheels. Sometimes we are kind of like that, aren't we? We're trying to cut wood without pulling the cord – push a wagon with square wheels when there are round ones in the wagon for us to use. We don't think about the gifts that God has given us to do our work that would make our work a lot easier. I think, because our work is hard, a lot of people have been discouraged, and yet, if we use the gifts we have, we have everything we need.

I think, too, that if we could find a way to get around, over or through these challenges that I just mentioned, I think the church, and I think the congregations, and I think

individually that we would all just rocket forward with a lot more power. Because the power's already there. I think a lot of problems that we have would just go away. I think a lot of personal problems would lessen or go away if we were really busy doing the work of God. I think a lot control issues would just disappear. And I think we would all be a rejoicing, happier people. I think we'd be more secure in God's love. And I think we'd be *so* secure that a lot of these insecure, petty animosities and the distrust would just melt away in the face of the power to do good that we would find within our groups.

So, it's my contention that even though this is a terribly difficult subject, we shouldn't shrink back from trying to understand it, because there's so much to gain from it. I also believe that if we persist long enough in our inquiry, and stick to what the Bible says, that God is going to make these things plain to us and show us how to use the gifts that He gives us.

I imagine that most of the people listening to this have heard sermons or read books about "how to find your gift." So I'm going to assume that we all know what the biblical gifts are and that we've done some thinking about how to use them. If that isn't the case, I'm hoping later, in LifeResource Ministries, to do some verbal processing on those topics later, and put them out as audios and videos. What I hope to do today, actually, is to think out loud for a bit about an aspect of spiritual gifts that I haven't thought much about until just recently. It has to do with God's use of spiritual gifts at this moment in time among us in the church today – the independent churches of God. And what I'd like to do is make a division, based on their usage.

The first area of usage I'd like to think about is the spiritual gifts used *to benefit the congregation*. Let's go to Ephesians 4, and verse 7. It says in verse 7:

Eph. 4:7 – *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. And he explains gifts.*

Then, in verse 11 it says:

V-11 – *It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – their job – their gifts – are to be used to prepare the rest of us for works of service.*

When were you trained for works of service? Who trained you? Are you being trained now? I think about my past and I can't think of any person, really, that trained me, because the Church of God hasn't really thought much about this until recently – it seems to me anyway. Not the church where I was. But I still have a gift, and I think I know what it is pretty well. So where did I learn that? Well, I think *God* taught it to me. But I think that was sort of a de facto kind of thing, because I don't think there were any people that knew to teach me my gifts.

Let's think about some of these gifts for a minute. Teaching is one of those gifts. So is pastoring, or helping the group organize so that they can use their gifts in the congregation. It kind of goes hand-in-hand with the gift of administration, doesn't it? I think Paul may have had a bit of that gift.

When the Corinthians started speaking in tongues, that was a gift that God gave them, because they had a need for it in services – there were so many people of different languages there – and they were all trying to talk at once. The implication kind of is that there wasn't any structure and no order, and everybody wanted to use the gift that God had given them. You can't fault them, really, for that. But I also kind of get the idea that, maybe, some of them had the big head about that. You know, "Whoo! whoo! Look what I can do!" That kind of thing. Paul just set a simple framework so that their gifts could be used in an orderly fashion. He said, "Okay, no more than three can talk at any one service." And then he left it to them to figure out how to make that happen. So they obviously had to get together and make up a schedule. Wouldn't you think? Otherwise, it would just be the three loudest ones, or the three rudest one, or the three biggest ones, or whatever. So there must have been some kind of schedule set up so that everybody could use their gift. He didn't say, "No more speaking in tongues," because that would have put him at odds with God, who gave the gifts. But he had a way to use the gifts in an orderly fashion. So he administered that.

I think, from my past – in the church where I was – if somebody started to speak in tongues – I mean, legitimately speak in a language that they didn't know, or speak English and have it heard by somebody in their own language – that probably wouldn't have been allowed where I came from. So the people that wouldn't allow it would actually be in contradiction to the will of God, wouldn't they? So, Paul – he's smarter than that – he wasn't trying to stifle their gifts, or control them, or decide who could and couldn't use them. He was just wanting to provide a structure in which the various gifts could be used the way *God* wanted. So he was a facilitator of the use of gifts.

