

## SERVING GOD AND MINISTERING TO PEOPLE

1 Corinthians 12:4-26

You have heard it said that every Christian has one or more spiritual gifts. If you read verse one of 1 Corinthians chapter 12 in most versions, you will find the word “gifts” following the word “spiritual.” Consequently, we tend to think that this chapter is devoted exclusively to discussions about the Greek word “charisma” (or gifts) of the Spirit. If we look closely, we will find that the application about which Paul is teaching is much broader than the concept of gifts or charisma. A better reading of verse one would be “Now regarding spiritual things, brethren, we would not have you to be misinformed or ignorant.” Ignorance and misinformation may be a problem in many traditional churches today. Some Christians are either misinformed or not informed about spiritual things and the result is that the church is not as influential and effective as it could be.

It is clear that not all Christians function in the realm of Spiritual gifts. Part of the reason is that many individual Christians, churches and ministers have never experienced the power that comes when the Holy Spirit is allowed to operate through the church. There are three elements to scripturally-based ministries: Training, Authorization, and Empowerment. Most ministers get the training in seminaries and most are authorized via some commissioning service; however, there is little evidence that there is any empowerment present in the operation of their ministries. The “spiritual things” include the enablement of God to do the work of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, spiritual things are not only desirable in the Church, they are absolutely necessary if we are to carry out the will of God on this earth. That, by the way, is the mission of the church: to carry out the will of God on earth. (See the Lord’s Prayer for confirmation of this truth – “Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”)

### Diverse – 12:4-6

<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup> And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. <sup>6</sup> There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 (NASB95)

The “spiritual things” that Paul addressed are found in verses four, five and six. The things are “gifts” and “ministries” and “activities.” As background information, the Greek word for gift is *charisma*, the Greek word for ministry is *diakonia* (root of the English word deacon) and the Greek word for “working, operation, effect, or activity” is *energema* from which we get our English word “energy.” It may be that Paul was making a distinction that certain functions in the list of nine things that were mentioned next were gifts or more precisely “graces,” others were ministries and others are workings or effects. The more conventional interpretation is that all nine are “grace gifts” and that these are used in various ministries and the ministries produce activities or workings.

Imbedded in this discourse that Paul gave them on “spiritual things” we find a subtle teaching on the unity of the Godhead. The spiritual gifts are from the Spirit, the spiritual ministries are related to the Lord (meaning Jesus) and the spiritual workings are referenced to God who is at work in us. The implication would be that since God is One in three expressions and is Three in one purpose, then the church which is made of many members are to be unified in its enablements or abilities, in its objectives, and in what it actually accomplishes.

### Specific – 12:7-10

<sup>7</sup> But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup> For to one is given the word of

wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit;<sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,<sup>10</sup> and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:7–10 (NASB95)

The various gifts, ministries, and activities have various purposes relative to the functioning or the common good of the church. For example, the power manifestations (miracles, healing, faith) are equipment for evangelism. The inspirational evidences (tongues, interpretation and prophecy) are for functioning in the church among believers for edification of the church. The revelation expressions (word of wisdom, word or knowledge, and discerning of spirits) are essential to the functional operation of such office gifts as exhorting, teaching, and giving. All these areas are quite different and yet all are needed for the successful operation (common good) of the church. God is the source of all legitimate power in and for the church and even though there are differences in gifts, ministries and activities there should be unity in the church since all these are from the same source, meaning the Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

In order to help the folks at Corinth understand the concept of unity in diversity that we see in the Trinity and which should be evident in the church, Paul picked an example from the physical world. The human body is such an example.

#### Intentional – 12:11-13

<sup>11</sup> But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. <sup>12</sup> For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. <sup>13</sup> For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12:11–13 (NASB95)

The church is the Body of Christ and it should not be surprising that there would be different abilities and function among the members in the same way that our physical bodies are made up of parts that have different functions. The unifying factor for the church is the fact that all who are in the Body of Christ have the same Spirit residing in them. This is the “Gift of the Spirit” as contrasted with “Spiritual Gifts.” The Gift of the Spirit is simply the Holy Spirit of God resident within the believer. Every Christian has a measure of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:9 says that if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. All who are in the Church came in the same way and that was by a spiritual rebirth and it was the same for everyone whether the person is rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, slave or free. (Recall what Jesus told Nicodemus - You must be born again.)

It is helpful sometimes to use a different word than we are accustomed to using when reading a familiar passage so that we can have a fresh understanding of the passage. For example, if we use the English equivalent of the Greek word that is transliterated “baptized” in place of that word, then verse 13 says “For by one Spirit we were all immersed into one body. . .” That change gets us away from visualizing the “baptism ritual” rather than the practical reality of being immersed in an ongoing and continuing way in the body of Christ. When we make that simple change, then we also discover that the word “in” rather than “by” is a more appropriate translation of the Greek word “EN” used in the first part of verse 13. If you can visualize that picture of each individual born-again believer being immersed in the Spirit of God, then it would make perfect sense that if they breathed in or drank in (while immersed) that they would breathe or drink in the Spirit that surrounds them. The result is that we are in the Spirit and the Spirit is in us. Everything taken together is then the Body of Christ.

Paul’s use of the word “drink” rather than “breathe” (which would be a more natural picture since the Greek word for spirit is *pneuma* or air) is likely based on a tie in with the idea

of water baptism or the teaching in Chapter 11 on the Lord's Supper where one "drinks" the fruit of the wine.

