

The Church, Where Everybody Is Somebody, Part I

When I was a seminary student, the ideal for church renewal seemed to be the original first century church. However, the more I study Paul's letters to the Corinthians, the less inclined I am to return the church to the first century! When I read about the behavior of some of these Corinthian church members at their congregational feasts and observances of the Lord's Supper, I'm particularly glad I wasn't called to serve this first century church!

The influence of the world was sorely felt within the church in Corinth. The thinking of Greek Sophists, who placed a premium on skillful oratory dispensing philosophical precepts, had made its impression on these new Christians in the church. Pride of knowledge and of gifted speaking were regarded as virtues in Corinthian society. Some of the members of the church, who had received charismatic gifts of speech, naturally, if erroneously, thought of themselves as having greater spirituality and giftedness than ordinary believers. Those who considered themselves gifted exalted themselves over the rest of the church members.

Paul uses a different word than his usual word for spiritual gifts, *charismata*, as he begins his message. He uses the word *pneumatica*, which can be a word for spiritual gifts, but can also be translated *spirituals*, referring to the people who thought of themselves as more spiritual than everyone else. Paul gives these *spirituals* an oblique rebuke in verse 1 when he attacks their ignorance of the whole subject of spiritual gifts. This mild rebuke would have been particularly offensive to these who prided themselves in their superior knowledge.

The lectionary suggests our New Testament reading from 1 Corinthians 12 for today and also next Sunday. So today, we'll consider verses 1-6 as part one on the subject of "The Church: Where Everybody Is Somebody."

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-6:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

The church of today is guilty of one of two extremes about spiritual gifts. On one extreme is *charismania*, which is the abuse of spiritual gifts that pressures every member of the church to experience certain gifts, usually glossolalia, or speaking

in tongues. At the other end of the spectrum is *charisphobia*, which is the avoiding of the subject of spiritual gifts altogether, for fear that someone somewhere might speak in tongues or do something else considered undignified, unacceptable or out of our control (B Witherington).

Spiritual gifts are very much an ingredient in the church's body life, and are essential to its nature and mission. Spiritual gifts are those abilities, talents, and contributions the Holy Spirit gives to every Christian. God the Holy Spirit enables every believer to develop and use gifts in fellowship with and in service to and through and even beyond the local church. God gifts his people to do his work, whether in the context of a local church body, or through parachurch ministries and denominational and interdenominational organizations and efforts.

In chapter 12 Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ, and is referring primarily, it seems, to the local church. We must admit, however, that the impact of spiritual gifts often reaches beyond the local church, and these gifts enable churches and believers to minister to one another beyond the local church context and even across denominational lines. Spiritual gifts need also to be considered in the context of special kingdom efforts, such as missionary organizations and teams designed to advance the cause of world missions, and ecumenical evangelistic efforts.

The main idea Paul is upholding in our text is that in the church there are "No Little People," (F Schaeffer). The church is the body of Christ where everybody is somebody of real significance to the church and its functioning and health. We servant leaders must understand the significance of spiritual gifts, and that all those we are called to lead and serve are gifted for service and ministry in the church. Regardless of how prominent or insignificant these gifts and people may appear, they all have significance in the eyes of God. His purpose is to build and strengthen his church through all those he has called together for his kingdom advancement. We are to see what God sees regarding the significance of all members of the body of Christ and the particular gifts they have received from God.

Using the vernacular, we could interpret Paul as saying in our text that in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ everybody is somebody of special significance. And everybody is somebody because everybody in the church is *spiritual* (verses 1-3). There's a distinction between church membership and personal faith. We noted last Sunday that we made our confession through our baptism, and if we were baptized as an infant, then we affirmed our personal faith in our confirmation.

Yet we must nevertheless acknowledge that not all who *profess* faith *possess* faith. Jesus gave us the parable of the "cheat" growing up alongside the wheat, and said the final distinction between true converts and false adherents would have to await the final judgment (Matthew 13:24-30). And, no doubt many of the

problems in the Corinthian church were caused by unregenerate members who had infiltrated the ranks. But also there may have been those who were genuinely converted yet were mistaken about true spirituality. The problems in Corinth were caused by perhaps the unregenerate and also the ignorant.

In the Corinthian church there were those whom Paul alludes to as the *spirituals* (pneumatics), whether they were true converts or false adherents to the faith. In either case, these people were deceived. The pneumatics thought they were in a class by themselves and inherently superior to others in the church who were not endowed with the same spiritual gifts as they possessed. The gifts of which the spirituals boasted were the more ostentatious expressions, particularly glossolalia, or the gift of speaking in tongues.

In contradistinction to this concept, Paul says by nature of our conversion we're all, not *spirituals* with an exclusive gift, but are rather all spiritual people, because we as believers have all been regenerated by the same Holy Spirit. Paul says elsewhere, that the possession of the Holy Spirit is the birthright of every believer in Christ (Romans 8:9). As we noted last Sunday with Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist declared that those who would believe in and follow Jesus would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33).

Paul reminds the church of their pagan past, when many of them were under the demonic influence of idols (2-3). And when they worshipped in the temples of pagan idols they were caught up in an ecstatic frenzy that caused some of them to utter blasphemous phrases, such as "Let Jesus be cursed!" But now they are all in-filled with the Holy Spirit, who enables them to make the good confession, "Jesus is Lord."

