
Spiritual Gifts and their Challenges in Church Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Leadership in the church is rooted in the enabling power of the Holy Spirit couples with proper understanding of human development psychology. Most time, church leadership have engaged in various discussions on the Spiritual gifts more than its practical exploration among believers. Hence, this paper is set to unravelled biblical truth about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and discusses challenges confronting its proper administration in church leadership. Using books and journals, the writer discovered that Spiritual gifts are unique abilities and endowments given by the Holy Spirit to members of the Christian community to help build and strengthen the Church. More so, some key reasons, supported by scripture and theological insights, as to why one should exercise their spiritual gifts include church edification, personal faith development, and God's glorification. The paper also discovered that challenges such as misunderstanding and misapplication of gifts, pride and spiritual elitism, lack of accountability and abuse of power, Integration into church life and leadership structure, neglect of charismatic gifts, division in the church, and differences in doctrinal beliefs regarding spiritual gifts can create factions within a church community. The paper concludes that embracing and using these gifts appropriately, and understanding the challenges of their usage will aid Christian leaders to cultivate an environment where individuals feel valued and equipped to contribute their unique talents. This will enhance church's overall mission and deepens its members' spiritual growth.

INTRODUCTION

Christian leadership differs from secular leadership and it therefore requires more than human abilities because the relevance of divine equipping cannot be over emphasized. In fact, Ishola in Ishola and Oyeniyi (2024) asserts that “leadership is spiritual” (28). Ishola implies that there is a spiritual dimension to leadership. For Christians therefore, spiritual gifts are part of the spirituality of leadership which Christian leaders cannot afford to ignore if their leadership would be optimally effective to God’s glory. The gifts of the Spirit in the Christian context is a pointer to the indispensable giver of the gifts, The Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11). Based on the lists and definitions of spiritual gifts in the concluding part of his book, one could tell Peter Wagner’s definition of spiritual gifts as those special abilities given by God to some members of the Body of Christ for edification and growth of the Church (Wagner 1979,259).

Effective Christian leadership is therefore rooted in the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, who distributes spiritual gifts to believers for the edification of the Church. Apostle Paul emphasizes the vital role of spiritual gifts in Christian leadership as he writes to inform the Corinthian church about it (1 Cor. 12:1). In the light of this, this manual discusses the connection between spiritual gifts and Christian leadership in terms of: Biblical foundation for spiritual gifts; types of spiritual gifts and Christian leadership roles; exercising spiritual gifts, and possible challenges of spiritual gifts.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Spiritual gifts are unique abilities and endowments given by the Holy Spirit to members of the Christian community to help build and strengthen the Church. Leaders’ understanding of these gifts would improve their lives and of those they lead (Ishola 2022, 21). These gifts are many, but to understand why

these gifts are important, it is needful to learn what the Bible says about them and how they are used in the church. These gifts are spiritual gifts because they are “spiritual” (1 Cor. 12:1). According to Kittel and Friedrich (1964), the Greek for “spiritual” gifts simply reads “*ton pneumatikon*, ” meaning “things characterized or controlled by the Spirit.” Some translations interpret this to mean spiritual persons.

The emphasis that the gifts are given by the Spirit of God is repeated throughout 1 Corinthians 12. In verse 4, the word “gifts” is translated from the Greek word *charisma*. The root word *charis* means “grace.” The word *Pneumatikon* suggests that spiritual gifts are things characterized by the Holy Spirit and *charisma* tells us that they are gifts of God's grace. It is typically understood then that these are gifts of God's grace and not something we earn or deserve. (Rom. 12:6; 1 Pet. 4:10). The Bible is not also silent about the purpose for these Spiritual Gifts, but it clearly states that they are meant for “Services.”

Paul in 1 Cor. 12:5 uses the Greek term *diakonia*, which translates to “service.” This is the same word used for “deacon,” and is translated to mean “servant.” Thus spiritual gifts are not to be kept to oneself, but are services to be performed. Their primary function is to serve, “but in all and in everyone it is the same God at work” (1 Cor. 12:6). Paul in verse 6 uses the Greek word *energon* from which we get our English word “energy” also meaning work (Newman 2007,457).

