

FINDING YOUR NICHE



Appendix 1

SPIRITUAL GIFTS DEFINITIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

(Taken from spiritualgiftstest.com)

The spiritual gifts listed below are found in three passages: Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30, and Ephesians 4:11.

Administration	Knowledge
Apostleship	Leadership
Discernment	Mercy
Evangelism	Miracles
Exhortation	Pastor/Shepherd
Faith	Prophecy
Giving	Serving/Ministering
Healing	Teaching
Interpretation of Tongues	Tongues

Administration

The Greek word for the spiritual gift of administration is *Kubernesis*. This is a unique term that refers to a shipmaster or captain. The literal meaning is "to steer," or "to rule or govern." It carries the idea of someone who guides and directs a group of people toward a goal or destination. We see variations of this word in verses like Acts 27:11, and Revelation 18:17.

With this gift the Holy Spirit enables certain Christians to organize, direct, and implement plans to lead others in the various ministries of the Church. This gift is closely related to the gift of leadership, but is more goal or task oriented and is also more concerned with details and organization. See also 1 Corinthians 12:28, Titus 1:4-5.



Apostleship

The spiritual gift of apostleship is sometimes confused with the office of Apostle. The office of Apostle was held by a limited number of men chosen by Jesus, including the twelve disciples (Mark 3:13-19) and Paul (Romans 1:1). The requirements for the office of Apostle included being a faithful eyewitness of Jesus' ministry and His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Corinthians 9:1), and being called by Jesus Himself (Galatians 1:1). The Apostles were given authority by Jesus to do many different things to establish the church, including writing Scripture and performing miracles (John 14:26, 2 Peter 3:15-16, 2 Corinthians 12:12).

There are no more that hold the office of Apostle today, but the gift of apostleship continues in a different sense. Jesus gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers at His ascension (Ephesians 4:7-12), and these represent a distinct category of apostles. They do not have the authority to write Scripture as the original Apostles did. They also have a different purpose in the sense of establishing the church – the foundation has already been set.

The mission for those with the gift of apostleship today is to plant new ministries and churches, go into places where the Gospel is not preached, reach across cultures to establish churches in challenging environments, raise up and develop leaders, call out and lead pastors and shepherds, and much more. They often have many different gifts that allow them to fulfil their ministry. These are leaders of leaders and ministers of ministers. They are influencers. They are typically entrepreneurial and are able to take risks and perform difficult tasks. Missionaries, church planters, certain Christian scholars and institutional leaders, and those leading multiple ministries or churches often have the gift of apostleship. See also Ephesians 4:11, 1 Corinthians 12:28, Acts 1:21-22, 1 Corinthians 9:1.

Discernment

The spiritual gift of discernment is also known as the gift of "discernment of spirits" or "distinguishing between spirits." The Greek word for the gift of discernment is *Diakrisis*. The word describes being able to distinguish, discern, judge or appraise a person, statement, situation, or environment. In the New Testament it describes the ability to distinguish between spirits as in 1 Corinthians 12:10, and to discern good and evil as in Hebrews 5:14.

The Holy Spirit gives the gift of discernment to enable certain Christians to clearly recognize and distinguish between the influence of God, Satan, the world, and the flesh in a given situation. The church needs those with this gift to warn believers in times of danger or keep them from being led astray by false teaching. See also 1 Corinthians 12:10, Acts 5:3-6; 16:16-18; 1 John 4:1.

Evangelism

All Christians are called to evangelize and reach out to the lost with the Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), but some are given an extra measure of faith and effectiveness in this area. The spiritual gift of evangelism is found in Ephesians 4:11-12 where Paul says that Jesus "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry,

for building up the body of Christ." The Greek word for evangelists is *Euaggelistes* which means "one who brings good news." This word is only found two other places in the New Testament: Acts 21:8 and 2 Timothy 4:5.

Evangelists are given the unique ability by the Holy Spirit to clearly and effectively communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others. They are burdened in their hearts for the lost and will go out of their way to share the truth with them. Evangelists are able to overcome the normal fear of rejection and engage non-believers in meaningful conversations about Jesus. Their gift allows them to communicate with all types of people and therefore they receive a greater response to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. They continually seek out relationships with those who don't know Jesus and are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit to approach different people. They love giving free treasure away for Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:7), and it brings them great joy knowing that the "feet that bring good news" are beautiful to those who believe (Isaiah 52:7). See Ephesians 4:11, Acts 8:5-12, 26-40, 21:8, Matthew 28:18-20.

Exhortation

The spiritual gift of exhortation is often called the "gift of encouragement." The Greek word for this gift is *Parakaleo*. It means to beseech, exhort, call upon, to encourage and to strengthen. The primary means of exhortation is to remind the hearer of the powerful and amazing work of God in Christ, particularly in regard to the saving work of Jesus in the atonement. We see Paul commanding Titus to use this gift in Titus 1:9 and throughout chapter 2, particularly Titus 2:11-15. He also charges Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2.

The Spirit of God gives this gift to people in the church to strengthen and encourage those who are wavering in their faith. Those with the gift of exhortation can uplift and motivate others as well as challenge and rebuke them in order to foster spiritual growth and action. The goal of the encourager is to see everyone in the church continually building up the body of Christ and glorifying God. See also Romans 12:8, Acts 11:23-24; 14:21-22; 15:32.

Faith

The spiritual gift of faith is not to be confused with saving faith. All Christians have been given saving faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), but not all receive this special gift of faith. The word for faith in the New Testament is *Pistis*. It carries the notion of confidence, certainty, trust, and assurance in the object of faith. The gift of faith is rooted in one's saving faith in Christ and the trust that comes through a close relationship with the Savior. Those with this gift have a trust and confidence in God that allows them to live boldly for Him and manifest that faith in mighty ways.

In the Bible the gift of faith is often accompanied by great works of faith. In Acts 3:1-10 we see this gift in action when Peter sees a lame man at the Beautiful Gate and calls on him to stand up and walk in the Name of Jesus. Jesus said even a small amount of this faith could move mountains

(Matthew 17:20; 21:21). Paul echoed this truth in 1 Corinthians 13:2.

The Holy Spirit distributes this gift to some in the church to encourage and build up the church in her confidence in God. Those with the gift of faith trust that God is sovereign and He is good. They take Him at His Word and put the full weight of their lives in His hands. They expect God to move and are not surprised when He answers a prayer or performs a miracle. See also 1 Corinthians 12:9, Hebrews 11:1-40.

