

Spiritual Gifts and Responsibility

A Study in Spiritual Gifts (part 2)

Elon Musk: A villain or an exemplary human?

Is it okay to be a jerk if you 'get things done'?

Walter Isaacson is a legendary biographer who has written books about Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, and Leonardo da Vinci. Two years ago, he began shadowing Elon Musk. "I started off with a guy who was one of the most popular people on the planet", Isaacson says, "and ended up with a guy who's the most controversial."



There is no doubt Elon Musk is an exemplary human. He has done more to advance electric vehicle technology than any other company. He has placed rockets in space when NASA cannot even get astronauts into orbit any more. He has built a network of satellites that has brought the Internet to people in isolated regions of our planet and he is working to protect humanity against the dangers of AI.

However, as Isaacson's biography reveals, Musk is impulsive, dark, a risk-taker, with varied personalities and demons dancing around in his head and life. He purchased X, the social media app formerly known as Twitter, and seems intent on using it to utter hurtful comments in the early hours of the morning and to publish hateful views to the public.

Musk is a successful innovator, an accomplished engineer and a driven CEO who often pushes his people to the brink and beyond. This results in amazing advancements, while also leaving a trail of broken people and relationships behind him.

Musk can be a jerk, but he is a jerk who accomplishes great things. Is that okay?

I do not think being a jerk is acceptable because while Musk has been gifted with a keen intellect, powers of persuasion and innovation, with resources beyond the imagination of ordinary people, he uses those gifts at the expense of the people and systems around him. His sense of purpose should not be achieved at the expense of his responsibility to be a good people. Humanity will continue to do perfectly well without his technologies.

We are each provided all that is needful for life and godliness. Every one of our lives is purposeful for we have been called to God's Purpose.

The gifts our Creator has given to us are not primarily for our own benefit, but for the benefit of those around us —our family, our friends, our neighbourhood and, most especially, for building up our church. We each have a responsibility to use the gifts we have been given and to fulfil the appointments to which we are called.

We are not meant to do this alone. Those God calls are equipped with the enabling power of God's Spirit to carry out their appointed tasks.

OT Examples of God's Gifts or Appointments

There are many examples in the Old Testament (OT) of the Lord appointing people to functions within the community of his people.

God Appointed Prophets

The Prophecy of Jeremiah provides an example of the Lord appointing a person to a specific function:

I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jeremiah 1:5)¹

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet, directed by the inspiration of God to proclaim His will, which included delivering warnings, judgement and other exhortations.

God Appointed Israel's Kings

Another example is found in *The First Book of Samuel*, where is described the Lord appointing kings in ancient Israel:

[The LORD said,] "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from following me and has not carried out my instructions." So Samuel became angry and cried out to the LORD all night. (1 Samuel 15:11)²

The LORD God called and appointed the first king over Israel—it turned out to be a bad choice— but Saul was the Lord's choice nevertheless, even though he failed to live up to the call.

Prophets and kings were important roles that bound ancient Israel together as a nation under God, or not, if those prophets and kings failed in their responsibilities, if they failed to live up to their calling.

God Appointed the Persian King Cyrus

While we wonder at the appointing of Saul as king, even more controversially, the Lord appointed a foreign king in the life of ancient Judah:

The LORD says this to Cyrus, his anointed, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and disarm kings, to open doors before him, and even city gates will not be shut (Isaiah 45:1; see also Is 41:2)

To teach his people a lesson, the Lord allowed them to be exiled by foreign powers: first the Assyrian, then the Babylonian empire.

Cyrus, also known as "Cyrus the Great", was king of Persia circa 559–529 BC. He became lord of Judah when he conquered Babylon—which had been ruling Judah—in 539 BC.

The prophecy of Isaiah reveals this foreign king was himself called by the Lord to restore Judah at the end of their exile.

The Lord works in mysterious ways!

God Empowers Leaders and Kings With His Spirit

Not only does the Lord call and appoint people to particular functions as leaders, even prophets and kings, he equips them for those roles:

The LORD replied to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man who has the Spirit in him, and lay your hands on him." (Numbers 27:18)³

When a man or woman is called by the Lord to fulfil a function, he equips them with all they need for that role. In Joshua's case, he did not just put up his hand to say, "I will do it". He was appointed and equipped through the laying on of hands by Moses.

