

Prayers

To God

Pray in silence, rejoicing in the space through which the Holy Spirit can minister to your soul. Do not be afraid of quietness or the Holy Spirit

For myself

Eternal God, Author and Creator of all things, give me such trust in Your love and grace that I may be at peace about everything that happens to me this day. May I have such confidence in Your guidance, that no actions taken, no words said, no conversations heard, and no communications received, will make me wander from the pathway You have set before me for this day. AMEN

For others

Pray for the people in Syria who have had their lives destroyed by civil war. Pray for all who have similar experiences throughout the world, and pray of the peace of the nations

Meditation

Be merciful, Lord Jesus, be merciful.

When I come into your glorious presence,
Hear the cries of my broken heart and heal my soul.

When I am at fault, and do not know what to do,
May I fall into your merciful hands, not those of the enemy.

When I stand accused before others, unjustly,
Surround me with Your mercy so that I may be strong.

When I have walked through trouble and strife,
Assure me of Your everlasting mercy, constantly upholding me.

When I rejoice in Your salvation, and give You all the glory,
Place a willing testimony of Your mercy on my lips.

Together with all Your people, the Church, I depend on You;
Show us all Your mercy, according to Your steadfast Love.

Be merciful, Lord Jesus, be merciful.

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and you are its individual parts. ²⁸ On the one hand God has appointed in the church

- first apostles,
- second prophets,

- third teachers;
- then miracles,
- then gifts of healing,
- helpful deeds,
- leadership,
- types of tongues.

²⁹ Yet are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ Now you are earnestly seeking the greater gifts; but instead, I will show you by far the best way ...

Review

This is an extraordinary conclusion to this great chapter of 1 Corinthians. Earlier, Paul identified a dramatic list of spiritual gifts given to people individually by Almighty God to bless His people and enable them to do the works of the Kingdom (12:8-10). The gifts are given personally and individually, and Paul makes the point that they are also given to enable God's people to work together *'for the common good'* (12:7). The individual gifts are given to help people take up their place within the church and fulfil its task (12:11).

Paul then offers us arguably the most powerful explanation of the unity of God's people in the Bible; he describes the church as the *'body of Christ'*, and just like any *'body'*, it has *'many parts'* (12:12-26). So Paul's vision of God's church is one of both unity and diversity. Now in our reading today, Paul offers us another list of gifts, but they are more correctly called *'church appointments'* (12:28) even though many are clearly the same as the spiritual gifts (e.g. *'healing'* and *'tongues'*). How then does this list relate to the earlier one?

Lists of spiritual gifts on the Bible, and what they mean

Too often, we read Scriptural lists of spiritual gifts as if we must simply add them all together to get the *'whole picture'* of God's graciousness towards His baptised people (including Isaiah 11:2, 1 Cor 12:8-10, Romans 12:6-8 and Ephesians 4:11). This entire list is of course fascinating, yet the fact that it contains a fair degree of overlap should tell us that God's purpose here is not to give us one big list in several parts. Each list has a purpose and place within Scripture, and within God's order of things for His people and the church.

For example, Isaiah's list describes the gifts given to those at the forefront of exercising God's work of redemption; Romans 12 lists gifts which bind God's people together in worship and service; Ephesians 4 lists gifts appropriate for leadership and evangelism. Here in 1 Corinthians the earlier list (12:8-10) describes God's gracious gifts to the believer by which each one contributes to the common work and worship of the church (12:7,11). However in the latter verses of the chapter, we now read about gifts not grammatically in the singular, but in the plural; *'prophets'*, *'teachers'* etc. This is because they describe the orderly work of God's church in power and authority.

Why a list of gifts in order, 'first apostles, then teachers ...' etc?

