

Title: It Takes the Whole Church – pt.3

Text: 1 Corinthians 12.1-11

Theme: Fundamental unity enjoyed in practical and needed diversity

Series: 1 Corinthians #55

Prop Stmt. The practical and necessary diversity of spiritual gifts is an obvious benefit to the function of the local church, but its ultimate goal is to show off the nature and attributes of God.

Read Text:

Several years ago when we were in the initial steps of the building program that resulted in this Worship Center, my youngest daughter decided to plant a maple seed because she wanted to grow a tree that could be planted near the new building. She took good care of that tree, and it did rather well. The time came last fall for the tree to be transplanted here. I looked at a copy of the master landscaping plan and marked the place where a tree was supposed to go. I then carefully dug the tree up, and placed it in a bucket, and brought it to the church. Then I discovered that the dirt out here is like concrete. I could not for the life of me, get that shovel to penetrate the ground. Meanwhile, the tree is sitting in a bucket and it does not like that. It is starting to look a little wilted. Now, I am starting to get concerned. I found a claw hammer and began to tear up the ground as best as I could and cleared a little spot for this tree and put it in. I then ran to a store and bought a couple of bags of dirt and put that around the tree. Every day I got a bucket of water and watered that tree, but it was not doing well. The leaves were wilting, shriveling and falling off. I was in a panic. This tree was clearly in distress. Of course by now I am getting all sorts of advice as to how I should have transplanted the tree, which by now is absolutely useless. My daughter can see what is happening and with a look that says, stick with preaching, goes home and plants another seed. Meanwhile, I dug the tree back up, added more dirt and tried to salvage what was left. But it does not appear to help. The tree is dying. One day, I just prayed over this now very, very sad looking tree, or whatever was left of it. And I begged God to save this little thing. I am reminding Him that if He can make California Redwoods, He can breathe life into a dinky little Maple tree. I am no master gardener but it sure looks to me as if this thing is toast. Winter approaches, and the three remaining leaves fall off. I'm prepared to resign myself to the inevitable, and yet, God can save this thing. This spring, I felt like King Darius approaching the Lion's Den the morning after Daniel was thrown in. I am afraid to look, but who knows. You know what, that little tree survived. The top is dead, but the rest has made it. There is a God. Actually my theology goes a little deeper than that. (By the way, the tree sits in the front yard just in front of the library.) But here is my point.

A child may think that it is God's main responsibility to fix their toy, or help their pet dog get better because when you ask them to pray before dinner or in Sunday School, the requests often do not go much deeper than help us have a fun time sort of stuff. Therefore, an adult may be tempted to think that such trivia as a tree is beneath the immense dignity and the unsurpassing greatness of God. The truth is, God does not primarily exist to fix my daughter's little tree or make up for my horticultural

incompetence. Therefore, I should not treat Him as a Divine fix-it being whose main use is to make my world a little more comfortable. But at the same time, God's greatness does not stop Him from taking an interest in the minute details of life. God is so capable. He is so perfect, so complete, so wonderful and so amazingly unified in His transcendence and in His immanence. But He expresses that perfect unity in a harmonious diversity as seen in all of His actions and He calls us and equips us to do the same.

Unity in the midst of diversity is not always experienced, on a human level. But when it is, it is an absolute delight. This week several of you who served in the Vacation Bible School ministry mentioned what a joy it was to be part of something where people worked so well together. Of course, it doesn't hurt that the leader is 6'8" does it? But fear wasn't the motivation. Please, please take this text seriously. The Holy Spirit is screaming at us to pursue unity in Christ in the midst of our diverse gifts. What has happened is that Evangelical Christianity has turned this text (that demands unity) into a battle ground with the gift of tongues being the hottest terrain. Some, on the side which embraces the gift of tongues for today have twisted and abused the text in an attempt to make it say something that it was never intended to say. In a reaction to that, some on the side who do not believe that the gift of tongues is in operation today have been guilty of trying to make the text overstate their case. I am pleading that we all be honest with the text and that we allow it to speak as our final authority, and not allow our experiences or our clichéd answers be what slams the door on the discussion.

What we discovered last week (4-6) is that a spiritual gift does not fit into a narrow definition. Charismata (grace-based gifts) is a broad word. In this context it means ***a God-given ability bestowed upon a believer in order to minister to the church***. It is not necessarily an amazing, jaw-dropping, powerful demonstration of unexplainable phenomena. In fact, service – diakonia can mean waiting tables, collecting money for the poor, in other words, everyday acts of service that are done by believers can be spiritual gifts in operation. God always connects ability to a task. God gifts each believer in order for that believer to minister with that gift in the church.

