

“Earnestly Desire the Higher Gifts”

The Twenty-Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Isaiah 48:12-22

It is very difficult to have a sane and thoughtful discussion about a hot-button theological topic when a doctrine has loyal and emotional adherents, a controversial history and has caused division, and lends itself to sensationalism. When this is the case, there is a natural tendency to seek to distance ourselves from those who abuse or distort that doctrine, instead of dealing with what Scripture actually says about that doctrine. If you’ve ever witnessed what takes place nightly on the set of TBN or have witnessed a revival meeting, you might just conclude that you want nothing to do with the gifts of the Spirit. Yet, Paul exhorts the Corinthians (and us) to “earnestly desire the higher gifts.” What does Paul mean by this exhortation? What is the role and function of these higher gifts? How are they connected to the offices in the church—like minister, elder, and deacon?

We are in a series on 1 Corinthians and we now wrap up our study of chapter 12. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, it is really too bad that we cannot tackle this entire section of Corinthians (chapters 12-14) in one sitting because all of Paul’s points are interconnected—but then that would take us several hours. Given the length and complexity of Paul’s three-chapter answer to a question the Corinthians had submitted to him, we have to unpack each of Paul’s points in chapter 12 not only to understand why he will devote so much ink to a discussion of speaking in tongues in chapter 14, but also because the points Paul makes in chapter 12 are so important to the life and health of Christ’s church. If there is one letter in the New Testament which speaks to the circumstances of those of us now living in Southern California, it is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

Sadly, this section of Corinthians has been the source of great controversy—especially with the rise of Pentecostalism early in the twentieth century. Pentecostals look to this section of 1 Corinthians for support for many of their doctrines and practices. As I have been pointing out in the past few sermons, the key to avoiding some of the problems associated with Pentecostalism is to understand what these spiritual gifts actually entailed, as well as determining what role they played in the apostolic churches. One purpose of these gifts was to confirm the preaching of the gospel (this was especially the case with miracles and healing). Another purpose of these gifts was to equip each member for service in Christ’s church for the common good. A third purpose was to enable a diverse group of believers to love one another because Christ has loved us first.

As Paul lays the groundwork in chapters 12 and 13 to answer the Corinthian’s question about the role and purpose of tongue speaking in chapter 14, Paul reminds the Corinthians that in order to properly exercise the gift of tongues, the Corinthians first need to understand the role that spiritual gifts (the *charismata*) were to play in Christ’s church. But we cannot understand the role of spiritual gifts without placing them in the broader category of spiritual things (the *pneumatikon*). In making a distinction between spiritual things and the gifts of the Spirit, Paul is able to contrast the pagan conception of “spirituality” with the way Christians should view the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

As Paul has made plain in the opening verses of chapter 12, any biblical discussion of spiritual things begins with our profession that “Jesus is Lord” (Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all things, as well as that one who died for our sins and who was raised from the dead for our justification). What we believe and confess about Jesus is the starting point for any talk about the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

Paul's approach to spiritual things is completely unlike that of Greco-Roman pagans who see spiritual things in terms of invisible forces which the spiritual elites among us learn to control and manipulate. The Greeks were especially fascinated with fortune-tellers, people who cast spells, and with those who spoke to the dead. They looked for spiritual super-stars who were able to master these spiritual techniques to ensure good weather, good crops, and good fortune, as well as fertility. Paul has to convince the Corinthians to move beyond this pagan way of thinking and doing for this is nothing but idolatry. Such is incompatible with their confession that Jesus is Lord, and with the biblical conception of spiritual gifts. The Corinthians must leave behind all these pagan practices and so must we.

The Holy Spirit gives some believers very visible and publicly-exercised spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit also gives to others more mundane and seemingly ordinary gifts. But all of these gifts are given for the common good, for the service of others, and to enable us to love another—the theme of chapter 13. As we saw last time, Paul sees the church as the body of Christ. While not all the members of the body have the same function or purpose, each one of us is necessary to the well-being of the whole. This means that gifts are given for service, not for status. There are no spiritual elites in Christ's church, only justified sinners given gifts of the Spirit. We are appointed to our various roles in the church by Christ himself, for his purpose, our common good, and for his glory.

Because Christ's church is an organism (Christ's spiritual body), and not merely an organization (although Paul will go on to emphasize proper order in the church), Paul reminds the Corinthians that when one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers. When one part of the body rejoices, the whole body rejoices. This is why dividing the church is such a great sin, and why Christians have no business seeking to form factions. This is also why all members of the body are equally important. The church is Christ's body and he gives the gifts of the Spirit as he sees fit.

