

The gift of faith

Dan Evans, May 2003

Everyone who believes in God has a degree of personal faith. It is a logical requirement and comes from your decision to believe, plus the influence of God's Holy Spirit in your heart. It may be supplemented and bolstered by observing the hand of God working either in your own life or that of another; a physical healing, for instance.

There is another variety of faith that is not a product of your own determination. It is the spiritual gift of faith God grants to some but not all, according to Scripture.

Faith as a spiritual gift

God has blessed me with the gift of faith. It has immeasurably blessed my life as well as the lives of others I have known. However, it is something many mature Christians do not understand. They recognize its benefits in my life (and perhaps even their own), but they can't come to terms with the fact that it is a special, God-given blessing given to some but not all.

Other gifts are similarly parceled out in a limited manner. In my experience, the same people who disregard the gift of faith, usually come from a heritage or subscribe to a theology that minimizes or dismisses the existence of all or most spiritual gifts, even though they are clearly depicted in God's Word.

Lists of spiritual gifts are found in six different places in New Testament passages:

Romans 12:6-8

I Corinthians 12:7-10

I Corinthians 12:28

I Corinthians 12:29-30

Ephesians 4:11

I Peter 4:9-11

Scripture makes distinctions between the traits of men and the gifts of God. The debate about the legitimacy of spiritual gifts in the church today is not the topic of this paper. Suffice it so say, that when you dismiss any portion of scripture as non-applicable to a certain audience or to a certain era, you erase any basis for concrete, fundamental inerrancy of God's word. It all then becomes subject to your own personal comfort level and you assume responsibility for defining God and his lordship. I'd hate to have that job. I prefer to allow God to define Himself.

God's endowment to some Christians of a special spiritual gift of faith, is found in I Corinthians 12:9. Paul says "...to another was given faith by the same Spirit." In that passage is both the legitimacy of the gift of faith and the distinction between the faith God asks every Christian to have, and the limited apportionment of special faith to some. For instance, when he states "to another was given," he makes it known that not everyone receives it. And, in stating "by the same Spirit," he substantiates the role of God and his Holy Spirit in awarding the gift.

My faith

Like all Christians, I have a basic, underlying faith in God that has grown through normal and unique life experiences. God tells us – directly and indirectly – all through scripture, to trust Him; to believe him. That kind of faith is essential for every Christian.

The spiritual gift of faith represents in my life the equivalent of an axle running through the earth from pole to pole, like the globe found in school classrooms or perhaps your own home. Imagine such an axle with the earth perpetually spinning straight and true without interruption or deviation.

The earth constantly experiences storms, floods, earthquakes, wars and fires. But, just as those disasters fail to affect the reliability of the earth spinning on that imaginary axle, my faith keeps me spinning through dark threatening hours in my personal life. I sometimes suffer lapses in judgment and choose to momentarily ignore my faith and fall back on self-pity. But my faith waits on the side, ready to put things back into perspective when I once again submit to it.

Faithlessness

I have not perfected the full-time surrender of my self to enjoy 100% hope, 100% of the time, but I know that I can and I usually do. Many people, however, conduct themselves very differently. Disappointment, discouragement, remorse, sadness, hopelessness, desperation, fear, worry and feelings of inadequacy are their welcomed friend. Their lives would seem incomplete without a dark cloud hovering over every circumstance. They not only give such feelings a home, but they put out the welcome mat and throw a party when they arrive.

Some people take pride in their lack of faith. They consider it their obligation, duty and privilege to bless you with discouragement, gloom and fear. And, if they can't succeed in dragging you down to their level of despair, they question your salvation, or at least the depth of your relationship with Christ. "God wouldn't allow this awful thing in your life if He didn't love you very much. Count it a blessing to be targeted with this affliction."

This disturbs, even angers me. For a person with the gift of faith and my propensity for sarcasm and intolerance, such people are the devil's own kin! I don't believe that God "blesses" us with problems. I do believe that He will bless us with solutions if we allow Him that freedom. And, in hindsight, we are free to consider the entire experience as a blessing.

Surprisingly, there are chronically retarded believers who say "no thanks" to God's offer to solve their problems. Their blessing delivery pipeline is choked with years worth of answers to prayer that they never received. They elected to close the blessing valve because God's solutions automatically wash away the grit and grime of the problems they face. They prefer the grit and grime over victory because it reinforces their well-developed sense of self worthlessness.

Chronically retarded believers – Christians who allow God to work only in limited areas of their lives – often exhibit this phenomena in other aspects of their existence. The most recognizable is fear and worry. They may have carefully fertilized a lack of self-worth that convinces them that they are unworthy of God’s attention. They wear the badge of low self-esteem proudly.

Christians who are stuck in neutral – who don’t let God run their lives and address their disappointments – often have a house, car, wardrobe, yard, body or family – something tangible and physical in their lives – that is also badly neglected. That’s not to say that a messy house indicates lack of faith. In my case, a messy house reflects laziness; unwashed clothes reflect misguided priorities; my need for a haircut is indicative of how cheap I am. Someone once characterized my shopping traits by calling me frugal. I corrected him and said “No, I’m cheap.”

