

Beyond Bibleman: Superheroes and Spiritual Gifts
Cornerstone 2001 Imaginarium lecture

Whenever we as Christians engage in analyzing our culture, we have to talk a bit about **worldviews** – the lenses through which we look at history and morality and culture, and how we make sense of it all. On that score, I'd like to review a little bit of what we've discussed here at the Imaginarium in the past. How many of you remember Mike Hertenstein's talks on The Double Vision of Star Trek?

You remember how Mike contrasted the Christian worldview with the one developed by Gene Roddenberry, the creator of Star Trek – and how it matches up with some ideals that Christians also stand for (things like economic justice and harmony between peoples of different colors and cultures), but it falls down in comparison with other Christian ideals – most often having to do with personal morality and other issues of freedom and identity.

I don't know if any of you were here back in 1995, which was the first year of the Imaginarium – anybody?

One of the lectures that year was by Lint Hatcher, who wrote for the late, great Wonder Magazine, which you hear some of us talk about. For that lecture, Lint read an article that he and Rod Bennett had co-written entitled Monster Fan 2000. This is good reading if you can get your hands on it, which I encourage you to do, if you can. This article was all about the horror genre, classic horror and modern horror – and the differences in worldview that they reflect. We took a look at *Frankenstein*, and *Dracula*, and other classic Universal Studios films of that time, and how there's a very Christian sensibility behind those stories – a struggle of good versus evil, the need to rescue people who've come under the influence of an evil spell, the sense in *Frankenstein* of having trespassed into the realm of God in trying to design a human being – in our own image.

But in the modern horror genre, there's something very different going on – something different at the very root of the ideas being portrayed. Most horror movies of the late '60s and '70s, about with the release of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in '68, reflect a very different, sometimes blatantly anti-Christian, reductionist, materialist worldview. Where basically the cinematic technique is all about shocking you with the next horribly gory scene, and about as transcendent as they can get with a message is,

“You as a human being are a piece of meat, and your destiny is a hole in the ground.” **“Have a nice day.”**

Now, to be fair, you should realize that I'm painting in broad strokes here. Not everything fits timewise into these categories – for example, you have Salvador Dali doing very strange things with a movie camera in the 1930s, and you have some very cool Christian worldview things going on in *The Matrix* two years ago. My point is that there are two major influential camps, two influential schools of thought in terms of who is influencing the discourse, the cultural discussion, if you will, that takes place in

popular culture about the supernatural, and the big questions - **Who are we? Why are we here? What does it mean to be human? Where are we going?**

All this to say, we have much the same thing going on in the comic book realm. On the one hand, for example, we have the sort of view of the world that's reflected in Gotham City and Metropolis, the respective homes of Batman and Superman, created in the late '30s. These writers were working with the big questions in a way that reflects the same outlook as the filmmakers of their time – one might almost call it “Capra-esque” in some ways, and I know that says different things to different people, but that's OK. In these settings, things are relatively peaceful and orderly until somebody gets into trouble of some kind, or an outside evil force (in the person of an archcriminal) comes in and messes things up. The heroes, having been in disguise while working their day jobs, don their costumes and become indomitable forces for good to right the wrongs and vanquish the foe, and through their actions, no matter what the criminals do, justice eventually triumphs. And that type of story says certain things to us psychologically and spiritually about what kind of world we live in, the meaning of human beings, and things like that.

On the other hand, recent comic writers and artists have brought us worlds like that of Spawn by Todd MacFarlane (some of you may have heard of the movie that was made in 1998), where the world is so dark and hopeless that you look up at the sky, and it's like the lid on the trash can, and you're staring up at it from on top of all the evil and filth that surrounds you. Is anyone here familiar with Harlan Ellison?

He's a mainstream science fiction writer and screenwriter, who's won a bunch of Hugo awards, and dabbles in comics a little bit. He certainly would never admit to any Christian sensibilities – he's a proud humanist sort of guy. In regard to Spawn, I heard him speak at a conference recently, and this gave me pause – he said that reading Spawn even gives **him** the willies! He almost brought himself to use the word *evil* to describe it, and this is a guy who doesn't believe in anything that could be called a transcendent moral code.

And, the “hero” characters in stories like these – actually, more correctly, anti-heroes - in this sort of comic book world are driven mostly by revenge rather than by any altruistic notion of serving mankind. Take the character John Constantine from the modern comic Hellblazer – he's a cynical, angry, violent, lonely man. If he helps the people he meets, it's almost by accident, or only as a means to an end. Again, I'm not saying that humans – or Christians – are never like that -- never cynical, angry, violent, or lonely. I am saying that to soak your brain in fantasy worlds like these gets a message deep into your head and your heart about the way the world is, the way human beings are, what a good person is and does, what a bad one is and does – because stories teach things into us. They talk to us about the possibilities of what the future will bring. Again, it's not that one school of thought is more “conventional” than the other, or one worldview is more “realistic” than the other, but rather, **these two major worldviews that compete for our attention in the comic book universe are different ways of interpreting the same set of facts about God, the created world, and human beings**. They take the questions

about how we relate to God, to creation, and to each other, and sometimes get very different answers.

This brings me to the beginning of my topic today – the Christian publishing phenomenon of “Bibleman”.