There are three basic requirements so that the work of God can be accomplished by the spiritual gifts, ministries, and activities:

1. Believers (individually and as a church) must be thoroughly consecrated to Christ's glory, only. It is not an ego trip. (An individual body part must be subject to the direction of the mind.)
2. An effective, fervent prayer life is necessary. God responds to the prayers of His people. One miraculous answer to prayer within a congregation will do as much to lift, encourage and solidify the people of God as any one thing. (For our physical bodies to function properly, the network of nerves must be functioning so that communication routes are always connected. Prayer is our line of communication in the spiritual realm.)
3. The Christian must recognize his dependence on the Holy Spirit and be willing and able to exercise spiritual enablements that God has provided.

### One Body, but Many Members – 12:14-19

<sup>14</sup> For the body is not one member, but many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one member, where would the body be? 1 Corinthians 12:14–19 (NASB95)

In these verses, Paul addressed the issue of two possible attitudes that might be detrimental to unity in the church that could result from members not being "content" with the gift and ministry they have. One attitude might be that some have low self esteem and views either their gifts or their ministries as being unimportant in the overall functioning of the church. Such an attitude could lead to these being inactive or just reactive rather than proactive in their ministries and the church suffers from that failure. This may explain why some committees or teams rarely take initiative to fulfill the purpose of their teams' ministry.

Another possible detrimental attitude that could follow from not being "content" is that of jealousy of the ministries and gifts of others in the church. That could result in criticism of those involved in what they consider a more desirable role. It could also lead to efforts to duplicate an existing ministry which might lead to competition rather than cooperation.

### Many Members, but One Body – 12:20-26

<sup>20</sup> But now there are many members, but one body. <sup>21</sup> And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; <sup>23</sup> and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, <sup>24</sup> whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, <sup>25</sup> so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 1 Corinthians 12:20–26 (NASB95)

We see that in verse twenty Paul stated the inverse of verse fourteen. In the verses that follow, Paul addressed two addition attitudes that do not help achieve the "common good" for the church. The attitudes of a critical spirit and individual pride are closely related and it is difficult to separate them. In the previous section we saw people who didn't see much value in what they did but thought that others had more important roles. In this section we find the converse of people who viewed their ministry as the most important function in the entire church and saw little value in what anyone else did.

How often do we actually say we don't need a particular ministry in a local church body? We might be very reluctant to verbalize such an opinion. I made a list of about twenty general areas of ministries in a typical church and it covers a broad spectrum of things that may be done and/or needed to be done at one time:

Adult Ministries, Children's Ministry (K-6th grades), College Ministries, Congregational Care, Facilities, Food Service, Hospitality, Leisure Ministries, Men's Ministries, Miscellaneous, Missions-Community Ministries, Music, Nursery Ministry (0-4 yrs old), Prayer Ministry, Religious Drama, Single Adult Ministries, Stewardship, Women's Ministries, Worship, Youth Ministries (7th-12th Grades)

Each one of these could be expanded with specifics such as Miscellaneous could include such things as Facility Safety Inspection Team, Bus/Van Driver, Bulletin Board, Calligraphy, Media-Library Worker. Worship might include Testimony or Message, Baptism Assistance, Lord's Supper Preparation, Children's Church, Special Decorations, Sound System Operation.

There are situations in which some of the specific activities sort of disappear because of lack of interest and lack of need because of changing technologies or the absence of someone to develop the skills needed to carry out the function. As we look at the situation in any church we need to consider what changes and emphases are in play when adding or eliminating various activities.

There were controversies in the church at Corinth about which gifts, ministries, or spiritual workings were the most important. Some people were puffed up because of their ministry and others were looked down upon because their gift was not as showy. Paul tried to show how ridiculous such arguments were by comparing physical body parts. Which is least important, your foot or your hand? Truthfully, I want to have both feet and both hands plus toes and fingers. It is the same way with sight or hearing – both are important. It is the same way in the Body of Christ. There are no unimportant members or parts of the body.

We could learn from the example of the physical body to help us operate better in the church. If evangelism is not a very strong ministry in a church, then not many people get upset because evangelism may not be their "thing." Consequently, nothing is done to correct the situation. On the other hand, if your left foot was injured or if it was not very strong, then the whole body might suffer from it because we would not be able to do all the things we might like to do. It is very likely that the situation would NOT be ignored and corrective action would be taken to restore the body to wholeness. All areas of the church ought to be functioning and doing so in a strong and vigorous manner and each area ought to help the other areas to make sure that it happens.

It is important for us to realize that the Holy Spirit gives the various gifts and offices to the church so that all can benefit from those abilities. All believers have been enabled and are to contribute to the good of the entire body of believers. We all need each other in the church in much the same way that each part of the physical body needs the other parts to function and be healthy.

All the gifts, ministries, and workings are important and I'm sure that it grieves God to see His children boasting over their particular enablement at the expense of another person with a different gift or ministry. If a person boasts and feels proud of a spiritual gift, ministry or working in his or her life, then the underlying thought is that he or she believes that it was deserved or something was done to earn it. This shows a misunderstanding of what God's grace is about. On the other hand, if a person is not pleased with the gift, ministry, or spiritual activity they have been given and is envious of the gift, ministry or work of others, then he or she is questioning God's decision in distributing the spiritual enablements needed for the church (the body of Christ) to properly function.