The faithless fathoms of life

Christians who can’t let go of their problems, fearing that God will take them away and leave them with nothing negative to dwell on, might have trouble letting go of loneliness, old newspapers, ball point pens, shopping bags or empty pill bottles. They need something to envelope them; something that crowds out reality and isolates them from acquaintances who might express optimistic attitudes and healthier perspectives on life. A ball point pen collection or a pantry with a neat stack of shopping bags is not itself a qualification for faithlessness. But, there is often something visible that marks a faithless person other than the pure spiritual condition of their heart.

A person without faith (or minimal faith) can also be deeply prejudiced against those who exhibit strong faith, significant success or blessings. They believe that a lack of talent, wealth, health and ability is the trademark of a true Christian. They are distrustful of another person’s blessings, even doubting the reality of that person’s salvation. They might apply the human-contrived fairness principle and simply resent the achievements of others. This spiritual condition is similar to political socialism which states that no one person should experience something better or greater than others in their community.

People with severely limited faith are, in some ways, more lost than people without Christ. To know God and yet forbid Him to have influence in your life is one of the most deplorable spiritual states I know. After all, as Gloria Gaither once said, “if God made us, we ought to let him run us.”

Manifested faith

I’ve tried to define what faith is, both the garden variety we all need and the special spiritual gift God grants to some. I’ve rubbed a few readers the wrong way, perhaps because they identified with what I said about those who make an effort to limit their faith. For many, faith is threatening. For others, it is liberating.

God’s Word doesn’t explain why God chose to distribute spiritual gifts in a limited manner, anymore than we can explain any of the tough questions about the Christian life,

such as why some people suffer and others don't. Many people are blessed with more than one gift.

Some of the gifts identified in scripture very closely resemble normal traits. Who hasn't known a non-Christian who was hospitable beyond measure or who exhibited admirable speaking abilities? Both are shown in I Peter 4 as spiritual gifts, yet Paul clearly states that spiritual gifts are for Christians.

Does it matter if we can't tell if a friend's consistent exercise of wisdom is a normal trait or a spiritual gift? I don't think so. Furthermore, I believe that God just might bless someone with a particular gift to bring balance to that person's life. God designs us and our nature (which should not be confused with character or personality) to serve a certain purpose for His Kingdom. For some, that nature can be especially powerful (e.g., administration) and needs the balance of a contrasting gift (e.g., mercy).

God has absolutely blessed me with the gift of faith. It is nothing I could develop through any amount of discipline or determination. My normal traits lean toward doubt, suspicion and caution. So, being able to believe blindly without any doubt or hesitancy, through every circumstance, is definitely a God-given gift.

I also have abilities in administration, wisdom, serving, encouraging, giving, leadership and hospitality. Do I also have those gifts? Not necessarily. Most of those abilities I learned. I have even been in circumstances where I was able to discern spirits (I Cor. 12:10). However, I believe that God just opened a window into those circumstances as needed for specific moments, just as He will in isolated instances use someone in a healing or evangelization role when that is not a genuine gift.

Are there Christians without any spiritual gifts? That's another deeply theological issue that far too many people are willing to take a position on. It is made even more interesting by hints in scripture that the six lists of gifts I've already noted, are not fully inclusive. See Mat. 19:12 and I Cor. 7:7. That, together with the fact that these six lists don't exactly align, could suggest that there are still more gifts than those identified. Personally, I assume that every Christian has one or more spiritual gifts. However, I don't think it matters if I or anyone else takes a definitive position on the matter.

What is your gift?

Is it important for us to know what our gifts are? Perhaps. Many churches make a point of helping people identify their gifts. In my experience, no one had to help me do that. If I had never put a label on it or come to the place where I could write this treatise, would that have made any difference? Not likely. My faith (when I allow it to be) is impervious to doubt. And, it leaks out of me and encourages other people whether I'm aware of it or not. Just as my faith is somewhat beyond explanation, my personal experience of it is without need for definition. I don't exercise my faith, it exercises me. I don't control it, it controls me. I don't have to talk about it, it just functions.

I think more important than stepping through a process to identify your spiritual gift, is a deliberate decision to develop those other traits and abilities that share similarities with spiritual gifts. Let your spiritual gift function as God designed it, and work on those other abilities that will further fulfill your life's mission and redeem your existence. Decide to be a better friend, a more reliable teacher, a more devoted servant, a more sacrificial helper. Learn the proper way to be an encouragement (too often our poorly executed attempts to encourage people, backfire). Adopt a spirit of giving, which requires that we learn to do so with the proper motives.

A spiritual gift *from* God is wonderful. Your gift *to* God is your spirit of openness to be molded, refined and leveraged by Him for the fullness of His kingdom; its fullness by souls.