Now, when I first heard of Bibleman and saw snippets of the videos in Christian bookstores and picked up and looked at the stuff they had piled on the stand-thing that had “Bibleman” plastered all over it, I thought that, well, this is the evangelical response to the modern comic book hero. And, it’s marketed directly to children as a sort of a combined Sunday school lesson and Saturday morning cartoon. For those of you who aren’t familiar with Bibleman, his alter ego is named Miles Peterson, who’s a guy who had it all – money, power, and the rest – but something’s missing. He feels an emptiness in his soul. So he gives up in despair, and right in the place where he’s gone and having his breakdown, he finds a **Bible** in the dirt. He pulls it out of the mud and starts to read it, and he dedicates his life to God and becomes Bibleman. Wherever he goes, he quotes Bible verses to vanquish evil – in the form of “Dr. Fear” or some such villain. That, and whaling on them with his big ol’ “Jedi light sabre”-looking sword.

I’m not here just to diss Bibleman. I know that it’s really popular, and there’s a reason for that. I know some parents who appreciate it, and they use it to motivate their kids to get into the Bible. **That’s cool.** I think anything that tries to motivate kids to read books of any kind, especially the Bible, is a great contribution to pop culture. Honest.

But, the point I want to make is, is Bibleman all there is that’s **good** about the concept of the superhero? Does God really intend that all of us “fit that suit”, as it were, in order to do good in our world? Try this on – **does the Bible teach us that in response to every problem and conflict in our world, the way to conquer evil is as simple as speaking Scripture verses at it?**

I suggest that the Bible teaches something different, something much more profound and powerful, on that score.

If you’ve got your Bible, turn to Acts 19, starting at verse 11. This is the story of the 7 sons of Sceva. I’ll read it for us:

And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. But also some the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, “I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.” And seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. And the evil spirit answered and said to them,

“I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?”

And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. (Acts 19:11-16, NASB)

Luke's point in telling us this story is that **words by themselves didn't work** – Sceva's sons weren't connected to Christ or to the Body of Christ, the church, and so the devil ran right over them. The point is, it's faith, and your connection to Jesus, to Paul, to the body of Christ that gives spiritual words their power. I believe that "God's word never returns void" (Isaiah 55:11), but remember also that the devil quoted Scripture to Jesus during His temptation. And, the words the tempter spoke didn't work on Jesus, obviously, because the tempter had no connection to the power that originally spoke those words.

Also, another question that Bibleman brings to mind is, what if actions, not words, are what's needed to set a situation right? Let's turn to James, chapter 2, verse 14:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can that faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed", but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17, NIV)

The Apostle John has this to say in his first letter, chapter 3, starting at verse 16:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or tongue, but with actions and in truth. (I John 3:16-18).

So, that's pretty clear, isn't it? Bibleman's words, of course, are all good and true, but our **actions** speak at least as loud as words, are at least as powerful in spreading the Gospel.

So, it appears that Bibleman doesn't quite contain everything we're looking for in terms of our search for a "Christian superhero". Especially, if you don't fit the Bibleman suit – what if you're shy, or not real good with words? So, where else can we look for clues as to how to approach the hero concept from a Christian standpoint?

Here's an idea that I think can point us in a very profitable direction –

Does anyone here remember Rod Bennett's talk from last year about alien messiahs called "King Kong Died For Your Sins?"

In Rod's talk on King Kong, we talked about the difference between allegory and re-iteration. He gave a real important definition of re-iteration, which for our purposes, I'll repeat:

A RE-ITERATION, in literature (or film, or comic books), shows the **same forces** which created the real-life story going to work upon a **different** set of circumstances... **creating similar results**, whether the different circumstances themselves are **fictional... or real**.

We talked about the example of "Schindler's List" and the sense in which Oskar Schindler is a Christ-figure. ANYONE who gives his life to rescue Jews ... is a Christ-figure. He can't help it.

Remember, Oskar Schindler wasn't just a character in a movie – he was a real person, and the story on the screen was a true story. So, as Rod said, if the images of Christ are there, it's because they're present in the real-life story of Oskar Schindler!

Now, the movie made it clear that Schindler was no angel. He was a womanizer, and he was a ruthless businessman. Yet, somehow, in God's providence, he was placed by God in a certain place at a certain time, and despite his sinfulness, God used him to save the lives of innocent people. It's almost like the Holy Spirit pressed His purposes into the mind and the life of the man, without his even being aware of it.

I suggest that we have the same thing going on with the epic stories of superheroes, be they ancient mythological characters, or larger-than-life figures of history or folklore, or the heroes of comic books.

THEY ARE REITERATIONS OF CHRIST.

Bob Kane, Jerry Seigel, and Joe Schuster, in imagining Batman and Superman, certainly were not doing what John Bunyan was doing with Pilgrim's Progress. Though Batman and Superman may have Christlike attributes, they didn't contrive to put them there on purpose. So, without an intent on the part of the authors to do that, a Superman or Batman comic is surely not meant to be read allegorically in regard to Christ.

But, in their stories, when they tried to imagine and reach for those grand tales of magnified but real human struggles, and imagined what the forces of Goodness and Justice and Friendship might look like when they come up against forces of Evil and Corruption and Greed, **those forces began to create and direct the stories** that they wrote and the characters they created.

