

On Spiritual Gifts (2)

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of November 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled On Spiritual Gifts Part 2 and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 12 to 31.

Please be seated and you may like to have open the passage from 1 Corinthians 12, page 933 in the New Testament. Well, with apologies for those people who don't like sport, the Australian cricket team was announced a week or so ago.

It's in the middle of a test match at the moment. But the announcement of the cricket team wasn't really all that surprising. I mean, putting aside the particular names that were mentioned, it just happened that there were six batsmen, two of whom were openers, one wicketkeeper and four bowlers, three of whom were fast bowlers and one was a spinner.

And by and large, whenever an Australian cricket team is announced, you're always going to get about six batsmen, you're always going to get a wicketkeeper and you're always going to get four bowlers and sometimes there's one and sometimes there's two spinners.

[1 : 23] It's all a bit boring. I don't really know why they need selectors. And they say that Ian Healy, who was the wicketkeeper, who's just sort of retired, sort of been shoved out, so to speak, his batting had let him down.

And yet they actually pick a wicketkeeper to replace him. I mean, why not just do away with the wicketkeeper and have another batsman if they're so concerned with making runs? But then, given what they're doing now, they only need two anyway.

The point is, of course, that any cricket team needs a variety of members. They need batsmen and bowlers and a wicketkeeper.

And they need batsmen who can open the innings and batsmen who can bat later down the innings. And they need fast bowlers and spin bowlers and all sorts of bowlers in between. And usually they pick a team that has got a balance of all of those things.

You never see a cricket team that has got 11 wicketkeepers in it. Or you never see a cricket team that has only got 11 batsmen and nobody who could bowl. Or 11 bowlers without a batsman.

[2 : 25] But in the same way, you never see an AFL team take the field with 18 players all above 6'4", all going up to contest the centre ruck. I mean, who's going to crawl along the ground and pick up the ball?

And despite how good Tony Lockett is, you never find a team that has got 18 Tony Locketts. It'll all be a bit wasteful, really. And Manchester United, despite having Mark Bosnich as its goalkeeper, if they could clone Mark Bosnich, they wouldn't go to the field with 11 Mark Bosnich's.

Because what's the good of 11 goalkeepers? You need somebody who's going to play in the centre and somebody who's going to score a goal. And if you go to see the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, I think you'd feel a bit left down if all they had on the stage were about 80 people who were all playing the triangle.

I mean, where are the violins and the trumpets? And all the other things. And if you go to hear a decent choir sing, I think you'd feel a bit cheated if all you had are a sort of 25 basses, you know, boom, boom, boom, and you don't actually get a melody line.

Now, the point I'm making is a very obvious one. In a team of some sort, you need to have a variety and diversity of abilities and talents and skills in order to harmonise and do the job of the team.

[3 : 43] And in a similar way, the church is like that. But Paul doesn't use an analogy of a cricket team. Unfortunately for him, he lived pre-cricket.

And he doesn't use the analogy of a choir or an orchestra. He actually uses even a better analogy than a team or a choir or an orchestra. He uses the analogy to describe the church of a body.

And the reason it's a better analogy than even team or orchestra or choir or something like that is that the body has an indispensable unity about it that even a team doesn't have.

Sometimes you see a team playing and they're not really playing as a team. But the body is one fundamentally and firstly. And when we greet each other in the street or after church or something, we don't suddenly think, oh, there's Fred's hand, I'll shake it.

We see, there's Fred, I'll shake his hand. That is, we see the unity of the person before we see just the hand or the foot usually. I mean, we relate to a person.

[4 : 50] We don't relate to somebody's foot or left knee or something like that usually. So the body is a better analogy for the church because it's got an essential and fundamental and indispensable unity about it.

Now the point of stressing that is that when we think of the church and our variety and diversity of gifts as we did last week and then into this passage this week, it is not just us working as a team complementing each other.

That is, we have an essential unity together. We are one body together. It is not just that we're one body when we happen to come together on a Sunday morning or when we're doing church things.