I think, when you think about gifts used in a congregation, we'd be really wise to think about that. If somebody has a gift that they want to offer the congregation, and the congregation doesn't see a need for it, well, it's kind of futile to try to offer it to them, isn't it? Or, if there are so many people that think they have that gift, there's kind of an overkill on any one area, then it needs to be like Paul says – organized – so that people can use them better.

I also think that the gift of teaching has a lot to do here with works of service. At our Feast site this year at Park City, we have a teacher coming. And he's not just going to exhort us to get involved in our community and do evangelism there, he's going to show us how. He's going to *teach* us how to do it. He's going to take us by the hand, lead us into the community, and show us what to do. He can do that, because he's done it himself. And he knows *how* to do it. And I would think that, if you attended sessions and you had the gift of teaching, then you could come back to your area and show others what to do and how to do it, because you'd done it yourself while you were there. So I think that's what the gift of teaching is about. We've thought about it being teaching the Bible,

and it could well be that, but there's a whole other kind of teaching that we don't really think that much about. And that's teaching people how to do something. It gets a little sticky sometimes when we think about these things.

People used to tell me, sometimes, that my ability to connect with kids was a gift. Well, I didn't like to hear that, because I know that what I do anybody can do. But then I started thinking about how I learned those things and it was in a context of a congregation, interacting with God's kids and God's family. So I think God showed me what to do. So wouldn't that be the gift of *knowledge*. I mean, if connecting with kids is something anybody can do, that wouldn't be the gift, would it? But knowing *how* to do it might be.

I've seen people drawn to different populations. I was talking to a man recently about how much I liked to interact with young people, and he was telling me how much he liked to interact with the elderly. So, is that a gift? Or is knowing *how* to interact with them the gift? I'm still thinking my way through all of that.

Another way the church uses gifts is *to care for the church itself*. It's interesting. I know of a Church of God group – a congregation – that's focused on taking care of their members and on taking care of the new people that come in. They focus on helping them learn what they need to know and helping them find their gifts. I was looking at their mission statement, and it says, "To help the people in their congregation find their gifts." And I asked them, "You know, you've had this for ten years. How come you've just started to grow now?" And he said, "Because we finally decided to get serious about what we said we were going to do." And when they did, then they started to grow. They *are* growing. All this done well yields more members. That's one way spiritual gifts can be applied – to take care of the church.

So what would be the gifts that people would use in helping others to learn what their gifts are – in just taking care of people – their physical needs? Well, one of the gifts in the Bible that's mentioned is *helps*. I think that has to do with giving people assistance – and especially to the weak and the needy.

Another one is called *ministry*. And that's a word that we don't use the way it was intended to be used, I don't think, in the New Testament. It just means service – to meet the needs of people – to serve them.

There's another called *exhortation*, which could be more.... You know, when you think of an exhortation, you think of somebody talking loudly and pounding on a table – you know, exhorting people. But what the word really meant was to *entreat* people, or to console, or comfort, or persuade people in a more gentle way, actually.

The gift of *giving* is mentioned. We think about giving money, but people who are, a lot of times, generous with money are also generous with time – with other resources.

And the gift of *mercy* – pretty much self-explanatory.

Another gift that's mentioned is *leadership* – doing the right thing.

And then *hospitality*. I think about that, too – as all of these gifts are things that people can be strong in. God gives us these things in the context of the church.

The Bible talks about a gift of healing. According to the Bible, that's the ability to lay hands on a person, pray for them, and they are healed miraculously – as in a blind person being able to see immediately, or somebody who's lame being able to walk immediately – and not by our own power or what we know, but because God does a miracle. I don't know anybody that has that gift, but I know lots of people who are drawn to the sick and who know *how* to care for them and know how to comfort them. Which one of those gifts would that be? Well, that could be the gift of *helps*, or *giving*, or *mercy* – any of those - *ministry*.

I see people that come into the church many times without any of that. And somehow, over time, they find those things. They find those things a part of themselves. I'm thinking that may be the way God gives gifts now. We don't need prophets now because we have the whole Bible. We don't need tongues because it's so easy to have things translated, compared to the way it was back then. These other things we definitely need.