Types of Spiritual Gifts and Christian Leadership Roles

Spiritual gifts are given to every Christian, especially leaders, regardless of background or status and the manifestation of these gifts is for the common good

(1Cor. 12:7). The Bible provides a clear foundation for spiritual gifts, outlining their nature, purpose, and intended use (Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:4-11, and Eph. 4:11). Spiritual gifts may be categorized into vocal; service, and power gifts. Spiritual gifts can also be categorized into motivation, ministry and manifestation gifts (Ishola, Class Note 2024). This manual uses categories such as motivation, ministry and manifestation gifts as it places leaders having such gifts into one or more of the three categories. These three categories provide a broad framework for understanding how different gifts operate within the Christian community.

Motivation Gifts

Ministry gifts are focused on silent acts of service and practical assistance within-the body of Christ. The benefits of these gifts are however not limited to the body of Christ. These include gifts of service, teaching, encouraging, giving and mercy which are briefly discussed as follows:

- **Service (or Helps):** This gift involves performing tasks or services that assist the church and its leaders. Those with this gift often work behind the scenes, supporting others so that the church can function smoothly (Rom. 12:7).
- **Teaching:** The gift of teaching involves the ability to explain and apply Scripture in a way that helps others grow in their faith. Teachers are responsible for conveying sound doctrine and helping others understand the core beliefs of Christianity (Romans 12:7).
- **Encouraging:** Often paired with teaching, exhortation involves and motivating others to live out their faith. This gift builds up the body of Christ by providing counsel and urging fellow believers toward spiritual growth (Romans 12:8).
- **Giving:** The gift of giving refers to the ability and willingness to contribute

material resources generously, without seeking recognition or reward. This gift is often exercised in a way that meets the practical or physical needs of others and furthers the work of the Church (Rom. 12:8).

- Mercy: Those with the gift of mercy are uniquely sensitive to others' needs and sufferings. This gift enables individuals to show compassion and care in tangible ways, such as helping the sick, the poor, or the grieving (Rom. 12:8).

Ministry Gifts (Ephesians 4:11)

Christian leadership is deeply rooted in the understanding of spiritual gifts. Leaders in the Church are often recognized based on the gifts God has given them and their willingness to use those gifts for the benefit of others. The Bible provides several leadership roles which are more attached to the ministry gifts that are crucial for the functioning of the Church.

a. Apostles: "The role of the apostle is to plant churches, spread the Gospel, and establish the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. In the early Church, apostles were those who had seen the risen Christ and were commissioned by Him. Modern-day apostles are considered visionary leaders who help to expand the Church's reach and establish new ministries (Eph. 4:11) ..." (Fee 1994, 32). More roles of Apostles are: Church Planting (establishes new churches); evangelizing (Spreads the Gospel); teaching (educates believers); leading (Guides and directs); missionary (expands God's kingdom); and et cetera.

b. Prophets: Prophets are closely tied to the gift of prophecy. Prophets provide insight into God's will for the Church and are often used by God to warn, encourage, or correct His people. Their role is vital in keeping the Church aligned with God's purposes (Grudem 1994, 56). More roles of prophets include: Foretelling (predicts

future events); preaching (proclaims God's message); Intercession (prays for others); guides (provides spiritual direction); warning (warns of danger or judgment); encouraging (uplifts and motivates believers).

c. Evangelists: “Evangelists are gifted in sharing the Gospel and leading others to faith in Christ. They are passionate about outreach and are often instrumental in bringing non-believers into the Church. The role of the evangelist is to spread the message of salvation and to inspire others to do the same (Stott 1979, 40). Furthermore, the roles of Evangelists are: to spread the gospel; leading others to Christ; teaches the Bible, mentors believers, fulfills the great commission and et cetera.

d. Pastors (Shepherds): “Pastors are responsible for the spiritual care and guidance of the congregation. They are called to nurture, protect, and lead the flock, much like a shepherd tends to his sheep. Pastors often exercise the gifts of teaching, exhortation, and leadership, ensuring that their congregation grows in spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:11) ...” (MacArthur 1991, 72). Pastors serve as spiritual leaders; biblical teacher; soul caregiver; community builder; intercessor, and et cetera.

e. Teachers: “Teachers are those who are gifted in explaining the Scriptures and helping others understand the deeper truths of the faith. The role of the teacher is to ground believers in sound doctrine and help them apply biblical principles to their lives. This role is crucial for the ongoing discipleship and spiritual growth of the Church (Ephesians 4:11) ...” (Piper 2003, 55). Teachers also impart knowledge; foster understanding; develop skills; and et cetera.