We are one fundamentally all the time as Christian people. And that's Paul's first point. It's his presupposition. It's his given really when he talks about gifts and diversity in this passage.

We are one body. So he begins in verse 12, For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

[6 : 03] We'd expect him to say so it is with the church. But actually he's stressing our unity so much that he's saying just as Jesus is one, so is the church one.

And then he elaborates on that point in verse 13. For in the one spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one spirit.

You see, the very nature of us being or becoming a Christian means that we essentially belong to the one body. It is God's work that has brought us as Christians into God's family.

We are one. Now I think he's making a few little points in this verse that are worth pausing to reflect on. The first is that unity for Christians is God's work and it's given.

We are one. It's not that our job is to create Christian unity. God has done that. The very fact that we are Christians means that we are united together with other Christians.

[7 : 14] And that's expressed publicly, I guess, in baptism but in the receiving of God's spirit. Every Christian has God's spirit. Every Christian has been baptized into the body of Christ.

It's not a human achievement to attain unity. Notice then that this unity is a spiritual unity or we might say even a theological unity.

That is, it's not a unity because we happen to be at Holy Trinity Doncaster. It's not a unity because we happen to be Anglican. The unity is that we're Christian.

And it's God's work and he's done that. Now the ecumenical movement is a movement that seeks to try and build better links and bridges and even some more unity between different Christian denominations.

The Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglican, Uniting, Baptists and so on. That's not a bad thing. But what they're trying to do is to express more of an institutional unity.

[8 : 17] But there is already unity between Christians. We are one with our fellow Christians who are Roman Catholics or Baptists or Lutherans or Uniting Church or Pentecostal churches or whatever.

We're already one with them as we are already one with each other. And that is God's work, not ours. The second point that's in verse 13 that's being made there is that Christian unity transcends racial or social distinctions.

In Paul's day he expressed it as you're either a Jew or a Greek, meaning a non-Jew, a Gentile, or you're a slave or a free man. Social and racial, in effect, distinctions.

But Paul's point here is that more important than those distinctions are Christian unity. And that is that Christian unity is actually stronger than the distinctions of race or socioeconomics.

Now sadly Christians have not always remembered that. Martin Luther King, when he was alive, obviously said about America that the most segregated hour in America was 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning.

[9 : 32] When Americans would go to church and the blacks would go here and the whites would go here. Now there are some good reasons why sometimes that happens, like with a Mandarin language this afternoon service in here.

But by and large our Christian unity is to transcend racial and social distinctions. Rwanda was another sad case in point, where all the work of the Christian gospel came quickly unraveled a few years ago, when the Christian unity between Tutsis and Hutus was suddenly forgotten, as the old tribal and racial distinctions came to the fore.

We must make sure that first and foremost in our minds is that we are Christian. That is ultimately what matters. Not whether we are white or black, whether our birthplace was Australia or England or Sri Lanka or Taiwan.

What matters is that we are Christian. And that unity is stronger than any distinctions between us. A third point just of reflection on this opening verses is that the body metaphor for the church challenges the way we think so individualistically about ourselves.

Our world is all about me, I, singular. It's an individualistic sort of world. We tend therefore to act rather independently and therefore sometimes selfishly, even in our own church life, about what we're prepared to do or not do.

[11 : 08] But Paul is saying here, by describing the church as a body, that more than just thinking of ourselves as an individual, we have to recognize that we are a body corporate together.

And that is more important than thinking of ourselves as an individual Christian. Therefore, what we do as a Christian, whether in private or in public, actually in some way affects the body.

If you hammer your little finger, your whole body feels the pain. So what one Christian does, even if it's outside of Christian fellowship, actually in some way has an impact on the whole body.

So remember that when you're thinking about what you're doing, whether in church or during the week out of church. It means that when we're absent, we are causing some detriment to the whole body.

When we avoid Christian fellowship, then we are weakening the whole body. But on the positive side, when we're contributing and using our gifts to the full, then we're not only just gaining the benefit ourselves, but of course we're enriching the whole body as well.

