

**More Significant than Yourselves:
Managing High Giftedness in the Church**

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Introduction

And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Luke 2:47)

Obviously, Jesus of Nazareth was a gifted person. At the age of twelve, visiting Jerusalem during Passover with his parents, he was found in the temple among the teachers, who listened to him and asked him questions. Further increasing in wisdom and stature, he grew into a young man of extraordinary knowledge. He had the gift of seeing what remained invisible to others. He took the conversation with people where it hurt. He saw through intentions. He was able to articulate the essence of the law of the Jews. He looked far into the future. He saw the natural in conjunction with the supernatural. Often he was misunderstood because of his complex ideas and holistic vision. Eventually, Jesus came into conflict with the authorities because of the injustice he observed.

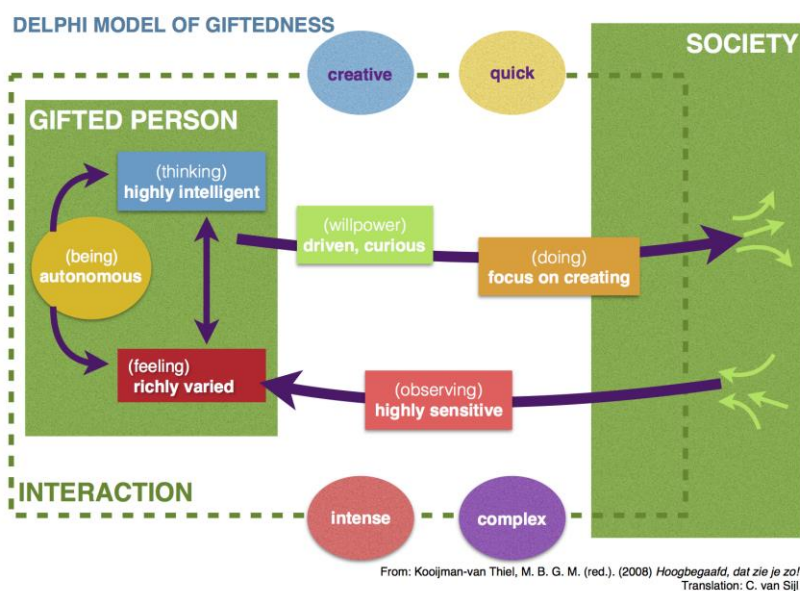
Among his followers today, these qualities of Jesus do not always seem to be appreciated. Gifted adults in the church have a hard time connecting with their fellow Christians. Constantly questioning faith and its organization, they barely manage to be understood and appreciated. Consequently, they run the risk to abandon the church. From the perspective of the Christian leader, this is a real loss. However, their job is not an easy one. While pastors are skilled to use leadership theory managing group processes, no leadership theory seems to focus on the gifted individual. In this paper we explore whether connections can be made between the knowledge about giftedness and leadership theory. What leadership theories can be helpful for pastors to encourage gifted people in the church and use their qualities?

1: High Gifted Individuals in the Church

What is wrong with me? Unfortunately, for most highly gifted individuals, asking this question is their way to knowledge about the quality of giftedness. Gifted Christians often encounter problems not only in their personal and social life, but also in faith and church life. In this chapter we discuss their characteristics and difficulties. We also briefly examine a biblical pattern for the position of gifted individuals in the church.

Characteristics of High Giftedness

High giftedness is a combination of high intelligence, high sensitivity, high sexuality, and high religiosity.¹ While models of giftedness often focused on *learning* and treated giftedness as something people can become through education², modern theories rather emphasize *being* in their description of giftedness. Often the Delphi-model is used to describe the experience of giftedness:



¹ Dineke Kooten, van, 'Hoogbegaafd en misdiagnoses', accessed 14 March 2021, <https://www.dinekevankooten.nl/archief/hoogbegaafd-en-misdiagnoses/>.

² A.P Nauta and Rianne van de Ven, *Hoogbegaafde volwassenen: zet je gaven intelligent en positief in* (Utrecht: BigBusiness Publishers, 2017), 26.