So how does one determine what one's gift is? And whether one should use it in the congregation? Well, since it *is* a congregational context, feedback from the congregation is really important, isn't it? If you're in a group, the group's going to be affected by what you do there, so the group needs to give input into what you're doing. It's only fair, isn't it? People who are affected by choices need to have input into what the choices are. If you have the gift of helping, but, if you want to help by singing and you can't sing a lick, your offer probably wouldn't meet with much enthusiasm, would it? So that's kind of a way to get feedback, isn't it? If you sing a song, and you ask people what it was like, and they him-haw around a lot, that probably would mean that you have the gift of helping, but singing might not be one of your natural talents. So it's always good to differentiate natural talents from a desire to serve. If we have a desire to serve, it's always good to find out what our natural talents are so that we can use them to help others.

My wife is good at bookkeeping. That's one of the things that she offers to a lot of the projects we have in LifeResource Ministries, and has for years kept track of the finances for trips we've gone on with groups of kids and different things like that.

So, it's always good to ask others what they think we're gifted in as well, isn't it? One of the most powerful church groups events I've ever seen was when people sat around in a circle and talked about what they'd learned about the things that others in the group were good at doing.

So, my point is, when a decision affects the lives of others, they should be included in that. Can anybody here think of an example of that happening in the New Testament – where there was a need and everybody got included in who was going to get to take care of them? The New Testament example, where the widows were not being taken care of in

the early church, and they complained out it. And the apostles said, “You select some people to take care of you.” Now, who did they pick? Well, they would pick the kind people, the people that took the time to talk to them, the people that they knew cared about them, people that they knew would go to bat for them. So they picked the people that were naturally inclined to help them. And then the ministry ordained them to do that. That’s an example of what I’m talking about – when the gifts are being used within the congregation. And the congregation gets to have input about those things.

Okay, so that’s one usage of spiritual gifts. But I want to think of another one now. It’s a whole different ballgame when it comes to gifts that are offered to the greater church – and not just our little group. You know, there’s huge advantages to being an independent congregation. There’s no organization that gets in between us and Christ. There’s nobody telling us what we *have* to believe if we want to come to church there. There’s nobody that requires us to have church in a certain way – certain kind of music, dress a certain way. And there’s certainly no corporate walls of separation between us and other Christians groups.

I know one lady – a friend of mine from many years ago – who told me that if she listened to *any* material, or read any material from any group, except for the group she was in, she would be disfellowshipped. And people from that church, I know, have said that they’re not even allowed to fellowship with their own relatives. Now that’s a wall of separation created by a corporate body.

But there are *disadvantages* – after you think of all the advantages. There aren’t as many services – like a lot of the bigger organizations have. Literature to pass out is hard to come by for us. Biblical education for the young people is an issue. Ministry training. Youth activities. When we’re all scattered out in small groups, kids need to be social with each other. It’s hard to find activities close to home that they can go to. So, those are some of the *disadvantages* of being an independent Church of God Christian.

There are some people who are working to overcome that by offering their services and their gifts to the *whole* church – not just to their congregation. I think about Ron Dart’s YEA lessons for children. I guess I should say Ali Dart’s YEA lessons. I think about their festival site. I think about the guy that’s coming to our feast site to teach us how to do evangelism – Gordon Enger. He’ll go anywhere to teach any group how to do that. He’s a part of a congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee. His congregation may be sitting in the bleachers rooting for him, but he doesn’t take his marching orders from them. It’s *his* gift he’s offering to the church. For a time, Guy Swenson was working on a literature base – and may still be doing that. Elaine and I are working on parenting and supporting congregations to make their efforts with kids more effective.

The thing here is, since it’s not being offered to a congregation, but to the whole church, it’s not up to the congregation to decide about how that’s going to go. It’s up to the person. And some people think, “What if somebody that can’t speak very well at all decides to have a tape ministry, or CD ministry?” I actually know somebody that did that. He had the very best of intentions. He had something he wanted to talk about. He bought

the equipment. Started up. Some time later, I heard that he was offering his equipment for sale. And the reason was, because nobody wanted to listen to what he had to say. So what does that mean? I think it means that it was his really good idea, but it wasn't what God was supporting. Maybe he didn't have a gift for it.