In their desire to get at the truth of what it means to commit yourself to Goodness and Justice, what being human entails, they almost couldn't help but make use of those images and attributes that we recognize as Christian, but which, more importantly, resonate with that savable soul in every human being, those things that the soul knows it needs – the only things that make sense enough and seem to taste like something that will

satisfy the mind and heart -- these saving, rescuing superpowers, employed on behalf of the downtrodden and victimized, rescuing them from danger, and righting injustices.

In this way, they **re-iterate** that story that the Psalmist says all creation is trying to tell – from the glory of the Lord written on the stars, to a little baby of noble parentage born in a barn, to a great city where justice rules forever.

It's the story of our Lord.

And it's the story that we enter into when we become one with Him.

Jesus said in John's Gospel that because He has gone to the Father, we will do even "greater works" than He did. Of course, we as servants aren't greater than our Master, but we enter into His ministry of bringing the good news of the Gospel and the experience of redemption to the whole planet. And certainly, as Christians, being united with Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, I daresay we've all tasted a little of that battle between Good and Evil – the Apostle Peter said we would -- the trials that face anyone that tries to work for justice or help the downtrodden or otherwise do good in our world.

That's why I believe that these superhero stories can be encouraging, and educational in some ways, because --

These superheroes are reiterations of Christ, in the same way that WE are meant to be reiterations of Christ.

You see, even though comic book stories are obviously fiction, I believe that "the spirit of these tales of wonder is true."¹ That is, they point us toward things that we as Christians need to be reminded of – the need for:

- **Belief in the truth,**
- **For standing up for the poor and victimized,**
- **For persevering in the face of trial, and**
- **To remember that because of Christ, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE!**

Now, maybe you can relate to this. For those of us who really get jazzed by all this crazy comic book/superhero/monster stuff, and who've loved it all our lives (on some level, whether we admitted it to ourselves or not), I think we've all experienced times when we're in a conversation with fellow Christians, and the subject of pop culture comes up, maybe a movie like *The Matrix* or *Princess Mononoke*, and then... we take the risk and a deep breath, and admit that we really think this stuff is cool, and sometimes we hear God talking to us through it -- and then you get that **stare**. And, it kinda makes you self-conscious and doubt yourself – and you wonder, "Is this distracting me from God? I've learned so much good spiritual stuff from it – what's really going on?" Or, you run into

¹ The Great Deeds of Superheroes, Maurice Saxby and Robert Ingpen, NY: Peter Bedrick Book, 1989, p. 6.

people who are downright hostile to the idea that popular culture has any redeeming value at all.

Just to encourage you, I'd like to remind you of a young boy whose mom wrote to C.S. Lewis in the 1950s. The boy was worried after he'd read the Narnia books that he loved Aslan more than Jesus. You recall that Lewis responded, "Tell Laurence from me, with my love ... that he can't really love Aslan more than Jesus, even if he feels that's what he's been doing. Because the things he loves Aslan for doing and saying are simply the things Jesus really said and did. So that when Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before."

So, in these heroes, we find Christ re-iterated in a fresh, new way, and in finding and recognizing Christ, there's a sense in which we find and recognize ourselves – Jesus said, "Wherever I am, there My servant will be." (John 12:26) In the light that Christ sheds in our hearts, in our imaginations, He can use these characters to show us what our dreams and goals really are, what really motivates us in serving God, the things that hold us back.

Wherever we find stories of mighty deeds done to rescue people and bring peace and justice to the land, **I believe that Jesus wants us to see ourselves in these stories**, to imagine how we could minister His grace to those in need, to rescue those in danger of sin or death. I believe these stories can be a great inspiration to us in our spiritual walk, and depending on which stories we identify most with, they can tell us a lot about ourselves and perhaps even point us in the direction of our own mission in life.

So, let's talk about what makes up the character of the Superhero.

First, we have the initiation of the hero through some sort of encounter with evil – in most cases, a great personal tragedy. The usual pattern is that an ordinary person's life takes a turn into a face-to-face meeting with questions of life and death, and the meaning of their lives. Then, they move toward making a dedication of their lives to the doing of good, the vanquishing of evil, and service to mankind. Now, think about your own conversion story, your testimony – how you became a Christian, or perhaps another spiritual milestone in your Christian walk. These times in our lives involve 1) a confrontation with evil (it could be our own sinfulness, or our weakness and fear in the face of evil), 2) an acknowledgement of the truth that we need God and our surrender to Him, 3) a resolve, a dedication, a **consecration** if you will, to resisting that evil forever in the future, and 4) an infilling of God's power in our lives to help us and empower us to do good, and to overcome when the confrontation comes up again.

Just as a side note, I'm not necessarily delineating these in exact order – whether the infilling of God's power comes before the resolve to resist evil, or what. I'm not going to go there theologically at the moment. I'm saying these are **elements of Christian initiation**, though, whatever order you want to put them in.

Let's look again at Spiderman. Here's the story of Spiderman's origin, straight from the horse's mouth at Marvel Comics:

Spider-Man's real name is Peter Parker, and he was orphaned when his parents were killed in a plane crash. From then on, Peter lived with his aunt and uncle, May and Ben Parker, in a suburb of New York City. As a teenager, Peter was supersmart but shy, and didn't have many friends. One night, while attending a lecture and demonstration about radiation, Peter was bitten by a spider that had accidentally been zapped with radiation.

