

If we were to look around us, we could easily see how Paul’s principle of “*different gifts*” works. For instance, if we go to any athletic event there are usually a number of players on each team. And while they have different positions to play and different skills, that very thing is the source of their unity and the thing that makes it possible for them to play the game and win. The same is true when we go to the symphony. There are a variety of instruments, played with various skills by each player, but all those instruments and all those different musicians create a finished musical presentation in concert.

In fact, the word “concert” means mutual agreement and concord, which may be why in the church we have a tendency to seek unity through conformity. Rather than encouraging each person’s uniqueness, we mistakenly discourage it. In some churches a quest for uniformity is not satisfied by showing loyalty to the pastor and staff or faithfulness to church activities, but rather there is an effort to get all the members to think alike on all issues. While there is a certain short-term efficiency in this style of leading, in the long run it’s self-defeating because it does not recognize the unique giftedness of each member of the church. The kind of unity God wants comes from recognizing each one of the different gifts he has given. As Paul writes to the Corinthians about the gifts of the Spirit, we can learn a few lessons for ourselves and for our church today.

Autobiographically speaking, neither the church where I was baptized nor the churches I attended as a young adult paid much attention to Paul’s teaching from 1 Corinthians 12. From time to time, I may have heard an occasional doctrinal sermon on the Holy Spirit but the main emphasis, as I remember it, was the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and to the Son in the Trinity, and the importance of referring to the Holy Spirit as “he” and not “it.” Never do I recall a preacher or teacher telling me that becoming a Christian means the Spirit of God comes into my life and that he gives me special gifts designed to enrich my life and to enrich the whole community of believers that I’m a part of. Consequently, I was in college before the truths in this chapter began to have even the slightest impact on my life.

While in college I remember hearing Gordon Cosby deliver a lecture on the role of the church in identifying and developing the gifts of its members. He was the pastor of The Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., a church that received national attention when Elizabeth O’Connor described its life and ministry in her book, *The Call to Commitment*, that came out when I was a freshman. Cosby made two points from his stories about The Church of the Saviour and the gifts God gives. First, there is no gift the church needs that God has not given to one of its members. Second, the work of the church is to encourage

members in the discovery and use of these gifts. Some folks ignored his points; others reacted to them. I began to think differently about my faith and about how the church accomplishes its kingdom work in the world.

The idea of the “*gift of the Holy Spirit*” goes back to Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost when he gave a heartfelt appeal for those who listened to repent and be baptized. He promised, “*And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38). Peter then said, “*The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call*” (Acts 2:39). That sounds to me like it includes even us—all of us—wouldn’t you agree?

Paul discusses how the Spirit operates in the life of an individual Christian in such a way that he or she discovers understandings and traits and abilities not previously recognized. He calls them “*gifts of the Spirit*” (plural) in verse 1 and uses the word *charisms* from which we get the term “charismatic,” which broadly designates an individual who has received a special gift. Paul doesn’t describe in chapter 12 *how* this occurs, but confidently states *that* it occurs. Those of you paying close attention to the sermon title on the screen in the sanctuary, or in a printed bulletin, have seen my take already on these *charisms* given by the Spirit to followers of Jesus. It’s *Christmas in January!* Now technically it’s Christmas in any season of the year, on any day of the year, that God chooses to pour out his Spirit on his people. Wondrous gifts are given.

One explanation that may be helpful to understand this is that God could have given to each of us at birth all the gifts he wants us to have. But sin causes us not to recognize or claim or use these gifts to God’s glory. Our self-centeredness and our preoccupation with lesser things have a way of focusing our lives on things that are more temporary. But then, when we become a Christian, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us and in the process begins to uncover valuable insights that have been buried beneath the clutter of our lives. God begins to open doors that we had nailed shut and develop those parts of us that we had ignored or allowed to atrophy. To me, this may accurately describe how God is constantly at work in our lives. In any case, any gift of the Spirit that God gives is unmerited, undeserved, but a gift given for a purpose.

While our science-oriented society long ago dropped the idea that God is trying to communicate with us through the statements of an individual who might be out of touch with reality or mentally ill, the church community needs to be encouraged to exercise more discernment when confronted by sincere people with seemingly bizarre ideas and plans who say “the Lord has spoken to me.” In spite of the fact that we are warned by John to test the spirits to see whether or not they really are of God (1 John 4:1), there is a

gullibility among some people that can possibly discredit that which is authentic in the church. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that since our first confession of faith is “*Jesus is Lord*” (Romans 10:9-10), anything contrary to Jesus’ life, Jesus’ example and Jesus’ teaching could not possibly be motivated by the Spirit of God.

