

One of the things that we usually do not really consider other than superficially is the nature of spiritual gifts. We all know there are gifts of the Holy Spirit as Paul writes about them in 1 Corinthians 12. These are gifts that are bestowed on believers by God for the common good of all. Yet who can we say has these gifts? I've missed out the passage on parts of the body as we recognise that as a fellowship we all need each other, love each other and have different gifts and talents to offer Jesus. Chris has read the passage, but keep your Bibles open there – the Word of God is living and active.

1 Corinthians 12 *Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to dumb idols. ³Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. ⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.*

Then continuing from verses 27 to 31 *²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.*

Then there are the gifts listed in Romans 12, but are these of the same order as those in I Corinthians 12? The only ones common to both passages are the gifts of prophesying and teaching. The others, which seem less "spiritual" are different.

Romans 12 *⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.*

Then we have the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which are behaviours rather than spiritual gifts. These are revealed in Galatians 5: 22-23

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

These are the gifts that reveal what Holy Spirit can do.

What is the difference between these gifts and our natural talents? We inherit certain parts of our character, abilities, intellect and talents and through life develop certain parts of our character, abilities, intellect and talents. What we want to do, we can learn to do; but how far we get is determined in the natural by the willpower, the time, and the opportunities we have, to learn how to do what we want to do. As human beings created by God, we acknowledge He has some hand in what shapes our character and the talents we have. Our parentage, our environment, and our own decisions build our character and develop the talents we have. Being good at something or being willing to do something comes from two directions: (1) our natural talents and desires, and (2) what God is doing in our lives – whether consciously or unconsciously.

God is supernatural, and He uses men who have no faith in Him, and men who could be wicked, to do things that affect the destinies of mankind. For example, the Persian kings who conquered Israel seem on the one hand to be cruel tyrants keen on conquest and expanding their empire, and on the other hand quite reasonable men who recognised the wisdom of Daniel, who allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to go back to their homelands, and who

understood right and wrong in the case of Esther's pleas for her people. Pontius Pilate gets a bad press, but he was used to enable Jesus to do what God needed Him to do. Putting ourselves in Pilate's situation, what he did was entirely rational for someone having to keep the peace with limited military resources in a foreign land full of religious troublemakers. His worldly wisdom was no different from that of Caiaphas who said that it was better for one man to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed. God's purpose had to be fulfilled using the men on the ground to do the deeds required. At the crucifixion we see human talents and human wisdom being used by God, while none of those making worldly decisions had any inkling that they were being used by God. This is in complete contrast to the spiritual gifts from Holy Spirit where the recipients are fully aware of the supernatural origin of them.

I have gone on a bit about the difference between (1) what we can do in our own strength - using our natural talents, what we have learnt in our lives and what we know can do without any help from God - and (2) what we can do only in God's strength, none of which we can gain other than by the grace of God, usually unexpectedly as a **complete surprise**, and **without training**.

The "without training" part may come to you as a surprise. There are so many books and courses on training for Christians, that one might think, that all you have to do is diligently read and get trained up. If that were so, the Church would be thriving and growing, people would be saved daily, miracles and healings would be commonplace, and pretty much everyone would by now be a Christian. BUT, and this is huge BUT, why isn't there some great outpouring of signs, wonders and daily large numbers of people accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour, resulting from all these resources available to the Church? Brother Yun in 1970s and 1980s China led many to faith in Jesus with scraps of the Bible because the Bible was banned in China... just having a Bible meant imprisonment if discovered. There were no training manuals, no courses and Chinese disciples led one or more to Christ every week because they were doing what the Word of God said! The underground church grew like wildfire as the people had a hunger for meaning in their lives that is found in Jesus Christ. The same happened in the Roman Empire in the first few hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus without any of the resources available to us today.

Let me explain what I mean. As I see it, and some of you may have other views, the state of the Church has been a matter of concern for many years for most Christians. For example, our denomination celebrates 50 years of its existence and is a shadow of its former self. That is much the same for most mainstream denominations. To overcome this, I am so glad that Bernard is using the experiences of Dunamis to encourage us to submit to the Holy Spirit more and more in our lives and eagerly desire to hear from His Spirit when we take the time to listen and be aware of His presence.

Galatians 5:13-17 ¹³You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' ¹⁵If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶So I say, **live by the Spirit**, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want."

The question often asked of Christians is how are they different from the rest of society? Is our behaviour any different from other people? A lot of you will say yes, we are different: we're kind, generous, forgiving, and loving towards others. So are many non-Christians. We don't swear: so do many non-Christians. The old adage is "if you were accused of being a disciple of Jesus, is there enough evidence to convict you?"