As we turn to our text—the closing verses of chapter 12—Paul switches from the analogy of the human body to the relationship between offices in the church and the gifts of the Spirit.

As he brings the body metaphor to a close, in verse 27 Paul writes, *“now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”* In the Greek sentence, the “you” is placed forward in the sentence for emphasis and there is no article used with “body.” This indicates that Paul is not talking about just any “body.” Rather, this is the body of Christ of which each of his readers (“you”) are members. Therefore, all those things that Paul has been saying about Christ's spiritual body (the church) and the gifts of the Spirit apply to each one of the Corinthians. No one person can claim to be the whole body. And no individual person (however unimportant they think themselves to be) can be excluded from the body.¹ There is both unity (one body) and diversity (many members). We don't have to be the same in terms of culture, race and background, but we do have the same Savior. Therefore, we are one.

Beginning in verse 28, Paul discusses some of the ramifications of the way in which the gifts of the Spirit are related to the different offices within the church. Says Paul, *“and God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.”* Paul offers a similar list in Ephesians 4:11—*“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.”* These lists of gifts indicate a priority of sorts, although given our prior discussion about the importance of every member of the body, we ought to be careful not to say more than Paul does. The list of these gifts and offices is probably

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 174.

representative rather than comprehensive.² This is how some of the gifts, relate to some of the offices.

There are a number of important things here we need to carefully consider. First, it is vital that we notice the switch Paul makes mid-sentence from various offices (apostles, prophets, teachers) to various gifts of the Spirit (miracles, healing, and so on). I take this as an indication that the gifts of the Spirit are connected to the officers of the church—a point we will address momentarily. Throughout the gospels, Jesus performs miracles. Throughout the Book of Acts, the apostles do the same to confirm the truth of the gospel they proclaim. This fact ties miracles directly to the office of apostle (or to the apostolic circle), and to the establishment of the churches that we read about throughout the New Testament.

Second, the term “church” (*ekklēsia*) is used here in a universal sense—the universal church as the body of Christ. This is significant because throughout the New Testament, the term “church” is most often used of a local congregation.³ This tells us that what follows is not only true of the Corinthian congregation, but of all the apostolic churches. God has appointed specific believers to these offices in these churches. And God gives these people chosen for these offices the spiritual gifts necessary to equip them for their service in the church. This is why those who are given certain gifts of the Spirit are then called to the offices God has designed to rule his church in the name of Christ. As Paul spells out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, the offices he mentions here in 1 Corinthians (apostles, prophets, and teachers) eventually become the offices with which we are more familiar, minister, elder and deacon.

This connection between certain spiritual gifts and church offices is often overlooked. But once we make this connection, we can avoid much of the grief which arises from misuse of spiritual gifts. While there are no spiritual elites with insights into secret things (like the pagans believe), there is to be order in the church through the establishment of these three offices, filled by those men who have been equipped by the Spirit and called by the church. Such men are called to these offices because the gifts given them by the Spirit have been confirmed in them through their participation in the life of the churches.

Once the gifts of the Spirit mentioned here are tied to the three offices mentioned by Paul in his so-called pastoral epistles, we can immediately see the problem when someone claims to possess these gifts of the Spirit (miracles and healing), and then claims they are called to start their own “ministry” in which they exercise their “gifts” apart from the church. This is what creates the kind of lone ranger televangelist who starts his or her own ministry and who then runs amuck doing untold damage to the reputation of Christ and his church. The gifts are to be exercised in the church, for the common good, to build-up the body of Christ. They are not to be used to build someone’s fame and fortune.

The first two gifts mentioned by Paul clearly have a different (greater) significance than the other gifts—it is likely that God used those with the gifts of miracles and healing to establish the Corinthian church. It is also not an accident that Paul lists tongues as the least of the spiritual gifts. This is significant because the Corinthians valued the gift of tongues so highly that even though it was the least of the gifts, the way they were exercising that gift was causing much of the division among them. Whatever purpose speaking in tongues has, this gift does not establish the church, but it can divide it. That much is clear.

As for the offices mentioned by Paul (apostle, prophets and teachers), according to texts like Mark 3:14

² Hays, First Corinthians, 217.