In this passage from *The Book of Numbers*, we learn that most especially and generously, the Lord fills with the Holy Spirit those he calls, that they might execute their function with his power, not just their own.

God empowers leaders and kings with his Spirit.

The Spirit Was to Be Given to the Servant of the Lord

So important is it that calling and equipping go together that an important example, in the OT, was the prophesied Messiah, of whom it was written,

This is my servant; I strengthen him, this is my chosen one; I delight in him.
I have put my Spirit on him; he will bring justice to the nations.
(Isaiah 42:1; see also Is 61:1)

The Lord did not leave the people to chart their own way in this fallen world, but called leaders at all levels to lead his people, prophets as well as kings. As we shall see, these servants are themselves gifts.

Having called prophets and kings, the Lord God equipped them with the Holy Spirit, for they could not fulfill the function and role to which they were called without his power.

Even the promised Messiah, who would conquer sin and death, did not do so in his own strength. This servant of the Lord too was appointed and equipped with the Holy Spirit, else he could not fulfil the responsibility to which he was called.

We are thankful for this testimony and examples found in the OT of our scriptures.

Jesus Christ Was Endowed With the Holy Spirit

In the New Testament (NT), we see this same pattern.

Christ Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecy of the Messiah. As such, he too was filled with the Holy Spirit, as it is written,

When Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased." (Matthew 3:16–17)⁴

Everyone who is called and appointed by the Lord is endowed with the Holy Spirit. No less so than Christ Jesus himself.

Why should we think we could fulfil our responsibilities in our lives without the Holy Spirit?

The Apostles Were Endowed With the Holy Spirit

Not only was Christ Jesus, the promised Messiah, filled with the Holy Spirit, so too were the Apostles, for they had an important function in the early Church. As it is written,

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Could the Apostles have taken up the mission of Christ Jesus without the help of the Holy Spirit? They were certainly called and appointed to the task (Mt 28:18-20), but their track record was not exactly stellar.

No, in addition to whatever time, talents and resources they brought to the task, the Apostles too needed the gift of the Holy Spirit to fulfil their responsibility.

Spiritual Gifts Given to the Church

That same process of calling and equipping, appointing and gifting, continues in the Church that grew out of the ministry of the Apostles. As it is written,

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11; see also 1 Co 12:28)

Christ Jesus continues to give to the Church by appointing people to step up and into a wide variety of roles in his Church, most notably the roles of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastors and teachers.

There is a perceptive story told of Heinrich Heine, the German poet, who was standing with a friend before the cathedral of Amiens in France. “Tell me, Heinrich,” said his friend, “why can’t people build piles like this anymore?”

“My dear friend,” replied Heine, “in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than an opinion to build a Gothic cathedral.”⁵

Many Functions Within the Church, Yet Unity Is Preserved

There are indeed many functions within the Church, yet unity is preserved when these appointments are filled appropriately and executed responsibly,

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.
(Ephesians 4:4–7; see also 1 Co 12:4–11)

The gifts of these functions are equal. That men and women are called to these roles, among others, is a grace, an unmerited favour of our Lord to the one called and equipped.

Nevertheless, the choice is not arbitrary.

All Christians Are Appointed to Build up the Church

Whoever the Lord calls and appoints to these roles in the Church, all Christians appointed for the purpose of building up the Church.

But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.
(Ephesians 4:15–16; see also 1 Co 12:12)

How might we learn the wisdom of the Lord if no one teaches us? How might we come together as a spiritual family if no one pastors us? How might we respond to the good news of Jesus if no one shares this word with us—if other words, evangelises? How might we be challenged to reconsider our sinful ways and systems if no one calls us out—in other word, prophesies? How might the strongholds be broken and new territory claimed if no one ventures into new lands and opportunities—in other words, acts as an apostle?

These functions within the Church are essential for there to be a local church, yet whatever our calling, to whatever we are appointed, it is a great responsibility to participate in building up the Church that the Kingdom might expand in the hearts and minds of the lost, the least, the last and lonely.