What is the essential difference between Christians and everyone else? Is it not "**living by the Spirit**" as Paul writes in Galatians 5:16? If so, what gifts of the Spirit do we have?

We can eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, but what would our motivation be to desire them? Being a disciple of Jesus is all about submission and surrender: complete submission and surrender to Jesus by obeying all He has told us in the Word of God. Wanting to prophesy won't happen unless one is willing to be merely a vessel for the Holy Spirit to speak to the church. Wanting to be a healer won't happen unless one is willing merely to be a vessel for Holy Spirit to use to touch people He has chosen to touch. The rarity of these gifts in the Church in the Western world today is due, in my view, to the egotism of every human being: that little part of us that wants to be

recognised as someone used by God. As soon as that raises its head, the gift, if given at all, is likely to be taken away because God will not share His glory with anyone. **Let me repeat that: God will not share His glory with anyone.** Pride is a sin that affects us all. It was the cause of Lucifer's rebellion. Those with natural talents and good character have been blessed by God with these abilities, whether they are believers saved by Jesus or the unsaved. They will appear to be good people – something these days everyone claims to be – but still sinners who will make mistakes displeasing to God. They are people like us... like me... like you. We Christians are trying to be disciples, **but inside are we really submitted to God whole heartedly, or just on a part time basis? There is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, and we all need to be built up and encouraged BUT...** another BUT, are we being truthful and realistic about our relationship with Jesus? Do we really love God, and do we really love our neighbours as ourselves? To do so involves sacrifice of our time and money: that means our time to do what we would prefer to do is eaten away by serving the Lord. **Is this a commitment too far for many of us?** How many of our neighbours are unknown to us, so how can we love them? Does getting to know neighbours or anyone in need expose us to an unknown journey with an unknown destination if we really love them, which we may find too burdensome, and so the easier route is not to get too close... almost walk on by on the other side. I do, when it is apparent it might spoil my day, my week, the rest of my life even. I fall short – I have my “what would Jesus do” bracelet to remind me, but I know Jesus would heal the sick, whether physically or mentally, and I cannot do that, though it would be great if I could and all of you could. The NHS would be superfluous if Christians healed folk.

Eagerly desiring gifts of the Spirit has to come with the right motivation, so that whatever is done, is done to exalt God, give Him the glory, and with grateful thanks that no reward will be expected. As soon as we expect a reward or recognition for what we have done, we're sharing the glory that belongs to God alone. Wanting to be thanked and praised for something God expects us to do as disciples is a very human response. Throughout the Gospels very few who were healed thanked Jesus, and He didn't expect to receive thanks or complain that He wasn't thanked, but gave God the glory when He was thanked. This level of humility has been something that has been so hard to achieve as when we do something good, we feel good about what we've done and whether we keep our thoughts to ourselves or not, smugness, pride, self-righteousness creeps in and the Kairos moment is lost, and may not return without repentance and recognition of where we've tried to share with ourselves the glory that belongs to God alone. **God gives his grace to the humble and opposes the proud.**

Humility is not easily practiced... it's easy to be humble when our pride is unaffected by preferring others above ourselves or submitting to others when our pride knows there is little cost. It's another matter when being humble really hurts our pride and natural talents – when we see stupidity or inability to grasp what we see as pretty obvious, or ignorance from those with fewer talents. Being humble involves being patient, kind, gentle and self-controlled. God probably finds us as stupid, ignorant and unable to grasp what is pretty obvious... and yet He loves us and wants the best for us, with all our limitations. If I am frustrated or you are frustrated with others, imagine how frustrated God must be with His creation: 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.'

Back to pride, the sin that is so often hidden, but comes out from time to time. Jesus says in **Matthew 6** '*Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.* ²*So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.* ³*But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,* ⁴*so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

The attitude we have towards Jesus in part determines His ability to use us for His glory. God is sovereign, as I have said earlier, He can use any one to do His will. However, when we eagerly seek spiritual gifts which we know will edify the church, which will heal the sick, which will comfort the lonely and bereaved, which will encourage disciples to persevere and lead the lost into the kingdom of God, we have to understand that to be used by God requires us to follow His ways, praise and glorify Him regardless of circumstances and be open to whatever unexpectedly and surprisingly happens as a consequence of seeking Him with all our heart, soul and strength.

I have wondered, and no doubt many of you have wondered as well, why these major spiritual gifts are a rarity in churches in the Western world. The answer I think is that few eagerly desire them with the right motive.