Giving

The Greek word for the spiritual gift of giving is *Metadidomi*. It simply means "to impart" or "to give." However, this word is accompanied in Romans 12:8 by another descriptive word: *Haplotes*. This word tells us much more about the kind of giving that is associated with this gift. The word *Haplotes* means "sincerely, generously and without pretense or hypocrisy."

The Holy Spirit imparts this gift to some in the church to meet the various needs of the church and its ministries, missionaries, or of people who do not have the means to provide fully for themselves. The goal is to encourage and provide, giving all credit to God's love and provision. Those with this gift love to share with others the overflow of blessings God has given them. They are typically very hospitable and will seek out ways and opportunities to help others. They are also excellent stewards and will often adjust their lifestyles in order to give more to the spread of the Gospel and the care of the needy. They are grateful when someone shares a need with them, and are always joyful when they can meet that need. See Romans 12:8, 13, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:6-15; Acts 4:32-37, Galatians 4:15, Philippians 4:10-18.

Healing

The spiritual gift of healing found in 1 Corinthians 12:9 is actually plural in the Greek. *Charismata iamatōn* is literally translated "gifts of healings." This spiritual gift is closely related to the gifts of faith and miracles. All spiritual gifts are to be exercised in faith, but gifts of healings involve a special measure of it. This gift is interesting in that there is no guarantee that a person will always be able to heal anyone he or she desires. It is subject to the sovereign will of God, as all spiritual gifts are.

The Disciples were given authority to heal and cast out demons, but they were not always successful. The Apostle Paul was not able to heal himself and was told that God's grace was sufficient to carry him through his infirmity without removing it from him (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). This gift is given at various times and places to reveal the God of heaven to the sick and tormented. If healing is not granted, then we can conclude that God has greater plans for letting the person go through the illness or infirmity.

The spiritual gift of healing is an intimate one as it reveals the heart and compassion of God. Jesus is the Great Healer and Physician and during His ministry on earth He healed countless people

and cast out demons (Matthew 4:23-24; 8:16; 9:35, Mark 1:34). Healings reveal that God is near to His people and He cares about their sufferings. Healings are meant to draw people to God through His Son Jesus Christ. God wants those healed to respond in faith with thanksgiving and love as the leper did in Luke 17:15-19, and as the demon-possessed man did in Mark 5:18-20. By God's grace, physical healing should lead to spiritual healing (faith in Jesus) and eternal life with Him in heaven.

Those who have this gift are compassionate toward the sick and pray over them regularly. They have great faith and trust that God can and will heal some and are not deterred when He chooses not to. They are motivated knowing that God's revealed power will draw people to faith in Jesus. Their ultimate concern is the spiritual well-being of those being healed and their relationship with Jesus. They yearn for the day that there will be no more pain and suffering, and sin will no longer wreak havoc on the people of God. See 1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30, James 5:13-16.

Interpretation of Tongues

This is the spiritual gift where the Spirit gives certain Christians the ability to clarify and interpret messages uttered in an unknown language. See 1 Corinthians 12:10.

Knowledge

The spiritual gift of knowledge is also known as the "word of knowledge" or "utterance of knowledge." The Greek word for this gift is *Gnosis* and it simply means knowledge and understanding. The Scriptural emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12:8 is on the ability to speak this knowledge to others in a given situation. In the opening passages of 1 Corinthians, Paul spoke of knowledge and recognized that the highest form of knowledge among men is the Gospel of Jesus Christ (i.e. the testimony about Christ, cf. 1 Corinthians 1:4-7). What we can conclude then is the gift of knowledge is an understanding of the things in this world and in our lives that is founded in the Gospel and rooted in the Scriptures. This gift is closely related to the gift of wisdom which is alluded to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

The Holy Spirit gives this spiritual gift to some believers to bring about understanding and to inform the church or individual believers. The person with this gift is usually well-versed in the Scriptures and often has much committed to memory. They can retain the truth and communicate it effectively at the appropriate times. The gift of knowledge allows a believer to relate the Scriptures, and particularly the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to all aspects of life in this world. They can see how it connects to every situation and circumstance and how the reality and truth of the Gospel is to inform every decision a Christian makes. See also 1 Corinthians 12:8; Romans 15:14; 2 Corinthians 2:14.

Leadership

The spiritual gift of leadership is closely related to the gift of administration and, interestingly, the spiritual gift of pastor/shepherd. The Greek word for the spiritual gift of leadership is *proistemi*. This word means to lead, to assist, to protect and to care for others. The spiritual gift of leadership is found in Romans 12:8 sandwiched between the gifts of giving and of mercy. It is placed there intentionally to show that it is a gift associated with caring for others. This is what connects it to the gift of pastor/shepherd, and what differentiates it from the gift of administration. It is more people oriented than task oriented in its application. This is not to say those with the gift of administration do not care for people, of course they do, but those with the spiritual gift of leadership focus on people and relationships more directly.

The word *proistemi* is connected to caring for people in other passages as well. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 Paul says to “respect those who labor among you and are over (*proistemi*) you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” The labor and work of those who were leading the believers in Thessalonica was that of tirelessly caring for their souls. Paul also connects leadership to caring for others when he asks, “If someone does not know how to manage (*proistemi*) his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” 1 Timothy 3:5.

The Holy Spirit gives the spiritual gift of leadership to some in the church to care for God’s people and lead them into deeper relationship with Christ and each other. They base their success on how well they help others succeed and grow in their spiritual walk with Jesus. They are able to accomplish many different tasks and objectives as they lead, but they will always lead relationally and with a deep concern for the well-being of others. They are “visionary” and less concerned with mundane details than those with the spiritual gift of administration. Many are entrepreneurial and willing to take risks to see the kingdom of God advanced through the church. They will go to great lengths to protect those under their care and are well-equipped to lead through crisis situations. See also Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:4-5, 12; 5:17.

Mercy

All Christians are called to be merciful because God has been merciful to us (Matthew 18:33; Ephesians 2:4-6). The Greek word for the spiritual gift of mercy is *Eleeo*. It means to be patient and compassionate toward those who are suffering or afflicted. The concern for the physical as well as spiritual need of those who are hurting is covered by the gift of mercy. Those with this gift have great empathy for others in their trials and sufferings. They are able to come alongside people over extended periods of time and see them through their healing process. They are truly and literally the hands and feet of God to the afflicted.

The Holy Spirit gives the spiritual gift of mercy to some in the church to love and assist those who are suffering, and walk with them until The Lord allows their burden to be lifted. The gift of mercy is founded in God’s mercy towards us as sinners and is consistently expressed with measurable compassion. Those with this gift are able to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15) and

“bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). They are sensitive to the feelings and circumstances of others and can quickly discern when someone is not doing well. They are typically good listeners and feel the need to simply “be there” for others. See Romans 12:8, Matthew 5:7; Luke 10:30-37; James 3:17; Jude 22-23.

