

SESSION 6

The More Excellent Way

This Session's Focus

Some gifted people never learn to use their gifts in the right way. A gifted artist may focus so much on his own genius that his self-consciousness and conceit stifle his creativity. A fine athlete may become less effective by being nasty and unkind to her opponents or even to her own teammates. A skilled surgeon's ambition and the taste of fame may so blind him that he begins to lose his dedication to patients.

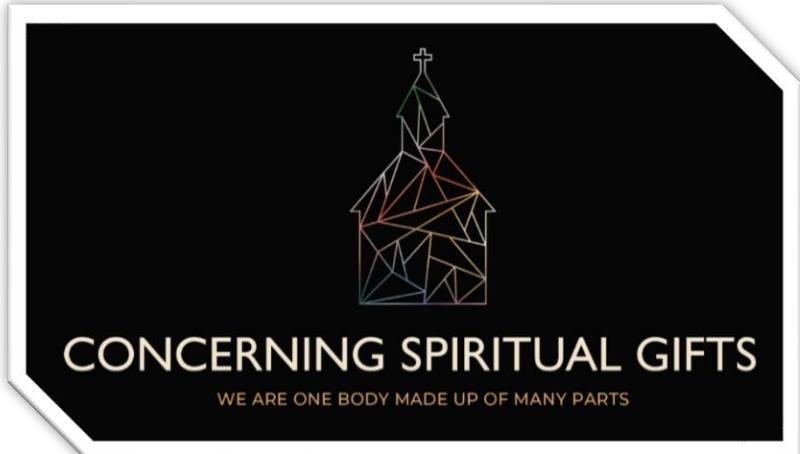
Similar abuse can occur with our use of spiritual gifts in the Church. Congregations blessed with spiritual gifts sometimes drag people along sleepily, neglecting their ministries, or they become embroiled in destructive conflicts. People may show little concern for harmony or peace as they practice their gifts; they may struggle for supremacy or become judgmental with one another.

The Church suffers through all of this, and the Spirit's gifts receive a tarnished image among God's people. Through all these human weaknesses, God continues to pour out His grace to His people. The Spirit provides His Church with gifts and also blesses us with the character we need to use His gifts well. The fruit of the Spirit make up this character. The same Spirit who gives gifts to His Church also provides the fruit. These fruit enable us to use the gifts for the common good.

How are fruit of the Spirit different from spiritual gifts? You recall that God gives spiritual gifts (as we use the term in this course) to whom He wills, when and how He wills. Spiritual gifts are given selectively, and we each have only one or a few gifts. Fruit, on the other hand, are "all for all." God gives all the fruit of the Spirit for all Christians. We can all desire them, pray for them, work for them, and grow in them. The fruit of the Spirit, which are given by the Holy Spirit, grow in our Christian lives as we grow in the Lord through His Word and Sacraments.

Meditation

Lord, it's good to be where love abounds. Maybe that's one reason why I'm so grateful for our church. Love thrives among us, Lord—a good and true fruit of the Holy Spirit. I see it in the eyes of our people, this love. I see it in how we huddle together after church, as if our church is somehow bigger and richer than just the morning service. Some people especially seem to nurture that love. You know who they are, Lord. They work peace among us. They are the smile on the face of the Body of Christ in the place we call our church home. Lord, You know



how grateful I am for the gifts You've given our congregation. We are not a poor church, Lord. We are rich in gifts and in ministries! Today, though, I sing Your praises for our church's character, a blessing from Your Spirit as well. Gifts are best given and received in an atmosphere of love and joy and peace. So thank You, Lord, for the Spirit in our church. Amen

Session Primer

Read aloud the following news article. Use the questions that follow to discuss the article.

PEACE CHURCH, VALLEY CITY, CLOSES DOORS

(Valley City) Peace Church, Valley City, closed its doors yesterday after a final service attended by thirty-two. Founded in 1922, the church once claimed a membership of eight hundred souls.

In recent years, the church has been involved in a series of conflicts, including legal battles in the courts. Ten years ago, the church's most recent pastor, William Lauder, arrived and began an active community outreach program. The church added day care, food and clothing closets, and lodging for the homeless to its programs.

For a while, Peace Church grew. Neighborhood people became church members. The leadership of the church also changed. In the process, many of the church's former leaders felt disenfranchised and disagreed with Lauder's community emphasis. A large group left the church to join nearby Trinity.

A second struggle occurred when a group of about a hundred members of Peace formed a charismatic prayer and praise group and met regularly at the church for their own services of prayer, tongues, and healing. The group pressured the pastor to renew the church with charismatic fervor, but met with little success. Lauder took a call elsewhere, and the group left to form their own church, Holy Spirit Church, a mile from Peace.

Since then, Peace has been embroiled in controversies over the sale of the land, the calling of a minister, the authority of elders in the church during a pastoral vacancy, and the church's support of various community organizations.