In verse 4 Paul picks up on the problem that the church faced, created by the seeming disparity in the nature of the gifts. Some of the gifts were quite spectacular, and those who possessed them had a tendency to be prideful. Those gifts were exercised in the context of worship, so they gave high visibility to those who possessed them. It’s easy to see, knowing the very human tendency to promote oneself, how these individuals might begin to think that they were more important than the others. On the other hand, some members were given gifts that were exercised in less dramatic ways—in a servant role, for example—and it is easy to see how because of the quiet and unseen ways in which they did their part they might wonder if their gift was not as important and if they were really needed in the church at all.

Yet God takes very seriously our failure to use what verse 7 calls “*the manifestation of the Spirit...for the common good.*” For example, in Jesus’ memorable parable of the sheep and the goats he condemns our negligence. Some of those whom the King scolds ask him, “*Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?*” (Matthew 25:44). Jesus says, “*He will reply, truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me*” (v. 45). In saying this Jesus is suggesting that what his followers *fail* to do for the most vulnerable members of our society we *fail* to do for Jesus himself. For example, when we neglect sad or lonely Christian people, we essentially neglect Christ himself. It seems as if those the King speaks against simply forgot to do anything they considered unimportant. Their shock at Jesus’ condemnation suggests they simply forgot that some Christians go to bed hungry or in prison. But Jesus seems to say that’s not an excuse.

The gifts Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 12 refer to the abilities that God has given to us for God’s glory and for one another’s benefit. So, for instance, he refers to gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy and even speaking in different tongues. The apostle even implies, for example, in v. 7 that a desperately poor person who is bound to her home can pray for God’s people and work. While that may not seem like much by comparison, we could argue that it’s perhaps the greatest gift we can give to another person.

Of course, it’s always easier for us to recognize when our Christian brothers and sisters are not using their gifts and talents for the “common good.” Paul, however, invites Jesus’

followers to primarily ask *ourselves* what gifts God has given us, and how we can use them. We use those talents the Spirit has given to us not only for each other's spiritual welfare, but also for their physical well-being. Jesus, after all, didn't just feed hungry crowds the bread of life that is salvation. He also fed them bread they could eat and from which they could receive nourishment.

I wonder how many of us see our neighborhood as a community. I suspect that may have died out with the front porch, because today people drive home, push a button and the garage door comes up. They pull their cars into the garage, push the button again, and the garage door goes down. Years ago, I heard someone refer to this as the "cocoon society," where we cocoon ourselves in our homes and never venture out to meet our neighbors. And it's true. I wave at my neighbors as we come and go, but do you know where I normally see them? Shopping. Everyone has to eat. At least we have that in common. The point is, we rarely run into one another in the back yard. That's just one other reason why we could use a really good snow this winter. We often talk to our neighbors when we're shoveling out. Don't we?

Do you ever think of the church as a community? We come together every week, well, most weeks anyway, to be truthful. We study the Bible together, we pray and sing together, we break bread together. Sometimes we find ourselves in the sad place of having to say goodbye to one of our friends, but still, even diminished by our losses, we remain a community.

Some Christians tend to concentrate on meeting other people's physical needs. By doing that, however, we may be treating each other like animals that only need food and drink. Other Christians primarily think about others people's spiritual well-being. Yet by doing that, we ignore the fact that God created us as whole persons whose earthly bodies God will raise to life one day. I think God wants us to experience the deep joy that comes from generously using our talents and gifts "*for the common good.*"

I'm sometimes struck that sharing the gifts that the Spirit God has given requires an attentiveness we don't practice very much in our busy culture. People who are hurting in our church and community, for instance, don't usually publish their pain. In fact, they may sneak out of church before the service ends or try to avoid people. But when we are eager to share our gifts *for the common good*, we will find ways to connect with people who may be separated from the faith community. Our job is to swallow any annoyances we might have with needy people to serve them in Jesus' name. "*Now to each one the manifestation of the spirit is given for the common good*" (v. 7). God is still in the business of giving his people gifts. It's Christmas in January! Amen.