Instantly, Peter developed a number of superhuman powers. He found he had tremendous strength, great reflexes, and a superior sense of balance. He also discovered that he had the ability to make parts of his body – especially his hands and feet – stick to other surfaces. (That's how he can walk up walls like a spider.)

Soon Peter began using his powers in a public way. Wearing a mask and calling himself the Amazing Spider-Man, Peter appeared on a television show as a fantastic stuntman. At first he planned to use his powers only to become famous in show business. But after the television show one night, something happened that changed Peter's life. A burglar ran past him, and Peter didn't do anything to stop the man – even though he could have used his superpowers to stop him easily.

A few days later, this same burglar broke into Peter's house and murdered his uncle. Dressed as Spider-Man, Peter helped police capture the burglar. But he was filled with grief and regret, knowing that if he had stopped the burglar himself, the tragedy might never have occurred.

At that moment, Peter Parker resolved to use his powers to fight crime.²

So, is this Spiderman's "testimony", or what? I don't know if you'd want to say he's "saved", but he's had a real change of heart, one that puts him on the side of kindness and justice.

And, there's something about that dedication, that resolve, that consecration of the superhero to being a force for good, that sets him apart from others. This comes out in many comic book stories, both classic and modern. Through our different worldview lenses, though, it looks a little different: In the classic comics worldview, the hero's dedication to using his gifts for good gives his life and his actions a focus, yet it doesn't alienate him from those he serves – in fact, it connects him deeply to other people in his community. Even though the Lone Ranger is the Lone Ranger, he's not a lonely person. He's got Tonto, and there's a sense of connection and being at home with the people of those Western frontier towns that he protects. This commitment to goodness in the hero also often reveals who his real friends are, as well as who his real enemies are. In the modern worldview, though, there's a tendency to focus on the alienation and isolation

² The Marvel Superheroes Guide Book by Megan Stine. New York: Parachute Press, Inc., 1991, p. 8-9.

that the hero experiences. Some of them you find wandering through their worlds, not quite connecting to anyone or anything, and again, helping other people almost by accident. I'll talk more about that a little later.

Here's another component of the superhero character that's intriguing from a Christian standpoint - **the secret identity** or **anonymity** in doing good for others. "Who was that masked man?" This component of the superhero's character is one of the things that keeps him or her from getting a big head – keeps them from wanting to rule the world or something. It's borne out of a true humility - the classic Superman tales especially reflect this - **a profound acceptance of their place in the cosmos, as subordinate to the Creator** of all things, as created beings, and a rejection of pride that seeks domination of others. (And, they recognize that overarching pride and grasping for power as the trademark of their enemies.)

Jesus tells us clearly in the Gospels that this is meant to be part of our practice of the Christian faith, of following in His footsteps. You remember that when Jesus healed people, He told them not to tell anyone... He said, "**When you give alms, don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing...**"; He said, "**Go into your prayer closet and shut the door...**" (Matthew 6:3-6) This secretness, our personal devotional life, the things we do and the people we are when no one's looking – this is one of the ways in which "**our life is hid with Christ in God. When He appears, we will appear with him in glory.**" (Colossians 3:3-4) Christ increases, and we decrease. (John 3:30) Christ's power reaches out to people, and we're the channel, the vessel for that act of love. The irony is that to the extent we move with this secretness in mind with our focus on Christ in this way, the more outwardly directed and un-self-conscious our actions can be. Our personal identity becomes secure in Christ; we don't need to do anything to shore it up or knock it down.

This is the total antidote for the "gloryseeking", self-conscious attitude that you see in some Christians from time to time. Romans 12:3 warns us "**not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but rather think of ourselves with sober judgment...**", but this becomes less of a chore when we're focused on our love for Christ, our desire to obey Him, and entering into His love for others. C.S. Lewis once said, The truly humble man is not the one who is always judging himself as to whether he is too high or too low. The truly humble man is the one who doesn't think about himself at all. This is a way that serving and loving God draws us out of ourselves to serve others. And, there are times when our identities in Christ are so hidden, so secret that we don't even know them. He's using us in ways that we don't even know about, simply by virtue of the fact that His Holy Spirit lives in us, and if we are His, He can accomplish purposes that our little minds can't contain – "**beyond all that we ask or think**", as Ephesians 3, verse 20, says.

Now we come to the hero's equipment, his superpowers. For example, we have Superman's x-ray vision and superman strength (among other things), Wonder Woman's golden lasso and gold bracelets that she can stop bullets with, all of Batman's gadgetry that he invented, Aquaman's ability to breathe underwater, and we could go on and on.

It is my **strong belief**, brothers and sisters, that the superpowers and the equipment of the superheroes in comic books, as well as in the legends and myths of cultures all across our planet (everything from Thor's hammer to Spiderman's webshooters to the Batmobile), are **re-iterations of the new spiritual order** that was revealed when the Holy Spirit was given by Jesus to the Church gathered in that upper room 2000 years ago on Pentecost - and gave these infinitely wonderful, yet gloriously practical **SPIRITUAL GIFTS**.

They represent the **power** and the **equipment** that God has given us to go out into the world and do "greater works than these", because Jesus said, "I go to the Father" (John 14:12). These spiritual gifts, that are outlined primarily in First Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, are the ways in which you and I, as members of Christ's body, have been called and equipped to literally SAVE THE WORLD!

