

“The Unity and Diversity of the Holy Spirit’s Gifts”

26 September 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Shout to the Lord

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:1-31

Sermon:

There has been a lot of discussion recently about the partition of Ireland. 100 years has passed since our Island was divided in 1921. The Irish feeling is that it should not be celebrated, and the question is should it be commemorated. Our denomination and our President have been caught up in the debate.

What is self-evident is when something is divided the desire is to put it back together, to heal the division, to create unity, because being whole or complete is better.

The Church in Corinth was struggling with divisions and Paul has been clearly pointing them towards unity. Don't let personalities divide you, don't let personal animosity or grievances divide you, don't let differences in how you interact with the world divide you, don't let gender issues divide you and don't let pride and wealth divide your church meals and the Lord's supper.

Paul's desire has been for unity, do we follow personalities, NO, do we take fellow believers to court NO, do we insist on our way even if it hurts the faith of another NO is Christ divided NO, and our unity is grounded in the gospel and the message of the cross of self-sacrificing love. Divisions NO; Unity Yes!

Today we begin a look at the issue of spiritual gifts and their use in church life. The Greek word used for gift is “charismata” and in English we use the word to describe a person as having “charisma” a gifted, positive, personality. Within the church we also use the word to describe a person or church who highlights the gifts of the Holy Spirit and thinks of them in a certain way, they are described as Charismatic. Within churches people hold different views on the gifts of the Spirit and their use and that can be a source of division. This was a problem within the church in Corinth and Paul addresses the issue with the words “*now about spiritual gifts*” indicating he is tackling a new topic about which they have written. The importance of the topic is indicated by the fact he takes three chapters to outline his thoughts. So let us look together at his argument and teaching.

I. The problem and the foundational truth (v.1-3)

Paul traces the problem regarding spiritual gifts to their ignorance about them, ESV uniformed and to their being led astray and influenced by their “pagan” past and worship of idols. He highlights the fact of idols being mute, not speaking! When your god does not communicate you tend to be influenced by your emotions and passions, and fervent activity by you is seen as “spiritual”. I was reminded of the prophets who worshipped Baal in Elijah's day, (1st Kings 18:27-29) The culture in Corinth favoured the dramatic and the ecstatic, and

the result was pride, division, unloving behaviour (Ch 13) that led to disorder (Ch 14) and Paul needs to address this robustly for the good of the church.

By contrast, the Holy Spirit speaks and the foundational truth he speaks is “Jesus is Lord”, therefore the test of any Christian activity or declaration is; does it proclaim that Jesus IS Lord, this then is how we recognise the true work of the Holy Spirit, his testimony about Jesus, his pointing to Jesus and in contrast we recognise false spirits if they curse, demean, or trivialise Jesus. The Holy Spirit speaks and the message that unites is the proclamation of the truth, “Jesus is Lord” those creating division in Corinth had allowed ignorance of this uniting truth escape them as they pursued self-centred expression of the gifts, as we will see.

II. Diversity with unity (v.4-13)

Paul begins to teach about spiritual gifts and he is very thorough. His main point is the spiritual gifts are diverse (variety) and they are to unite, diversity with unity.

A. The triune God v4-6, “there are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit”

Diversity with unity is perfectly shown in the Personhood of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These verses speak of the same God, Spirit, Lord, Spirit who works in everyone but in different ways, gifts and service. The model is the Triune God, the three persons have different tasks, but they work in unity for the same purpose. As our God so those who follow him.

B. The sovereign God v7-11, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good”.

They are given under God’s sovereign control, “he gives them to each one, just as he determines” and every believer has a gift of the spirit.

Nine different gifts are listed here, the message of wisdom, the message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues! Time prevents an explanation of each.

They have been given for the common good! The spirit of our age is individualism, looking after number one, to feel good, to look good, we do most things for ourselves. Individualism is self-centred. However, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given not for the individual but for the common good, the community, the church.

C. The body of Christ: v12-13 “the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So, it is with Christ.”

Paul explains this is by using the theological truth of baptism (by, with or in) the Holy Spirit. One question to clarify in our minds is when do we receive the Holy Spirit? The position of the PCI as a reformed church is that the Holy Spirit is given at the time of our conversion.

As Paul says in Romans 8:9, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

The WCF 34:3 says, *“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father is ever willing to give to all who ask him, is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption. He regenerates humanity by his grace, convicts them to sin, moves them to repentance, and persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith.”*

The distinctions between us do not counter unity, the Holy Spirit's presence trumps all distinctions as the determinant of unity. I used to love the game “Trumps” a card game where the card with the largest stat won. Paul is saying the presence of the Holy Spirit in every believer unifies and trumps every other distinction. Nationality and culture, (Jew or Greek) wealth, or status (slave or free) the Spirit unites us despite those differences.

