



PRESERVING BIBLE TIMES^{inc.}

Because Context Matters

“The Priesthood of ALL Believers”

The Biblical Soil for Growing Disciples

At some point in ecclesiastical history, someone snatched away the inceptive Hebrew blueprint by which Jesus' movement was being constructed and replaced it with a non-Hebraic one. As a result, what has been built since is at best a caricature of what was intended. In many respects, it is downright contrary and antagonistic to the spirit of the original believing community.

— Brian Knowles¹

Introduction The recent release of our “20 Reasons ‘Discipleship’ Died” Newsletter was read by more people, forwarded to more people, and generated more responses than any topic we have yet written on. The most recent “Glimpses into Paul’s Roman World” Newsletter “When Christianity Took Rome, Rome Took Over Christianity” generated feedback asking what might “*the priesthood of all believers*” look like in today’s church setting? So it seemed appropriate to develop that theme to a greater extent as these two topics are inextricably intertwined. Discipling flourishes when “*the priesthood of all believers*” is in full flower. Conversely, the bloom comes off the discipling rose when our Body Life isn’t functioning like a *royal priesthood*.²

An Epiphany Experience It was late August 1979. We were new to East Lansing, Michigan, and looking for a church home. One Sunday we visited a church on the edge of the Michigan State University campus. That Sunday the pastor spoke on “*Spiritual Gifts (SG)*.” Despite having been a deacon in one denomination and an elder in another, I had never been exposed to this subject, an omission I find common to many churches.

When the service was over, I asked the people around us: Have you ever heard of SGs before? *Oh yes, they replied, Pastor Tom preaches this sermon about every six months. He wants to make sure that everyone knows about SGs – their role, purpose, and implications for body life, vocation and calling.* I found this notion of SGs intriguing. If God gives us gifts, shouldn’t we open the box up, take them out and use (enjoy) them? Yet many (most?) evangelical Christians seem to have put their unopened gift(s) away in a locked closet.³

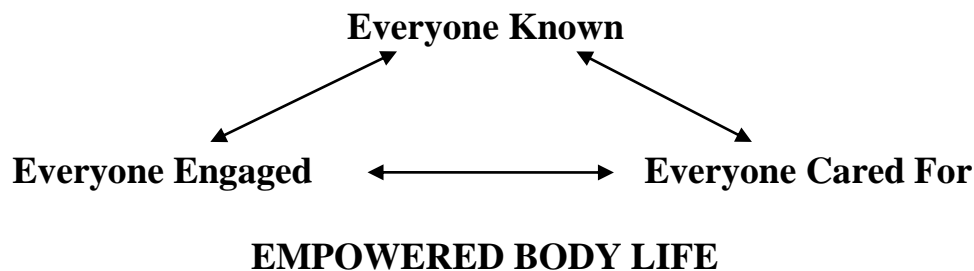
More to Come In Pastor Tom’s church, everyone seemed so excited, engaged, energized and empowered, all knit together by God’s Grace. We soon discovered that each person in the church knew their SGs (couldn’t join the church without taking a “*Spiritual Gifts*” workshop). Furthermore, each person was plugged into an appropriate ministry (aligned with their SGs) and had a mentor to help develop and refine his/her SGs. Thus, if it was suggestive that you might have the SG of

- **Hospitality**, you became part of the Greeters Program and were prepared to take visitors to lunch, discover who they are, and connect them to others in the church with similar interests.
- **Exhortation** (with a counseling emphasis), you started a fifty-hour lay counseling program.
- **Evangelist**, you joined the visitation program that knocked on doors in the community, starting with those who visited the church.

- **Pastor**, you walked alongside those in small groups helping to facilitate their spiritual growth.
- **Teaching**, you started a process to find where you best fit - teaching pre-school, elementary, junior high, high school or adults.
- **Mercy**, you might be working with people with disabilities, widows or nursing home residents.
- **Service**, help with the needed infrastructure of church events.
- **Administration**, oversee the church's programs, e.g., Sunday School

You get the idea.

It's Not That Complicated! In Pastor Tom's church, everyone was engaged in ministry at the point of their SGs. No one was unhappily "toiling" where they were not gifted. Almost no one sat on their hands in the pew passively observing Body Life blossoming around them. Watching this dynamic unfold allowed us to experience how our life together in Christ was meant to be.



The double arrows convey mutually re-enforcing aspects of this Body Life dynamic; e.g., because everyone was cared for, by definition everyone was known in the Body. In addition to SGs, there was another data base that organized everyone's talents, abilities and skills. So when someone had a car, electrical, plumbing, roofing, or other problem, we knew who to call to help out the brother, sister, widow in need.