We also discovered that even though people may naturally highlight a particular gift, the use of these three different words makes it clear that no gift is more important than any other. Therefore, no one can say that just because a person has a gift that is exercised publicly that this means that this person more important or more spiritual. Also, just because a person may have more than one gift, does not mean that person has more of the Spirit. Also, the reason the Spirit gives some people more gifts or different gifts is not because He favors that person over another, but it is all in keeping with the Spirit's purposes. In these 3 verses, the emphasis is clearly upon the Giver and not upon the gift, because the Giver is what gets the work done, not just the gift. Now we are able to understand better of what Paul is seeking to beat into the Corinthian church. If everyone on the team is a pitcher, we have uniformity, but we do not have diversity. The entire team is needed. The entire body is needed. If we are going to show off Christ, every part has to be engaged. Gifts are not the occasion for boasting but gifts are the occasion and opportunities for ministry and service. You do not have to wait until something comes

over you before you minister, because the emphasis here is on being a gift, not so much on the exact nature of the gift. The specific lack of definition in the text for each gift makes this clear. Your lifestyle and your commitment to being a gift will logically and necessarily take the gifts that the Spirit has endowed you with and will use those in your life settings.

I also want to point one other thing that comes up in verses 4-6 before we begin dealing with the next part. Three times in three verses Paul talks about “**different kinds** of gifts,” “**different kinds** of service” and then “**different kinds** of workings.” This is important to understand. Later on he speaks of the gifts (pl.) of healing (v.9), which implies that there are different types of even the same gift. So, what is taught throughout this section is this: The Spirit of God gives to each person different gifts, and differing varieties of those different gifts and differing degrees of differing varieties of those different gifts and differing durations of differing degrees of differing varieties of different gifts. In that sense we are like cut-out cookies at Christmas. The dough is all the same, but a variety of cut-out forms are used and therefore, an endless variety of decorations and pastry coverings give each one a unique look. The dough is our theology. We have to believe the same way. We have to have a rock-solid commitment to the Lordship of Christ (v.3), but the way that looks will be different in our lives, and it may look different in your life today than it did 5 years ago. If you were to break us open, our theological DNA is the same, but we express that differently and we serve differently. Therefore, the church is not an assembly line that makes every person look like the same widget, it is a body, where all of the parts which do not look alike or function alike, all have a part that they play because they were designed to play that part. Okay, I have thrown a great deal at you already. Let’s summarize and move on.

The Spirit gives gifts for ministry to each believer.

The Spirit works in each member, but works differently in each member.

The Spirit may work differently at different times in the same person.

No gift is evidence of super-spiritual status.

No gift is evidence of spiritual underachievement.

Now, v.7.

1. **Spiritual Gifts have a Unified Purpose.** (v.7, 11)

Keep this in mind now. God exists for His own glory and good. Each member of the Trinity contributes in a perfectly united way to accomplishing this goal. Therefore, the gifts that we are given is God’s way of equipping us to live in a God-glorifying way. If you want to live for the glory of God, then you have to live in a way that reflects God. Who is God? He is a perfect, unbreakable unity of three diverse members. What is the church, it is to be a complete, unbreakable unity of many diverse members. Spiritual gifts puts this on display.

Verse 7 is a transition verse where Paul is emphasizing the Divine source of these abilities before he begins to address them in detail. He then repeats this point in v.11 as a

summary statement underscoring the point that these gifts are not given for personal advancement.

The common good means “with a view toward profiting.” Is Paul talking about something that profits the individual believer or something that benefits the entire body? Is it possible that some gifts profit the individual believer in such a way that it has an indirect benefit to the rest of the body? Chapter 14 makes it very clear, that these gifts given to individuals are given for the benefit of the entire body. Now let me caution you here. It may not be immediately apparent how a particular gift benefits the entire body. For example, a person with the gift of healing is of no immediate benefit to you if you are not sick. But obviously, the gift of healing was a legitimate gift of the Spirit, even though it may not benefit the entire body in an obvious way.

There are some who claim that they have the gift of tongues and that they use it as a private prayer language. One of the obvious arguments against that is this verse. How does the private use of the gift of tongues benefit the rest of the body if God is the only One who can hear and understand what is being said, including the one who is doing the praying? That is a legitimate question. But, before you use this verse as a slam dunk argument, hold the phone for a second. Remember that the apostle Paul had an experience in which he was taken up into the third heaven and heard things that he could not even talk about. Now, how on earth does that help anyone else? What public benefit was there to Paul’s private experience? Granted, there was an indirect benefit, because this experience was part of what helped Paul be a very spiritually minded leader. Listen carefully. I am not arguing for tongues as a private prayer language. I am only saying that I cannot categorically dismiss it altogether based on this verse, since private spiritual experiences can result in a believer being more spiritually minded and that is of benefit to the rest in the body. I pray in private and I pray in public. Are my public prayers the only ones that benefit the church? Obviously, not.