I have to say that again – **Our spiritual gifts are the ways and the means that God has given us to participate in His work and literally save the planet!**

This is how God works to save the world – He works through us.

We are all called to be Christ to one another and the world. **This is the whole reason for the existence of the Church on earth– to continue Christ's work of redemption of the whole planet** – some theologians put it, "to redeem the temporal order". That's our purpose as Christians.

So, let's get into it – What are spiritual gifts? What do they look like?

Let's start with the Scriptures that describe them. First, we have First Corinthians 12, verses 4 through 20:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all persons.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He gives them to each one, just as He determines.

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because, I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body”, it would not for that reason cease to be a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body”, it would not for that reason cease to be a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

Now, imagine with me for a second. Picture, if you will, a gathering of superheroes from every corner of the universe, converging at a specific point in time, in a place called Mars Hill near Athens. A man called the Apostle, the missionary, is speaking to this colorful gathering, and as we get closer, we overhear him teaching, perhaps in words like these:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Power of Goodness is given for the common good of all. To one there is given through the Power of Goodness psionic mental powers, to another x-ray vision, by means of the same Power of Goodness; to another the ability to fly by the same Power of Goodness, to another to breathe underwater, to another superhuman strength, to another the ability to feel other’s emotions, to another to communicate with animals of all kinds, and to still another the power to become invisible at will. All these are the work of one and the same Power of Goodness, and He gives them to each one, just as He determines.

If Wolverine should say, “Because I do not have psionic mental powers, I do not belong to the X-Men”, he would not for that reason cease to be a part of the X-Men. And if Wonder Woman should say, “Because I don’t have x-ray vision, I do not belong to the Justice League”, she would not for that reason cease to be a part of the Justice League. If the whole Justice League were x-ray vision, where would the Lasso of Truth be? If all of the X-Men had telepathic powers, where would the ability to change the weather be? But in fact God, the Power of Goodness, has arranged the Justice League, and the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be.

And, in like manner, Storm cannot say to Cyclops, “I don’t need you.” And Mr. Fantastic cannot say to The Human Torch, “I don’t need you.” ...

Is this making sense?

Now, I hope it’s obvious that such things as the ability to read minds or become a Human Torch are not literal spiritual gifts! Again, since these things are literary re-iterations and we’re not working with strict allegory, they don’t map one-to-one, and they don’t really need to for our purposes. This was just an illustration of how comic books heroes, and especially groups and teams of heroes, create a lovely picture of how we’re meant to understand and use our spiritual gifts, and how we cooperate and collaborate with other members of the Body of Christ.

Now, I have a handout that I'd like for you to have and look at, and we'll go over it. This is just going to scratch the surface – if we were going to explore everything there is to know about spiritual gifts, we'd be here 'til Tuesday! These are just some ideas to help jump-start your thinking and how you might apply these ideas to your own life.

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Starting off with some definitions:

YOUR VOCATION/CALLING: A divine work of love, which you are uniquely called by God to perform, through which God means to change **you** and **the world around you**.

YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFT(S): Your supernatural spiritual equipment (tools, skills, aptitudes) to be used in the fulfillment of your calling.

I point this out so that you won't confuse the two – your vocation or calling is **your life's work**. It's a larger concept that covers more ground than just what your spiritual gifts are. The key is that **discovering your spiritual gifts can help you discern the nature** of your calling or vocation – what God's will for your life might be. Elizabeth O'Connor of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. once said, "We ask to know the will of God without guessing that His will is written into our very beings. We perceive that will when we discern our gifts."³

The word used for spiritual gifts in the New Testament is the Greek word *charisma*:

And there's the definition from Strong's Concordance.

- *a divine gratuity (gift), e.g. deliverance from danger or sin*
- *a spiritual endowment*
- *a religious qualification/skill*
- *a miraculous faculty*
- *a free gift*

Primary Scripture passages describing the gifts: *I Cor. 12-14, Eph. 4, Romans 12, I Peter 4: 7-11*

A LIST OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS*:

Now, I'm not going to go over every individual gift right now. For one thing, it's a good bet that many of you are familiar with material like this, and for another, we're running out of time. I'll just line them out quickly, so we have them ringing in our heads and ears as we go on:

Pastoral gifts (focus: nurture of individuals and community):

Encouragement/Exhortation – *From the Greek *paraklesis* = "comforter". The ability to minister words of comfort, consolation, encouragement, and counsel to other members of the Body.*

Helps – *The ability to invest your own gifts and talents into the life and ministry of others, to enhance their effectiveness.*

³ Eighth Day of Creation: Gifts and Creativity, Dallas, TX: Word, Inc., 1971, pg. 15.