Jesus says to His disciples in Mark 16: 15-18 *‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. ¹⁷And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on people who are ill, and they will get well.’*

If the signs Jesus says that will accompany the preaching of His Word were there, would more people notice the reality of the supernatural power of God? The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles demonstrate the supernatural nature of Jesus. The Church grew because people recognised the reality of the supernatural, and the faith of its believers. As the centuries passed and the Church became a state religion, so also did the supernatural element decline. The same happened in Israel where the supernatural power of God was obvious as Moses led the people out of Egypt and into the promised land. From time to time, Israel was saved when God intervened. The temple was filled with the glory of God when dedicated by Solomon. Elijah and Elisha performed miracles. But the leaders of the people no longer expected God to do what He could, but among the common people the hunger was there as the crowds followed John the Baptist and Jesus. Today, many Christians in the West have no expectation that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit have a place in their lives or the life of the church. **Eagerly desiring these gifts** is not seen as a priority or even a possibility. **Is that where we are?**

Bernard has been introducing us to Dunamis where the focus is on submission and surrender to Holy Spirit and allowing Him to use us to glorify God. The Kairos moments are times when God speaks or does something which will edify the church, glorify Him, and at the same time encourage or heal us. Every supernatural encounter encourages us because it makes us aware of the reality of God. When His Holy Spirit touches us, we are uplifted and encouraged. Many have great faith and never encounter the supernatural, so I’m not saying that we need supernatural spiritual experiences to grow as Christians, but eagerly desiring what gifts are available should be part of our walk with Jesus. Rejecting the supernatural is what the world does because it is outside what science tells us is possible, yet belief in Jesus requires acceptance of what science cannot prove or disprove. After all, Jesus was born from a virgin, died and is alive today, and His Holy Spirit can dwell in billions of believers’ minds. Jesus has a consciousness, or awareness, of every human being on the planet. He is waiting for every man, woman and child to accept Him as Lord and Saviour. **That is mind blowingly awesome.**

In Romans 10, Paul writes to us about the Israelites, God’s chosen people, but what is said about them applies to us. There is so much in this passage, but it is the Gospel. Let me read to you Romans 10: 1-21

10 *Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ²For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. ⁴Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

Today those in Parliament, the media, education, the professions, the leaders in all walks of life and who might be called “opinion formers” do not know the righteousness of God and seek to establish their own rules for living, their own righteousness and justify themselves as good people. Self-righteousness is unloving smugness wrapped in the pride of wanting to be seen as caring and tolerant... just like the Pharisees with their loud prayers and ostentatious giving to the poor and needy, while ignoring their families and walking by on the other side. Self-righteousness is unloving and uncaring when care is outsourced to carers and other people and it’s intolerant when what is disagreed with is dismissed or worse, cannot be allowed to be said. Paul continues in Romans 10:5 onwards

⁵ *Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: ‘The person who does these things will live by them.’ ⁶But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or “Who will descend into the deep?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: ⁹**if you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. ¹¹As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in Him will never be put to shame.’ ¹²For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ¹⁴How, then, can they call on the one***

they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' ¹⁶ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' ¹⁷ **Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.** ¹⁸ But I ask: did they not hear? Of course they did: 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' ¹⁹ Again I ask: did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, 'I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.' ²⁰ And Isaiah boldly says, 'I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.' ²¹ But concerning Israel he says, '**All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.**'

For "the Israelites", we can read the British, the Europeans, the Americans, all the people in the lands where the Gospel has been preached and is increasingly rejected. Our mission field is here in Kent.

My message for the new year is that we eagerly seek the spiritual gifts available to us from God and be realistic in recognising where we are in our walk with Jesus and where we need to travel towards to grow in grace, mercy, and humility. Self-examination is hard because of our pride in believing either that we are OK, or believing we aren't OK but can do little about that. **None of us is OK! We may be saints who sin from time to time, but who among us is fully submitted and surrendered to Christ in the way Paul and the Apostles were? I'm not. We all need more of God's Spirit dwelling in us – I need more of Him and you need more of Him - so that His Spirit can work His will through us and release us to accomplish more than we could ever imagine, if only we submitted our will to His will.**

Let's pray - Father God, You know us so well and yet You still love us with all our weaknesses, sinfulness and disobediences. We confess before You that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. As we begin this new year, please reveal to us Your will for us. You know our abilities and limitations, and You know how we can be used by You if only we knew Your will. Would You in Your great love towards us, draw us closer to You in the coming days and months.

We praise You Lord for Your mercy and grace. Open our eyes and ears to Your Word and Spirit. Amen