

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 (Part 2 of our study in chapter 12)

Title: One Body, Many Members, Different Gifts

Truth: God has carefully composed the church to carry out His work.

Date/Location: January 3, 2021 at FBC

Review

We saw in the previous message on 1 Corinthians 12 that this passage teaches a bunch of truth propositions—too many to repeat here. Also, the church, the body of Christ, is formed by Spirit baptism. I wrote in my last notes on this matter the following: “The church together is a ‘living thing,’ not a mere list of names. It is a living dwelling-place for God through His Spirit.”

Furthermore, the church body is well illustrated by a human’s physical body with its different, complementary parts. Every part needs every other part to function properly, and no part can dispense with other parts lest function be compromised.

The body illustration helped the church in Corinth to deal with two problems. The **first** problem was the inferiority complex of some members who wrongheadedly thought that they and their roles were unimportant and thus were not content with what God had given them to do in the church. The **second** problem was the superiority complex of other members who sinfully thought that they were *something* as contrasted with others who were not important. Both attitudes—discontent and despising of others—have no place in the church. They are both manifestations of self-centeredness.

Introduction, v. 27

A. Verse 27 ties up in a summary fashion what Paul has taught thus far. Namely, the people of the church are the body of Christ and so have a **corporate role** and an **individual role**. Individuality is not lost: the corporate does not swallow it up. But neither is the corporate nature lost to some supposed supremacy of the individual. The church is not a commune; but neither are its members lone rangers. We are members of one another (Romans 12:5, Eph. 4:25).

B. Membership in the church is not merely about being on an official list. It is about diversity of parts and function (12:14); it is about unity (12:20); it is about care for one another (12:25); it is about partnership in sharing joy and grief (12:26); it is about loving one another (12:31, ch. 13); it is about edification (many verses in ch. 14).

I. Delineating the Spirit-Given Gifts, v. 28

- A. We should note that the gifts are abilities, and they are closely associated with “offices” or “positions” in the church. Sometimes people will distinguish gifts from offices, but I will not make that a big issue in these notes. The distinction is somewhat flattened by recognizing that for someone to hold the office, they must have the requisite gift from God. Otherwise, their service will be either ineffective, or not true service at all.
- B. The gifts are listed in a particular order. The words *first*, *second*, and *third* are notable in verse 28. They indicate an order of importance, and, as we noted before, the order has to do with the ability of those gifts to edify the body. Last on the list are such things as tongues and interpretation. They would eventually fall away and become unnecessary in the life of the church. Then in verse 29 Paul has a list of short questions that list the gifts again in the same order, except that he skips a couple toward and adds a new one to the end (interpretation).
- C. List of the gifts and definitions. See also the notes on 12:4-11.
1. Apostles. There are no apostles today. An apostle was a man who was specially chosen by Jesus as a personal representative of the Messiah. He was guided into all truth by the Holy Spirit so that he could preach and write the New Testament portions assigned Him. He personally witnessed the baptism, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:21). He was able to authenticate his place in the office by working the signs of an apostle (2 Cor. 12:12) which were some miraculous things like healings or raising someone from the dead.
 2. Prophets. A man or woman who received and proclaimed new revelation from God. There are no prophets today. A Bible

expositor could be called a prophet because he is a proclaimer of earlier divine revelation, but because of confusion with the miraculous idea of receiving new revelation, it is better to use a term like Bible teacher, pastor, herald, evangelist, or similar term that does not carry charismatic baggage with it.

3. Teachers. People who are gifted by the Spirit to take divine truth and convey it in an understandable way and a way that is applicable to life. This is the primary gift of edification today in terms of conveying the word of God to the church. There is also the gift of evangelist (Eph. 4:11) which is the ability to take the divine truth of the gospel and present it in a clear and persuasive way to those who do not know the Lord. It is the primary gift of building up the church in terms of adding new people to the church from the world.
4. Miracles. God gave some people the ability to do miracles to build up the church, to authenticate its ministry, and perhaps to protect or provide for it. This gift is not given today by the Spirit. This does *not* mean that God does or cannot do miracles today; it means *God does not gift people* to do so.
5. Gifts of healings. This is analogous to the previous gift in that it is not given today. This included the removal of demons (exorcism), which the apostles and a few others did in the baby era of the church. The focus of this gift was to heal afflictions of the physical body, as a way to authenticate God's messengers.
6. Helps. This is a general gift, like a gift of service in various capacities. Some people have the desire and ability to help others and are especially fulfilled by that pursuit.
7. Administrations. This is a gift of people who have leadership and organizational abilities or coaching talent. They are the certain people who can help people get moving in unified direction to accomplish something. They can help marshal the resources (people and material) to accomplish a large task. They might be forward-thinking, or be able to see the gap between where we are and where we want to be, or have especially clear thinking on what issues are important right now, or be able to encourage, or are able to handle technical matters with skill.

