

The Sum of the Parts

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12-31a; Matthew 5:13-16

March 18, 2007

Church of the New Covenant

Rick Neale

In this letter to the young church in the Greek city of Corinth Paul is addressing several troublesome issues that have arisen. One problem was deep divisions over the manifestation and exercise of spiritual gifts.

The most serious troubles concerned speaking in tongues. During worship services some members of the Corinthian congregation – and others, as evidenced elsewhere in the Epistles – would enter into a state of ecstasy and begin speaking in strange ways. At times there would be one or more others in the congregation who understood them and could explain what they were saying. These were said to have the gift of interpretation. At other times, no one understood what was being spoken.

In the Corinthian congregation this practice was getting out of hand. It was disrupting worship services, causing arguments about its authenticity, and dividing the congregation.

Speaking in tongues is one of several religious experiences described as ecstatic. In their extreme people become frenzied, and whirl and sway and sometimes faint. These phenomena are by no means unique to Christianity. There is evidence of them in the Hebrew Testament where Moses and Aaron “prophesy”, where David dances wildly in front of the Ark of the Covenant as it is brought into Jerusalem, and where the prophets of Baal – as we heard a couple of weeks ago – limp, and cut themselves, and dance around their altar in response to the challenge by Elijah.

In ancient Greece there was the famed Oracle of Delphi, a priestess who would go into a trance and make arcane utterances, which a priest would then interpret as prophecies of good fortune or of disaster.

Around the world there were and are still cultures whose modes of worship whip their people into a wild frenzy, with all of the same ecstatic manifestations that Paul is addressing.

I have spent more time on this than I probably should have, but I have done so for the same reason Paul did. Ecstatic manifestations are very impressive. Their danger is precisely as Paul described it. Both the practitioners and the witnesses of these mysterious occurrences can get the idea that those with this class of gifts have a special anointing that sets them apart from the rest of the congregation and gives them a higher spiritual status. That was the situation in Paul's time, and it can still be a problem today. Many churches in our own time have split apart because one faction thought they had a truer manifestation of the Spirit than the other.

To these ecstatic practices Paul brings a sober response. In the list of spiritual gifts Paul places tongues and their interpretation dead last. And he exhorts us to "earnestly desire the higher gifts," such as wisdom and knowledge.

He does not denigrate or forbid the practice of speaking in tongues. He does, however, strongly caution Christians about it. He writes in more detail in chapter 14, and his final word on tongues and all of the more dramatic manifestations is quite familiar to all of us Presbyterians: "All things must be done decently and in order."

To be sure, Paul is not counseling against passion. There is a difference between frenzy and passion. Nor is he warning against ardor. There is a difference between frenzy and ardor.

No spiritual gift is given for the glorification of itself or of any individual. Every spiritual gift is given for one purpose and one purpose alone: service. Not glorification. Service.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit" – that is, to every single member of this church – "is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*" Every one of us is uniquely equipped by God's Holy Spirit for the common good of *servicing*: within our church, within our community, and within this world.

There are a variety of gifts because there are a variety of ways Christ needs us to serve in the world. To illustrate this Paul employs, with a gracious humor, his wonderful metaphor of the human body as the body of Christ. If every member of the body claimed to be an eye, how could it hear? And if everyone wanted to be the ear, how could the body smell, or walk, or speak, or reach out a helping hand? Each of us is differently gifted.

In that variety there must be unity, because each of us depends upon everyone else. And for unity to be possible, everyone must own their uniqueness with humility.

Our model for humility and for unity in service is the one who said of himself, I “came not to *be* served, but *to serve*,” namely, Jesus Christ (Mk 10:45). We are not to be distracted by whatever differentiations there may be among gifts of the Spirit. We are to follow the path of Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited [to cling to],
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

Christ emptied himself, humbled himself, and came here to serve a very needy world.

In that spirit (!), then, let us all acknowledge that we – every one of us – have been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, we have been called by God into service with Christ, and we have been empowered for this ministry in specific ways by God’s Holy Spirit.

The question most of us have here, is What ways? In what specific ways have I been empowered for ministry?

The first thing one might want to do is find out what the Bible has to say about spiritual gifts. In the Epistles there are three lists, and depending on who is counting, the gifts number anywhere from 17 to 20. These lists are found in 1st Corinthians (in the chapter we are considering today) and in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. They include prophecy, teaching, giving, leadership, faith, healing, miracles, helping, and so on. I encourage you to study those passages, ponder them, and, most of all, talk among yourselves about them. There is something there for each of us.

Many of us have participated in a spiritual gifts seminar and completed a questionnaire that helped identify our spiritual gifts. Others have not. I understand that we have several identified healers in the congregation, some teachers, and some with gifts of faith, discernment, compassion, and more. I understand, also, that this questionnaire seemed to indicate that there are no “leaders” here.

I beg to differ. There are many wonderful, hard-working leaders in this congregation. Perhaps none of you wants to claim that title. Perhaps you see yourselves as, say, worker bees, helping out as best you can. Well, you serve or have served on Session. You are a leader. You have chaired committees or headed up a project or two, or organized a dinner or special event. You are a leader.

Maybe your modesty prevents you from claiming the title of leader. That humility is perhaps *the* best qualification for the leaders needed by the Church of Jesus Christ. There *are* leaders here.

And there are other gifts among you as well, some of which are still undiscovered.

Whether or not all of us have been through one process or another to try to identify specific gifts for ministry, all of us are called to keep our eyes and our ears and our hearts open. The Church of the New Covenant is not here just to take up space on this hill. We are here to serve in the name of Jesus Christ, to make his love known in and for this community.

To a great degree you know that, for you have a history of loving service. But there is still more to come. We are being called into new dimensions of Christian service. I do not know precisely what they are. Perhaps you don't either, (If you do – please tell us right away!) But the first bright rays of a new dawn are beginning to appear over the horizon. The time is coming for us to strrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrretch spiritually and start learning more about how the Spirit empowers us.

Next week we have a unique opportunity. Our Spiritual Growth Team – some of the, um, *leaders* in this congregation – invites all of us to a special intergenerational Sunday School hour to investigate this question of what our spiritual gifts are. It is going to be fun, it is going to be stimulating, *and* it going to involve all of us in the vitally important task of engaging with the Holy Spirit as God leads us into our future in ministry together.

You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine that all people may see the good that you do, and thereby give glory to God.