Also, where the earlier list (1 Cor 12:8-10) has no place for hierarchy because each personal gift contributes to the *'common good'* (12:7), this idea is now left behind. Paul is now describing the whole body of Christ, the church of God in its fullness, doing God's work, and requiring the Father's gracious gifts for this. There is a difference between gifts given for individual worship and godly works, and those other gifts that relate to jobs within the church, from teaching to the healing ministry, preaching, prophecy and more.

As we are about to discover in coming chapters (especially chapter 14), Paul is keen to emphasise that God's church needs order and organisation. So it should come as no surprise to us that gifts of church service are listed here in order; *'first apostles, second prophets ...'* etc. (12:28). People are individuals, but when they work together, their gifts must be exercised with order and organisation! Some say there is nothing in the Bible about church order and discipline, but I beg to differ; Paul's comments here speak about this precisely!

The list of church gifts

There are eight gifts listed here (12:28). Some think this list parallels that of the individual gifts (12:8-10), but this only works if you lump together the last two, tongues and interpretation, which reduces the earlier list from nine to eight. Common to both lists are tongues, healing, miracles, and prophecy, but this is simply because they are relevant both to personal faith and the life and work of the church.

Notice how Paul places tongues last of all in this list, even though he values the gift highly (14:5). In chapter 14 he explains that tongues can cause confusion in public worship and must be carefully controlled (14:1f.).

Interestingly, he also places 'leadership' towards the bottom and below 'helpful deeds', perhaps to play down our human tendency to want leaders on whom we can place both our expectations and our disappointments. Jesus is the Lord of His church, as every Christian should remember.

Continuing in the list, it is obvious that miracles and healing are significant. They have played a major role in the life of the church for centuries, and are not only a natural extension of individual gifts, they are a reflection of the ministry of Jesus' own ministry (Matt 8:8,12:15 etc.). Moreover, He commissioned the church to do these things just as He did (see John 14:12).

Higher levels of leadership

The more significant features of this list are to be found at its top, with 'apostle', 'prophet' and 'teacher' as the top 'one, two three' of church leadership gifts. We may not think of leadership like this today, but there may be some value in it. We rarely use the term 'apostle', because we think of the twelve 'apostles' as Jesus' disciples minus Judas, plus Paul. Nevertheless, the word 'apostle' means 'one who is sent', and just as Jesus 'sent' the first disciples He has also sent us to be His agents in the world. Indeed, the term 'apostle' can be mixed up in people's minds with the term 'missionary', but this is because 'apostle' comes from Greek and 'missionary' comes from Latin, and both meaning the same ('one who is sent'). Paul is unequivocal; the one who is sent by God to do His work is first and foremost in the hierarchy of His church, which is very different to our understanding of church structure today!

Next come prophets and teachers, and there can be much confusion about these. The teacher is one who explains the things of God having learned them by study and revelation. The prophet however is much like the person we call the 'preacher', who is responsible for delivering God's Word (as were Old Testament prophets). We use these terms too loosely now and expect the preacher to do both. Nevertheless, Paul says that the one who delivers God's Word is the prophet, who is above the teacher; the two roles are distinct.

'On the one hand but ...'

But if we are to understand this list fully there is yet one thing to struggle with, because Paul is not merely giving us a list of church jobs for the benefit of church management, he has a bigger point to make. He begins our passage today with these words, 'Now you are the body of Christ and you are its individual parts' (12:27), emphasizing both the unity and diversity of God's people, which go hand in hand. But Paul begins verse 28 with a qualification; he says; 'On the one hand God has appointed in the church ...' (12:28); so however impressive the list, we must look beyond it for the point Paul is making.

He goes on to ask the question; 'are all apostles, are all prophets ...' with the expected answer, 'No!' Paul's concern here is that people might eagerly try to improve their lot by climbing the ladder of church leadership. Someone could start with the gift of 'helpful deeds', and then aspire to the gift of 'healing' before going for the role of church 'teacher', perhaps even a 'prophet' or more. People holding high office and exercising such gifts were regarded as about untouchable then as prominent worship leaders and evangelists of today, and if someone could reach such heights the benefits and personal provision would be considerable, together with the respect and status of a leader in the church. However, Paul was wanting to earn against such worldliness.