This model shows that gifted individuals are (being) autonomous, (thinking) highly intelligent, and (feeling) multifaceted. In relation to society, they are driven and curious in their motivation, creative in their activities, and highly sensitive in their perception. Furthermore, gifted individuals ask more and deeper questions, have complex ideas, a holistic perspective and long term vision. They easily spot inaccuracies and injustice and are strongly focused on content rather than relationships. As a result, they often experience existential loneliness, inferiority, misunderstanding and conflict.

High giftedness is also described as a personality development, for example in Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive desintegration. The experience of being different is generated by over-excitement, which can manifest itself in serious psychological or psychiatric problems. Rather, these are symptoms of a high development potential to create what Dabrowski calls a *personality*, for whom autonomy towards the group is essential.³ Such a development model is interesting for our purpose to understand the impact of giftedness on Christian faith and church life. Frustration, even in faith, can be a potential for personal growth.

High Giftedness in Faith and Church Life

Giftedness does not stop at the front door of the church, or when entering the community of believers. Where church communities appear to be designed for conformism, uniform and reproductive thinking, the gifted attach to an authentic, associative approach from different angles.⁴ Applied to faith life, the gifted are self-directive, autonomous and guided by their own ideal images.⁵ They don't settle for less, but investigate matters thoroughly. In addition,

³ 'Theorie van positieve desintegratie', in *Wikipedia*, 17 November 2020, https://nl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Theorie_van_positieve_desintegratie&oldid=57555965.

⁴ Ria Havinga-Brand, *Hoogbegaafd geloven* (Ouderkerk aan den IJssel: Ekklesia, 2009), 62; Werkgroep Kerk, 'Te slim voor de kerk? Een handreiking om hoogbegaafdheid en kerk beter op elkaar af te stemmen' (Choochem. Vereniging ter ondersteuning van hoogbegaafde christenen, n.d.), 8.

⁵ Havinga-Brand, *Hoogbegaafd geloven*, 51.

they look for the differences rather than the greatest common denominator.⁶ Applied to church life, the gifted have difficulty connecting with the group because of their high standards, other interests and self-direction. Abstract concepts are easily accessible to them, with the result that they are quick to question life and faith practice when things do not match what is being taught.⁷ Authority must be earned and derived from content. If the questions of the gifted are not recognized as a learning style, church members will feel attacked and the gifted will become an outsider.

What is known about the relation between religion and high giftedness? On the one hand, research shows that gifted people are not attracted to religion.⁸ In addition, there is an assumed connection between the level of intellectual development and church abandonment.⁹ On the other hand, high religiosity is mentioned as one of the characteristics of high giftedness.¹⁰ To bring these insights together, we have to distinguish between religiosity, as a deep human connection with the higher (with faith as its substantive form) and the church as a social structure within a religion.¹¹ According to Ria Havinga, gifted individuals will easily and quickly arrive at what is called the postconventional level, at which the own religious tradition is compared with other traditions and convictions.¹² This theory seems consistent with an application of Dabrowski's positive disintegration to the life of faith. Gifted individuals quickly overcome faith as presented by parents and pastor, and arrive at an

⁶ Dineke Kooten, van, 'Hoogbegaafd geloven' (Mini-symposium Hoogbegaafd Geloven, Ede, 30 September 2017), https://www.choochem.nl/nl/1032_terugblik_mini-symposium_2017_hoogbegaafd_geloven.htm.

⁷ Havinga-Brand, *Hoogbegaafd geloven*, 51.

⁸ 53 of 64 studies show a negative relationship. See: Maurice Hoogendoorn, "Religie trekt hoogbegaafde niet aan", *Nederlands Dagblad*, n.d., https://www.choochem.nl/html/filesystem/storeFolder/11/!cid_image002_jpg@01CE9A60.jpg.

⁹ Havinga-Brand, *Hoogbegaafd geloven*, 49.