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 174.

ff., apostles were men those chosen and commissioned by Jesus himself to establish the churches after his ascension. The original twelve seem to have been supplemented by people like Barnabas, James and Paul (what we call the apostolic “circle”). These men were considered to have been guardians of the gospel given to them by Christ himself, and they were among the witnesses to Christ’s bodily resurrection (or in Paul’s case—a witness of the Risen Christ). As the years go by, and more and more churches are established, the apostles begin to die off and their writings (Scripture) become authoritative in their absence. It is striking that the original apostles (or those in the apostolic circle) do not ordain new apostles. Instead, they ordain ministers, elders and deacons whenever they plant new churches.

Almost from the beginning, the church spoke of the importance of bishops as men standing in direct continuity with the apostles. Bishop is but another word for elder. After the Roman emperor Constantine’s supposed conversion to Christianity in 312 A.D. and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, the office of bishop became a much more political and administrative office than it had been in the early church. Before Constantine’s conversion, bishops tended to derive their authority from the fact that they preserved the true doctrine of the apostles as taught in God’s word. After Constantine, bishops tended to see their authority arising from the office itself. It was not the continuity of the doctrine, but the continuity of the office which now mattered. This explain’s why Rome stresses apostolic succession—an unbroken line of popes going all the way back to Peter. This also explains why Calvin and the Reformed reject apostolic succession, emphasizing the continuity of apostolic doctrine from the time of the writing of the New Testament to today. Although the apostles disappeared, their doctrine did not. This apostolic teaching is what prophets are to proclaim and what teachers are to make plain.

Prophets have nothing to do with Nostradamus. They do not predict the future. Biblically speaking, prophets are those men called to proclaim God’s word (ministers), and are divinely enabled to find Christ in the various books of the Old Testament. They were also enabled to proclaim the message of Christ crucified with a supernatural boldness—often times in the face of those who are hostile to Christianity. Recall that this was an age with no history of Christian reflection upon the events of the Old Testament. The canon of the New Testament was not yet completed so there was a need for the Holy Spirit to equip early preachers to understand how Christ fulfilled the promises found in the Old Testament. The office of teacher is closely related to that of prophet and more than likely refers to those engaged in catechesis (instruction in doctrine and refuting the claims of heretics and pagans), rather than proclamation.

From this point on, Paul begins to speak of particular gifts of the Spirit, rather than the people who have these gifts as he moves from a list of offices to particular gifts.⁴ Paul speaks of miracles and healings (which are fairly clear as to their meaning), before speaking of those with gifts enabling people to help others (“helping” in the sense of showing great compassion) and those who are able to administer the affairs of the church (the word Paul uses refers to someone who pilots a ship). What precise form, exactly, these gifts took in the Corinthian church remains a bit mysterious.

When he mentions apostles, Paul may have been speaking of those apostles who had visited Corinth (Paul and Peter). When he mentions prophets, he may be referring to the prophets who preached in Corinth, or those elders who taught them (like Apollos). When he mentions helps and administration, he may be referring to the unnamed men who served as deacons, and to those who governed the church. In other words, Paul might have been speaking of the actual church officers who served in the church of

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 175.

Corinth. But in any case, the gift of tongues—which was causing the Corinthians so much grief—is clearly at the tail-end of Paul’s list for a reason. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 14:19, “*in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*”

That God distributes these gifts as he wills is now hammered home through Paul’s use of a series of rhetorical questions (a favorite technique of Paul’s). In verses 29-30, Paul asks “*are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?*” The obvious answer to all of these questions is “no.” These gifts of the Spirit are distributed throughout the body for the greater good of the whole. While it appears from Paul’s questions that all Christians receive at least one spiritual gift, his questions also make it pretty clear that no one Christian receives all of the gifts of the Spirit. Everyone and their different gifts contributes to the well-being of the whole.

While Paul has made repeatedly the point that all gifts (even the lesser gifts) are essential to the well-being of the church, in verse 31, Paul now exhorts the Corinthians to seek the greater gifts and then at the same time directs them beyond their preoccupation with spiritual gifts to something more far important. “*But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*” At first glance, this may appear to contradict what Paul has been repeatedly affirming throughout this section—namely that even the lesser (more mundane) gifts are essential to the well-being of the body as a whole. Now he says “*earnestly seek the greater gifts.*”

But it is not at all inconsistent for Paul to encourage the Corinthians to desire the greater gifts—given a proper understanding of spiritual gifts. God gives these gifts as he sees fit, and all of the gifts of the Spirit are essential to the well-being of Christ’s church. Since these gifts enable us to serve one another in love, we should desire them—especially the greater ones. As several commentators have pointed out, the pursuit of higher gifts is preliminary to the reception of them.⁵ The desire for them reflects an internal call—that we desire to use our gifts for the service of others in Christ’s church, and we are willing to receive whatever gift that God has for us because these gifts build-up the body.

