

Embodying Grace & Peace | How to Be the Church

“Spiritual Gifts (Especially the “Special” Ones)

Romans 12.6-8; 1st Corinthians 12.27-13.13

6.19.22

(Rom 12.6-8) Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; ⁷ if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

(1st Cor 12.27-13.13) Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? ³⁰ All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? ³¹ But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way. ^{13.1} If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³ But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

We've been looking at being the Church AND doing what the Church is called to do (as Phil put it last week). In Romans CH 8 we found the mercy/motivation for being the Church. We saw the power of God's Spirit who LIVES in the Body of Christ, the Church. He makes the Church a living organism... God's Temple made of living stones!

Here, in Romans CH 12, we find all the imperatives – all the command-words defining her mission in the world. The Church is presented as a single Body with many organs and limbs, all with vital functions to play in ONE Body yet with wildly diverse parts like bones, eyes, toes and livers. The organs/members are

very different, but all share the same DNA and all are necessary to the life and health and mission of the one Body.

AND all have spiritual gifts from God to be employed as the Church carries out her purpose in the world. Today, I want to focus on a few of the gifts that are more ... supernatural and therefore more... intriguing or at least more interesting to us. I'm thinking especially of the gifts of prophecy/tongues. One might read the New Testament and come away wondering, "Why doesn't God speak to US the way He spoke to the earliest Christians? Why don't WE get direct revelation from God like THEY did?"

This might also be a kind of embarrassment to the Church because IF hearing from God through special messengers is a normative part of basic Christianity AND if it's NOT happening in our worship services and church-life, THEN maybe we've missed the boat...not spiritual enough... maybe we're NOT authentically Christian? "Maybe I should unite with a group that has these special gifts."

ARE these gifts or manifestations of the Spirit something we should seek today and IF SO, what would their practice look like in a modern church? What if it's NOT happening and what to DO about it?

Let's look at: 1) The End of the Gifts 2) The Means to the End and 3) The More Excellent Way

When I say "the END of the gifts" I mean FIRST, the goal or purpose of the gifts – what is their purpose in the Church?

Here, I direct you to our good friend O. Palmer Robertson whom I quote in the bulletin and who has spoken in our church. In his excellent book, *The Final Word*, Robertson puts it very crisply: objectively, the revelatory gifts are to point to Jesus Christ – HE is the end, the goal, the aim and destination of God's revelation. Everything points to Him. He is the End – the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

All the symbols, all the types and shadows of the ceremonial Law – all the commands, all the promises ALL point to the Apple of the Father's eye – Jesus Christ!

And subjectively – i.e. in each person who believes, God's gifts of revelation lead to us to Jesus Christ, so that as we believe in Him – we receive IN HIM, grace and new life cultivating LOVE. This is why this famous passage – 1st Cor 13 emerges like a snow covered peak above the clouds. It's St Paul saying, "You DO realize that love is the goal of our instruction...right?" (1Tim 1.5) God giving gifts and revealing His secrets to us is NOT simply to satisfy our curiosity or give us a spiritual rush – HE reveals that WE might LOVE!

So, let's review: what's the aim of prophecy or revelation? It's to point us to Jesus Christ... and what end or goal is that supposed to produce in us? It's faith expressing itself by LOVE! (Gal 5.6) If the gifts and if supernatural revelation doesn't lead to love it's just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

BUT... when I say "the END of the gifts" I also mean that the gifts DO have a shelf life – all Christians believe the gifts of prophecy and tongues are for a limited time – some say their end will be in heaven and some

say they will end after a foundation has been laid for the Christian Church on earth (whenever that foundation is laid that prophecy will end). And I'm in the latter camp.

When the NT speaks of the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, I believe it's speaking about that period of time when the twelve apostles walked the earth and used the Keys of the Kingdom entrusted to them by Jesus Christ in order to write the Scriptures.

Before the Scriptures were finished, the Church had to rely on prophecy but each time a "prophet" spoke, whatever he or she said had to be tested (1 Cor 14.29). In other words, it wasn't that great to live in the house while the foundation was under construction BECAUSE someone might think he had a word from God but when the elders conferred, they sadly agreed, "Nope! What this person said was NOT in keeping with what we learned from the apostles, so the word has to be rejected.

It was NOT a great situation and NOT superior to what we have now in the Canon of the New Testament.

Now before I go on to the means to the end – let me unpack what happens if we get this wrong. What happens if the revelation gifts are expired but are used anyway? In other words: what happens if God no longer uses prophecy, but people are still prophesying.

First, let's acknowledge that in many places in the world Christianity is experiencing explosive growth... and much of this growth is among our Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. In my early years after I became a believer in Jesus Christ, I was a member of one of these churches.

I've known many people who believe that prophecy will only cease in heaven... and that God is still today revealing Himself in propositional statements (e.g., "thus saith the Lord"). And from my own Reformed/Presbyterian tradition, I've read unfair criticisms, unloving, arrogant and sometimes plain ignorant critiques of the movement.

As was mentioned last week, not only are persons to be considered as member/organs in the Body but also churches and denominations and traditions. And I think we should bend over backward to preserve the unity of the Body and LOVE – love is the goal of our instruction! (1Tim 1.5)

Let's remember the prayer of Jesus: "that they may all be ONE!" (John 17.11, 21, 22) We should love, cooperate with, learn from and help other Christians as much as we possibly can (even if we differ!). At the center of this spiritual gifts teaching is the famous "LOVE Chapter"!

But my concern, today, is what we might call the "democratization of revelation" i.e., that everyone hears from God and God speaks to anyone who listens to that "still small voice". I've heard this from inside and outside the Church: "God told me..."