[12 : 25] Now a lot more could be said about Christian unity. That's not really Paul's main point. It's his starting point. It's his given. But now his main point is that our unity does not mean uniformity.

The corollary of Christian unity is a rich diversity. We saw hints of that last week, and Paul expands upon that this week.

In the verses that follow, 14 to 26, he addresses in turn two groups. Those who feel inferior, and then those who feel somewhat superior as Christians in Corinth.

Now you may remember schoolyard games at lunchtime, when the inevitable way of choosing the teams that would play cricket or football on the school oval were the two best players would stand out, and they'd take it in turns to pick from the group that's sort of milling around.

I'll have you. Okay, I'll have you. And of course you're picking the best player, and then working the way down the list. And inevitably, I would be last or second last in the list. And it was fairly easy to feel unwanted, and fairly easy to feel inferior.

[13 : 41] And to be honest, they picked wisely, because I didn't contribute very much usually. But sometimes Christians feel that as well. Sometimes Christians feel not very useful, a bit unwanted, not much to offer.

Oh, there are lots of other people who can do that better than I can. There are lots of people who can contribute in the music, or up front, or catering, or doing the flowers, or things.

I haven't really got a lot that I can do. And so it's easy for some Christians to feel unwanted, hence unloved, as though they don't belong, and they're not needed.

That sort of Christian, I guess, would say something like, well, really, if you think of a body, I'm just a foot. It's the hand that really does it all.

I'm just a foot. I'm not really got much to contribute. Or they might be saying, well, I'm just an ear, but the eyes have it. And I don't really have a lot that I can offer here.

[14 : 45] Well, in verses 15 to 20, Paul is addressing those people who feel inferior. He says, in effect, what I've just said in verses 15 and 16.

Because I'm not a hand, I don't belong. Because I'm an ear, I don't belong. Paul says in verse 17 then, Despite you may feel inferior, if the whole body were an eye, where would hearing be?

If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? That is, if you're feeling inferior, if you don't feel as though you've got a lot to offer, he's saying, that doesn't make you unwanted.

It doesn't make you unnecessary. Paul is saying that every person is needed, whatever their gifts are or abilities are, no matter how great or small, no matter how obvious or behind the scenes they may be.

You imagine, he's in effect saying, that if the whole body were an eye, it would be grotesque, it would be like a science fiction character. Or if the whole body were a foot, it would be like that foot in Monty Python that's not attached to a leg that just sort of plunges down on things and squashes them.

[16 : 04] Paul's saying here, don't feel inferior. Your gifts are as necessary as any others. You're needed as much as any other.

There's no need to feel inferior. In fact, he says in verse 18, the diversity is God's doing. God's ordained what gifts and abilities people have.

So therefore, in effect, by implication, use them, big or small. Now Paul, of course, is not just talking about a body, but he's talking about the church.

And he's saying to those Corinthians who may feel put down or inferior, you're just as important as the rest. Don't think of yourselves as being unwanted.

In God's eyes, that's not true. It takes more than one gift to make a church. You imagine that if in our congregation here, all our gifts were preaching.

[17 : 04] Well, we'd have long services, wouldn't we? We'd have nobody to pray or nobody to lead us in music and nobody to hand out books and nobody to do the flowers and nobody to serve tea and coffee and nobody to look after the children or the creche or any other job.

Every single Christian, Paul is saying, big or small, has a role and a part to play, a gift to offer. Whatever yours is, don't feel inferior. Well, then he turns in verse 21 to talk to those who feel superior.

This has been a common thread in this letter of 1 Corinthians. These super spiritual type of Corinthian people have been boasting about their knowledge, about their wisdom, about their gifts and Paul, from time to time, has been directly addressing their pride and their arrogance.

In verse 21, he personifies bits of the body again. He says, the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor the head to the feet, I have no need of you. He's paraphrasing, of course, the attitudes of these superior feeling Christians in Corinth.

How sad that Christians could in effect think or say to other Christians, we don't need you. I've got all the gifts I need. We've got all the abilities in our little clique or elite group here.

