

A Time of Prayer: Consider

January Edition

CONSIDER: ENABLED BY THE SPIRIT FOR DISCIPLESHIP ¹

In her book *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, Kathleen A. Cahalan argues that “ministry” is a shared call to active discipleship on the part of all baptised members of the Body of Christ. She examines the life and practice of Christian discipleship in the New Testament and identifies seven key features: discipleship means being a follower, worshipper, witness, neighbour, forgiver, prophet, and steward.²

The good news is that in the mystery of baptism the Spirit ensures we “are not lacking in any spiritual gift” (1 Cor 1:7) needed to faithfully embody the personal and collective discipleship to which Jesus calls us in support of God’s mission.

How does our baptismal identity as Jesus’ disciples shape us? ³

Our discipleship is initiated in the waters of baptism by the power of the Spirit in the community of disciples. And in the waters of baptism, Cahalan argues that a Christian undergoes a fundamental reorientation of their life and identity in at least three ways.


- First, baptism is **personal** insofar as God claims each person to be a beloved child, created by God and called by name to live the way of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Second, baptism is **communal and social**. It is the church that baptizes (Acts 2:37-41). The community stands as witness to a new life in Christ and promises that the way of discipleship will be made known to initiates. Baptism incorporates a person into the Body of Christ, a community that shares the call to discipleship. For Paul it was imperative that the communities he founded understand that this communal or ecclesial identity is fundamental to life in Christ. He reminds his readers over and over that by virtue of baptism in Christ they are unified in the one Spirit, “Jew or Greeks, slaves or free” (1 Cor 12:13). This ecclesial identity creates the unity of one Body in which no person is more or less than another.
- A third way in which baptism reorients a person is through a sense of call. Baptism is **vocational**.

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word, *vocare*, which means “to call.” Cahalan understands the category of vocation in both a broad and specific way. Broadly speaking, all Christians have a common vocation to discipleship, a shared calling. But vocation is also specific. It refers to the particularity of our callings, the way each person is summoned by God to live faithfully given their talents, gifts, and circumstances.

¹ Excerpts from: Cahalan, Kathleen A. *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1989. The summaries provided are largely abridged versions of the arguments presented by Cahalan in the pages indicated for each section. For ease of reading, her words are presented as prose rather than separated into direct quotations.

² Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 1-23.

³ Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 24-28.



Taking human life as a whole, she defines Christian vocation as *the response to God's call and the Spirit's charisms manifest in adult life commitments in relationship to three aspects of the self: (1) how I live, particularly in relationship to permanent post baptism commitments; (2) what I do, the service I offer to God in and for a community; and (3) who I am, the sense of self as it relates to my personal, historical, cultural, and social contexts. Our baptismal identity and call to be a Christian disciple is lived out in and through the particular callings that constitute our vocation.*

Gifts and charisms of the Spirit equip disciples for vocations in support of God's mission.⁴

For Paul, God has made known this way of life through Christ in the power of the Spirit. But what, in Paul's terms, distinguishes the general call to the shared life of discipleship from a person's unique "vocation"?

One answer can be found in his understanding of grace and charisms. The Greek word for "grace" is *charis*, meaning a free gift that brings delight, joy, love, gratitude, pleasure, and kindness.


Paul distinguishes two kinds of grace-gifts. The first are universal gifts that all Christians receive, gifts of faith, hope, and charity. Without these fundamental gifts of the Spirit, discipleship remains a purely human effort.

In addition to these universal gifts, Paul recognizes that each person in the community receives special or unique gifts. Each person is capable of different kinds of service and he calls this second type of gift "charism." The particular gifts express different services, but the Spirit is the essence of the gift.

Paul advances the idea of charisms in three letters: Romans 12:3-8; First Corinthians 12:4-11; and Ephesians 4:11-16. In each case Paul argues that charisms are particular and unique gifts granted by the Spirit to each person for the purpose of building up the community. In each letter he lists a variety of gifts, not in order to create an exhaustive inventory, but to illustrate the gifts he witnesses in each community and to make a point about their diversity and unity. Paul's teaching on charisms is connected to two key ideas: diverse gifts are needed for the common good and the building up of the Body of Christ, and together these gifts unify the community into one Body (1 Cor 1:10; Eph 1:1-2, 4:4-6; Phil 1:27). These two ideas may at first seem contrary or paradoxical, but in fact for Paul they are interdependent (1 Cor 12:4-6; Rom 12:4-6).

Paul explains that the Spirit gives many diverse gifts to the community. All members receive some charisms; in other words, no Christian is charism-exempt (1 Pet 4:10). But there is no single person who receives all the gifts, nor does it seem that an individual receives only one charism. Each person is a unique combination of charisms, and no two people hold exactly the same constellation (1 Cor 7:7). Perhaps like the human genome, there is a basic shared structure and yet no two persons are alike. Each person is unique.

⁴ Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 30-33.



Charisms are fundamentally gifts for service; they are capacities or qualities that people express through activities, actions, speech, and what today is commonly referred to as practices. In other words, charisms are not private, internal qualities, meant for self-improvement. They are to be embodied actions, lived out and expressed in word and deed. Charisms are not solely about gifts for church leadership either, but gifts given to the entire Body for the common good of the Body, some of which pertain to community leadership (1 Cor 12:7).

The Spirit works in such a way as to ensure that charisms are always present in the community, that gifts are distributed and, if discerned and responded to, will enable the community to flourish in its mission (1 Cor 12:11).