I know that when Elaine and I started up, we asked God to show us that we were doing something helpful by providing encouragement and financial support for us. And He's done that. I think about the Cincinnati congregation running the Lexington Weekend, offering a service to the Church of God. If they weren't any good at it, and there was no spiritual value there, it wouldn't keep getting bigger every year. But it does! So I see that what they're offering is valuable spiritually to a lot of people.

Some people value arguing about doctrine. And then other people value fellowship, and connection and relationships. That latter group is the group that shows up at Lexington. And the first group doesn't go, because they've found out they're not allowed to argue about those things there. That's kind of how it works, isn't it? And if there's value, then it grows.

Why is this the better way to do things? When you talk about things for the entire group, isn't it better to just let people work those things out with God?

I went to a feast site one time, and there was a person there who had been sent there to speak. I'm sure a lot of money had been spent getting him there, and housing him while he was there, and all that. Forty-five minutes into his sermon, he looked at his watch, said, "Bye," and walked off the stage. He had nothing to say. I don't remember anything he said. And I don't know that anyone I know remembers anything. It was kind of a waste of effort. And I was thinking about that later. How did he get there? Well, it cost a lot of money to get him there – and it was my money – some of it. But I didn't have any choice. I *have* a choice of whether to go to Lexington or not, or to go to Ron Dart's feast site, or use his YEA classes, or any of those things. So, isn't that a better way? It's just between the person who offers the service and God.

I'd like to read a section in Acts, the 5th chapter, and verse 34. There was a time here, early on in the church, when the Jews were planning to do a lot of hurt to the apostles.

Acts 5:34 – *But a Pharisee, it says, named Gamaliel – in Acts 5:34 – a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put out for a little while, and he addressed them. "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago, Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed. All his followers were dispersed and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census, and led a band of people in revolt. He, too, was killed and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case, I advise you, leave these men alone. Let them go. For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God.*

We don't have to try to control people's efforts to serve the church at large. God's going to take care of that. If He supports it, it's going to go. And if He doesn't, it won't. I heard a presentation by Pam Dewey at Lexington last year. It's called, *Mission – It's Possible*. And her point was, that if God puts some urge in you to do something to serve Him or His people, then He won't let you fail. He won't let you fail, because He's the one driving that. Right? He wants that to happen. That was meant to be encouragement, but it should also be very encouraging to all the rest of us, because we don't have to do anything to try to prevent people from doing something that isn't right. It just won't work if it isn't. It's just simple. You don't have to do anything. We don't want to find ourselves fighting against God.

I know there are some congregations that have tried – when some of their members have tried to make an effort to help the greater church – to control it, but that doesn't work very well either. You know, if you and I had been members of the church at Antioch, when Paul was brought there after he had received his calling from God, we – like the rest of the people there – might have resisted his calling, and said, "We don't want him speaking to us. He killed Christians." But we would have been wrong, wouldn't we? And we wouldn't have been able to stop Paul – for probably one main reason. And that is that God wasn't going to allow him to be stopped. And the other one – a lesser reason – was that Paul knew what he had been told, and he was going to do that no matter what.

So, if God is for it, it's going to go, and if He's not for it, it's not. And we just have to look at these things, and if they're helpful to us, use them, and if they're not, we don't. It's not our business. That, I think, has to do with the use of gifts in the church at large, as opposed to the congregation.

There's a third area that I want to talk just a little bit about, and that is the use of gifts *in the community as evangelism*. We have one area – *in the congregation* – where the congregation gets to input about the gifts of members, because it affects them directly. And that input is intended to help people find their gifts and use them in a way that is helpful to the group. Then we have another area where congregations should be careful *not* to get in between God and those He gives a gift to for the service of the church – and that's in the area of *individual ministries* used outside the congregation for the betterment of the church as a whole. But what about gifts used *in the community* – not directed toward the congregation or the church.

For example, suppose a congregation decides to reach out into the community and do a Camp Outreach, where the college-aged people in their group help rebuild the homes of the elderly poor. Or maybe they decide to organize a food drive for Thanksgiving. I think the rule of thumb applies. If the congregation is involved in it, then the congregation should be able to use the volunteers as needed.

