

Unity in Ministry

1 Corinthians 12:1 – 11

Introduction

As part of the “Pleasing God” series that Pastor Russ has orchestrated for our Sunday mornings, I was assigned the topic of “Unity in Ministry.” This is a significant topic, for as we will see, it very much is not only “pleasing to God” when we pursue unity, it is expected.

When thinking of some story, anecdote, or setting to begin this sermon, I pondered many of the well-known “team” metaphors. Some come from military examples, others are business vignettes. But one I came back to was a very simple one from a sports perspective that illustrates this “team” mindset well. What I want you to envision is a relay team. Whether it is in track and field or swimming, the relay is often an exciting event. The goal is for all team members (usually four) to run or swim as fast as they can. Individual performance is an essential part of the team's final goal. But, there is a very real “team” aspect. Particularly in the case of the track and field relay, simply handing and receiving the baton, “the exchange,” is often the most critical portion of the race. Too little, too late, or totally wrong can spoil an otherwise great performance. Relay teams often require the most “practice” in perfecting this team portion of their race. And it is not unusual that often a less able individual performer actually participates best in the team. Now this metaphor can easily be extended to many aspects of life but this morning I just wanted to use it to begin to prompt your thinking as we extend it into the area of Christian ministry.

Christian ministry, which we can define as the organized function of service to God and others, requires both individual and “team” aspects. When it is accomplished the best, it involves best of both worlds. But we do not have to find non-Scriptural challenges alone, our text for this morning illustrates this concept very well.

Several weeks ago, Pastor Mark presented a sermon from this same chapter that we have selected for this morning, chapter 12 of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. Pastor Mark challenged us from the body metaphor that Paul uses in this particular text to consider our role in the church's ministry. He challenged us to recognize that each one has a place and purpose in the life of the church, and should aggressively pursue arenas to serve and support. His final challenge was in the form of three appeals. He challenged us to be joined with Christ in salvation (it isn't Christian ministry if it is not “Christian”), to be joined with the Chapel in membership (recognizing the role of “church” in providing the framework and accountability for ministry in this era of redemptive history), and to be joined with one another at our flock gatherings (to support, exhort, pray for, and encourage one another). Pastor Mark ultimately wanted us to recognize the

Christian life through the apostle Paul's use of the metaphor of the body and to participate as the "part" we have been given to be.

As we find ourselves again in this letter to the Corinthians, we need to remind ourselves of the overall context of this correspondence. Even though Corinth was a big city, a cosmopolitan center of trade and travel, do not necessarily think of this as a large church. They obviously had close relationships that were stretched and challenged on many fronts. These Christians were significantly influenced by their cultural past and their present surroundings. The Corinthian culture was quite a melting pot of experiences and opportunities (although do not quite think of the debauchery present before the city was re-invented as a Roman colony). Partly because of their social and religious upbringing, it appears that they had a tendency to see the Christian life through a lens that theologians refer to as "over-realized eschatology". This means they saw their current existence as somehow being the ultimate or the goal of Christianity. Because of this it appears they were concerned of identifying the emblems of their "arrived" nature. Because of this Paul challenged them at the root of their conflicts. He frequently used the good motives that they possessed but corrected their applications in this letter. But then again, there were times that he actually threw out their thinking altogether.

In the first six chapters of this letter, Paul responds to reports relayed to him from at least Chloe's household and perhaps for others. Beginning with chapter 7 he then answers concerns that were sent to him through a piece of correspondence that he had received from them. (Ah! It would be great to have this actual text as well.) Each issue is dealt with and elaborated on. We recognize these topics when we see an introductory "now concerning" in the text. You can find these in 7:1, 25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1 and 12.

Even though we have a collection of various concerns either from report or from a letter that Paul has read, do not read these individual problems in isolated or disconnected away. There is a significant intimate relationship among them that the apostle is working through as they flow in and out of each of the others so by the time we arrive in chapter 12 and it's "now concerning," we have just finished several sections on how gathering should be accomplished and its connection to the Gospel. And even though chapter 12 has as its substance the idea of spiritual gifts, and in particular the conflict over the idea of tongues, that is not the actual theme of the text in front of us. We are significantly challenged with the idea of the unity of the goals of the church as the vehicle by which God accomplishes his purposes in this era of redemptive history. Let us read from verse 1 to verse 11.