8. Tongues. This is the gift, no longer given, in which a person can instantly know and speak a foreign language. It is a real language with real usefulness in the real world to communicate the words of God to the people who speak the foreign language. Today, language must be learned the hard way. There are people “gifted” with linguistic interest and ability, but they still must put in the work to learn and practice the language.
9. (From v. 30) Interpretation. This is another obsolete gift, by which a person could understand a foreign language spoken in a tongue and be able to translate it to (presumably) his native tongue to share the meaning of what was spoken with the audience. This was a unique gift in that if the gift of tongues was exercised in the church, this one was **required** also to be exercised. But if there were no interpreter, then there was to be no tongue spoken!

II. Diversity of the Distribution of Gifts, v. 29-30

- A. The apostle Paul now applies what he illustrated earlier with the human body. Namely, he uses rhetorical questions to explain that not everyone has the gifts that he lists. Not all Christians are apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, tongue-speakers, or interpreters. Some were gifted in each of those categories, and the rest did *not* have those gifts.
- B. If someone were to require that you exercise any one of these gifts to demonstrate that you are saved, then you would know *immediately* that person is a false teacher. Most believers throughout the course of church history either could not or did/do not have gifts 1-5 and 8 on the list above. Some are gifted at administration and many have the gift of helps. (Some don't exercise their gifts at all, or even know what they are.) But saying, “If you are saved, you must heal someone, or you must be an apostle, or you must speak in tongues,” is **false teaching**. Salvation does not come by the exercise or demonstration of gifts. Salvation comes to a person through true repentant faith in Christ, and nothing else. Certainly, the transformation wrought by God in the life of the believer will yield good works, but the manifestation of a particular gift by all believers is an unbiblical requirement.

III. Desire for the Best Gifts, v. 31

- A. The apostle wants the believers not to seek not self-aggrandizement but rather edification. Their problem was they wanted to show off and be well-known in the church. Paul is not encouraging them to do more of that because *that* was the problem! Such a selfish approach does nothing for the health, strength, and growth of the church. What God desires is His assigned abilities to be exercised in grace and the power of the Spirit to build up the body.
- B. The desire here is *corporate*: “**you all** seek/desire the best gifts.”
1. It is not a directive to individuals to seek to “one up” their gift to the next level better one. God has already decided what gifts you are assigned. For example, the prayer, “Lord, give me the gift of tongues” is out of place because not only is that gift not given today, but God has already given you the gifts He has, and you are simply required to use them. I find no Biblical evidence to justify that the gifts given by the Spirit morph over time in the life of an individual believer. Let me reiterate that thought because it is so misunderstood by some today. The corporate “seeking” of gifts completely undercuts the “I pray for tongues” thought process. That idea reveals a level of selfish discontent with where God has placed you and how He is using you. If God has not given you a certain gift yet, and you have been in the faith for some years, it is pretty much certain that He is not going to give it to you now. In fact, the gift of tongues He *never* gives today. But be that as it is, you are called to be content with what God has given you, and use it with all your might.
 2. The corporate desire means that we are hoping **God will send people** who are able to do certain things that we cannot already do. The desire is that **God would activate people** in the church who are not presently using their gifts. The desire is for the **church to excel** in the operation of all its gifts so that it can make the most progress in holiness, etc. for the glory of God. It is not “God, give *me* a greater gift so I can be famous” but rather “**give us greater gifts** so that we can honor You better.”

- C. We gather from the end of this passage (the greater/better gifts) that some gifts are better than others because of their value in edification. *Members* with those gifts are not more valuable than other members because *all* the members are necessary. Rather certain *gifts* have more potent or widespread or visible edification power. Spiritual gifts are measured by how they edify the body. The spiritual profit that they give to the church is the true metric by which they must be evaluated. More public gifts are not automatically better because of how they seem or how they puff up the “minister.” The real measure of the gift is how much spiritual profit is gained by the members and ministry of the church (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:3, 5, 12, 26).
- D. Even better than desiring the best/greater gifts is to use the gifts in a loving way. That is the subject of chapter 13:1-8.

Conclusion

God emphasizes to us that the church is a unified body, with each part having a different role in ministry for the building up of the body. This blows up the “clergy versus laity” model that is so common as to be accepted implicitly in most people’s minds. The church is not one minister and many members; it is many member-ministers! It is a **body** with all parts operating; an **engine** with all parts functioning; a **biosphere** with all parts living and fulfilling their roles; a bustling **corporation** with every employee scurrying about doing their part to accomplish the mission statement; a **family** where all the members are doing their part.

See Ephesians 4:11-16 and Romans 12:3-8 for other expressions of the same truths.

What has God appointed *you* to do in the church? Find your role, exercise that role wholeheartedly as to the Lord, and be satisfied in it. Keep your eyes open for more opportunities to serve, or different ways your gift(s) can be used in the church, or for a different gift you did not know you had. Pray God will bless the church with more gifted people as He sees fit.

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