

THE TOOLS FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY: GIFTS 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11; 27-31A

For those of you who don't know, we are in the sixth week of our series on Community. We've seen that God created community as a reflection of his image, but that through sin community was broken and only in and through Jesus death and resurrection is community restored between God and man and man and fellow man.

At the cross, in Christ, God created a new community for himself called the Church. And we saw last week how this community is both united and yet diverse. Through the cross we are united together in Jesus, and through Jesus' resurrection he gives to the church, to his body, this New Covenant community, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. And those who believe and trust in Jesus, are filled with the very presence of God. And the presence of the HS actually becomes the mark of those who are truly in Christ, those who are in Christ are also in One Spirit. The Bible tells us this gift of the HS is a downpayment for our coming inheritance, and that in this church age the HS empowers God's people to live faithfully and to witness to Jesus in this world. The HS keeps God's people on God's task, on God's mission.

You see, the church is not a cult that hides out in an underground bunker until the world ends. We are to be active in this world, testifying to the risen Christ. And the Spirit empowers God's people through gifts he gives to them to equip them for the tasks God has for them.

Most of you know that Eli and I returned from China last summer where we were for the last 8 years. During those 8 years we lived in three different apartments. Now China isn't Kenya, so don't be thinking mud hut; we lived in pretty nice places, but over the course of those eight years my tolerance standard for the amount of stuff in the house that wasn't working properly slowly went downhill. It wasn't that the quality of construction was so bad that I got sick of fixing everything, although that was partially true. The real issue was how difficult it was to really procure what I needed to do the tasks on my honey-do list.

Now, Chengdu doesn't have Home Depot, or Lowe's, instead it has what I would call the Junk Pile. The Junk Pile was a store down the street one block from our apartment and sold everything you could possibly need for home repair in a space of 5x20x20' high. There may have been some system of organization in that store, but I was clueless to it. And so often, when something broke around the house, I would head down to the junk pile to try and scrounge up what I needed to fix it. Now on top of dealing with the complete lack of organization at the Junk Pile, is the challenge of my limited language ability. Now I can get around everyday in Chinese, talk about the weather, our families, what I'm going to be doing, without a problem. Words like hammer and nail I know, but vocabulary like 4mm Allen Wrench, or Expandable foam,

calking gun, or metal drain ring are just not words I've learned. So often I'd walk into the store and the conversation would go something like this:

"What can I help you with?"

"Um, I'm looking for this thing, it's a little like a screwdriver, you use it to turn things into stuff, it's shaped like an L, it's small." Blank look.

One time I was looking for expandable foam to fill this hole we thought rats might have gotten into our apt. through. "I'm looking for this stuff. It comes in a can. You press the button on the can and it goes pffff (I didn't know the word for spray) and it goes in a hole and grows and there is no hole anymore?"

So instead of fighting every time to get this figured out and just poking through the junk pile, I gave up on fixing a lot of things.

I believe that in the church our approach to spiritual gifts can be similar. We know that there are these things that we need to really keep our community in good repair, but we don't know how to talk about them or frankly really what they are, and so instead we give up and allow some things around our "house" to remain broken.

Well - the topic of spiritual gifts is far too large for me to cover in its entirety today. Don't be too disappointed, but we're not going to get into the inner workings of how prophecy and tongues and words of wisdom and knowledge ought to operate within the church. We probably will do some teaching on this at some point in the near future, but today is not the day. If you are left with more questions than answers come talk to me, I can recommend some great books to read etc.

Well - let's turn to the passage at hand. We talked about this last week, but in Corinth there was a group within the church that saw certain spiritual gifts as the essential evidence of having the Holy Spirit, or being spiritually mature. Because of this the church was fragmented along the lines of the haves and have nots. The haves felt that because of their gifting they had a special level of spirituality while those who were not gifted in those ways were less spiritual and less vital to the body. The have nots questioned whether certain gifts really were essential marks of spiritual maturity and felt left out of the life of the body because of their apparent lack of gifting.

The whole reason that Paul brings up the topic of spiritual gifts is to respond to this issue within the Corinthian church. The first three verses of Ch. 12 really highlight this background:

"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit."

