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# Lord, Make Me an Instrument

ENERGIZED FOR SERVICE

BY ROY NADEN

Last Sunday morning I tuned to a church service on television to hear Timothy Brown, the president of Western Theological Seminary. His sermon inspired me.

Some years ago, Timothy had in his congregation an elderly missionary who had served for years in the Arabian Gulf and had become dearly loved by the Middle Easterners she served. She became so thoroughly one of them, they gave her an alternate name. Rather than using her given name, Cordelia, they called her, "Princess." And when in her advancing years she returned home to America, the congregation where Timothy served treated her like royalty.

Near the end of her life, Cordelia had abdominal surgery. The day of the operation, her pastor took the Dan Ryan Expressway to Chicago and went to Cordelia's room in Rush-Presbyterian-St. Lukes Medical Center. When he walked into the room, she was asleep. He waited. After some time, Cordelia opened one eye, but quickly closed it again. Later, she opened both eyes and said softly, "Good morning, Pastor," and followed the greeting with the words: "I saw Jesus of Nazareth this morning." Timothy could not help but be startled by those words, but was well aware she was coming out from the effects of an anesthetic. So he gently asked, "What did He look like?"

She began the description in a predictable way. "He had dark, deep-set eyes," she said. And Timothy thought to himself, *That's how we all imagine Jesus looked. After all, He was a Middle Easterner. No surprise there.* Then she continued, "He had long, tapered fingers—soft to the touch." That was a little unusual, for we tend to think of "carpenter Jesus" with hands calloused from the daily use of saw, chisel and plane. But with no more than the shortest break, Cordelia added, "His brow was furrowed, and He was perspiring freely." That struck a familiar chord, and Timothy immediately thought of Christ on the cross. But her next words shattered that image: "He wore a little green scull cap, spectacles and had a stethoscope around his neck."

Timothy smiled down at his friend and said, "You're describing your surgeon!" And Cordelia responded confidently: "That's how Jesus came to me today."

How true: When God has a ministry to do in this world, He usually chooses people as His instruments.

To do His work in your neighborhood, He chooses you; in mine, He chooses me.

Long after the sermon ended, I found my thoughts drifting back to Cordelia, and the privileged role men and women play as God's instruments influencing those with whom we come in contact.

It brought to mind The Association of Adventist Women, which this year named two amazing Adventist Women of the Year: one a sportsperson (that's a first), the other a church administrator. Mary Whipple was the coxswain when America's Women's 8 won the 2000-meter event in the Beijing Olympics. She continues as coxswain in the rowing program at the University of Washington. What an amazing opportunity it is for her to be His instrument to a handful of young women whose lives are preoccupied with the sport of rowing. Audray Johnson, now more than 70 years of age, is director of four departments in the Southeastern California Conference, and one of a growing number of women in North America who has been commissioned to the Gospel ministry by her conference. In her work in Family Ministries, Audray has been God's instrument in healing numberless families, and the encouragement of many ministers who have been called to nurture some of their members through their family traumas.

Whoever you are, wherever you live, whatever you do from day to day, you are also called to be His instruments in your sphere of influence whether it be with a few, like Mary, or with many, like Audray.

Which brings us to the topic on which I was asked to write

this article—spiritual gifts. Nearly 30 years ago this theme became part of the focus of my attention in preparing a course in the Theological Seminary, and it inaugurated a decade of research—including several doctoral dissertations. Some of the results were quite academic, but the most important findings I found to be both intriguing and reassuring.

### THREE PREEMINENT BIBLE PASSAGES

In three of his letters, the apostle Paul explains: first, how to prepare ourselves to receive the Spirit's gifts; second, the purpose of these gifts; and third, the process by which we receive and use them.



In Romans 12, we learn that preparation on our part means to give ourselves to God, without reservation, as completely as if we were about to become one of the sacrifices placed on the Altar of Burnt Offering in the Old Testament Sanctuary courtyard. We read: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1 NIV). Then the chapter continues by naming many of the Spirit’s gifts through which we can be His instruments to bless others.

In Ephesians 4, Paul details the purpose of spiritual gifts in God’s great scheme of things. It is to nurture into maturity all that take the step of preparation described in Romans 12, and to make them more effective instruments in nurturing others—both inside and outside the church. We read: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and 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 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11–13, NIV).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul notes three steps in the process by which the Spirit’s gifts vitalize the ministry of the members of Christ’s body.

First, he references the gifts themselves, these “gifts of grace” bestowed from the overflowing hands of the Holy Spirit.

Next is a reference to the great variety of gifts. And there is need for a great variety in order for the whole range of human needs to be met. As we explore all the gifts the apostle names at the end of this chapter, we see they fall into two main categories: gifts to nurture those who have committed their lives to God, and gifts of outreach to those who have not yet made that commitment.