Miracles

The spiritual gift of miracles is described in Scripture much like the gift of healing. It is found in 1 Corinthians 12:10 and the Greek phrase *energēmata dynamēon* literally translates “workings of powers.” The double plural most likely means that these gifts were diverse and were not permanently available at the will of the gifted believer, but instead were bestowed at various times and circumstances. Thus, the gifts are subject to the divine will of God and His purposes and are not decided by the one who performs the miraculous works.

We know that Jesus performed many miracles in His earthly ministry, even more than those recorded in Scripture (John 20:30-31, Acts 2:22). The Apostles regularly performed miracles of all kinds including casting out demons, healings, raising people from the dead, striking people dead, causing blindness, and much more (Acts 2:43; 3:1-10; 5:1-16; 9:36-43; 13:4-12; 19:11-12). Other believers performed miracles as well, including Stephen (Acts 6:8) and Phillip (Acts 8:4-8).

Miracles were given by God to the church to reveal the presence and glory of God among His people and to create a sense of awe and wonder and Godly fear. Though there were many enemies of the church, often the result of miracles being performed was more people coming to faith in Jesus and glorifying God, as well as greater faith and boldness within the church (Acts 4:29-31; 9:35, 42).

Those with the spiritual gift of miracles often have a heightened sensitivity to the presence and power of God through His Holy Spirit. They have a special measure of faith and desire for God to reveal Himself and draw many to faith in His Son Jesus Christ. They take care not to draw attention to themselves or have a following of people, but are constantly pointing others to Jesus. Those with this gift understand that God is Sovereign and He can work when and how He desires, but they make sure they are available and listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. This gift is often accompanied by prayer and strong petition by these individuals for God to reveal His glory to people. They do not claim power themselves, but always give credit and glory to God for His mighty works. Often God will deliberately humble them to keep them relying on His grace and pointing to His Son, rather than miracles. See also 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28-29; Acts 1:8; Galatians 3:5.

Pastor/Shepherd

The spiritual gift of pastor or pastor/shepherd is one that carries many different responsibilities. This gift is closely related to the spiritual gifts of leadership and teaching. The Greek word for pastor is *Poimen* and simply means shepherd or overseer.

In the Biblical context, shepherds had several different responsibilities to their sheep and ultimately, to the owner of the sheep. They kept a lookout for predators and protected the sheep from attackers. They cared for wounded and sick sheep, nursing them back to health. They rescued them if they became lost or trapped. They spent enormous amounts of time with them guiding them to the places of nourishment and rest. The result was a trust and relationship that kept the sheep following the shepherd. The sheep were attuned to the shepherd's voice to the point that even if they were temporarily mixed with another herd, at the call of the shepherd they would separate and follow him.

Pastors are called shepherds because their calling and gifting are much like those who care for sheep. They are called and gifted to care for the spiritual well-being of a local body of God's people. Pastors are first and foremost servants. They are servants of God and servants of His bride, the church. They are given a mixture of abilities by grace that allows them to serve the needs of an entire community.

The goal of the pastor is to reveal the glory of God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit to a people who need God's grace for life. The primary way the pastor will do this is by teaching the Word of God to the church. The gift of pastor is directly linked to the gift of teaching in Ephesians 4:11 and elsewhere. In fact, this gift could be called the gift of pastor-teacher. The ability to teach the Scriptures is also one of the many requirements of being an overseer (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). By teaching the Scriptures to the church, the pastor feeds the "sheep" of God.

The Holy Spirit gives the spiritual gift of pastor to some in the church to humbly teach them, guide them, protect them, and to lead them in the mission that God has for His church, namely the Great Commission. The pastor loves the Gospel of Jesus Christ and puts it at the center of his life and ministry. Pastors do not seek fame or recognition for themselves, but they are placed in a position of authority by the Holy Spirit. The role of a pastor is one of humility and service as he is reminded daily of his overwhelming need of God's grace for the task at hand. See also Ephesians 4:11; Jeremiah 3:15; Acts 20:28; John 10:11-18.

Prophecy

This is the spiritual gift where the Spirit empowers certain Christians to receive revelation and speak powerful messages from God to people. See Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12:10, 14:1-5, 30-33, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Peter 1:20-21.

Serving/Ministering

The spiritual gift of service, or ministering, covers a wide range of activities in its application. There are two Greek words for this gift. The first one, found in Romans 12:7, is *Diakonia*. The basic meaning of this word is "to wait tables," but it is most often translated in the Bible as "ministry." It refers to any act of service done in genuine love for the edification of the community. The word *Antilepsis* is translated "helping" and is found in 1 Corinthians 12:28. It has a similar meaning: to help or aid in love within the community.

The Holy Spirit endows some believers with this gift to fill the many gaps of ministry and meet the needs of the church as it fulfills the Great Commission. The goal is to energize the church and free up others to use their gifts to the fullest. The result is the continued edification of the church and the added ability to see beyond its own needs and reach out into the community.

We see people with this gift in passages like Acts 6:1-7, 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, and many others. Those with the gift of service are committed to the spread of the Gospel. They serve in ways that benefit others with different gifts and ministries that are more public. They have a heart devoted to Jesus and a desire to follow His command and example in Matthew 20:25-28 (cf. Mark 10:42-45). Those with this gift do not seek recognition or a position in the “spotlight,” they just love to help out. They are content with serving in the background knowing that their contribution will bless the church, display the love of Christ to the world, and bring glory to God. See also Romans 12:7, 1 Corinthians 12:4-7; 28, Acts 20:35; 2 Timothy 4:11; Revelation 2:19.

Teaching

The spiritual gift of teaching is one that carries a heavy responsibility in the church. In fact, James 3:1 warns, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Like every believer, teachers are to be stewards of every word that comes out of their mouths. But the greater responsibility to which they are called is to be stewards of the Word of God to His people. Teachers have been entrusted with the task of effectively communicating what the Bible says, what it means, and how we as followers of Jesus Christ are to apply it to our lives here and now.

The Greek word for those with the spiritual gift of teaching is *didaskalos*. From the root of this word we get our English word, “didactic.” The word *didasko* means to teach, instruct, instill doctrine, explain, and expound. Those with the spiritual gift of teaching love to study the Word of God for extended periods of time. They consume the Scriptures as food for their hearts, souls and minds with the expressed purpose of knowing Him and then making Him known to others. They want to know what God has revealed of Himself and what He requires of us as people created in His image. They take great joy and satisfaction in seeing others learn and apply the truth of God’s Word to their lives. They love to see how the Gospel is woven throughout the Scriptures and how it glorifies and magnifies Jesus Christ in the hearts and lives of those who love Him by grace.