Paul is basically saying: *“I don’t want you to be ignorant on this subject, I want you to understand about spiritual gifts, what they are and how they operate. I know that before, when you were pagans, you were clueless about these things. I want you to understand that true spirituality, the true test of those who have the Holy Spirit, isn’t any one spiritual gift, but the confession that Jesus is Lord.”* Now Paul doesn’t mean this in purely mechanical terms, as if anyone who says the three words, “Jesus is Lord”, must be saved and have the Holy Spirit.

He’s saying that anyone who has the Holy Spirit is not going to live like they formerly did as pagans that would speak of Jesus being accursed, but that those who have the Holy Spirit are going to live lives in line with a confession of the Lordship of Jesus, lives that display Jesus as the supreme and the ultimate authority over you and how you live, and that it is this, rather than any one spiritual gift, that is the true evidence of having the Holy Spirit.

But Paul isn’t going to stop here, he’s going to go on and tell them what spiritual gifts are really about. And here’s a summary of what Paul says in the next several verses. And we’re going to break this down point by point today:

“God gives a diversity of gifts to His church, through the work of the Holy Spirit in every believer, for the work of building up the body. These gifts can appear to us both ordinary and extraordinary, and are distributed as God sovereignly wills.”

1. God gives a diversity of gifts to His church.

2.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”

Do you notice how this is the same language that we see later in Ch. 12 that we looked at last week? Now Paul is using an interesting grammatical tool here to show us the incredible breadth and variety of spiritual gifts. Do you notice how Paul pairs these two terms together in each phrase: *gifts - Spirit; service - Lord; activities - God*. Paul here is pointing us toward the source of these gifts - the Triune God. Just as the Triune God is the supreme example of diversity and unity together, so spiritual gifts within the church are diverse but all from a unified source.

Paul’s point of diversity is taken even further when we understand the breadth of meaning in the words Paul chooses to use here. This word in our translations rendered “service” was used in secular Greek for all kinds of work - waiting on tables or civil service; Paul even uses this expression in 2 Cor. when he speaks of taking up a collection for the poor. The idea of “working” too, is pointedly general. The word in Greek is *energema*, and simply hints at the power that energizes activity. One

commentator broadly defined this word as, “ways in which the divine power is applied.”

We also see this breadth of examples in the lists of spiritual gifts that we find here in 1 Cor. and elsewhere in the NT. They do anything but give us a clear number of gifts that we could list as being spiritual gifts.

Here in 1 Cor. we have such gifts as: *words of wisdom and knowledge, faith, gifts of healings, working of miracles, prophecy, distinguishing of spirits, kinds of tongues and interpretation of tongues*; but at the end of Ch. 12 Paul lists gifts such as helping and administrating along with tongues and healing. Romans 12 also gives us a list of seven gifts including service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership and showing mercy.

The whole point in all this is that Paul is doing everything he can to broaden the Corinthians perspective on what spiritual gifts are. There is no need to define too narrowly what a spiritual gift is. An incredibly diverse variety of spiritual gifts are given to the body.

We probably shouldn't be surprised by this since God loves diversity. We just need to look out at creation to see how God delights in variety.

It's interesting as you look throughout the course of history, but particularly in the last century, political dictators on both sides of the political spectrum have thought that harmony could come by uniformity. And so we all have the images in our minds of the Nazis or Japanese during World War II or the Red Army under Mao and it's this image of robots, automatons moving in perfect sync. But God isn't that type of leader, and the church isn't that type of people. God sees diversity, not uniformity, as the key to unity, because that's what he is like himself!

2. *God gives a diversity of gifts to his church through the work of the Holy Spirit in every believer.*

While Eli and I were in China we were working with Tibetan people. In Tibetan Buddhism the road toward enlightenment is filled with secret knowledge and practices that are often reserved only for the highest up monks. And so you have these what are called lamas that because of their education and level of access to certain sacred writings, hold the keys to these esoteric practices that lead toward the state of nirvana.

The gifts of the Spirit are not like that. Look @ what Paul says in v. 7: “*to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit.*” To each is given. Spiritual gifts are not given as a reward for good behavior. God is not like Santa Claus keeping an eye on who has been naughty or nice for what he'll put in their stocking.