When I went to Camp Outreach in Lexington, they asked me to do two things. They asked me to do the Bible studies and they asked me to paint. I think I did a better job of organizing the Bible studies than I did painting. I got paint all over me and everything. That's what they wanted me to do, so that's what I did.

What if a person, on their own, decides to do something to help in the community? Well, I think if the congregation's not involved, the congregation shouldn't get involved. It should be obvious. But we have had some congregational interference in the past about that.

I know a young woman, who belonged to a larger Church of God congregation, who decided to have a home Bible study and invite neighbors and friends. Her pastor told her that she wasn't allowed to do that. Actually, she *was* allowed to do that – just not by *him*. I think she did that, but she got in some hot water over it. Well, that's just on her own personal effort – didn't have anything to do with what the congregation did. I don't think any of the people in the congregation even came to it. So why should the congregation be meddling in her relationship with God and what God gave her an urge to do. Well, they shouldn't – unless they want to be found fighting against God.

Let's think of another example. Elaine and I have two grandchildren. They're four now – really healthy – but they were born very premature. One of them had to stay in the hospital for quite a long time. They're doing fine now, but Elaine was watching a TV show recently, if I remember correctly, and she learned that some hospitals have baby cuddling programs for premie infants. And that was really close to our hearts, so she checked into it, got the details, and we signed up. I've been at it two times now. You know, we didn't have to ask permission from anybody to do that. We think that may turn into an evangelistic effort in some way later. We're not sure. I know that we can pray for those babies and ask God to reveal His truth to them, and we wouldn't know for years whether that was going to happen or not – whether it would be God's will. She was telling some other people in our group about it, and everybody liked it. Now *all* of us are doing it. It's not a congregational thing really. It's just people – friends – trying to help others. It doesn't have to be organized. Really, our relationship is with Gretchen, right? We take our marching orders from her – the one who is head of the volunteers at the hospital. So, it's not a congregational thing, but we're all, just interestingly enough, doing that.

There's another lady in our congregation who knows a woman in her neighborhood that is mistreated by her husband. She tries to talk to her and encourage her. Once they got on the subject of religion, and the lady asked if the lady from our church would do a Bible study with her, and now they are studying their Bibles together. Individual effort. She doesn't have to get permission from us, does she? She just can do that. What is the gift there? It could be mercy. Could be helps. Could be teaching. Certainly it is leadership, because it's doing the right thing. It's evangelism. I mean, there's a lot of ways that could go. I guess the fruits will show what the gift is.

Public speakers are taught that it's not a good idea to introduce new material in the conclusion. The conclusion is for wrapping up and recapping. But silly me, here I go adding something new. As I conclude I want to propose a reason why spiritual gifts are so hard for us. I think that every aspect of this whole topic is hard because it requires the exercising of faith to find and use them – and sometimes to refrain from impeding others from using theirs.

But why did that guy bury his talent and not put it out there to work? The word *talent* means money in the New Testament. But that was just a metaphor for the spiritual gifts that God gives us. Well, he was afraid that he would blow it. He was afraid that God would punish him for blowing it. So he settled to simply sit on it, and not really put it out to work. That was safe. So his desire for safety and ease of mind short-circuited his desire to use his talent for the glory of God. He didn't *trust* God to help him use the talent He had given him. Well, that's a lack of faith, isn't it? Being afraid that God is going to do this or that to us? That's a lack of faith. Not being willing to step out and do things that God wants us to do – that happens from lack of faith.

We see some who don't *trust* God to help other people find and use their own gifts, and they have to try to manage other people. What they're *really* doing is trying to manage the free flow of the Spirit of God in the church. When you put it in those words, it sounds really silly, doesn't it? How could any of us think that we could ever control the flow of the Spirit of God? It says that the river of God, that flows out from under that throne of God, that that river flows wherever it wills, and none of us are going to stop it. That certainly is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. So, when people try to do that, all they're doing is showing the world that they're insecure, and spiritually weak, and lacking in faith.

So I hope that what I've said today is like stirring a big pot of soup. I hope something floats up for you that will help you in your search to find and use the powerful gift God has given you – and also to support others in finding and using *their* gifts.