And third, as we begin to sense how we have been gifted to be His instruments, God expects us to use those gifts in ministry, blessing the lives we touch. The word Paul uses to describe this implementation is the one from which we get the English word “energy.” And with the realization that God has gifted us, we become “energized” to use our gifts in ministry.

We are not meant to be naval-gazing Christians, wasting time pondering what we might do or admiring our gifts in a way that promotes pride, but rather the Spirit energizes us to be God’s instruments blessing the people we meet. The gifts are not an end, merely the means to the end of being God’s active instruments. We read: “There are different kinds of gifts [of grace], but the same Spirit. There are different kinds [varieties] of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works [energizes] all of them in all men” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6 NIV).

As Timothy expressed it in his sermon: When God does what God does in the world, He chooses to do it through people—like you and me.

### EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

By exploring the responses of a very large sample that participated in our research over a decade, we learned some important facts about what it means to be God’s instruments employing the Spirit’s gifts. For me, it removed some of the mystery when we established that there is a predictably high correlation between each individual’s personality traits and the gifts God gives in order for us to become His instruments to bless others. God loves to see us just be ourselves when we relate to others! It is not likely (though it is certainly possible) that God would expect a very shy, retiring person to suddenly become an outgoing public evangelist.

I have a very outgoing friend. He just loves being with people. It is always such a pleasure to have him stay with us. On one occasion we stood in front of an elevator door waiting to

go to another floor of a department store. After a short wait, the door opened and we saw the elevator jammed with people. There was not a chance of squeezing in even one more person. My friend Russ glanced at them; they stared back at him, almost daring him to try to get into the crowded space. Then, without a moment's hesitation, I was startled to hear him say in his booming voice: "I'm sure you're wondering why I've called you all up here this afternoon!" And the doors closed. You can imagine the bemused looks on the faces of the people in the elevator as it sped up to the next floor. My friend has many gifts that perfectly match his spontaneous personality.

You do too.

A second finding of our research is that most of us don't have just one gift; we have a cluster of gifts, and they spread across the full range of the various elements of our personalities.

Then we defined all the gifts named in the New Testament and analyzed them statistically through factor analysis. The results showed that two gifts can be so closely related that they are in reality two faces of the same coin—for example, leadership and administration. So there is not much to be gained by trying to be precise about the exact gift or gifts we have been given by the Spirit. We are just asked to be ourselves and use our gifts as opportunities arise.

One final finding of our research has been that there is a very close relationship between your natural talents and your spiritual gifts. Those individuals who are gifted speakers before they give their lives to Jesus are still gifted speakers after conversion. Gifted musicians before conversion are still gifted musicians after conversion. Quiet intimate nurturers before conversion continue to be quiet intimate nurturers after conversion. Skilled organizers before conversion are skilled organizers after conversion. Skilled money managers before conversion are just as skilled after conversion. And the main difference before and after is simple to understand. Before, we lived to glorify and promote self. After, we have a different goal, a new aim, a changed perspective described ably in hymn-writer Fannie Bolton's memorable words:

*Not I, but Christ, be honored, loved, exalted  
Not I, but Christ, my health and strength to be,  
Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard,  
Christ only Christ here and eternally.<sup>1</sup>*

The apostle expressed a similar commitment in his letter to the believers in Corinth: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2 NIV).

It is not the raw ability that has changed by conversion, but rather the way it is employed. Our motivation is completely changed.

## MODERN GIFTS

Much attention has been given to the lists of spiritual gifts named and listed in the New Testament letters. And it is fruitful attention. But we should not expect the letters written 20 centuries ago to name all the abilities, expertise, talents and gifts to be found among Christians in our technological age. Imagine what use Peter and Barnabas would have made of high-speed connection to the Internet if the cities they were about to visit had the same access! In those circumstances, I imagine Paul could have named computer programmers and analysts in his gift lists. Today, as then, any of the ways you can bless someone's life is a revelation of the Spirit's gifting.

It is believed Francis of Assisi wrote meaningfully about being a Spirit-gifted, Spirit-empowered instrument:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.*

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love;*

*where there is injury, pardon;*

*where there is doubt, faith;*

*where there is despair, hope;*

*where there is darkness, light;*

*and where there is sadness, joy.<sup>2</sup>*

And once again, I find my thoughts drifting back to a missionary in a hospital after surgery. And it leads me to ask myself a question, and maybe it's one you would like to ask yourself too: I wonder if any of the people I met today said afterward, like Cordelia, "That's how Jesus came to me today."

Roy Naden is professor emeritus at Andrews University and writes from his home on Bainbridge Island in Washington's Puget Sound.

1. Fannie Bolton. "Not I, But Christ." Lyrics and Music. *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985 (adapted).

2. Francis of Assisi. "Prayer of St. Francis." Words attributed. (1182-1226)