The Holy Spirit gives certain people the spiritual gift of teaching so that they would help the church fulfill her ministry as “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). Without this gift, the church would quickly fall into error and sin. Teachers are there to make sure that doesn’t happen. They hate when Scripture is abused and used out of context or with ill intent. They love the truth and speak the truth in love. They will never hide or withhold it. On the contrary, they desire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus who taught in the synagogues and in the Temple as well as anywhere the people were gathered. They are called to demonstrate God’s love while revealing His truth to the world without fear. The effect of their ministry is the upholding of God’s Word and the growth and maturity of His Bride until the day of His return. See also Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7; James 3:1.

Tongues

This is the spiritual gift where the Spirit enables a Christian to supernaturally speak a previously unknown language. See I Corinthians 12:10, 30, 14:4, 39, Acts 2:4, Acts 19:6.

Wisdom

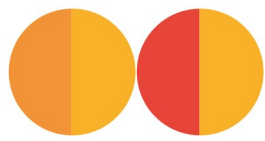
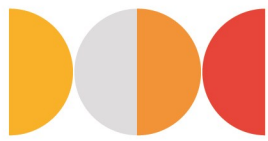
The spiritual gift of wisdom, like the gift of knowledge, is also referred to as the “word of wisdom” or “utterance of wisdom.” The Greek word for wisdom is *sophia* and it refers to the intimate understanding of God’s Word and His commandments which results in holy and upright living. In the context of 1 Corinthians 12:8, it means to speak to the life of an individual or to a specific situation with great understanding and a righteous perspective, with the goal of guiding others toward a life of holiness and worship.

Several Scriptures reveal the true beauty and fruit of wisdom. Psalm 111:10 says: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!” Wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD. It begins with knowing who God is and who we are in comparison to Him. That leads to understanding and then to practicing righteousness. A life of wisdom ultimately results in the praise of God.

James 3:17 says “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” This is undoubtedly a work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. The highest wisdom is found in the cross of Christ, which is “folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The Holy Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of wisdom to not only impart the truth and understanding to believers, but to invoke a response of holiness and worship lived out in the world and amongst God’s people. Wisdom doesn’t end with knowledge, but is expressed in transformed hearts and lives.

Those with the gift of wisdom have a deep understanding of the holiness of God and the lack of holiness in their own hearts. They can recognize this in others as well and have the compassion and boldness to share that truth with them. They are able to take from their own life experiences and share what God has taught them through those things. They can easily recognize where a decision or action may lead and can warn against those that may be harmful or unfruitful. They can often see through the confusion of a situation and can give direction that would help an individual or group obtain a God-glorifying goal. The church needs those with the spiritual gift of wisdom to guide her through uncertain or difficult times. See also 1 Corinthians 1:17-31, 2:1-16, 12:8; Colossians 1:9-10, 2:1-3; James 3:13-18.



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Appendix 2

SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES (SORTED BY PERSONAL STYLE)

People who are **task-unstructured** might enjoy:

- Behind the Scenes volunteer
- Facilities volunteer
- Working in the food pantry garden

People who are **task-structured** might enjoy:

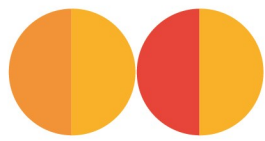
- Leading a ministry team
- Love Madison Project Coordinator
- Curriculum development
- Coffee Team
- Video Team/Sound Tech
- Parking Team
- Room Setup

People who are **people-unstructured** might enjoy:

- One-to-One Care Ministry
- Volunteering in Middle School or High School Ministry
- Mentoring
- Usher / Greeter / Welcome Team
- Children's Ministry Room Volunteer/Coordinator
- Life Group Coach
- Information Desk volunteer

People who are **people-structured** might enjoy:

- Life Group Leader
- Discussion Leader in various ministries (Starting Point, Financial Peace University, Men's Ministry, Women's Ministry, etc.)
- Small Group Leader for Middle School or High School Ministry Home Groups



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Appendix 3

FAQs

Is there a difference between a natural talent and a spiritual gift?

This is a difficult question to answer. On the one hand, the Bible seems to indicate that spiritual gifts are only given to those who have placed their faith in Christ, and who have received the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-7, 27-28). This would seem to imply that natural talents are given at birth or are developed throughout life, while spiritual gifts are given at spiritual birth, or developed thereafter. While this is the case, many people can point to natural tendencies of their personality which seem to correspond to their spiritual gifting. For instance, a person with the gift of mercy may be able to point to being a merciful person long before coming to faith in Christ. In a similar way, it is probably no accident that the apostle Paul was an expert in the law before coming to Christ, and then was suddenly put in charge of explaining how the intricacies of the law pointed to the themes of God's grace and plan of salvation (i.e. Gal. 3). Was this ability to know God's Word prior to coming to Christ the natural talent of knowledge, or the spiritual gift of teaching? They certainly seem related!

The Bible tells us that "every good and perfect gift is from above," and God in His common grace gives gifts to both the righteous and unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). We may not always be able to neatly differentiate between natural talents and spiritual gifts, but for the person who is a part of the body of Christ, both natural talents and spiritual gifts can be used to serve others.

Are there other spiritual gifts that aren't listed in the Bible?

Possibly. When we look at the various primary passages that list spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:7-11, 27-28; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), we notice that each text differs in which gifts are listed. This probably indicates that the gifts mentioned are not exhaustive, but examples of the ways the Holy Spirit empowers people to serve others. One example of this is artistic gifts. Could these be considered *spiritual gifts*?

In Exodus 31:1-6, we are told that God filled Bezalel and Oholiab with the Spirit of God, "with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge, and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts." This gift is not listed in any of the gift-lists of the New Testament, but it would appear to be a gift that is given by God for use in His Kingdom. And of course, there may be others.

What if I'm good at something I don't enjoy—is this still a spiritual gift?