We recently watched the series starring Andrew Garfield based on the Jon Krakauer nonfiction book, *Under the Banner of Heaven*. It's a mash-up of two true stories of Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints

(Mormons) who all simply believed that God speaks to everyone. And what happens is murder... (subtitle: A Story of Violent Faith). They're all running around saying, "God told me this and God told me that" and it's complete disorder and the death of love and relationship because as the writer so aptly puts it, "Common sense is no match for the voice of God." And what Jon Krakauer means is that if God speaks there's no debate, no discussion, no dialogue, no conversation, no relationship... no humility...no learning and no love.

Even when the early church faced a kind of make it or break it decision – whether or not to circumcise Gentile believers in Jesus Christ (had it gone the wrong way the Christian Church would be another sect of Judaism – they NEEDED a word!) – BUT, OUR GOOD AND GRACIOUS FATHER did not send a propositional statement but instead, weaning them OFF this mode of revelation, God let them talk and debate study and discuss and pray and at the end of the meeting it's recorded in Acts CH 15, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us NOT to lay another burden on these new believers..." (28)

See, God is weaning the Church off of direct revelation and ON to Christ the Final Word and LOVE – doing theology in community with LOVE being the goal of our instruction.

LOVE.

Love is the bottom line. It's a love that only the Holy Spirit can generate. It's a behavior that's often mimicked and it's even possible to THINK you're loving BUT to be moved by another motive. It's possible that "I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and to surrender my body to be burned, but not to have love..." Why would anyone give away all his possessions and face martyrdom if not from the motive of love? What other motive could their possible be?

That's the thing... people behave from all kinds of subliminal, mysterious motives: to look virtuous to others ... to convince MYSELF that I'm spiritual... to earn my way to heaven...to force God to bless me... People (WE) can do all these sacrificial things from motives other than LOVE – we can "love" people in order to control them, obligate them.

Well... if we can't love... because we always do even the most committed, sacrificial things in order to benefit ourselves – and IF that's true, then what is this chapter? It's a loud warning and an invitation to DEPEND on Jesus Christ, the embodiment of LOVE. Only Love-received can engender love in us. You have to BE loved by God if you will ever be able to love others. These young Christians in Corinth were forgetting that they'd been powerfully loved by God through the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

They'd forgotten that they were NOT virtuous, good, super-spiritual, wise, mighty and noble (1.26) people – they were foolish and weak. They were received by Love, by the ultimate demonstration of GOD'S Love when Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, took upon Himself the obligation to do God's will FOR THEM. He loved God and loved people PERFECTLY on behalf of everyone who trusts in Him. He took my guilt and suffered the penalty that I deserved. He was forsaken by the Father and endured the pains of justice and hell to take what I deserved – that's LOVE!

And when Jesus was placed in the tomb, stone cold dead, DEATH COULD NOT HOLD HIM. He rose for all His people.

And because that reality was NOT the focus of the believers at Corinth – because they were unbelieving believers NOT fixated on God’s love for THEM in Christ, they were now trying to be super-spiritual and gain the recognition of their fellow church-members INSTEAD OF resting in the love of God they were striving, using tongues and prophecy to impress one another.

But if we will face our own unworthiness – if we will receive God’s Final Word in Christ by hearing with faith (Gal 3.1-5) then we’ll be free to Love (Gal 5.22ff) and LOVE is the more excellent way. Tongues and Prophecy isn’t for advanced, grown-up Christians – it’s for spiritual children: “When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”

Now, a few helps in living in this “more excellent way”:

First, be fixated on Jesus Christ as God’s Final Word to us and WHAT A WORD HE IS! He is not only beautiful – HE is beauty Himself. Gaze on Him. Learn of Him. “He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

Learn to see all things through the lens of the Gospel – that’s how we make decisions and see the world as believers in Jesus Christ – what does the Gospel mean for race-relations (Gal 2.14) for money/saving/spending and giving? Apply it to everything – it’s the decoder ring!

Second, don’t say, “God told me” – unless you want my eyes to glaze over. I’m ok with “I feel like God is leading me” or I have a sense that God wants me to _____” or “I THINK the Spirit was impressing on me...”

The difference is real. The first, “God told me” kills all possibility of relationship... because if God actually TOLD you then my opinion means for nothing. So, open the door for other believers to speak love and truth into your life and discern the will of God in the environment of LOVE in the community of believers.

Third, get to know the Bible. I mean really know it and get saturated in it. Attend classes (and conferences!). Memorize it and learn to see your Savior’s Face on every page. Get a routine for reading it daily.

And remember that the Living Word, Jesus Christ is the Way to the Bible. If you don’t feel like reading it or your reading is cold and merely academic then call on Him, the Personification of Love and Truth, Jesus Christ – repent to Him. Say, “Lord, my heart is cold and reading is only mechanical at best... please, send the Spirit to wake me.”

He will honor that prayer.

Last, at the risk of undoing everything I've taught, as Hamlet said, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Having attended HUNDREDS of Charismatic/Pentecostal services, I've seen a lot of HOOEY!... And I've also learned a lot and met some sincere, wonderful brothers/sisters.

I once dated a girl who was not a Christian and I was... We eventually broke up and she moved almost 3000 miles away. I knew I'd never see her again. My Charismatic mom told me she had a "word from God" that this young woman was going to become a Christian but I knew that would never happen... But it did.

God brought her to Himself and we've been married for 36 years. I'm not sure but it seems to be working out.

Was it a "word from the Lord"? Well, I see it as an exercise in Christian discernment and the keen observations of a believing and praying Christian mother...

But let's not hold our position which such black and white certainty that we become Western materialists – God IS on the move and NONE OF US have Him figured out... after all: He's not a tame Lion!