Manifestation Gifts

Manifestation gifts are often easily seen at work once in use by the believer as it usually takes them to the limelight. This includes healing, miracles, faith, leadership, wisdom, knowledge, discernment of spirits, prophecy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues which are briefly discussed as follows:

- Healing: The gift of healing involves God working through

a person to restore physical, emotional, or spiritual health to another individual. This gift was commonly seen in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles (1 Cor. 12:9).

- **Miracles:** The ability to perform signs and wonders that demonstrate God's power. This gift is often exercised to confirm the message of the Gospel and to glorify God (1 Cor. 12:10).
- **Faith:** While all Christians are called to have faith, the gift of faith refers to a special ability to trust God in difficult times and to inspire others to do same. The gift often accompanies other gifts like healing or miracles (1 Cor. 12:9).
- **Leadership (or Administration):** This gift involves the ability to guide and oversee the activities of the church. Leaders with this gift are able to organize resources, people, and tasks in a way that fosters the growth and mission of the church (1 Cor. 12:28).
- **Wisdom:** This gives ability to understand solution to problems, a godly way out of a situation like the case of Joseph's suggested solution to Pharaoh's dream (Gen. 41). It also helps to understand God's revealed plan. It enables one to understand how a given knowledge may be best applied to specific needs arising (Acts 6:3, 10) (Wagner 1979,199).
- **Knowledge:** This is manifested in the ability to discover, accumulate, analyze and clarify information and ideas that are pertinent to the growth and well being of the Church (Wagner 1979,195).
- **Discerning of Spirits:** This gift helps to know which spirit is behind a person's manifestations thereby recognizing spiritual truths about a person or an act suggestive of being influenced by a spirit (Acts 16:16-18).
- **Prophecy:** This gift involves receiving and delivering a message from God. The message often includes elements of encouragement, correction, or guidance. It can be predictive (foretelling future events) or declarative (forth-

telling God's will): In 1 Corinthians 14:3, Paul notes that the one who prophesies "speaks to people for strengthening, encouraging, and comforting."

- Speaking in Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues: The ability to speak in languages unknown to the speaker (tongues) and the ability to interpret such utterances for the edification of the church (1 Cor. 12:10). These gifts are considered miraculous and are meant to point people to the power of God.

Exercising Spiritual Gifts

On the matter of exercising spiritual gifts, two important things are to be considered, which is why one exercise spiritual gifts and the other is "how spiritual gifts should be exercised." In the book of I Timothy 4:14-15, Apostle Paul gave Timothy the reason to exercise his spiritual gifts. Other theological scholar also gave their views on this matter. Exercising spiritual gifts is a vital aspect of Christian discipleship and community life, as it serves to build up both the individual and the Church. Below are some key reasons, supported by scripture and theological insights, as to why one should exercise their spiritual gifts.

Edification of the Church: One primary reason for exercising spiritual gifts is the edification of the Church. The spiritual building up of the community. Paul, in his letters, emphasizes that spiritual gifts are given not for personal glory but for the common good (Carson, 1987.) Ephesians 4:11-12(NIV): So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Theologically, this reflects the idea that the body of Christ (the Church) needs each member to operate in their gifting's for its maturity, unity, and growth (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

Glorifying God: Another important reason to use spiritual gifts is to glorify God. When spiritual gifts are exercised faithfully, they reveal God's power and presence in the world, which leads

others to worship and acknowledge Him. 1 Peter 4:10-11 (NIV): Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. This passage highlights that using spiritual gifts brings glory to God and demonstrates His manifold grace (Holy Bible).

Fulfilment of Individual Purpose: Exercising spiritual gifts also allows individuals to fulfil. The specific calling and purpose God has for their lives. The Bible teaches that believers are given different gifts in order to serve in specific ways that align with God's design for their life. Romans 12:4-6 (NIV): "For 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, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. This affirms that each believer has a unique role in God's plan, and exercising their gifts allows them to live out their divine purpose.