[18 : 25] We don't need you. Go and play somewhere else. Paul chastises that view. He says of them in verse 22, on the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

You can't have no need of them because they're indispensable. When he's thinking of the body, the weaker members may refer here to the internal organs, the liver and heart and so on, which not being seen were considered to be perhaps of weaker value or weaker strength than say the arms and the legs.

But of course, they're vital organs. They are indispensable. He takes a slightly different tack in verse 23. And those members of the body that we think less honourable, we clothe with greater honour and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.

I think there what he's probably referring to, at least as far as a physical body is concerned, are the sexual organs, the ones that we keep covered. He's saying, in effect, the less honourable parts of a physical body are actually treated with greater honour because they're clothed.

so it ought to be in the church that those who use superior people might be looking down on and disdaining, who think are a bit dishonourable or of ill repute or something like that.

[19 : 55] Treat them well. Treat them with greater honour. They are indispensable. It's hard to apply this metaphor to particular groups and try and work out who in our congregation is sort of like the dishonourable parts of a body.

I don't think that's meant to be what's happening here. Paul's point is simply that each is indispensable. Weak or strong, whatever part or role or function or gift somebody has, each is equally indispensable.

Now that's an important lesson I think for Christians to learn because sometimes Christians sit very loosely to their role within the church as though they think their Christian life can almost be separated out from the church as though I've got no real need of the church.

But Paul's analogy here makes that very clear that every Christian is both needed by the church and needs the church. There is a mutual indispensability.

There is no place for an individual or small group of Christians to hive off from the church and run their own Christian lives individualistically. Paul is saying that you are essentially a member of the church.

[21 : 16] Play your part in it. There's a certain arrogance I think about those who think that the church is not really for them. And I've met many people who've said to me over the years well I don't go to church but I am a Christian I am a believer but I don't have need to go.

Often I say little in response but in my mind I think that they've got it wrong and I'm not actually sure that they're Christians to say that sort of thing.

Because Paul is saying something very very essential about the church here. That every Christian needs it and the church needs every Christian as well.

So don't sit loose with church. You like me from time to time may well get frustrated by its monolithic structures and slowness of things but it is God's church and we belong to it and we're to play our part in it and amputating ourselves from it is a sure sign of spiritual arrogance and pride and in the end I think spiritual death.

Again Paul says the diversity is God's doing in verse 24 and the purpose he says in verse 25 is that there may be no dissension because in Corinth there was plenty.

[22 : 40] He made that clear in the very first chapter of this letter but also that the members may have the same care for one another. That is treated equally looked after equally some not treated better than others.

He elaborates on that in verse 26 if one member suffers all suffer together with it if one member is honoured all rejoice together with it. Now at an individual level I guess that that may mean something like if one person is ill or bereaved then the whole church suffers and sympathises with the person.

If one person passes their exams the whole church rejoices in that. But I actually think that it's more than just that. What I think Paul is talking about here is about the way various groups or functions within the church operate.

A good test I think of whether we are rejoicing with those who rejoice and suffering with those who suffer is how we respond for example to say our annual reports where we read of the multitude of groups and activities that are happening within Holy Trinity.

When we see a group really thriving do we rejoice with them? Are our hearts filled with delight to see people in the Mandarin service becoming Christians and being baptised?

[24 : 05] Or a particular Bible study group growing and flourishing? Or a particular children's or youth group growing and flourishing? Are we filled with rejoicing then? But what about the flip side?

When we see a group within the church really struggling and its membership declining? Or we see a group seeking to do its ministry but really struggling and not having much fruit?

What then do we think? Do we perhaps look down on them and think oh their leaders have got it wrong but our group's going well? Or do we suffer with them?

The latter ought to be our response. Too often within churches if not denominations there is a feeling of division or competition or something like that and that is ultimately destructive.

We belong together. So what one part of us is doing well or badly is us doing well or badly. And our response ought to be the same as that who are part of that group rejoicing when things go well but suffering when they don't.

[25 : 19] Let's make sure that our unity is always expressed in the midst of our diversity here. Well Paul applies this analogy of the body directly to the Corinthians in the last paragraph.