An example of a local church fulfil its calls is St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, a place of ministry in Christ's name. In its urban setting, St. Paul's lives to heal the broken, bring hope to the despairing, be a place of warm fellowship and reconcile the difficult issues which are so much a part of city life. The parish understands itself as a servant church, the human face of God. Service to others is strengthened by the Breaking of Bread, the preaching of the Word and the Prayers of the People—all pointing toward Jesus, the Word made flesh, who dwells with his joyous Community until the end of time.⁶

The Experience of Spiritual Gifts

All this talk of prophets and kings, apostles, evangelists and pastors, makes it easy to come to the faulty reasoning that only official roles are spiritual gifts. While these are perhaps the more noticeable and promoted, and essential, the experience of spiritual gifts is much more holistic than that.

Associated With the Laying on of Hands

When we place our faith in Jesus and begin to live a Christian lifestyle, turning our life and will over to the Holy Spirit, we begin to imagine and see how we might channel our time, talents, resources and gifts toward fulfilling our purpose toward fulfilling The Purpose. More often than not though, we need the Holy Spirit to break through our distraction.

Throughout the scriptures, the gift of the Holy Spirit is associated with the laying on of hands. As it is written,

Therefore, I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment. (2 Timothy 1:6–7)⁷

Paul the apostle wrote to his mentee, Timothy, to keep his calling alive, his spiritual gift which he received at the laying on of hands. This is a symbolic act where elders in a community put their hands on a person in whom they have discerned the call and appointment of God.

The laying on of hands is a powerful act of recognising the will of the Lord in a person's life.

Associated With Prayer and Fasting

The gift of the Holy Spirit is also associated with prayer and fasting:

When they had appointed elders for them in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

(Acts 14:23; see also 13:3)

In this verse is described Paul the apostle and his team appointing elders to communities they planted in the ancient Middle East. These appointments were so significant, and the choice so important, that the apostle and his team and the new communities backed up their prayer with fasting. Their intensity in seeking the will of the Lord was signified through intense prayer.

Spiritual gifts and appointments are so significant they must be treated with care and wisdom.

Spiritual Gifts Must Not to Be Neglected

Indeed, it behooves every friend of Jesus, every member of our church, to take seriously the identification of our gifts, what we have to offer to our community; to discern what function or role the Lord might be calling us each to, whether to an official role or a less celebrated function.

All is required for the building up of our church and The Church. Let us not neglect our spiritual gifts, as it is written,

Don't neglect the gift that is in you; it was given to you through prophecy, with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

(1 Timothy 4:14; see also Lk 19:11–26)

Every member of this church has a purpose to fulfil in building up this church, that this church might build up The Church and extend the kingdom of God by extending salvation to the last, the least, the lost and the lonely. It is not only the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers who matter, but the elders and the deacons and the Admin team; the welcomers and the production; the service and prayer presiders, the Music team and the readers; the hospitality and clean up; the Forge and Connect Group leaders. Everyone matters and every function matters.

If one person neglects their spiritual gift, the whole family of faith suffers. Let us encourage and equip each other. Let us pray and fast for each other. Let us lay on hands for each other and take our responsibilities seriously. Let us work together for the common good and for the honour of our God, to whom be praise for ever and ever!

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 See also 2 Sa 7:8; 2 Sa 12:7.
- 3 See also Jdg 3:10; Jdg 6:34; Jdg 11:29; Jdg 13:25; Jdg 14:6; Jdg 14:19; Jdg 15:14; 1 Sa 10:6; 1 Sa 10:10; 1 Sa 11:6; 1 Sa 16:13–14.
- 4 See also Jn 1:32–33; Ac 10:38.

- 5 William Sloane Coffin, *The Courage to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 82; as quoted in G. Curtis Jones, *1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1986), pg 66.
- 6 Reprinted with permission of Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Va; as quoted in Jones, pg 244–245.
- 7 See also Nu 8:10; Nu 27:18; Dt 34:9; Ac 6:6; 1 Ti 4:14; 1 Ti 5:22.