Strengthening Personal Faith: Using spiritual gifts can also strengthen the believer's own faith. As individuals use their gifts, they witness the power of God working through them, which deepens their trust and reliance on Him. 2 Timothy 1:6-7 (NIV) (Holy Bible) . For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. This encourages believers to boldly develop and use their spiritual gifts, as it enhances their spiritual growth and reliance on God.

Contribution to Mission and Evangelism: Spiritual gifts often play a crucial role in mission and evangelism. Through the gifts of teaching, evangelism, prophecy, and others, believers can effectively spread the gospel and expand God's Kingdom. It

enables the Christian or the Church to be an effective witness even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8 NIV).

HOW CHRISTIAN LEADERS SHOULD EXERCISE AND EXEMPLIFY SPIRITUAL GIFTS EFFECTIVELY

Exercising spiritual gifts effectively requires a combination of spiritual discernment, practical application, and a heart aligned with God's purposes. Christian leaders should note the following principles for exercising spiritual gifts effectively:

Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual gifts are empowered by the Holy Spirit, and one cannot effectively use their gifts without His guidance. It is through prayer, meditation, and sensitivity to the Spirit's leading that one learn how and when to use one's gifts effectively. 1 Cor. 2:10-11: "The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." By seeking the Holy Spirit, believers gain wisdom and insight about their specific role in God's plan and how best to use their gifts for building others.

Spiritual gifts must be nurtured and developed over time, much like natural talents. This involves studying the Word of God, learning from others with similar gifts, and stepping out in faith to practice those gifts. Paul urged Timothy to develop his spiritual gifts. 2 Tim. 1:6: "... I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you..." The metaphor of "fanning into flame" suggests that gifts can grow stronger and more effectively when actively cultivated. Similarly, reading, studying, and receiving mentorship from others help believers refine their use of spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts should be operated in love. Love is essential to the effective use of spiritual gifts. Paul emphasizes this, reminding believers that without love, the exercise of any gift is meaningless (1 Cor. 13). The aim of all gifts is to serve others,

and this can only be accomplished through genuine love and concern for others. Also in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (Stott, 2006.). Spiritual gifts, when exercised in love, achieve their intended purpose of edifying the Church and glorifying God.

Be humble and depend on God. Pride can distort the use of spiritual gifts, turning them into means for self-promotion rather than serving others. Effective Use of spiritual gifts requires humility and a dependence on God's grace. Spiritual gifts are given, not earned, and should be used with a recognition that all power and effectiveness come from God (J.D., 2018). 1 Peter 5:5-6: "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.'" When a believer maintains an attitude of humility, such believer ensures that their gifts are used to glorify God rather than themselves.

Exercise the gifts in the community. Spiritual gifts are most effective when exercised within the context of the local church or faith community. The Church is likened to a body with many parts, and each part has a function that contributes to the overall health of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). The effective exercise of spiritual gifts involves cooperation, accountability, and mutual encouragement among believers. Ephesians 4:16: "From him the whole body holds together by every supporting ligament, grows...as each part does its work." This passage emphasizes that every believer's contribution, using their spiritual gifts, helps the Church grow. Believers receive feedback, encouragement, and correction, which sharpens their spiritual gifts.

Use gifts in alignment with scripture. While spiritual gifts are diverse, they must always be exercised in line with biblical principles and under the authority of Scripture. Using spiritual gifts in ways that contradict God's Word leads to confusion, error, and division. Paul instructs believers to test prophecies and discern what is good (1 Thess. 5:21-22). Also in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for

teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Scripture provides boundaries and guidance, ensuring that spiritual gifts are exercised in ways that are consistent with God’s will and His purposes for the Church.