SGs and Church Leadership In the governing body of this church, elder selection took place in a unique way. To be nominated as an elder, you had to be both mature in the faith and have the SGs that the Elder board currently needed in order to have all the SGs represented "around the table" – a mini-Body with all the SGs represented. As a result, it was not unusual for the Elder board to submit itself to the judgment of those Elders whose SG mix were best suited to ponder/process any particular issue; e.g., SGs of discernment, faith, leadership. As part of the fabric of the church, Pastor Tom disciplined the elders who in turn were responsible for the shepherding oversight of home group "clusters" – a gathering of small groups in a defined geographical area.

Walking the Talk Pastor Tom was one of the most skilled and accomplished preachers I've ever experienced. Yet consistently he would get out of the pulpit and have one of his lay people with the gift of teaching bring the Sunday morning message. He used preaching at the evening service to prepare them for Sunday morning. Under Pastor Tom's intentional tutelage, I shared my first Sunday message in 1981.

When a gifted pastor – theologically astute and doctrinally sound - willingly steps out of the pulpit to intentionally develop the gifts of his lay people, actions speak louder than words, and everyone clearly gets the SG message! So many pastors protect their pulpit as if it is a fortress meant only for them (or the clergy) – clearly off limits to lay people with equal or more refined SGs of teaching/preaching than the pastor(s).

Pastor as Chief Facilitating Officer (CFO) With these kinds of experiences, I began to understand how crucial it is to view 1) SGs as the spark plugs that the Spirit uses to ignite the Body Life V-8 engine; and 2) how Body Life can flourish when pastors embrace the role of CFO (Chief Facilitating Officer), maximizing the SGs of their flocks through identification, development, and use of the SGs entrusted to each member. There are spiritually gifted people in every congregation (except perhaps in smaller ones) who can handle most of the tasks, functions, and requirements of the church better than the pastor(s)!

Too often pastors see themselves as the CEO (Chief Executive Officer), the one in charge who runs the show (and approves everything) whether they are gifted to do so or not! Why would enrolling in a seminary suddenly endow a seminarian with the SG's of Leadership, Pastor or Administration? It doesn't! Pastors need to be reminded that their SGs as well as their deficiencies quickly become evident to their congregations. So when pastors try to function in non-gifted areas, it's not a blessing to the flock unless the Holy Spirit decides to work overtime on their behalf to bail them out!

The Bus Analogy Recently, it has become fashionable to use the bus analogy to help people understand the role of leadership in organizations. The thesis is that you need to get the right people on the bus and make sure they are in the right seats. Do that, and your organization will thrive. The converse for churches is clear. Get the wrong people on the bus, or the right people in the wrong seats, and you will have a very ineffective Body life with much frustration and little progress.

Envision a church as a bus with each seat being a ministry facilitated by particular SGs. Pastors who embrace the CFO role stand at the door of the bus inviting people in and personally escorting them to the right (SG facilitated ministry) seat. I think if we had a choice, most of us would want to be on that kind of church bus.

Making Disciples and Apple Trees As previously observed, the Body Life climate in which *disciple-making* takes place is crucial. In Pastor Tom's church, there was no need for a discipling "program" emphasis. Instead, a vibrant, empowered life together with SGs at the core was intentionally cultivated. That's the soil that causes the making of disciples to supernaturally sprout and grow.

For example, apple trees don't have to be exhorted to produce apples. It just happens. And orchard owners don't hang signs throughout their orchards exhorting the trees, "*Let's Make Apples This Year!*" It's just what apple trees do! And that's how disciple-making is supposed to be. Think about it. If every church functioned like Pastor Tom's congregation, fully committed to *the priesthood of all believers*, would we even need para-church ministries? The existence of such ministries to "evangelize" and/or to "disciple" is self-evident that the corporate church isn't doing its (apple-orchard oversight) task of producing discipling apples!

Implications In my non-scientific view, SGs seem to be missing in action (MIA's) in about 90% of the churches in America. You rarely hear the subject mentioned; nor are there SGs Workshops offered. And of the 10% of the churches that are aware of SGs, very few have Pastor Tom's expansive vision for SGs and Body Life. No wonder the American church is anemic. It is vastly underpowered. It is running (or trying to) at only 3-4% of its design potential. It's a V-8 engine trying to run on one spark plug. As a result we have a small group of people burning themselves out while the vast majority sit in the pew and wonder "*Is that all there is?*" (A blues song sung by the late Peggy Lee). Who is training (or not training) pastors to miss the SG spark plugs of our life together? How did we get here? What changes need to be made to our pastor/minister paradigm(s)?