¹⁰ Kooten, van, 'Hoogbegaafd en misdiagnoses'.

¹¹ Dineke Kooten, van, 'Spiritualiteit en hoogbegaafdheid', Podcasts over hoogbegaafdheid, accessed 24 March 2021, <https://www.dinekevankooten.nl/archief/podcasts-over-hoogbegaafdheid/>.

¹² Havinga-Brand, *Hoogbegaafd geloven*, 56.

existential level, where images of God are annulled and there is a potential to grow into a holistic experience of faith.¹³

This seems to be a critical phase. While high religiosity is part of their giftedness, when they bump into religious conventionalism, the gifted easily become imbalanced and will perceive themselves as atheists or anarchists.¹⁴ When the conviction has been abandoned that something must be done or believed in a certain way, what church would fit them? Although the gifted are very active in first instance, they will abandon the church when their intellectual needs will not be met.¹⁵ However, when they do not completely let go of their faith, it is deepened and the own tradition is re-valued.¹⁶ When there is room for a process of growth, a connection with the group can be remained.¹⁷

Biblical Patterns for Extraordinaryness

According to New Testament teaching, everybody in the church is gifted in a spiritual sense.¹⁸ Can high giftedness be counted among the spiritual gifts? The gifts discussed in Scripture do not have to be miraculous or supernatural manifestations, but rather ordinary human faculties.¹⁹ On the other hand, as described, it is a great challenge to make high giftedness function as a God-given spiritual gift to use on behalf of the congregation, as commanded.²⁰ In addition, it is a challenge for the gifted to 'count others more significant than yourselves', which is Pauls' recommendation to seek for peace and unity in the a church such as in

¹³ Kooten, van, 'Spiritualiteit en hoogbegaafdheid'.

¹⁴ Kooten, van, 'Hoogbegaafd en misdiagnoses'.

¹⁵ Kooten, van, 'Hoogbegaafd geloven', 14.16.

¹⁶ Havinga-Brand, *Hoogbegaafd geloven*, 53.

¹⁷ Havinga-Brand, 55.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:8-11; Romans 12:6-8

¹⁹ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 111.

²⁰ See 1 Peter 4:10; 1 Corinthians 14:12

Philippi.²¹ If giftedness is perceived as 'more than' in many aspects, how can the biblical standard of humility be met?

In order to find a biblical paradigm for extraordinaryness, we learn from how disability theology seeks to understand Christian theology against the background of the experiences of the disabled.²² A similarity between disabled and gifted individuals is that both are a very small minority in the church. Furthermore, their social experience is one of exclusion and injustice.²³ Therefore, aspects of disability theology are useful in discussing the position of the gifted in the church, whereby a perception of haughtiness is avoided. Although the gifted are capable to many things, they often find themselves disabled to connect.

Disability theology includes the notion that the images of God and our perception of normality mutually influence each other. What image of God can help to develop a gifted perception of normality? Discussing normality in the church, John Swinton argues that 'as Christians, the only real model of normality is Jesus'²⁴ and through his injuries, Jesus is identified with disabilities and associated with the disabled. Considering giftedness, this is an interesting thought. Jesus was clearly a gifted person. Why could not Christians identify with Him through their intellectual and sensory gifts? If following Jesus is key to Christian life, there must be a way to provide a safe place for the gifted to fully live their extraordinary nature.

²¹ Philippians 2:3

²² John Swinton, 'Who Is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14, no. 2 (2011): 274.

²³ Swinton, 287.

²⁴ John Swinton, 'The Theology of Disability', Jude 3 Project, 3.42 min, accessed 19 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blwi2DchHbg>.