Paul makes all of this very clear, even in the word that he chooses to use for spiritual gifts. The greek word is *charisma*, of course related closely to the word *charis* or grace. It means something that grace has bestowed, a grace-gift. A gift not based on any merit in the recipient but completely on the favor and goodness of the giver.

And because these gifts are all of grace, God doesn't give them to some of his kids and withhold them from others. He graciously distributes his gifts to all of us. There are none of us here that can claim that God hasn't given us a gift, or we only got a lump of coal in our stocking. To each of us has been given a manifestation of the Spirit.

3. For the work of building up the body.

I don't know about any of your kids at Christmas time, but for my kids that is by far the most selfish day of the year. My kids are consumed with what gifts have their names on them. In fact, they've been surveying the landscape under the tree for weeks. And once they open them they run into their room on their bunk beds and get everything that's theirs as close as they can so nobody else can use it. You don't have to teach kids to be selfish regarding their gifts, but you do have to teach them to share their gifts. It's the same with us. We need to remind ourselves over and over that God gives us gifts, not for ourselves, but for others.

Maybe you've heard of these pew surveys that are done once in a while to get a read on what people in the church want. In these surveys people think, let's find out what people want and then give it to them and then the church will succeed and grow. Well one survey they did asked people this exact question - what do you want from a church? And they got several different answers, but do you know what the number one answer was? I want a church that never asks me to **do** anything. That makes no demands, where there is no accountability, where I don't have to serve.

But God has designed gifts for the common good, to be used to serve and meet the needs of others. The message from the world around us is that the path to personal fulfillment and satisfaction is through seeking to meet your own needs. But in God's kingdom it's actually in serving myself that I'm left empty. God's kingdom is completely inside out and upside down to the world around us. In the Kingdom, the path to personal fulfillment and satisfaction is through seeking to meet the needs of others.

God has gifted all of us in different and varying ways for the common good, to use these gifts for the tasks God has for us. Romans 12:6 says, "*Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.*" Eph. 2:10 tells us that "*we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*" God has designed and equipped us to magnify his grace and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, and he's created each one of us specifically with good works prepared for us to do. God has works that are specifically designed for the way that he has gifted you that no one else can do.

This is an amazing thing to think about. There may be people out there than God has prepared for you to touch in some way that only you because of who God has made

you to be and how he has gifted you can impact. This is why community is so crucial and everyone of us is crucial to community.

4. These gifts can appear to us both ordinary and extraordinary.

Up until now I have been avoiding the clear conclusion as we look at this wide variety of gifts that some of them appear to be things that people may already be talented in naturally while others are giftings that we see as being inherently miraculous - as being things that no one has a natural talent for. For lack of better terminology, some seem "ordinary" while others we might describe as "extraordinary". The interesting thing, is that Paul, in all his writing on spiritual gifts, intentionally flattens the ground between these two different types of giftings and doesn't make any distinction like this. To Paul, ALL gifts are supernatural as they are empowered and given by the Holy Spirit and used for the good of the body.

But what about this list of obviously more supernatural gifts that we have in front of us in 1 Cor. 12? Well, we don't have time today to go into detail regarding each one of these gifts. We really need a whole series to go through in detail what these gifts are and how we employ them biblically for the benefit of the body. But I do want to just give us a brief overview of different perspectives on these extraordinary gifts and where we stand as a church. Basically there are three main positions when it comes to spiritual gifts.

The first is the cessationist position. No, not secession (which I think Texas is always threatening), but cessation - which refers to the belief that spiritual gifts, and in particular what we would see as the more "supernatural" gifts like tongues, prophecy, and healing, were only a part of the early church and ceased once we had the Bible. The belief, which I am sympathetic to, is that gifts like tongues and prophecy could be in competition with the authority of the Bible which we need to maintain. We as a church do not hold the cessationist position, but we love and are close with those who do. These are often our Presbyterian and Reformed brothers and sisters as well as many Baptists, and we love them because they love the Bible.

Next is the charismatic position. The charismatic position would say that there is no reason biblically to deny the continuation of even the more extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. This is the position we hold as a church. We value the Bible as much as the cessationist position does, but we believe that the Bible teaches that all the gifts of the Spirit, as they are exercised under the authority of Scripture and authority of God's appointed leaders, are important for the building up of the body. So there is no reason to believe that God will not grant to our church gifts of tongues, prophecy, healing, words of knowledge, that are to be used in the way the Bible teaches us to use them.