It's been clear all along he's not talking about a physical body but the church. Now he makes that clear. Verse 27 he says now you you Corinthians you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

And then as we saw last week he has a list to illustrate the diversity. It's a list of gifts. It's not a complete list. It doesn't even quite tally with the list we saw in the first part of the chapter last week.

Surprisingly the first three are ranked. God has appointed he says in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers. We'll come back to that sort of issue later on but it does at first look surprising when he said that in effect all are equally important to God.

But at least at one level those three functions are primary for the establishing of a church. The apostles were those commissioned by Jesus and witnesses of the resurrection to go and start churches and the prophets and teachers were those who started the preaching and evangelism and then the teaching of the Christian faith.

[26 : 40] And then Paul lists a whole list of other things, deeds of power or miracles, gifts of healings as we saw last week. And then very generally, very inclusive, various forms or kinds of assistance.

I think there they're practical helps. people who might cook you a meal or drive you to church, people who mow the lawn or do something for somebody else as a way of pastoral care or concern, various forms of leadership which has in it not just the upfront leaders or elected leaders but even forms of administration and guidance, various kinds of speaking in tongues at the end of the list.

That's the one the Corinthians were proud about. That's the one it seems that some of them at least thought that every person should have if they were a Christian, that everyone should be able to speak in tongues.

Well, Paul has attacked that view by talking about diversity and unity. His rhetorical questions of verse 29 and 30 make that very clear. The way the questions are written in the ancient Greek means that the only possible answer is no.

Are all apostles? No, of course they're not. Are all prophets? No, they're not. Are all teachers? No, of course not all are teachers. Do all work miracles?

[28 : 04] Of course all don't work miracles. Do all possess gifts of healing? No, of course all don't possess gifts of healing. And then the next question in effect is saying you apply the same logic by which you've answered those questions to the issue of speaking in tongues.

The one that you think is all important. Do all speak in tongues? No, of course they don't. Not that that gift is bad, but that it's not essential because the church is diverse.

Sadly, there are some Christians who still think that every true Christian ought to speak in tongues. And I remember as the leader of a scripture union mission about 12 or 15 years ago that members of my team in the middle of one of the missions said to me that they didn't consider that I was really a fully fledged Christian because I didn't speak in tongues.

I must say I was a bit staggered. And I wonder what they do with passages like this. Paul is refuting such a view very decisively.

well this passage and what we saw last week as well is a challenge to us all for healthy body life in a church. It is warning us against atrophy from the lack of use of gifts.

[29 : 23] It's warning us against amputation by separating from church life. It is warning us against arthritis where we become intransigent and rigid in the way we do things.

It's warning us against having swollen parts full of pride and boastfulness. It's warning us against fractures from divisions and disunity. But positively and more importantly it is a call to us all, each and every one of us, to exercise our gifts to the full in rich diversity.

If you're unsure what your gifts are then start by using your natural talents and abilities for the service of God in some way. Pray that God may show you what your gifts are and give you gifts.

Try out things. Test the waters so to speak. Seek the counsel of wise Christians who know you well regarding your gifts. But also be alert to the needs because God gives gifts to meet needs in the church.

So where there are needs maybe God has gifted you to meet those needs. And also be willing to serve. For gifts are not things that we can put away in a cabinet and look at and prize.

[30 : 46] Gifts are only gifts when they're used for the building up of God's church. The chapter finishes with two brief statements. Both anticipatory of what's to come.

Paul says firstly strive for the greater gifts. Which sounds a bit unusual given what he said about equality and diversity. But before he explains that and he does that in chapter 14 and you'll have to be here in a fortnight to see this.

He then says another thing. It's sort of a digression but actually it's a fundamental context for the exercise of any gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

You'll have to come next week for that. Let's pray. Oh God we thank you that you have given gifts to your church for our upbuilding and growth in maturity and mission.

help us all to use our gifts to the full and for your glory building ourselves up so that the world may know that you are God to be trusted and honoured and obeyed.

[32 : 03] Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.