Hospitality – *The ability to provide a warm welcome and “open house” for those in need of food, shelter, and friendship.*

Mercy – *The ability to empathize with those who suffer physically, mentally, or emotionally, and to meet their needs with practical deeds of compassion.*

Pastoring – *The ability to nurture a Christian community by assuming a personal responsibility for their long-term growth and spiritual welfare.*

Organizational gifts (focus: structuring an organization or group):

Administration – *The ability to create, coordinate, and execute effective plans for the accomplishment of immediate and long-range goals.*

Giving – *The ability to give generously and cheerfully of one’s material resources to those in need.*

Leadership – *The ability to communicate a vision of God’s kingdom to a group, set goals, and then to coordinate, harmonize, and maximize their efforts for success.*

Service – *The ability to identify the unmet needs involved in a task or project, and then to do personally whatever is needed to accomplish the task.*

Gifts of understanding (focus: understanding the ways of God and humanity):

Discernment of Spirits – *The ability to perceive a divine or demonic presence in certain people, places, or things with accuracy.*

Knowledge – *The ability to discover, accumulate, analyze, and clarify information and ideas that enable others to better understand God, creation, and humanity.*

Wisdom – *The ability to receive insight into a situation to make the proper choice and/or determine God’s will, making an application of the given facts to solve problems and meet people’s needs.*

Communication gifts (focus: communicating truth to change lives):

Evangelism – *The ability to share the Gospel with unbelievers in such a way that they become Jesus’ disciples and become integrated into the Christian community.*

Prophecy – *The ability to proclaim a word or call from God in a way that brings conviction to the hearers, so that they recognize the message as a divine utterance and are challenged to respond.*

Teaching – *The ability to impart information and skills to others which help them grow spiritually.*

(Tongues/Interpretation – *The ability to speak a divinely imparted message in a language you have never learned, along with the ability to translate a divine message spoken in tongues into ordinary language.)*

Gifts of healing (focus: channeling God’s healing and restoration):

Healing – *The ability to serve as a channel through which God cures illness and restores health apart from the use of natural means.*

Intercessory Prayer – *The ability to pray for extended periods of time on a regular basis, with this intense prayer becoming the means by which God’s love and deliverance reaches those in need.*

(Miracles – *The ability to serve as a channel through which God performs powerful acts that are perceived by observers to have altered the ordinary course of nature.)*

(Deliverance/Exorcism – *The ability to be a channel through which God casts out demons and evil spirits.)*

Lifestyle gifts (focus: a lifestyle freeing a person for unusual ministry):

Faith – *The ability to place an extraordinary confidence in the purposes of God, resulting in acts which reflect a deep trust in God’s love and provision.*

Apostle/Missionary – *The ability to minister whatever spiritual gifts you have in a second culture.*

Celibacy – *The ability to experience great fulfillment and spiritual fruitfulness by remaining unmarried and celibate for Jesus’ sake.*

Voluntary poverty – *The ability to renounce material comfort and luxury, and instead adopt a lifestyle of cheerful, voluntary simplicity or poverty.*

(**Martyrdom** – *The ability to take extraordinary risks and undergo suffering for the faith, even to death, without fear and with a joyous and victorious attitude.*)

Creative gifts (focus: creative activity that orders and beautifies):

(**Craftsmanship** – *The ability to use artistic or creative skills to beautify and/or bring order to the physical world.*)

(**Music** – *The ability to write and/or perform music for the delight of others and the praise of God.*)

(**Writing** – *The ability to use words to create works of truth and/or beauty that reflect the depth of human experience and bring glory to God.*)

Now, here’s why the above is a list, not the list, of spiritual gifts:

Peter Wagner takes an open-ended approach, noting that none of the Scriptural lists in Romans, I Corinthians, or Ephesians is complete in itself. Some are repeated from list to list, while others are added or deleted. So, Wagner infers from this that these lists are not complete catalogs of the spiritual gifts, and if not, perhaps the list isn’t complete even when we combine all three. More evidence for this would be the fact that the Greek word used here for the gifts, *charisma*, is used elsewhere to describe other spiritual activities (celibacy, voluntary poverty, martyrdom, hospitality, missionary work, intercession); therefore these activities are also listed here. Other skills regarded by some scholars as spiritual gifts include craftsmanship, music, and writing; charismatic sources also delve more deeply into tongues/interpretation, miracles, and deliverance/exorcism as they are practiced in Christian communities today.

And there’s some resources there:

Sources for this information:

Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow by C. Peter Wagner, Regal Books, Ventura, CA. © 1979, 1994.

The Called & Gifted Workshop (Participant’s Notes) by Sherry Weddell, St. Catherine of Siena Institute, Seattle, WA. © 1998. (Website: www.siena.org)

Other books of interest:

Body Life by Ray C. Stedman, Regal Books, Glendale, CA. © 1972.

Nineteen Gifts of the Spirit by Leslie B. Flynn, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL. © 1974.

Discover Your Spiritual Gift and Use It by Rick Yohn, Tyndale, Wheaton, IL. © 1974.

Okay, next page: This the stuff I wanted to make sure to hit with you, because this is important information no matter what your spiritual gifts are.

Further definitions of a spiritual gift:

Spiritual gifts are not the same as “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23).

You’ll note that the “fruit of the Spirit” – Galatians 5 – is not listed above. The root of this idea in Galatians 5 is a different Greek word – literally, fruit, like oranges on trees. The fruit of the Spirit is His gifts to us to **keep**. They make us what we are; they are Christ’s stamping of His character on us (love, joy, peace, patience, and so on). Spiritual gifts/charisms are **outward-focused** - meant to be **given away**.

Spiritual gifts are not just natural talents, though they may be connected to one – a spiritual gift operates **above and beyond our natural abilities**. It makes things happen that really are impossible – like, people coming to faith in Christ through talking to **you**.

Spiritual gifts are not the same as Christian roles.