Every Christian is spiritual, and has as much of the Holy Spirit as anyone else, even as much as claimed by the *spirituals*, the *pneumatics*. The issue is, how much of ourselves we surrender to the control of the Holy Spirit. The concept of conversion and regeneration means we've been born again and now the Holy Spirit is at work to conform us to the likeness of Christ. And, by the Holy Spirit we have been engrafted into the body of Christ, the church.

On January 25th, 1999, Matthew Scott, in Jewish Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky, became the first American to receive a hand transplant, after a 15-hour surgical procedure involving a 17-member medical team (actually, about 70 physicians were involved in research and preparation for this procedure). The transplanted hand belonged to Glenn William Johnson, a convicted murderer who took his own life the day prior to the transplant operation on Matthew Scott.

We too were estranged and separated from God, and of no use to him (Ephesians 2:12). By grace we have been saved and redeemed from our former way of life, and grafted into the body of Christ, for the good of his church and the glory of his name (Romans 11:17). Let's not forget where we came from, and

our debt to grace. By the mercy and grace of God, we what we used to be. We have been born again, and have a new nature and a new calling to follow Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). Not only are we born of the Spirit, and are following Jesus as Lord, but are becoming like Jesus.

Some of these *spirituals* in the Corinthian church were living immoral lives, following the salacious practices of the culture around them. As we noted in chapter five, some were embracing the current philosophy of the Gnostic libertines, whose low esteem of the body allowed for immorality with impunity to the soul. But Paul says the believer's calling is to follow Jesus and become like him. Only the truly spiritual, i.e., the born again and Spirit-controlled, can receive and use the gifts of the Spirit. And the truly spiritual emphasize the primary importance of the fruit of the Spirit, beginning with love, which Paul says at the end of this chapter is the more excellent way (Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:1).

The pneumatics were flaunting their ecstatic gifts of speaking in tongues, and were claiming to be more spiritual than those who had less spectacular gifts. Paul doesn't challenge the authenticity of the spiritual gifts of the Corinthians, but gives a criterion for the legitimate use of these gifts—the common good of the church (verse 7). The spirituals were boasting of their spiritual superiority, which was erroneously based on outward, verbal phenomenon rather than inner holiness. In chapter 14, Paul emphatically states that the gift of prophecy, related to that of preaching, is vastly superior to that of speaking in ecstatic speech because prophecy edifies the church, giving strength, encouragement, and comfort. In fact, in verse 19 of chapter 14 Paul says intelligible instruction is 2,000 times better than ecstatic speech!

I can endure hearing most televangelists for only a few minutes, but was recently astounded to hear one pastor of a huge media church, as he calls it, describe a teenage girl so filled with the spirit during his sermon that she became drunk; so drunk, in fact, that she had to be carried from the church. I hope she had a designated driver!

As someone said regarding to those who work themselves up into a frenzy, "It's not so important how high you can jump that makes you spiritual. It's how strait you walk when you come back down." But spiritual gifts are not given to God's people for a rigid life and begrudging service. There shouldn't be anything about spiritual gifts that cause us anything but joy and fulfillment. God's gifts to us are not to tie us down to a life of drudgery and confinement to an unwanted church ministry and vocation. God's gifts of talents to be used for his glory and the good of his church should make us "come alive" (Elledge).

The most alive person in history was Jesus of Nazareth, who lived each moment by the power of the Holy Spirit and in concert with God the Father. And everybody in the church is to be a spiritual person, born of the Spirit, brought into

the Body, and becoming like Jesus, thus participating in the supernatural work of God. We must understand that everybody in the church is spiritual.

Paul said the gifts were universal, meaning that every believer has at least one spiritual gift that he or she received when the Holy Spirit came in to live. There is some ministry every believer can do in the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no need for any believer to have an inferiority complex in the Body of Christ. Nor is there any occasion for anyone to boast about a particular gift. As Paul asked earlier in this first letter to the Corinthians, “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1Corinthians 4:7, NIV).

Spiritual gifts are universal, but also are unique to every individual believer. In the New Testament Letters, we have general categories of gifts. The basic categories appear to be gifts of leadership and service, and also worship, teaching, and ministry. The fact that none is a duplicate of the others, and that some are unique to the 1st Century is evidence that specific spiritual gifts today include some that did not appear in these lists. The Lord uses gifts in any age, and can gift people to have a special understanding and perhaps prayer language that must be interpreted.

Leadership gifts, teaching gifts, and service/ministry gifts are for the church of any generation and era. I venture to say Paul might have even mentioned some clerical skills, or mechanical, and technical and perhaps even music and computer skills as spiritual gifts were he writing today. As Richard Hays says, we shouldn't try to evaluate our gifts by using these gift lists as though we were conducting some kind of spiritual Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory Test. We shouldn't make a sharp distinction between natural and spiritual gifts. All are from God, and employed in his service are gifts of our calling, our spiritual vocation. No gift or talent for the believer is for selfish or self-aggrandizing purposes, but rather for the good of others in the service of Christ.

I'm thankful we have part of the Dale Heights Body serving God with their gifts in Guatemala this week. I'm glad we have faithful members who use their musical gifts, their carpentry, handyman and bookkeeping gifts. Some have outstanding teaching gifts, and many of you are great cooks who put your culinary and hospitality gifts to great use. Let's use our gifts and pray God will add to us other members in 2016 who will also use their gifts to strengthen the Body and extend our mission.