Verse 7 sets two things on the table; the divine source and the divine plan. Verses 8-10 expand on the divine source idea which is why over and over in verses 8-10, Paul points out that these different gifts come from the same Spirit. Verses 12-30 expand on the divine plan idea that all of these gifts are given for the common good of the body. In that section he goes to great pains to show how these different gifts all contribute to the health and function of the body. Today, we are going to start looking at the gifts themselves and we are going to do so humbly and with a happy spirit of caution. In fact, the more I study this, the more I am convinced that there is on some levels, an intentional vagueness and ambiguity here because of the very nature of the diversity and fluidity of these gifts. Therefore, this much is clear.

2. **Spiritual Gifts are Diverse.** (v.8-10)

And they are diverse on purpose! Do not forget that this diversity of expression is given because we are to reflect the perfect diversity of God.

Just looking at this list of gifts makes it clear that these gifts are diverse. Additionally, when you line up this list with the other lists in the NT, the diversity becomes even more evident. This morning we are going to look at the different lists of the NT gifts and draw some conclusions from that. Next week, we will dig into the actual gifts themselves a little more.

Chart of Lists.

A. No single list is a complete listing of the gifts.

The Corinthian lists do not include exhortation and mercy like the Romans list does, but that does not mean that there was no one in Corinth with the gift of exhortation and mercy. Also, the list in Romans does not include distinguishing of spirits, but that does not mean that there were no people in the church of Rome with a discerning spirit. The list in Ephesians focuses on the actual positions, while the list in Romans focuses more on the actual function. The Corinthian lists are a combination of both, and the 1 Peter list looks like a summary of the two broad categories that describes all of the gifts. The Corinthian lists are the only ones that include miraculous type gifts which may indicate that God does not necessarily give all the gifts all the time to all the churches, but only gives to the churches what are needed for that time.

B. The order of the gifts is diverse.

Not only are the gifts themselves diverse, but their order is diverse. For example, prophecy appears 6th in the 1st list, 2nd in the 2nd list, 1st in the 3rd list and 2nd in the 4th list. In the actual list from the text in the 2nd list, Paul puts numbers next to the first three (first apostles, second prophets and third teachers) the rest of the list comes after those. Then, in the 2nd part of the 2nd list, Paul takes two things from the 1st list and changes their order. He then adds two more things to the list, but in both lists where tongues are mentioned, they are mentioned last.

Now, for those who tend to think that miraculous type experiences are evidences of spirituality, you would be tempted to say, “Look, these lists are so diverse, you can’t say that tongues are the least important just because they are listed last. It is merely coincidental.”

For those of you who are not comfortable with how the other side views the gift of tongues, you would be tempted to say, “Look, this gift is listed dead last in both lists. Look at the lists of the disciples, Judas Iscariot is always listed dead last too, except in Acts when the guy was already dead.”

I agree with D.A. Carson, the list thing has probably been overplayed by the “non-charismatic” crowd, but I do not think that listing it at the end is simply coincidental either. Because the tongues issue (or as one charismatic scholar calls it – “the problem child”) takes up so much attention in chapter 14, it is clearly a problem in the church at Corinth. So, on the one hand, while Paul is not uncomfortable with the gift of tongues

and sees it as a normal part of the worship life of the Corinthian church, neither is he willing to make it the standard of authenticity or the standard that determines levels of spirituality for all believers, because that is simply not true.

C. The lists contain ordinary and extraordinary gifts.

Leadership, administration and showing mercy are not miraculous responses per se. Working miracles (listed twice) clearly is. The same God who gives the gift of helps gives the gift of working miracles. If the same God is giving different gifts to different people is okay with it, shouldn't we be okay with it? But, the million dollar question is left hanging. Does God still work today the way that worked then? Or, to put it another way, are these gifts still in operation today as they were then?

I am going to attempt to answer that question next week, then I am leaving on a much needed vacation. But, here is what we have to bring to the table of understanding.

Conclusion:

1 Corinthians 4.6b-7

1. Do not go beyond the text.

God does not tell us everything we want to know, but He tells us everything we need to know.

2. Be cautious about making judgments on matters that are not perfectly clear.

The context of 1 Cor. 4, speaks of judging a person's heart when you do not understand the entire picture.

3. Our God-given differences (not man-made sinful divisions, but God-given differences) are God-ordained, and therefore are for His purposes.

What do you have that you did not receive? Nothing, then quit trying to take credit for it. Stop worrying about your image, reputation or status. This is true for your gifts, your ministry, your possessions, your education, your job, your health, your relationships, etc.

“Men have nothing good or praiseworthy except what comes from God alone.” – John Calvin