The third position, the Pentecostal position, believes all the the charismatic position holds, with the addition that when you become a Christian you don't receive

all of the Holy Spirit, but rather Christians should experience a second baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is testified to by the gift of tongues. So Christians that have the gift of tongues are Spirit-filled Christians, and Christians that don't speak in tongues are not as Spirit-filled as they could and should be. Now we love our Pentecostal brothers and sisters, but we just don't believe that's what the Bible teaches.

So, you may not have known it, but we are charismatics! I'll give you a chance to head out the door now, or whoop for joy at that discovery!

Though we don't have time to get into all the gifts today, I do just want to share one of my favorite stories of the operation of one of these extraordinary gifts. This is from the autobiography of Charles Spurgeon:

"While preaching in the hall, on one occasion, I deliberately pointed to a man in the midst of the crowd, and said, 'There is a man sitting there, who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays, it was open last Sabbath morning, he took ninepence, and there was fourpence profit out of it; his soul is sold to Satan for fourpence!'

A city missionary, when going his rounds, met with this man, and seeing that he was reading one of my sermons, he asked the question, 'Do you know Mr. Spurgeon?' 'Yes,' replied the man, 'I have every reason to know him, I have been to hear him; and, under his preaching, by God's grace I have become a new creature in Christ. Shall I tell you how it happened? I went to the Music Hall, and took my seat in the middle of the place; Mr. Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did, sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said that I took ninepence the Sunday before, and that there was fourpence profit out of it. I did take ninepence that day, and fourpence was just the profit; but how he should know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me; but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me, and saved my soul.'"

Spurgeon then adds this comment:

"I could tell as many as a dozen similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it; and so striking has been my description, that the persons have gone away, and said to their friends, 'Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did; beyond a doubt, he must have been sent of God to my soul, or else he could not have described me so exactly.' And not only so, but I have known many instances in which the thoughts of men have been revealed from the pulpit. I have sometimes seen persons nudge their neighbours with their elbow, because they had got a smart hit, and they have been heard to say, when they were going out, 'The preacher told us just what we said to one another when we went in at the door'"

5. Distributed as God sovereignly wills.

“All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

In all of our discussion of spiritual gifts we need to rest in God as the sovereign giver of the gifts. We cannot demand that God give us certain gifts or complain about the ones that he has given us, since God knows best what is needed within his body and gives his gifts for his glory and our good.

But what do we make of Paul’s charge to us in 12:31 and Ch. 14:1 to “earnestly desire spiritual gifts?” How do we reconcile the command to desire, insinuating that we ask God for them, with God sovereignly apportioning his gifts?

Like so many areas and Scripture we can hold both statements as true. God sovereignly distributes his gifts, but he does so sovereignly through the means of our asking. Just as we believe that our prayers in other areas are the means by which a sovereign God acts in our situations, so we believe that our desiring and asking to receive spiritual gifts is the means by which God apportions them.

Now that doesn’t always mean you’ll get exactly the gift you want.....

Well, we’ve gone through a lot today. Thanks for sticking it out with me! I want to end with this, and tie this back into community for us. How are you going to discover your spiritual gift or gifts? I think the answer isn’t in spiritual gift inventories or personality tests. It’s in community. In community, in particular smaller community where there is close relationship and trust and honor, as we serve and minister with and to one another we begin to see gifts in each other that we can encourage. We see roles that we fit in ourselves and find our place in the body. It is through community, not by ourselves, that we really discover who God has made us.

Our community groups too are the best place to put in to practice these giftings. Sunday morning there is only so many opportunities to be up front or even serve behind the scenes, but in our life together throughout our week in community groups we can walk in the gifts God has given us.

Smaller community groups are a place for us to put to the test some of our gifts and receive feedback from those we trust saying - you know I think that’s not really your gift, or you’re really gifted in that area - keep pursuing that.

My prayer is that we would be full of smaller communities of believers walking confidently in the place God has given them in the body. Discovering what God has created them for and pursuing it. That Jesus would be exalted and that his Kingdom community would grow both inwardly and outwardly.

PRAY