We are all called upon to do all of the activities listed as spiritual gifts at one time or other: we’re commanded to pray for one another, show hospitality, and to be witnesses at all times, but not all of us have the spiritual gifts of intercession or evangelism, and the opportunities and the grace for us to exercise Christian roles will come and go – it doesn’t have the permanency of a spiritual gift. A good example is the Christian role of celibacy and the spiritual gift of celibacy. The Bible teaches that those who are unmarried are to be celibate until God brings the person who’s meant to be our spouse into our lives, and we’re to maintain celibacy until we’ve actually entered into that covenant with one another. Now, I didn’t get married until I was 33 years old, and I went through some tough stuff. But, for some people, it’s not hard at all. They move through life and relationships with people, with men and women, in such a way that they gain all the emotional sustenance they need from those friendships, and their vision of doing God’s will in the best of all possible worlds doesn’t necessarily include a spouse or children. I was called upon to fulfill the role, but I didn’t have the gift. (And my husband right there is saying, Thank You, Jesus.)

Spiritual gifts are given for benefit of others, not for one’s own use.

Remember the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, “Make me a channel of Your peace”? The gifts are like channels that God creates in us to be rivers of grace to others. Your gifts are not for you – they can’t be used to meet your own needs. But, that’s what others’ gifts are for – Others’ gifts are for you. This is what is supposed to draw us out of ourselves and make us interdependent upon one another in the Body of Christ.

Spiritual gifts cannot be turned to evil.

Now, let me just point out that the exercise of gifts can be distorted or blocked by sin in our lives, but since it is the gift of God – not “our” ministry, but that of **God using us**, the Holy Spirit in us cannot sin or cause evil. Remember what we talked about with the sons of Sceva, that you have to be connected to Christ for any effort at ministry to have power. Also, First Corinthians 13 says that if the gifts are not exercised with love, they’re worthless, and we’ll talk about that more in a minute. The sources and scholars that I’ve

seen on this all agree that if you try to use a true spiritual gift for an evil purpose, it will disintegrate.

All Christians most likely have a *gift mix* – a combination of spiritual gifts that work together and weave themselves together into unique patterns of expression.

For example, take **Michael Card** – a popular Christian artist for many years, known for writing songs that are like mini-sermons and meditations on the Scriptures. How many of you know that before he went into music full-time, Michael Card was educated and ordained as an Episcopalian minister? For those of you who didn't know that, doesn't it make sense that his musical skills combine with gifts of teaching and knowledge gained in his studies in such a way that when you listen to his music, it's like having the deeper meaning of the Scripture sung into your heart and soul? Isn't it like that?

And, isn't that different than, say, **Saviour Machine**'s approach? Saviour Machine takes their musical talent (and uses a different musical genre) and combines it with – what? A very broad, theatrical, story-telling performance or show that's crafted in such a way as to tell the story of Christ with **striking visual imagery** as much as with the words of their songs and the sound of the music. And that craft, that flair for the dramatic, to present an image that teaches us the truth, can also be a spiritual gift – that craftsmanship in the presentation of imagery that filmmakers do, that painters and sculptors do, that writers do. And it serves as a bearer, a vehicle for God to use in telling people who He is and who they are.

How to recognize a spiritual gift:

Something you're good at and enjoy doing.

Galatians 5:22 says that the fruit of the Spirit is, first love, and then joy. Joy is a component of the salvation that Jesus has brought us, and He wants us to be happy in serving Him. So, as part of the Holy Spirit's working of grace in us, He gives us desires and specific ideas as to how to please Him and serve Him and others. This is why the psalmist says, **"Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart."** (Ps. 37:4) Also, Ephesians 1 says that **God "chose us in [Christ] before the beginning of the world"** (Eph. 1:4) So, God has designed you and your personality and your natural affinities in such a way that when you're functioning according to the way He designed you, you'll have His joy in your life.

Others' positive feedback and encouragement.

The whole point of having a spiritual gift is for God to use it to bless other people – so, if you hear people say consistently to you, "Wow, I really heard God speaking to me through what you had to say", or "I really saw Jesus in you when you did that thing", notice this, and praise God for it, because it's an indication that you might have a spiritual gift in that area.

A sense that we "fit the suit" - our lifestyle and personality dovetail together with the exercise of the gift in a healthy way.

There's an unselfconsciousness – an awareness of God's presence and an outward focus – a sense of being transformed into a gift God gives to others. Romans 12, verses 1 and

2, talks about how we offer ourselves, all we are to God – which is our act of spiritual worship - and He transforms us, giving us the ability to be the real presence of Jesus and a means of grace for others. We become the channel through which the powerful presence of Jesus is poured into situations where people are crying out to Him. And, part of the miracle and the mystery here is, *We may not realize it's even happening*. This is why other people's feedback is important – they can often be better judges of whether something uniquely spiritual is happening when you're exercising a particular gift or talent, because again, God gave you the gift for their benefit, not for your own.

Effectiveness – the gift works and creates a positive result for people. It's easy to forget this one, but it's very important in recognizing your spiritual gifts. Sometimes you can have an experience where you love what you're doing, but it falls flat – it doesn't really have any positive or lasting effect. That's an indication that you might not be gifted in that area. Or, you might be pretty consistently successful at doing something, some sort of service – but you hate every minute of it. That's also an indication that that skill might not be a spiritual gift, but a natural talent – that you inherited, picked up from your life experience, or whatever.

It's the combination of these factors that should make you sit up and take notice of the direction God might be trying to point you in.