A Simplified View of Church History I find the first-century church in Acts fascinating. No ordained pastors. No seminaries. No accreditation agencies passing judgment on seminary curricula and who is entitled to teach in them. Rather, we see people called to ministry by the Body (Acts 6:3-6), not people calling themselves to ministry. We see people using their SGs so extensively that Paul had to write words of caution. It's important to remember that when Paul exhorts those Corinthians to *not be ignorant about Spiritual Gifts* (I Cor. 12:1), the issue is not the disuse of SGs, but the misuse of SGs. Our 21st-Century ignorance is very different – vast disuse and even disregard of SGs!

Fast Forward to Today My wife and I went through Pastor Tom's SG workshop. When he saw my suggested SG profile of teaching, he said: *Doug, in two weeks you start teaching a Sunday school class for the graduate students. I suggest you start with the Gospel of John. If you need any help, let me know.* That's how I got started sharing the Scriptures in God's Kingdom. That's when I began to realize that my "Call" (vocation) was to teach the Scriptures and therefore my marketing career (which I did for 32 years) was now my avocation (tent-making ministry). This also made retirement planning straightforward. In essence, retirement is where you pursue your SGs free of your prior professional obligations.

Nancy's SG profile suggested hospitality, wisdom and exhortation (on the counseling side). So she entered a fifty-hour lay-counseling training program, which twenty years later led her to work as an inpatient therapist in a Minirth-Meier Psychiatric Hospital. Needless to say, Nancy and I are profoundly grateful to Pastor Tom, his vision for Body Life, his commitment to spiritual gifts as part of his pastoral theology, and the way God's Spirit knit all that together into our respective vocations which continue to this day.

I think you can now sense why I am an advocate for both SGs and *the priesthood of all believers*. In the 1980's I led dozens of "*Spiritual Gifts*" workshops and have recently resurrected them at the request of churches desiring to re-energize their life together as the Body of Christ. Like Pastor Tom, I too want everyone to know about SGs and their implications for calling, vocation, ministry structure and organization, retirement, etc.

Pew Wisdom for the Pulpit! Recently a Christian brother (with a career spent in higher Christian education) and I were musing about putting together a two-day seminar aimed at seminaries called "*Pew Wisdom for the Pulpit*" – those things from the pew's perspective that we wished pastors knew and understood before they left seminary and landed in our midst, e.g., a more panoramic view of "*the priesthood of all believers*." As we created our list of you-need-to-know-this-because-you-are-probably-not-being-taught-this list of topics, we just laughed. Who would ever invite us to share such practical wisdom with future pastors?

In Closing It seems to me that Ray Stedman summed it up nicely when he said: *It is obvious that there can be no hope of ever getting the church to operate as it was intended to do until each individual member recognizes and begins to exercise the spiritual gift or gifts which he or she has received.*⁴ The same observation could be made about disciple-making since it is so intimately linked to a climate that fosters a vibrant Body Life. Pastor Tom understood that reality. As the old adage goes, "*When everything else fails, read the directions!*"

Reflections to Ponder

- Before reading this Reflection, what were your ideas/thoughts *about the priesthood of all believers*?
- How did you react to our East Lansing church experience?
- What do you aspire to? The world aspires for "success" and the American Dream. Disciples of Jesus aspire to be a blessing to others and thus carry on the Abrahamic Covenant. One of the best ways to be a blessing is to use your God-endowed SG for God's glory and the benefit of others. Do you know which SG(s) have been lent to you by God's Spirit for your use to strengthen the Body? Are you committed to developing and refining those SGs for God's glory and the benefit of His people?
- What connections do you see for our vision (large or small) of *the priesthood of all believers* and our effectiveness in making disciples?
- I sometimes wonder if we need a book called the "*Purposed Driven Pastor*" that would have as part of its emphasis helping pastors see themselves as the Chief Facilitating Officer of their congregations - getting the right people on the bus and in the right SG seats. Agree or disagree, and why?
- What has caught your attention in the Reflection? Where do you sense God nudging you? What challenges you the most? What actions might/will you take?

Shalom Doug Greenwold, PBT Teaching Fellow Reflection #415 © Doug Greenwold 2015

Mailing List If you are new to these contextual Reflections, and would like to receive future ones, just let us know at info@preservingbibletimes.org and we will add you to the distribution list.

Notes and Sources

¹ Brian Knowles, *The Hebrew Mind vs The Western Mind* (website godward.org under "Hebrew Root Studies," "Study Papers and Feature Articles" category, September 1999).

² I Peter 2:6

³ A thought from David Hubbard, *Unwrapping Your Spiritual Gifts* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986).

⁴ Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1972) 50.