Informed!
(vs. 1-3)

Paul recognizes that as he develops and admonishes this church, he needs to provide significant, if not new, at least corrective, material so that they are appropriately “informed.” Let’s read the first three verses again:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

Observation (vs. 1)

We begin the passage with the observation and identification of a particular problem. The “now concerning” that introduces the passage, as we have said, is an indication of a response to an issue proposed by a letter written to Paul from the Corinthian congregation. We do not possess the Corinthians’ actual question, but we do know it dealt with the nature of giftedness. The posed some question regarding “spiritual gifts.” The term they used is in such a form that it can be translated as “spiritual people”. But the nature of the rest of the argument seems to refer to the concept of the identifiers or things. Therefore “gifts” is probably the best idea. However, the context of the book often puts these concerns in a setting that adds a distinct personal dimension. Their question seems to be about which gifts best identify one as a more mature and “spiritual” believer. This is likely one area that the teaching that they had received was correct but they had developed an aberration in how to make proper application. Paul makes sure that they were not *uninformed* in regards to this teaching of just *how* the spirit “gifts” believers. “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.”

Obstruction (vs. 2)

It was also important to provide them with this corrective information because they were obstructed in their thinking by their past and its religious context. Their desire to move beyond this mortal visible natural life caused them to over emphasize the blessings and benefits that the gospel brings to the already. This caused them to look beyond the application and tensions that the gospel brings because it is not yet.

Some scholars want to connect verse two more tightly with verse three. But I tend to agree with Donald Carson who sees the “therefore” in verse three as indicating that what follows is the information to answer their question. Verse three then is the elaboration on verses one and two. There are those who want to make the point of verse two to be that “in the past you experienced some “ecstatic experience” but this is ‘true’ speaking.” But relying on the direct grammar (and seeing the pun in the idea of mute idols), actually frees one up to see a broader context than merely “ecstatic utterance” as the focus of this particular section. “You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.”

Outcome (vs. 3)

So we get to verse three and we see that Paul wants them to understand something. This is the information that he alluded to in verse one. "No one speaking in the spirit of God ever says Jesus is cursed and that no one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit." We should hear primarily that Paul is telling them that the Holy Spirit and his gifts are characteristic of all believers. The outcome of true confession of "Jesus is Lord" implies the presence of the Spirit. Therefore, by definition one who possesses this confession is "spiritual". It is important for us to affirm that without the work of the Spirit no one can make the claim truly that Jesus is Lord and therefore embrace the gospel and then live in its benefits.

So indeed it was important for Paul to at the outset to inform them that the very nature of the gospel involves the work, and even more so, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in this era of redemptive history.

Empowered! (vs. 4-7)

And yet, no one can sit idly by. Since all believers are a work of, and possess the Holy Spirit, they then have areas and opportunities for service that are indeed empowered by the Holy Spirit as well. Let us read on...

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Variety (vs. 4-6)

This passage is put together with an interesting set of parallels. This use of a poetic framework places an emphasis by its literary structure. There are three phrases that move back and forth from the idea of variety to the idea of sameness. There is noted to be varieties in gifts, services, and activities. The way that these are framed it is probably not for us to consider these three ideas as entirely distinct but rather aspects of the "same thing". The emphasis here from this part of the phrases is on variety. In the Corinthians experience of the Christian life the variety that they are experiencing should be viewed as intentional and purposeful. The variety that they are noting around them, varieties in personality, teaching style, financial ability, family dynamic, and ability to resist temptation, are not to be seen as defects or deficits but all part of the environment in which they are placed to cause growth an encouragement and change.

By using three different words, we also learn something of how Paul understands the relationship of giftedness. He does not define the concept of spiritual gift too

narrowly or exclusive. By using them together in this way he does not want us to see them as near synonyms, but rather as related aspects of the same kinds of working. The idea being that gifts are service oriented activities that work and do and act.

Singularity (vs. 4-6)

But at the same time, he also stresses that this variety stems from a significant unity. We should take it very clearly here this reference to the Trinity. The activities of the Spirit of the Lord (a word used frequently to stand for the person of Jesus Christ), and God (often used by itself to reference God the father in his majestic fullness) are not to be seen strictly as independent of one another just as though these three persons of the Godhead work in consort together we should see the giftedness as also being bound to gather even though there is variety. And although there is a real match between the gift and coming from the Holy Spirit and action coming from the work of Christ who is the after involving the Gospel the principle worker in that activity and God the father who enables all that has occurred because there is significant overlap in these ideas don't try to create a theology of the Trinity from this parallel reference. What we should be seeing most strongly is there is a singularity a unity that is embedded in this variety of experience that the Corinthians have already noticed in the Christian life.

Intentionality (vs. 7)

But when we come to verse 7 we see that there is intentionality to this "varieties of gifts." We are told that "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." We should notice a couple of things here. The first thought is that it is 'to each' that this manifestation of the Spirit is given. Is not to some, it is not to a select few, it is not too those who are somehow accounted as more worthy than others. But rather it is distributed to each.