2: Leadership Encouraging Giftedness

After having discussed the characteristics and pitfalls of gifted individuals in the church, we explore how leadership theory can inform pastors to encourage the gifted to overcome their difficulties and use their giftedness as a startingpoint for spiritual growth and connectedness. However, not all theories seem to be in favor of such growth. Social identity leadership seems to be only of disadvantage for the gifted. Diversity leadership and distributed leadership are discussed as models that pastors can use to help the gifted find their place in the church. Assuming that the intelligence of the gifted surpass that of the pastor, we are helped with leader and follower-centred perspectives, that acknowledge the difference existing between the leader with each of their followers.²⁵

The Marginalizing Effect of Social Identity

High gifted individuals are only a small minority in the church.²⁶ From the previous chapters we get the impression that the gifted are more likely to have the experience of an outsider rather than a minority. The theory of social identity can explain the mechanisms by which this comes about. Jack Barentsen describes a social identity as 'a psychological sense of *us*, of belonging to a group'.²⁷ It has a cognitive, an affective and a normative dimension. The theory of social identity is relevant for high gifted adults in the church in two aspects. First, group formation takes place on the basis of social identity. When members represent the beliefs and values of the group, they become prototypical and gain influence. These members are socially attractive and are trusted.²⁸ As we have seen, gifted individuals tend to question what is common and tacitly assumed. They naturally criticize unprovoked assumptions and

²⁵ Bolden and Hawkins, 518.

²⁶ One in fifty of the general population. See: Werkgroep Kerk, 'Te slim voor de kerk? Een handreiking om hoogbegaafdheid en kerk beter op elkaar af te stemmen', 8.

²⁷ Jack Barentsen, 'Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction in a Changing Social Context', *Journal of Religious Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2015): 53.

²⁸ Barentsen, 55.

find it difficult to identify with the social identity of a church community. As a result, they are likely to be on the fringes of the group, not developing prototypicality, and not gaining trust.

Second, social identity theory explains leadership in churches, especially where there is an informal leadership culture. Prototypical members are assigned leadership qualities because they reflect the social identity of the group. Gifted individuals, who question the social identity because of their brain wiring, are unlikely to become leaders, whether formal or informal. As a result, they have few options to influence or change matters. This image of group formation is not attractive to the gifted. Pastors can use social identity theory to understand the lack of authority they have for them. The authority assigned to them by the group because of their likely prototypicality is precisely withheld by the gifted. Connecting the gifted to the life of the church requires an active use of other leadership styles.

Diversity Leadership and Anti-Intellectualism

It is precisely the diversity of the body of Christ that makes the body the body.²⁹ It makes sense to look at diversity leadership, which pays attention to minority groups in organizations, such as ethnic minorities, the disabled, or women. Diversity leadership, however, focuses on minority groups, while the gifted in the church are often such a small minority that it practically only concerns the individual. However, diversity leadership theory is interesting because it discusses negative stereotyping as one of the barriers against diversity.³⁰ Negative stereotyping is a subtle form of framing the outsider to maintain existing social boundaries.

For example, a negative stereotyping of giftedness is formed by an anti-intellectual climate in the evangelical churches. Mark A. Noll discussed this anti-intellectualism in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, the scandal being that there is 'not much' of an evangelical mind.³¹ His thesis is that American evangelicals failed to sustain serious intellectual life and the practice of high culture. The evangelical ethos Noll describes as activist, populist,

²⁹ Swinton, 'The Theology of Disability', 11.40 min.

³⁰ Craig Edward Johnson, 'Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Diversity', in *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership* (Los Angeles, LA: Sage Publications, 2014), 327.

³¹ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 3.

pragmatic and utilitarian.³² Another aspect to be mentioned is the biblicist interpretation of the Bible, neglecting its literary and historical context. So there is profound theological knowledge, but not much knowledge about the world in which faith has to be contextualized.

Johnson points to several psychological processes that can be developed to account for diversity: mindfulness, openness to new categories, openness to new information, and recognizing the existence of more than one perspective.³³ These psychological processes can be specified for gifted individuals in the church. Is there an awareness of tacit assumptions? Do leaders recognize the essential difference between smart and high gifted people? Can questions be asked that may seem threatening? Is there room for deepening education and evangelization, instead of accessibility? These issues that diversity leadership propose to include minorities in organizations are useful to generate attention for the gifted minority.