III. The challenge of diversity (v.14-26)

I had a short walk around the food section in Dundrum shopping centre this week and the variety of food outlets was incredible. Diversity is good. However, we must recognise that diversity brings a challenge, and this is what Paul addresses in the next section, using the easily understood metaphor of our physical body for the body of Christ the Church.

I think this issue has been and remains one of our greatest challenges in ARPC.

I have heard it said at times; *“I do not belong to this church”*, (v14-20) I'm different, I'm the only one, I don't have anything to offer, I'm inferior.

We are less likely to articulate openly, what Paul highlights in (v21-26) *“I do not need you”*, but our attitude can be a superior one, individualistic, I don't need these people, I don't have anything in common, I can survive without them, and our attitude and actions take us away from the body.

Paul doesn't have any time for that sort of attitude, it is to him ignorant of the reality of the nature and purpose of the spiritual gifts and he outlines his reasons why with appeal to the body metaphor.

1. Our interdependence is self-evident from the body metaphor, (v16) you can claim you don't belong, but you do, and cutting yourself off makes no sense.
2. Our interdependence is shown by the fact that each part needs the others to function well. Being blind or being deaf is a disability and no-one deliberately removes any of their senses as a preference to make the body better. Those who have lost their sense of taste through Covid don't see it as a good thing, it is very debilitating. I saw one guy on TV who put chillies in his food to try and get a sense of taste. (v17) If you absent yourself, you and the church are diminished.
3. God arranges everything perfectly, as creator, redeemer and sovereign Lord. (v18ff) Comparison with others leads to either of the inferior or superior attitudes. Recognising the sovereign, creative and redemptive genius of God leads us to ask different questions, “What is my role; how can I use my gift, how can I contribute to the body?” We do this with thankfulness for all that God has done for us.
4. Apparent strength is no indicator of significance. In the body metaphor losing a big toe may not seem the worst thing but it will have a significant impact on your balancing ability with more complex movements. No-one thought the appendix was

of great value, but research shows it to be a reservoir of helpful gut bacteria. In the Covid crises we learned the value of toilet roll and those who stack the shelves in supermarkets we did not miss as much the designer brands or the celebrities. You might think you don't count for much but to think that way disagrees with the perfect creative and redemptive genius of God who has made you, redeemed you and given you the gift he designed for use in his church. You may be weak (as many believed Paul was in Ch 1) but God has a purpose for you in his church.

5. Those parts of the body that are less presentable we provide with clothes and special modesty. They receive special care and concern. To not do so humiliates the body and is disrespectful and plainly not right.
6. If one part suffers every part suffers. Those of you who suffer from painful backs will know how debilitating that is, and that it affects every part of life - driving, sitting, walking, sleeping and concentration.
7. If one part rejoices every part rejoices. If you get a foreign body in your eye, it is your sole focus and the relief you feel in your whole body (we use that word) when it is removed proves Paul's point!

We are diverse, but we are interdependent, and to have an inferior attitude and say I do not belong or a superior attitude and say, I don't need you, is anathema to the body of Christ that is the church.

IV. Diversity with unity. (v27-31)

Having learned these lessons as to why diversity must be worked out in unity within the church, Paul concludes by recapping and emphasising its application to the church. Now **You** are the body of Christ, with **YOU** emphasised, this applies to you.

It is a surprise to hear him list the gifts in order after so strongly defending unity with diversity. Does a list of gifts not create a hierarchy of importance? The answer is a hierarchy does exist, however it is not about the person but the gift. Your brain is first, your heart could be listed a close second and your lungs third with kidneys fourth and your right leg could be listed as 15+ but all are needed, and God has given all of them for the functioning of a healthy body and he has done the same with the gifts given to the church.

The task for us all is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, this is the work of the Holy Spirit, and he has given each of us gifts to make that happen. The work of the church does not depend on me or the elders alone it depends on all of us working in harmony with our diverse gifts with the purpose of declaring Jesus is Lord.

The glue that holds us all together is love, love for God and love for each other, as we will see next week.

Praise: Consuming Fire

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: O Church, Arise

Benediction

Discussion Questions:

The Holy Spirit proclaims Jesus is Lord (v.3)! How might this impact our approach to spiritual gifts?

Paul teaches about spiritual gifts in terms of diversity and unity. How have you seen our church function like a body? How could we better express our unity and diversity?

Paul's list of gifts in Ch. 12 is extensive, but not comprehensive (see also Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Peter 4:10-11). What gifts has God given you? How will you use these gifts to benefit 'the common good'?

It's tempting to compare ourselves to others. How does Paul's teaching in this section restrain us from feeling either superior or inferior for the gifts God has given or not given us?