It could be. Perhaps you just need to use the gift in a different setting than the one you are currently using it in. However, sometimes we develop competencies in things that drain our energy, and we are not very joyful when we use them. If that is the case, it may be that your primary gifting lies elsewhere, but you have just grown in your competency in that particular area. The Bible seems to indicate this can happen, because it calls certain things like mercy, generosity, and encouragement “gifts” (Rom. 12:8). But mercy, generosity, and encouragement are things that every follower of Christ should be growing in and getting better at, not just those who experience it as a gift. While we may all develop these competencies to a degree, certain people seem to have a particular aptitude in an area, and seem to draw life when they exercise it. All are to give, encourage, show mercy (etc.), but it seems that for some, the Spirit empowers that effort, and the outcome is more than they can accomplish by merely trying. “Use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Pet. 4:10).

Can spiritual gifts change over time?

Yes, this is certainly possible. For instance, Paul encourages the Corinthians to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31), which seems to indicate that God may choose to give new gifts to believers at any subsequent time after coming to faith in Him. In addition, some people indicate that they became aware of a previously unknown or unused gift once they were placed in a different setting which brought it out. Whether this was an actual change in gifting or not, the person experienced it as a change.

You mentioned that one of the ways we understand our spiritual gifts is by looking at what we enjoy doing. Where in the Bible does it say that we will feel joy when we use our spiritual gifts?

This is more of a pastoral observation than a Biblical idea. It is related to the question above about certain spiritual gifts that are also character qualities, like mercy, serving, encouragement, and generosity. All Christ followers are supposed to seek to grow in these things, but some seem to experience a particular joy when they are doing them.

What if I'm not really sure what my spiritual gifts are, even after taking a test to determine them?

That's ok. The best thing to do is to remain in community, know others and be known, and look for opportunities to serve. It is likely that over time, as you serve in various situations, you and others will become aware of the gifts you uniquely bring to the table.

Can I be used by God if I'm not serving him in my area of spiritual giftedness?

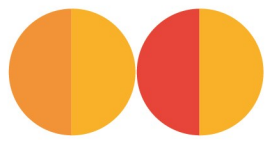
Absolutely! Spiritual *fruit* (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) is given a much more important place in the Bible than spiritual *gifts*. The Bible indicates that spiritual fruit (Christian character) determines our true effectiveness and productivity for Christ (2 Peter 1:5-8). So how do we develop spiritual *fruit* in our lives? The Bible indicates that we can only produce spiritual fruit if we remain connected to Christ and His words (John 15:4-8). It's that simple—we are to remain connected to Him, and He will produce fruit in us.

What about the miraculous or "uncommon" spiritual gifts like tongues and interpretation of tongues? Do they still exist today?

This question has led to much debate, as various denominations and churches have different practices in this area. Our denomination, the EFCA, does not take a position on whether such gifts are still operative in the church today. However, we deny any teaching which *insists* upon a post-conversion baptism in the Spirit which is evidenced by speaking in tongues. We believe baptism in the Spirit occurs at conversion for all believers, when they trust in Christ for new life.

In the Bible, it seems as there are at least three different scenarios surrounding the gift of tongues: 1) People spoke *actual languages* that they had not previously learned, for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel (Acts 2:1-11), 2) First generation Gentile converts spoke in tongues as a *sign* to the Jews that the Gentiles could also receive the Spirit (Acts 10:44-46, 11:1-18), 3) People spoke/prayed in tongues for personal edification (1 Cor. 14:2, 4).

At the local church level, we do not practice the gift of tongues or interpretation as a gathered congregation, although some members might in their private prayer times. In Corinth, the church's focus seemed to be on the gifts themselves, which led to much disruption and dissension. Paul urged them to focus on gifts that built up the body (1 Cor. 14:12). Therefore, as a gathered community, we use intelligible words of instruction, so that the entire church may be built up (1 Cor. 14:19).



FINDING YOUR NICHE



Appendix 4

VIEWS FROM THE EDGE



Mars Hill Graduate School thinkers offer fresh, thought-provoking perspectives on subjects that impact how we view the world, ourselves, others, and God. These edgy, compelling, and sometimes disruptive articles delve into issues and concerns relevant to your daily life, from current issues in the church and world, to parenting your child, to movies and the arts, to relationships and sexuality.

SOUL SERIES

GETTING CAUGHT BY YOUR CALLING

It's not a to-do list, a job, or a wish list. Instead, your calling is to reveal God through whom God uniquely created you to be. So how do you know what your calling is? Look at the stories and themes of your life and how they reveal God. / By Dan B. Allender

God acts in history and in your and my brief histories not as a puppeteer who sets the scene and works the strings but rather as the great director who no matter what role fate casts us in conveys to us somehow from the wings, if we have our eyes, ears, hearts open and sometimes even if we don't, how we can play those roles in a way to enrich and ennoble and hallow the whole vast drama of things including our own small but crucial parts in it.

Frederick Buechner

The day had arrived and a decision had to be made. Would I accept a job offer to teach at a respected seminary, or would I become part of the team that was starting a new graduate school in Seattle? My wife and I had spent weeks tossing around various options, and it boiled down to a choice between safety and madness. The established seminary offered security, a good salary, and the opportunity to teach the courses that I wanted. The chance to start a new school was ridiculous. We needed to raise \$300,000 just to find out if we would fail.

I had reached the moment where a commitment needed to be finalized. Becky brought the discussion to a close when she said, "You've never had a normal life. Why

start now?" In a matter of seconds, my mind flitted from how we met, to how I was seduced to go to seminary, to how I met Larry Crabb and went into counseling, to how Larry and I began a counseling program, to the events that had drawn Becky and me to this decision point. For whatever reason, my mind landed on the first sermon I heard after becoming a Christian.

I was a troubled 20-year-old who had been involved in illicit pharmaceutical sales for a number of years. The small cartel with whom I worked had arranged to sell drugs from a new supplier. I learned after the fact that the drugs would be coming from sources connected with organized crime. All of a sudden I had gone from the status of middle-class, mom-and-pop drug czar to the "big time." And the big time involved carrying guns, buying judges and police, and threatening undisciplined dealers. I wanted out, and I knew that could mean forfeiting my life. I can't explain why I had the strength to slip the bonds of that world, but I did. I knew if I died I would go to hell. More precisely, I knew that if there was a hell, I was certainly going there.

Somewhere in the recesses of my soul I believed in God, but the other 98 percent of my being thought the whole business of God was absurd. Death lay ahead eventually, no matter what I decided to do, so I said, "Fine," to God. That was the entirety of my prayer: "Fine." If it's true, then fine; if not, I didn't have much to lose.

I knew the gospel well because my best friend, Tremper, had discussed it with me many times. I had watched people come to know Jesus and had gone to a few Bible conferences and even to the campus of the seminary I eventually attended. I knew the basic beliefs of Christianity well, but it was not for me. Yet I was glad it was true for my best friend.