Distributed Leadership: Encouraging Self Leadership of the Gifted

Distributed Leadership is a form of shared leadership, as opposed to a hierarchical model. It is a model that gives people of all levels in the organization the opportunity to influence and manage processes.³⁴ Leadership then consists of shared activities and functions. It does not look for effective leadership, but effective followership.³⁵ Looking at the qualities of the gifted, distributed leadership would suit their need for connection and inclusiveness on the one hand and exploration on the other. When a culture of distribution is advanced, it will reduce the effect of negative stereotyping: questioning issues and exploring topics will be rewarding rather than embarrassed.

It is the theory of superleadership in particular that will help pastors to encourage the gifted, because it involves an active attitude of leaders towards subordinate development,

³² Noll, 13.

³³ Johnson, 'Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Diversity', 372.

³⁴ Montgomery Wart, van, *Leadership in Public Organizations: An Introduction*. (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 595.

³⁵ Wart, van, 104.

participation and delegation.³⁶ Leaders must encourage creativity and create independence and interdependence. It promotes self-leadership, meaning that 'the attitudes, beliefs, self-designed behavioral patterns, and motivational preferences of individuals make a critical difference in both accomplishment and personal satisfaction in work'.³⁷ The leadership style is self-directive, self-supportive, self-achievement, and self-inspirational.³⁸ These leadership descriptions overlap with what the gifted need to develop their potential in the church. The role for their pastors will then to promote a culture of intellectual inclusiveness and encourage intellectual and spiritual growth for those who need it.

³⁶ Wart, van, 105.

³⁷ Wart, van, 115.

³⁸ Wart, van, 117.

Conclusion

In the booklet 'Too Smart for the Church?' a workgroup of the society *Choochem* reports on a survey among its members about their experiences with the Church.³⁹ Those surveyed have both positive and negative experiences with the church, many of which overlap with our findings in chapter 1.⁴⁰ What is relevant for us is that much depends on whether the pastor is doing well.⁴¹ The working group advises the pastor in her preaching to display knowledge, bring in depth and raise matters worth thinking about. In addition, she has to make sure that no questions should be taboo. Having the opportunity to ask questions is more important than receiving answers.

Learning from the experience of high giftedness and leadership theory, we can add the following recommendations to what the working group has formulated:

- Get to know the gifted. Giftedness is not the same as being smart.
- Be open to a faith that surpasses the boundaries of orthodoxy. The gifted may question conformism, church practice, or even the creed. It may be their only path to spiritual growth.
- Learn to evaluate your own position as a pastor. Probably the intellectual capacity of the gifted surpasses that of you. Furthermore, your authority can be earned through a social identity culture, which is an obstacle to those on the fringes.
- Embrace intellectual diversity in the church. Although modesty is a Christian value, giftedness is a personality trait that can not be suppressed. The gifted need help to connect with the group. Negative stereotyping must be actively opposed.
- Use a distributive approach to the gifted. Incorporate their personal capacities in your ministry. Recognize their self-leadership potential in their intellectual and spiritual growth.

³⁹ Werkgroep Kerk, 'Te slim voor de kerk? Een handreiking om hoogbegaafdheid en kerk beter op elkaar af te stemmen'.

⁴⁰ Mentioned are the clichéd sermons and a lack of food for thought and answers. Werkgroep Kerk, 9.

⁴¹ Werkgroep Kerk, 'Te slim voor de kerk? Een handreiking om hoogbegaafdheid en kerk beter op elkaar af te stemmen', 11.

- Set healthy boundaries to the gifted. Most church members have a conventional faith that does not need to be discussed. The gifted should be educated about the impact of their giftedness on the group.

The biblical pattern for Christian life is the life of Christ, that includes his giftedness. In the community of Christ, which is inclusive in many ways, room is to be made for the gifted to use their qualities for good. While Jesus was rejected for who He was, Christian pastors face the challenge to establish a pattern to care for those who are to be counted more significant than them.

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