

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The New Testament has several different images for the Church: A body, a temple, a building, a field, and others. Each one emphasizes different aspects of what it means to be the Church. In this case, the body emphasizes the unity of the Church in the midst of the diversity of its members.

Our unity is in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Paul says in verses 4-7 that “It is the same Spirit who gives all the different gifts of the Church. While there are different kinds of service, it is the same Christ we are serving. And it is the same God who works through each of us.”

So the unity of the body is found in Christ. First century people said that the soul or the mind gives unity to the body. In this case, it is Christ who is the soul of the Church. He is the “head” of the body, the mind, the direction, of it.

And just like the human body, the Church body is made of many parts. There is diversity in the Church. First of all, there is a diversity of people in the Church. There is the diversity of male and female. There is class or economic diversity: slave and free, rich and poor. And there is ethnic diversity in the Church: Jew and Gentile. Though we are different as people, we still have unity through Jesus Christ. Christ surpasses all these external characteristics.

And there are a diversity of gifts in the Church. Each member of the Church has gifts from the Holy Spirit for the benefit of the whole body. Paul makes that clear in verse 7: “A gift of the Spirit, or spiritual gift, is given to each of us as a way of helping the entire church.”

There are two dangers when it comes to Spirit gifts.

One danger is the feeling of insignificance. “Because I don’t have the gift of doing _____, then I am insignificant. I don’t matter. I am not important.” So the foot says, “Because I’m not a hand, I’m not really part of the body,” and the ear says, “I’m not an eye, so I don’t count.”

But the body of Christ needs diversity. If it was all one part, it could not function. No part of the body functions in isolation. “What would happen if the whole body were an eye?” Eww. Seriously, Paul? That’s gross.

The second danger is pride. “The eye says to the hand, I don’t need you.” It’s not true. Our bodies function because there are many parts working together in harmony. We can get along without some parts but there is a loss of function when that happens.

God's design for the church is that there be equality, harmony, and honor among the members of it. No part should be elevated above others, as if it were of greater worth. The parts should work together. And each member should be honored.

And there should be empathy in the Body of Christ. We should weep together and rejoice together. We should "feel with" each other. And I think it's often hard for us to rejoice with others because we feel envious when others are honored or blessed. But we mirror what happens in the human body when we practice empathy. If your head hurts or your knee hurts or your back hurts, the rest of your body doesn't go merrily on its way. We experience pain on a holistic level. We are in pain when one part of our body is in pain. And it should be that way with the Church. When one part suffers, we suffer together.

The unity of the Body of Christ does not mean uniformity. We are not all one part. We are not all the same. Our unity is not that we all look like each other or act like each other. Our unity is found in Christ. We may look different and do different works, but we are all joined together in and by Christ.

"Here are some of the parts," and Paul goes on to give a list of some of the gifts of the Church. There are several lists like this found in the New Testament. The question is, should we view these lists as exhaustive, meaning there are no gifts not listed here, or as illustrative, just examples of the kinds of gifts the Spirit gives?

If the lists were exhaustive, then we would expect them all to be the same. Otherwise, the Corinthian church would have a different understanding of the gifts of the Spirit than the Roman church, and they would have a different understanding than the Ephesian church, because each of those churches has a somewhat different list. So I think it's best to understand them as illustrative lists. We shouldn't be putting limitations on the ways in which God's Spirit can work through the Church.

But there's a question here. There seems to be a ranking system: "First apostles, second prophets, third teachers." Are these gifts more valuable than the rest? Are those who have these "better than" the rest of the Church? It's debatable how Paul means that. Some have argued, and I think correctly, that the order is more chronological than in terms of importance.

Apostles are "commissioned messengers." According to Acts 1:22, apostles in the early Church were understood to be people who had a personal relationship with Jesus during his earthly life and who were eyewitnesses of the resurrection. Their authority in the early Church came from that personal relationship. Well, we no longer live in a world where there are eyewitnesses. So some have suggested we should understand

apostles more as “church planters.” People who begin a new church. It’s hard to have a church without someone to start it. So perhaps we should understand “first” that way.

Second, prophets. Prophets are preachers. We often think of prophecy in terms of foretelling the future, but that was really a small part of what prophets did. A prophet is someone who knows the heart of God and who makes God known to others through proclamation.

And third, teachers. Teachers are in the business of faith formation, helping people grow to become like Jesus. Remember, this was a time when there was no written New Testament. There were no Gospels written yet, or if there were, they were not yet widely available. 1 Corinthians was one of the earliest letters of the New Testament, so it’s not like they could read other letters, either. You got to know Jesus through people who already knew him, not through writings. So teachers were necessary. And so these three gifts were necessary for the start of a new church.

The rest of the gifts have no such rankings or order. Miracles and healing were signs of confirmation. They often accompanied the preaching of the gospel in new places. “Helpers” were those who ministered to widows, orphans, and the poor. They may have been the “deacons” described in Acts 6. Administrators are those with gifts for organizing the Church to accomplish its mission. The same word is used to describe the captain of a ship. These folks “keep the ship on course,” and the church needs those folks, too.

Paul puts the gift of tongues last. And I think he does so because some people in Corinth were over-emphasizing it. They were attaching pride to that gift. Those lacking it were seen to be spiritually deficient. It’s not that it is “less than” the other gifts. But some viewed it as “more than,” so Paul puts it last.

I would point out, by the way, that the modern Pentecostal movement seems to have made the same exact mistake the Corinthian church did with their over-emphasis on the gift of tongues.

Instead, Paul encourages the Corinthians, and us, to seek the gifts that are the most helpful for moving the entire Church toward maturity. If we’re going to seek a gift, it should be the one that the Church needs. Look around your church and local community. What is needed? What is lacking from the cause of Christ? What part of the Body is suffering? Pray for God to enable you to work toward that need. That should be our approach toward Spirit gifts! Not, “What do I have?” but “What does the work of God need right now?” And then we seek that gift.