The night I came to faith I had ingested a sizable dose of hallucinogens earlier in the day, so I was fairly fried. I felt profoundly uncomfortable walking into that small Presbyterian church in the country. People were friendly and warm. Tremper and I sat off to one side about midway between coming and going. I felt relieved I was on the end of the row so that if I needed to run, I'd have full access to an escape route.

The service began. At certain times people would stand, and I couldn't figure out what prompted the shift from sitting to standing. They read and spoke back to the dude up front. They sang, and then they would bow their heads and close their eyes as if the whole thing had been choreographed. Was I missing some hand signals or a secret command from the front? Clearly some time would be required for me to figure out this scene.

Then the guy in the robe began to talk. We opened the black books in front of us, and he read and then talked about what he had read. I didn't bother to read, nor did I listen. But somehow I heard him mention Balaam's ass. My ears came alive with curiosity.

He talked about how Balaam's ass had spoken to Balaam. I was freaked out. I glanced around and noticed that no one seemed at all concerned about this bizarre revelation. Halfway through the sermon the preacher switched and started saying, "Balaam's donkey." I was so relieved I nearly fell out of my seat.

In fact, I was so relieved I thought I would cry. A talking animal was just fine. Under the influence of LSD, I had often heard animals talk, but the thought of going through my religious life with talking body parts seemed more than any human ought to bear. Somehow, as unlikely as it might sound, I came to faith that night.

Faith gradually became central to my life, and years later my wife and I were faced with the decision to make a career move. Why would the scene in that rural Presbyterian church come to mind as Becky commented, "You've never had a normal life. Why start now?" Stories inform story. Becky and I were in the middle of a new, developing story. And old stories returned to help us make the decision that would be at the core of our new story. The decision was made. The hard work of weighing options, praying, and seeking counsel was crucial in sorting out the issues that mattered to us most, but the decision crystallized when Becky

read my life, then identified and embraced the other-than-normal path we have been called to walk.

The future is meant to be written in light of the patterns of the past. We can't predict the future, but we can read the patterns of the past to see how God has marked us for his purposes. He uses the past to open our future. As we learn to read patterns, we gain an understanding of our calling.

Reading Patterns

Becky and I and our friend Christie were traveling together on a half-day road trip. Our conversation was pleasant and free. After talking about various matters, my wife asked us both, "If you were a letter of the alphabet, what would it be?" Her question struck me as a monumental waste of time, a silly icebreaker for a threesome who had been through fire, storm, and calamity together. We didn't need to break any ice; we had been broken by more ice moments than an Antarctic explorer. But Christie, to my chagrin, jumped in with both feet. She added, "Before we answer for ourselves, why don't we say what letter we consider each other to be?" I was irked but outnumbered, so I played along.

We made guesses about each other and then explained why we made our choice. It turned out to be a fascinating conversation, but then it was my turn to be associated with a letter of the alphabet. When my wife said, "X," Christie began to laugh because she had chosen the same letter. My wife chose it because of the word *X-treme*. Christie chose it because she sees me as a person who lives on the border, at the crossroads, always pressing limits and calling others to cross to another side.

I laughed, but I felt caught and exposed. I am often more extreme than others. I live more in the drama of intensity and the crisis of decision than in reflective meditation. I felt the blush of being known and honored, albeit with the sense that both women were saying I am enjoyed, yet it is best to take me in small doses. We

will not read the patterns of our past unless we have data from the present. And the data can't come with fullness and accuracy until they come from others. We simply can't see our own face.

If we want to know the truth about ourselves, we must be in a relational dialogue. That's how God has made us. We must be avid, curious, and open if we are to learn who we are. We must listen to the wind that wafts through a conversation when someone asks, "Have you always been so intense?" or "You seem so sure of yourself—don't you ever doubt?" or "How come you seem to always hang back and let others speak before offering your opinion?"

Throughout our lifetime, all sorts of people have named us. Some of the naming has been cruel, designed to imprison us in shame. Others have spoken to us with the hope that their kiss and compliment would win them access to something they want from us. Still others, innocently or inadvertently, have named us, and those data are best given sober consideration. Stop now and think for a moment about the observations others have made about you. What are they? How do you

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react to these observations? Do you find truth there?

Add to that data more intentional feedback—input that you seek out. It is imperative to hear from those who know, love, and respect you. How do they see you, both at your best and at your worst? How

do they experience you when you are hurt, angry, afraid, lonely, confident, jubilant, and at rest? If you will listen to the words of others' experience of you, I guarantee you will be surprised and humbled.

Connecting the Dots

If you collect the data from a number of different observers, you will begin to notice that certain words, phrases, and concepts overlap. It is this overlap, the coincidence of common characteristics, that sketches an initial pattern. Once you own the pattern as at least somewhat true of who you are, then it's wise to look at the past and ask, "How did this pattern come to exist?"

So explore the overlap of observations. But remember that some of the words, phrases, and images used to describe you will be inconsistent. There is a simple reason for apparent or explicit contradiction: we are complex, inconsistent, and contradictory beings. We love and we hate. We sacrifice for others and we are self-absorbed. We are a mass of consistent inconsistencies. Therefore, as we turn to the process of reading our patterns, we must embrace the reality that there are as many gaps in our being as there are dots to be connected. As we read what is both consistent and inconsistent, we begin to gain the true measure of ourselves.

Dots and Gaps

Let's assume you have entered into significant conversations with a handful of friends, especially your spouse and children. You have heard, perhaps with some emotion, descriptions of what it's like to be around you at your best and at your worst. You now have a stock of data, and you've moved beyond defensiveness, doubt, and dismissal. You have collated the data and embraced much of it as likely being a true description of who you are. What do you do now?

It's time to connect the dots and plunge into the gaps. Connecting the dots means linking the words and phrases into a coherent pattern, no matter how flattering or disconcerting it might be. The gaps are

the words or phrases that are anomalies, the observations that seem foreign or contradictory to the larger picture others have of you. In reading your patterns—both in terms of consistency and inconsistency—you begin to get an inkling of your life theme.

Patterns That Reveal Themes

Listen to your life. It will give you countless words that describe your way of being, relating, and engaging others. These words will help you identify your character and your role in life.

How do others experience you when you are hurt, angry, afraid, lonely, confident, jubilant, and at rest? If you will listen to the words of others' experience of you, I guarantee you will be surprised and humbled.