CHALLENGES OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Spiritual gifts are intended for growth, unity, and effectiveness within the Church. Their application in Christian leadership can present several challenges. Understanding these challenges is crucial for leaders seeking to be faithful and effective. Christian leadership should therefore watch the following challenges:

Misunderstanding and Misapplication of Gifts. One significant challenge is the misunderstanding and misapplication of spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are meant to function within the body of Christ. Misunderstanding this context can result in individuals using their gifts in ways that are self-serving rather than community-oriented. For instance, a person with the gift of teaching might dominate discussions, overshadowing others and leading to an unhealthy church environment (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2009). Also, a leader might emphasize prophetic gifts while undervaluing gifts like helps. Leaders should watch against an imbalance that can create hierarchical view where certain gifts are viewed more important than others, contrary to Paul’s teaching that all gifts are necessary part of the body (1 Cor. 12:21- 26).

Pride and Spiritual Elitism: One of the most significant pitfalls of spiritual gifts is the temptation towards pride and spiritual elitism. Spiritual gifts can sometimes lead individuals to develop a sense of superiority over others. Paul addresses this issue in 1 Corinthians 12, where he emphasizes that love should be the guiding principle behind the use of spiritual gifts. The Corinthian church struggled with divisions and factions,

partly due to the misuse of gifts and a sense of superiority among those with more visible or dramatic gifts (Gordon, 1987). When individuals recognize their gifts, they may develop a sense of spiritual superiority over others, which contradicts the essence of servant leadership. This attitude can create division and foster an unhealthy competitive spirit within the church (Gangel & Benson, 1998).

Lack of Accountability and Abuse of Power: Another critical challenge in the exercise of spiritual gifts is the potential for a lack of accountability and abuse of power. Leaders who exercise their gifts without appropriate accountability can fall into the trap of using their position to exert control or influence for personal gain. This issue is

particularly pertinent in charismatic movements where the exercise of gifts like prophecy and healing can sometimes lack sufficient oversight. The New Testament provides guidelines for accountability and correction. For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 advises believers to test prophecies and hold fast to what is good, indicating the need for discernment and oversight in the use of spiritual gifts. The absence of accountability can lead to manipulative behavior or false teachings, damaging the integrity and unity of the Church.

Integration into Church Life and Leadership Structures: Integrating spiritual gifts into the existing structures and practices of church leadership can be complex. Many church systems and leadership models were established before a strong emphasis on spiritual gifts, and adapting these structures to fully utilize spiritual gifts can be challenging. Leaders may struggle with how to incorporate diverse gifts into traditional roles and responsibilities (Vanco, 2022). Paul's letters offer some guidance on this issue (Eph. 4:11-13). Leaders must balance the use of spiritual gifts with organizational needs and traditions while fostering an environment where all members can contribute their gifts meaningfully.

Neglect of Non-Charismatic Gifts: Another significant pitfall is the neglect of non charismatic gifts, such as administration, teaching, and service. While charismatic gifts often attract attention and admiration, non-charismatic gifts are equally vital yet frequently overlooked. Ephesians 4:11-12 highlights that Christ gave a variety of gifts to equip His people for works of service. When leaders prioritize charismatic gifts, they may inadvertently diminish the contributions of those with administrative or supportive roles. This can lead to burnout among those who feel their efforts are unrecognized and can create an imbalance in church operations. The neglect of non-charismatic gifts can hinder the church's overall functionality.

Misuse of spiritual

gifts cannot be prevented by “forbidding” certain gifts. Misuse can only be prevented by demonstrating creative ways to properly use each gift so that it benefits others, builds up the body of Christ, and brings glory to God (Schwarz 2001,94).

Division within the Church: A further pitfall associated with spiritual gifts in leadership is the potential for division within the church. Differing perspectives on the nature and application of spiritual gifts can lead to schisms among congregants.

Differences in doctrinal beliefs regarding spiritual gifts can create factions within a church community: For instance, congregations that emphasize the continuation of miraculous gifts may find themselves at odds with those who believe such gifts ceased with the apostolic age (Wayne, 1994). This division can fracture relationships and hinder collective mission efforts. To counteract division, church leaders must value unity and mutual respect.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed spiritual gifts and Christian leadership bordering on biblical foundation for spiritual gifts

and types of spiritual gifts. It also discusses how to exercise spiritual gifts and the accompanying challenges that Christian leaders should watch against. Embracing and using these gifts appropriately, and understanding the challenges of their use in view, will aid Christian leaders to cultivate an environment where individuals feel valued and equipped to contribute their unique talents. This enhances the church's overall mission and deepens its members' spiritual growth.

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