Discerning and developing your spiritual gift:

First, **educate yourself.**

- Study the Scriptures listed above
- Read any of the books listed
- Look into spiritual gifts seminars in your area

Next, **practice using gifts you think you might have** – put yourself in situations where those gifts are needed. This can be scary, but it's very educational.

Then, evaluate your experience as honestly as you can.

Determine what worked and what didn't - it's just as helpful to know which gifts you don't have as the ones you do have!

Avoid comparing your gifts with those of others - Remember the gift mix concept – because of the combination of your gifts, your expression of them may not look like that of someone else.

Accept the feedback and advice of those in your fellowship, including your pastor, because the gifts are for others. Their feedback is important.

And, an encouraging quote from Augustine-

The glory of God is man [and woman] fully alive. – Augustine.

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Now, you should realize that discerning your spiritual gifts is a **process**, sometimes a lifelong process, that takes time and effort. There is no website called “discover-your-spiritual-gift.com”; there are tools available that some pastors have developed, but they can only point you in certain directions. Real discernment and growth in your spiritual gifts takes prayer, it takes hard self-examination, it involves taking risks, and it will

probably involve failing a time or two. But it takes **work**, and it **requires faith**, as all things that please God do – they require faith.

I need to underline something very important about spiritual gifts at this point. Spiritual gifts function according to the Biblical principle that **you cannot live or grow as a Christian by yourself**. All of us need other Christians – we need to be connected to the Body of Christ in order to stay healthy and grow spiritually. Over and over, the Bible exhorts and challenges us to interact with other people, and insists that this is a key component of our personal spiritual growth. Jesus Himself in Matthew 24 says, “If you did one good thing for someone in need (fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited the prisoners), **you did it for Me.**” In other words, what you do in your relationships with other people matters to God. Remember all of the “one anothers” in Paul’s letters to the churches - encourage one another, love one another, pray for one another, serve one another, and on and on. The most important thing to get a hold of in regards to spiritual gifts is the fact that **love for others is what animates and focuses the use of our spiritual gifts**. Notice that First Corinthians 13, the “love chapter”, is sandwiched between two sections of Paul’s teaching on spiritual gifts and church order. Listen to the first three verses of Chapter 13, this time with spiritual gifts in mind:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong, or clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a [gift of] faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor [that’s voluntary poverty] and surrender my body to the flames [in martyrdom], but have not love, I gain nothing.

Paul is trying to get across to them, “Look, you could have every spiritual gift there is, and **if you don’t have love** -- it’s all for nothing.”

This is an important key for discernment, both in discerning your own spiritual gifts, and in discerning the different aspects of comic book worlds and heroes, as well as other genres of pop culture. **The hero’s connection to the community** is an important part of his identity, his character, his integrity. I mentioned the Lone Ranger, and how he’s not really alone - he’s got the companionship of Tonto, and he has an almost pastoral care for those Western settlers. Even for a loner like Batman, his commitment to be there to rescue innocent people in danger bonds him to Gotham City, makes him pay attention to what’s going on there, gives him a stake in the well-being of the city, and he lives at least his above-ground life as part of the community. **He needs people**; he needs Alfred to keep his secret, he needs the commissioner to let him know what’s going on (and depending on which Batman you read, he’s got Robin, too). In regards to Superman, Christopher Reeve, whom most of you know portrayed Superman in the 1980s movies, said in an interview once, “The most important thing about Superman is that he was a friend to people.” A friend to people.

Remember, Jesus Christ has called us His friends. I believe He wants us to be friends in these powerful ways to our fellow pilgrims on planet Earth, both Christians and non-Christians.

There are just two more things I'd like to share with you –

If you've heard nothing of what I've said so far today, please just do one thing – go to the video store and rent and watch the movie "Unbreakable", directed by M. Night Shyamalan, the director of "The Sixth Sense". How many of you have seen it?

For those of you who haven't seen it, it stars Bruce Willis as a man who's just wandering through his life, and then he discovers that he might have a unique gift. Then, a stranger, played by Samuel L. Jackson, comes along and encourages him to accept and develop that gift, and it changes the course of his life. **This movie contains every aspect that I've discussed here** – the encounter with evil, the secret identity, the discernment process – it's just beautiful. If I've been confusing or boring you today, you will understand everything when you see "Unbreakable".

In closing, I'll share with you a quote from John Henry Newman I'd like to call The Modern Hero's Creed, if you will. As you listen to this, think about where you're at with God and what He might be calling you personally to do, and it's OK to let your thoughts wander to your own personal heroes, real or fictional, and what you admire in them/what inspires you about them. This for all of us. I pray you're encouraged by this.

**God has created me to do Him some definite service.
He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another.**

**I have my mission;
I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.**

**I am a link in a chain;
A bond of connection between persons.**

**He has not created me for naught;
I shall do good – I shall do His work.**

**I shall be an angel of peace,
A preacher of truth in my own place
While not intending it
If I do but keep his commandments.**

**Therefore, I will trust him.
Whatever I am, I can never be thrown away.
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him;
In perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him;
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him.**

**He does nothing in vain.
He knows what He is about.
He may take away my friends,
He may throw me among strangers,
He may make me feel desolate,
make my spirits sink,
*hide my future from me – STILL***

HE KNOWS WHAT HE IS ABOUT.

Thank you.

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