Listen to your stories. They reveal a pattern of roles that you've played throughout your life. Without question there will be discrepancies and mind-boggling contradictions. There is evolution and transformation, but the being that a person was at age 3 still has some overlap with the inner world of that same person at age 93. A coherent sense of self lasts over a lifetime, and what is retained over a lifetime speaks to the unique role or character you are to play out on God's stage. What lasts, yet grows and matures to an even greater glory, reveals your thematic calling.

A theme is a unifying idea or motif repeated throughout a story. Begin by noticing what repeats and then note how it unifies the complexities of a story into a coherent whole. A theme is not merely the core point or moral of a story. In fact, if a story or life can be summarized as a moral, then it has lost its intrigue. In other words, a story that has a moral doesn't

reflect the inverted, complex, surprising, and scandalous story of the gospel. A gospel life will be rich, complex, contradictory, and surprising until the end. That's what makes it real and true. That's what makes you real.

A theme is also the meaning of a life that, when put into words, always needs to be rewritten to better state what is true. A theme can be spoken, but it is presumptuous to think we can codify a story, let alone an entire life. In fact, it's almost completely the opposite. As we explore the stories of our life, we gradually sense the development of a theme, the growth of significance. We feel ourselves caught up in a vital process in which meaning emerges from experience. In the end, that sense of deepening discovery in experience makes our life interesting to us. It is this way with all real stories. Fiction is never the mere illustration

of an idea. It is the created image of the very life process by which we feel ourselves moving toward meaning in our own experience.²

A life theme is not our mission, moral, or purpose. It is the significance of our life as seen by those who are close enough to sense how our life either reveals or fails to make known the character of God.

Rightly Reading Your Life Theme

I know a woman whose life mission is to make God known by her efforts to call people to come alongside those who have lost the safety and joy of their home as a result of domestic violence. Nancy Murphy, the director of both the Northwest Family Life Counseling Center and the Domestic Violence Advocacy program at Mars Hill Graduate School, is intimately familiar with the carnage of abuse. Her first husband began abusing her on the second day of their honeymoon. The abuse lasted for 10 years.

The story Nancy tells is marked with the tragedy of silence and shame, denial and desperate hope. She remained in the marriage because of the conviction that God offered her no alternative but to remain faithful and submissive. As the violence against her children grew, she eventually fled her native Canada and began a sojourn of education and personal healing. That journey resulted in her leading one of the foremost faith-based treatment centers in the nation. Her story is more compelling than any Hollywood drama, but in stating what she does, I have not named her life theme or her calling. What we do for a living, or in a ministry, or in family life or friendship is merely the context for our calling. I don't believe anyone has the calling to be president of a corporation, founder of a ministry, or director of a counseling center. Those are fine jobs and sometimes careers, but our calling is not what we do—but how we do it.

Nancy grew up on the west coast of Vancouver Island. It is a rugged, desolate, isolated part of the world. One of the few ways to move along the coast, one of the most inhospitable shorelines in the world, is by boat. Nancy grew up with her brothers and sisters on a 50-foot boat with her parents who were missionaries to the native inhabitants of the island coast. Nancy didn't realize she was Caucasian until she was 9. Her soul and worldview is Indian.

Native Canadian Indians do not set one another apart by giving awards or acknowledging outstanding achievement. To make one person greater is to make many less. Yet Nancy is a gentle, soft-spoken, down-to-earth, hilariously witty, wise, and bold woman, and for me to write those words about her nearly kills her. She allows me to say so only because it reveals something she prizes more than her privacy or comfort—the gospel.

Now, domestic violence is not a popular subject. It evokes terrifying images. It also tends to attract advocates for change who are angry and impatient to see things happen. This shameful topic is further

ignited by inflammatory activists. The result is that the larger population is alienated rather than enlisted to come alongside those who are broken by domestic violence.

So, in her line of work, Nancy is a conundrum. She is gentle and passionate. She is highly professional but always a warm and approachable human being. She has spoken before the joint houses of Congress and the Helsinki Conference to address the relationship between domestic violence and sexual trafficking. Normally, those who are granted such vaunted pulpits take on an air of scientific objectivity and dispassionate distance, but Nancy addresses the issues with passion and humanity. She invites people to both suffer and hope, to dream and risk. And she does so with a genteel depth that sneaks through defenses on both sides of the debate.

I know no one else who more richly lives the Beatitudes—blessed are the broken, the weak, and the poor, for they will not only be comforted, but they will rule the earth. Nancy's life theme is this: the broken and the foolish will triumph because of the wild and unpredictable paradox of love. Nancy and her husband, Tom, are wild and dangerous people whose life theme reveals God's intention and delight to destroy violence through kindness. Is it Nancy's calling to combat domestic violence? The answer is yes. She counsels, trains, educates, directs research, and implores others to open their eyes to the horror in order to see in it and beyond it to the hope of the glory of God.

But is Nancy's calling really to domestic violence? I believe the full answer is complicated. Nancy's calling is to domestic violence but also to a far greater goal—to invite others into the mystery of God's kindness. If you listen to her story, you hear all that she experienced throughout the horrific ordeal of domestic abuse. Yet her life theme reveals the odd hand of God who uses the most unexpected people to bring about the most unusual transformations.

A life theme sets the trajectory of our life, and that trajectory is woven into the

role we are to play. The specific tasks are but the open door we walk through to step onto God's stage. It is no wonder, then, that there are as many life themes as there are people. However, all the truest themes have to do with what each of us uniquely reveals about God's character. Our calling is to reveal God through the themes he has woven into our character. The questions that relate to where (place), what brokenness to confront (problem), with whom (population), and how (process) are largely left to our own choice and talents. The fact that a person is born a Caucasian Canadian Indian on the west coast of Vancouver Island doesn't mean that person won't someday be testifying before both houses of Congress. Location, timing, nationality, gender, and age don't limit the creativity or humor of God.

Once we begin to read our life, then we are called by God to do more: we are called to mess with our story. We are called to write our destiny and edit our writing in community with others for the sake of an even better and truer story. But first we must have some sense of the direction our story is meant to move. We must at least catch a whisper of our calling.

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God's Call: What It Is Not

God calls us, which means we must listen and respond. God calls us to tasks and to service, but most importantly he calls us into relationship with him. But when most people use the word *calling*, they're usually referring to a to-do list, a

job offer, or a wish list. The truth about calling, however, is that it has little to do with any of these.

It's Not a To-Do List

Our calling is not a list of things God wants us to get done, yet most of us have some affinity for lists. We find it helpful to break down our complex goals into bite-size tasks that, taken together, add up to a realized objective. For example, when asked how I write a book, I say, "I have no idea. I have never done it, nor am I capable of doing it." Writing a book is an impossible task, but it is not that difficult to write 12 chapters. The person who has not learned the skill of segmenting his or her life goals and tasks is at a severe disadvantage because everything will look too big to do.