Many who joined the church during Pastor's Lauder's ministry left soon after his departure. Most of the community outreach programs have been discontinued. The church has been without a pastor for three years. An attempt to sell some of the church's property to pay outstanding debts has led to a struggle in the courts among church leaders.

When asked to describe what has happened to his former church, Pastor Lauder responded, "We grew everything at Peace except the fruit of the Spirit. We're all to blame, myself included. If we could do it all again, we'd do it differently, I know."

1. What factors, in your opinion, most directly led to the demise of Peace Church?
2. What might have been done differently at Peace?
3. What does the story show about the use of the gifts of the Spirit in the congregation?

Biblical Search and Study

Discuss the following questions:



1. Read 1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13. Why do you think Paul so emphasized the need for love in the Church? What may have been happening in the Church at Corinth to prompt Paul’s chapter on love? (For clues, see 1 Corinthians 12:20–21; 14:4, 26–33a.)
2. Read Galatians 5:16–26. Verses 22–23 list the fruit of the Spirit. These fruit may be defined as follows:
 - a. *Love*—The Christian character trait whereby God empowers us to seek the highest good of another, no matter the cost or sacrifice involved, and no matter how “deserving” the other may or may not be.
 - b. *Joy*—The Christian character trait whereby God enables us to find delight in the Lord, regardless of the circumstances of our lives.
 - c. *Peace*—The Christian character trait whereby God enables us to find wholeness and quietness of heart in the conviction that we are the Lord’s.
 - d. *Patience*—The Christian character trait whereby God empowers us to be forbearing and forgiving with others, as our Lord is with us.
 - e. *Kindness*—The Christian character trait whereby God empowers us to be considerate and benevolent toward others, not irking or provoking them.
 - f. *Goodness*—The Christian character trait whereby God empowers us to express our sincere goodwill toward others at every point, even if it means criticism and rebuke.
 - g. *Faithfulness*—The Christian character trait whereby God empowers us to be trustworthy and reliable in our relationships with others.
 - h. *Gentleness*—The Christian character trait whereby God enables us to be submissive to His will, open to being taught, and compassionate for others’ needs and emotions.
 - i. *Self-control*—The Christian character trait whereby God causes us to discipline ourselves so that we can serve others.

Now go back and circle the fruit you wish to nurture and need most right now as you consider your use of your spiritual gifts in the Church. Second, underline the fruit most needed by your congregation at this time. Third, place a check mark next to the fruit of the Spirit that are growing well in your congregation’s spiritual garden.

3. Look at the list of fruit of the Spirit again. List an antonym (opposite) for each fruit. Why would these character traits cause division and conflict in the church?

4. Discuss ways the nine spiritual fruit can be nurtured. What are the means God has given His Church to enhance and strengthen our attitudes and character?
5. Think of a time when God enabled you to display one or more of the fruit of the Spirit in your personal life. Then think of a time when you displayed the antonym instead. If you feel comfortable doing so, share some of your feelings about these times.



Think again about ways to nurture the fruit. What commitments to nurture are you willing to make? How can the members of your class support one another in nurture?

What this Means for Us

1. Spiritual gifts are evident in the Church through ministries and activities that Christians undertake. Fruit of the Spirit are the attitudes and character with which Christians use their gifts. In this context, the Spirit's gifts can be a real blessing in the Church.
 - Divide your class into two groups. Together you represent a Christian congregation at work in ministry. Group A should represent the worldly traits that sometimes mark the church. You may wish to refer to the antonyms you listed under question 3 above. Group B should represent the fruit of the Spirit at work in the church. They will express the Christian traits that move the congregation ahead in ministry.
 - Role-play the following situations according to your group assignment. Members of Group A may speak to the situation on the basis of, for example, party spirit, impatience, or anger. Members of Group B may respond on the basis of, for example, kindness, gentleness, or self-control.
 - a. It has been moved and seconded that every member of your congregation be involved in an all-area evangelism canvass.
 - b. People are complaining that your new pastor is changing too much too fast.
 - c. A council member recommends that you fund the education of a congregation member who will train at a synodical school to be a Christian teacher.
 - d. A member of your church began to speak in tongues at a Bible class last Sunday morning.
 - e. Your pastor and the principal of your Christian Day School do not get along and often clash at meetings.
 - f. Your congregation is seriously divided over a proposal to build a new sanctuary.
 - g. Your congregation's young people are asking for financial support for a service project at a nearby nursing home.

What did you learn from your role-played conversations? Think back to what was said. How many worldly and spiritual traits can you list that were reflected in the conversations? Did any of the situations hit close to home? In each of the situations discussed, what spiritual gifts were at stake?



2. Choose one of the fruit of the Spirit that you feel you need and wish to nurture most right now. How would your life change if you lived according to that fruit? What would be different about you or about your role in the church? Share your responses with your group. Then pray for one another that the Spirit will grant this fruit.

Gleanings

On a separate sheet of paper, review your discoveries during this course. Jot down your surprises, your learnings, and your resolutions for the future. “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them” (Romans 12:6).