The temptation to misunderstand Paul’s exhortation to seek the greater gifts—as though these gifts elevated those who have them to the category of spiritual elite—is also mitigated by what follows. Yes, we should desire the higher gifts, but there is something far more important than seeking spiritual gifts, and that is love. “*And I will show you a still more excellent way.*” The excellent way is spelled out in some detail in chapter 13, Paul’s famous discussion of Christian love. This more excellent way ought to be the desire of everyone in the Corinthian congregation concerned with spiritual things. It should also be the desire of everyone who confesses that “Jesus is Lord.”

Just as we have seen earlier in the chapter, Paul’s “more excellent way” resounds with echoes from the prophecy of Isaiah, in which the prophet speaks of the blessings given by God’s Spirit in the messianic age. Speaking through the prophet, YHWH declares, “*I, even I, have spoken and called him; I have brought him, and he will prosper in his way. Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there.*” *And now the Lord God has sent me, and his Spirit. Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go.’*” In chapter 13, Paul will explain how the Lord lead us in the way we should go—that more excellent way hinted at by the prophets. That more

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 176.

excellent way is to focus upon the love that we are to have for our brothers and sisters—a love which the Holy Spirit creates in our hearts.

What should we take with us from Paul’s exhortation to earnestly desire the higher gifts?

First, Paul’s exhortation only makes sense if we completely reject the pagan notion so typical of first century Greek religion (and of our own age) that there were spiritual elites who have access to all kinds of secret and esoteric information—the secret things which only the truly spiritual can grasp. Paul has refuted this notion by reminding the Corinthians that God gives the gifts of the Holy Spirit to every member of the church as he wills. The purpose is for the common good so as to build up the body of Christ. There is nothing secret about them. They are to be used in the day to day life of the church, in the service of their fellow members. Paul is not telling us to seek these gifts so that we can start our own ministries and then attract a bunch of followers. Paul is telling us to desire spiritual gifts for use in the church (especially the higher gifts) because this strengthens the body of Christ (the church).

We also need to remove from our thinking the idea that should God give us one of these “greater” gifts, the Holy Spirit will embarrass us by making us do something in public that we would not even think to do in private. We’ve seen people laughing in the Spirit, people being slain in the Spirit, people who claim to be “drunk” in the Spirit and so on. Understandably, we run the other way. But if the higher gifts are given to us by God for the common good and for the building up of the body, then we need not ignore them because abuses exist. Paul tells us to desire these higher gifts and exercise them as we see being done in the churches of the New Testament. The stronger our members, the stronger our church. The stronger our church the greater our ability to identify pagan ways of thinking and doing, and the greater our resistance to heresy and schism, and the greater our ability to love one another. The stronger the church, the greater our ability to understand the gospel and the sufficiency of Jesus’ death for all our sins, as well as the glories of his perfect righteousness which enables us to stand before God.

It certainly helps to see the connection Paul makes between various offices and the gifts of the Spirit which are associated with these offices. Acknowledging this connection goes a long way in preventing the false teaching and the disruptive focus upon certain charismatic individuals who claim to exercise these gifts, but who use them for their own personal gain. Apostles are not around today, which explains why miracles and healings are not normative in established churches. Apostles established the first churches, miracles confirmed the truth of the gospel when it was preached, but then the apostles ordained ministers, elders and deacons in those churches, and once established, the ordinary means of grace (preaching and sacraments) became normative. In our day, we the Holy Spirit works in our midst through the preached word and the administration of the sacraments.

So, when Paul tells us to “earnestly desire the higher gifts,” he’s really exhorting us to see if we have an internal call within our hearts to serve in Christ’s church. This refers to established church offices (desiring to be a minister, elder or deacon), but is certainly not limited to these offices. In fact, the internal call is a simple thing. Do you see something that needs to be done, which you desire to do and which you are capable of doing? Then let one of the elders know, so that your internal call can be tested in the church (the external call), and so that your gifts can be exercised in such a way to strengthen the whole body.

Beloved, let us earnestly desire the higher gifts for the good of our church. And let us seek that more excellent way, so that if our church is known for anything, it is our focus upon God’s love for us in Christ, and our love for each other. This is why we should earnestly desire the higher gifts.