So while creating to-do lists is a necessary skill, it is not what God calls us to do. His calling involves doing, but we are seldom called to do a single or even a central task. What he calls us to do is in accord with a larger task—that of being. We are not what we do, but we do become like whom we serve. This process may seem complex, but it's actually quite simple. An excellent pianist can play the notes of a song without playing it with passion. A superb tennis player can hit every stroke as well as a pro but never break into the top 100. Why? It's the issue of heart. And issues of the heart always have to do with whom or what we worship.

Even in the animal kingdom, a story like *Seabiscuit* revolves around the intangible but observable issue of heart. A brown-beaten little horse is sold for a pittance because it is deemed deficient. A wise handler slowly draws out its strengths and uses its wounds to engender a ferocity that is unbeatable when the horse is ridden with wisdom.

I don't question this story. It is the same in each person's story. God speaks with ferocity about the issues of our heart:

"I am sick of your sacrifices.... Don't bring me any more burnt offerings! I don't want the fat from your rams or other animals. I don't want to see the blood

from your offerings of bulls and rams and goats.... Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Fight for the rights of widows."

"I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your hymns of praise! They are only noise to my ears. I will not listen to your music, no matter how lovely it is. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, a river of righteous living that will never run dry."

God commanded his people to offer burnt offerings, and then he said, "They make me sick." He wants us to live with a heart of passion for justice—period. Religious deeds, be it prayer, fasting, giving, sacrifice, song, or dance, turn God's stomach when we do them without a heart for righteousness. And living out righteousness is no less than creating a holy, beautiful, sacred space for glory to grow. God doesn't give us a to-do list; instead he calls our heart to holiness and justice.

It's Not a Job Offer

Most people understand calling as God's calling us to a specific job. Indeed, God called adolescent Jeremiah to preach of his coming judgment. And God called Paul (then named Saul) to serve the very people that he, blinded by zeal, had been trying to destroy. God calls us to certain tasks and jobs, but he doesn't do so because we are uniquely suited to do them. He calls us to the task or job because we are weak, broken, and ill-equipped for the task.

I don't believe anyone is called to a job or a profession. My calling in life is not to be a writer, therapist, speaker, teacher, trainer, or administrator. My calling is to walk through any door God gives me in order to reveal his glory. If I'm a graduate-school president, it's for a season, but my life lasts for eternity. If I am a physician or an auto mechanic, it is no different: I am called by God not for a mere season or reason, but for an eternity to reveal his

glory. What is my calling? It is to make known something about God that is bound to my unique face, name, and story. It is to reveal God through my character.

It's Not a Wish List

God is not in the business of satisfying our top 50 dreams. When my daughter was in her first semester of college, she was assigned the task of coming up with 50 things she wanted to do in life. I loved the list she made. I wish I had been compelled to do the same when I was that age. Though, of course, it's never too late. The dilemma is that we find no one in Scripture who was asked to think in those terms. It's an assignment that makes sense only in a Western, capitalistic, middle- or upper-middle-class culture. Imagine the answer of an immigrant family: "We want to find a job and obtain food, clothing, shelter, and education."

My daughter's list included pleasure and sacrifice, growing and learning, building and tearing down, relationship and ideals. She did a beautiful job of identifying what she really wants to do, but I told her, "God is not in the business of helping you succeed at achieving your dreams—even ones that involve sacrifice for his purposes."

When people use the word *calling*, they're usually referring to a to-do list, a job offer, or a wish list. The truth about calling is that it has little to do with any of these.

In fact, I believe he is most committed to dissolving and re-creating our dreams. God births dreams in us and then allows the desire to move us; and it is in the pursuit of our dreams that we encounter tragedy and meet the deeper desires that only loss and heartache can reveal.

What deepest desire of our being does God call us to discover? It is no other love and no other one but him. We are called to reveal God through the themes and dreams he has woven into our heart. Therefore, to know our calling, we must come to name the unique trajectory of our story.

God calls us to certain tasks and jobs, but he doesn't do so because we are uniquely suited to do them. He calls us because we are weak, broken, and ill-equipped.

Getting Caught By Your Calling

We begin with our stories, always. So read and reread your story. In due season, some of the patterns and the trajectory of your life will begin to appear through the fog. At first there will be only a shape, but with time, prayer, and reflection, you will see the contours of your path come into focus. This is not a mere intellectual exercise.

We don't find our calling; it finds us. We may catch our calling as it hurtles toward us, but mostly we are caught in its web long before we recognize its existence. We are actor-writers of our character, but most of us sense we are discovering something that has been given to us far more than it is something we are creating. It is both/and, of course. We both discover and create. It is this dual perspective that allows us to ask: "What moves me? To what and to whom am I to say yes? How will I follow the unfathomable desires of my heart?"

God gives us desire and meaning. They are inside us alongside our calling, without any effort on our part to create them. When it comes to being caught by my calling, my options are simple: Whom will I serve (the population)? In what locale will I serve that community (the place)? In

that community and in that place, what portion of the Fall will I face (the problems)? And what means will I use to address those problems (the process)? Our calling in life is always tied to population, place, problems, and process.

God may have helped you gain a sense of your calling by linking you first to one of these Ps well before he began to illuminate your story, theme, and calling. For instance, he may have built into you a great passion for Hispanic people and culture. Or perhaps mountains have captured your imagination since the vacations your family took to Vail. Either way, your heart was drawn to the mystery and magic of something particular.

Ask some questions of yourself. Why does your heart ache every time you see an advertisement for the Special Olympics? There may be no one in your life who has a developmental disability, but when a ministry for children with disabilities begins in your church, you are haunted. Or perhaps you long ago discovered that you could outwork most mere mortals. You may not be a genius, but you have the gift of perseverance. You can handle details and create order and beauty out of chaos. Your gift marks you as a life-giving presence for many who can create new ideas but couldn't administrate themselves out of paper bag.

You are gifted. You are called. You are telling a story. The clearer you can be about yourself, the further you will be on the journey of catching and being caught by your calling. And the moment you say

yes to a population, a place, a problem, and a process—you have been seized by your calling.

April 2003

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What feedback have you received about your way of relating with others?
- What do the themes and patterns of your life reveal about God?
- What wrongs do you dream of righting?
- What good do you dream of growing?

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Footnotes

1. Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 32.
2. For more on this idea, see Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds. *Understanding Fiction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 178.
3. Isaiah 1:11, 17.
4. Amos 5:21–24.

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