We should recognize that what is given is a manifestation of the Spirit. We have already affirmed that without the Spirit of God one does not say that Jesus is Lord. We must then also affirm that this giftedness for service and action is the manifestation of the working of the Spirit. It is the evidence that the Spirit is engaged in this person's life. To "manifest" something is to make it obvious or visible. Each has "giftedness", ability, and a motivation to serve that is generated and driven by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And we should also see that this working of the Spirit these manifestations that we have been given are not intended to be some private experience. They are not for "personal growth" or learning but rather "for the common good." There is intended always to be extension of the work of the Spirit in one life to impact others. The working out of the Christian life is never described as merely a private engagement. Always in the Scripture, the Christian life is thought of in the

context of community. Very frequently texts that speak of “you” are actually in effect plural. The Corinthians were not to think of themselves as somehow a collection of individual Christians but rather to view themselves as a unity that has a manifold variety of needs and, yes, gifts, in order to engage and grow. They were to see themselves as the church at Corinth.

They were to see themselves as the vehicle that God has chosen to both manifests the Gospel to the world around them as well as create the change needed within them for this era in redemptive history. Each of them has been an empowered by the Holy Spirit with gifts for service and action in order for the common good to be expressed in their lives.

Appointed! (vs. 8-11)

This brings us to our last portion of this text. From this section we want to see that this “variety expressed in unity” or even “this unity expressed in a variety” is indeed apportioned even determined by God himself. Let us read these last verses.

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

Given (vs. 8-10)

We first want to point out what exactly was given. It is noteworthy at the beginning of this section we see listing of various types of gifts. One merely needs to list look at other lists of spiritual gifts we find in other texts of Scripture to realize that none of them are intended to be exhaustive. You can see these other lists in the following places. In I Corinthians 12:28 is another listing in the same unit, in Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11 and in I Peter 4:11. There are overlaps and differences. Some appear to be presenting them in broad categories while some lists things that are very specific. One of the implications of this is that it does not appear that Paul is anywhere attempting to specify a definite limit as to what the Spirit gives one or enables one to do.

There may be some element of arrangement in these lists, but their arrangement is not such that they provide a hierarchy of value to these gifts. In fact, as we heard from Pastor Mark a few weeks back, the remainder of this chapter implies that things that appear to be honorable or more noble than others are often not as useful or necessary as things which sometimes are perceived as less honorable or noble.

We could spend some time with this list to specify what each of these ideas is referring to. We could take the time to discuss exactly what it means to have an utterance of wisdom or an utterance of knowledge. How are they different? What does it mean to have this special work of faith (it obviously must be different from the faith that allows one to embrace the gospel). What kinds of healings or what kinds of miracles are we to see? Is this concept of prophecy about telling the future or speaking a word from God? And then, what are we to think about this idea of speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues? This obviously was one of the issues that the Corinthians were considering as a mark of specialness for them. That is what led to the challenge here in our text. But we don't have the time, what we do want you to see and to recognize here is that all of these things are "given" and none of them are somehow a result of the specialness of the one exercising the gift.

Determined (vs. 11)

As we finish this in verse 11, we see that all of these were empowered by the one and same Spirit who apportions to each one individually *as he wills*. There is then a determination of these gifts. The determination of these gifts is not found or dependent upon the person receiving the gift but in the sovereign operation and plan of God himself through the Spirit. This should cause us to be careful when we complain that we just aren't gifted like someone else. We should be careful when we complain that "if I only had that gift" or "I wish I had..." We should see here is that the gifts that we have are exactly the gifts that God intends for us to have.

Reflect and Respond

So exactly how does this text impact us in ministry? Let us keep in mind that giftedness involves to the skills and the abilities and the confidence to accomplish service for common good. We often segment this idea of "common good" into ministry areas to accomplish the purpose of the church. To spread the gospel, grow together in love for God and one another and to worship, praise and glorify God in our gathering, we often segment these ideas into pieces that are practical, functional and orderly. Even though it can be over done, we have to remember that all of them are serving for the common good and common goal in common focus. There is a unity in that variety. One area of ministry cannot exist to the detriment of the others; all must work together.

And even yet within ministries there are needs for those to administer, to explain, to pray, to create, to development, to build relationships, to provide instructions...I could continue the list... all of which are necessary for particular areas and ministries to work well. A multiplicity of these gifts and abilities are necessary for any ministry to work.

Here are a few closing questions.

What are my gifts and am I using them for the common good?

Ask your elder or a ministry leader for assistance (some of you might be surprised that not all agree with you as to what you think your gift might be).

Do I think my area of giftedness is the most important?

Am I annoyed by people who don't share my particular gift and are gifted in other ways?

Keep in mind I am not saying that one can have the gift of agitation, the gift of laziness, the gift of lackadaisical mess. Those are not gifts, those rather are things in areas to work through and change and grow and to put off.

But we do find ourselves engaged in conflict and we just can't see eye to eye with the other person, we probably ought to ask ourselves who are we to tell the potter he didn't use his clay correctly.

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