'By far the best way ...'

The church today and probably from the earliest times, can be subject to those who climb ladder to hold office rather than pursue the route of the exercise of God's gifts. Paul wanted the people at Corinth to know the truth about spiritual 'gifts', and also the truth about leadership in the church. For this reason, he notes that people naturally 'earnestly seek the higher gifts' (12:31), but he is concerned to reveal God's way, which is 'by far the best way ...' (12:31). This, of course is the way of love, as written about so astonishingly in chapter 13.

So when we study this amazing chapter we should not forget that, whilst so obviously applicable to almost every area of human life and activity, Scripture's 'hymn to love' (1 Cor 13) is written with perhaps two purposes. It asks the Corinthians to beg them to use the personal gifts of the Spirit in an attitude of love befitting the heart of God, and it urges God's people to run their churches and organise them by using the God's gifts in a spirit of love, which is more important than even the gifts themselves.

Discipleship

Application

Appointments in the church

The way the churches of God are organised is a matter of contention, for no two churches are similar, and it is hard to list the different ways in which they are structured let alone justify them from Scripture. Many hold fast to the Old Testament principle of leadership by 'priesthood'; others maintain the threefold offices of deacon, elder and Bishop, even though it is almost impossible to tie these down from the various scriptural references to these words. Others take historic Latin or other language equivalents of such words, which end up as 'pastor' or 'minister', and more than this, many church leaders are required to exercise almost all the structural and organisational gifts and skills mentioned in the Bible, from teaching to prophecy to management and hospitality. Where local church people will not accept the challenge of standing tall to the call and mission of Christ, some become '*all things to all people*' for the sake of the Gospel (9:22), and end up being very confused about their own personal 'gifts' and graces.

I am convinced that church leadership works where those employed and those elected for leadership in a church come together and work out their gifts and graces. Then, bearing in mind what is said here about leadership in the church together with Ephesians 4 and Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, God's will is sought concerning due authority and the structure by which it is best presented in the world and for the mission of God's people.

Apostles and prophets

I long to see prophets and apostles at work in the church. By this I mean that I long to see people speak God's word unashamedly as prophets, not because they thereby think they are somehow 'right' or are accorded such grandeur, but because they do what the Bible says and are willing to submit the words they receive to the body of Christ so they may be considered and perhaps accepted. I also long to see apostles appointed by the laying on of hands within worship, so that those who are genuinely called to give up all for Christ may do so and be commissioned and supported for the work of God.

The better way

We are heading towards the 'way of love', and although love is not mentioned in this chapter, it is foreshadowed by this great chapter of 1 Corinthians. When God's people face all their decisions about church leadership and structure in a spirit of true love and compassion reflecting the heart of God, then great things will certainly happen. I fear that in too many places, churches and chapels of various Christian denominations have dwindled to nothing because they have never been led to live and work to the standards of Scripture and the standards of God's love as found here in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. As we are about to find out, without 'love', we are nothing, nothing at all.

Ideas for what to do

- *Look at the way your church is organised. Is there any likeness between this and what you read in this passage of Scripture? Think and pray about what you can do to change things for the better. If this is God's will, He will provide the way forward!*
- *Consider whether the various church leadership gifts are exercised within your church. If you find absences, go and ask you church leaders about this, and what this passage means to them.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach us about the true leadership of the church? Do we have to use the same terms to describe our church offices as those used in the Bible? If so, which ones?*
2. *Consider the list in verse 28, and discuss whether you agree the order.*
3. *What difference does the gift of love make to the exercise of gifts of leadership in the life of the church?*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, come to us with compassion and love, to help us do Your will in the organisation of our churches. Bless us as we seek to do Your will, and help us to overcome the problems that stand in the way of loving attempts to change things for the better. **AMEN**