

Gifts to build up the church

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor

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Ephesians 4.1-16

As a brief introduction to today's thoughts, it is good to remind ourselves of the general purpose of Paul's letter to the Ephesians; both an amazing letter and, at the same time, one that for me is sometimes misused to support certain theological understandings. In very broad terms, Paul spends the first three chapters in laying firm theological foundations and the remaining chapters for the practical outworkings of that faith. Today's lesson begins that teaching. Initially, I wish to spend some time looking more specifically at that reading. And then, hopefully, to broaden it out into the bigger picture for of what I truly believe is God's desire for us individually, for this church and, more generally for the whole of His wide world church. As one writer suggests:

The primary purpose of this section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a call to unity. And, the recipients of the letter . . .

(that's us as well, of course)

should "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3). They are to equip the saints for ministry "until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (4:13).

Thus, if it was and is important to the early church and, I believe, for the church today, it should also have some far-reaching implications more generally to our sad and divided world. After all, are we, as God's people meant to be as salt to the whole world.

Jesus is the reconciler and as we all become reconciled to God, so are we to be reconciled to one another.

One of my greatest griefs regarding the Church these days is the lack of Christian charity that seems all too common between what can only be termed the 'various' factions within the Church. It is bad enough to see the bitter and often appalling way that political parties speak about each other. However, I truly believe that it must 'break the Lord's heart' as it were, when various sections of the church speak about 'the others' in somewhat similar ways. And it happens on both sides of so much of what is so called 'theological debate'. Although, I sometimes struggle to see those debates in terms of 'theological' debate.

So, Paul challenges all of us today to: "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3)

The body metaphor of verses 12-16 is interesting: the church is depicted as growing into its own body. Christ is already "mature" or, as I interestingly read can be translated as "the complete man"). So, it can be argued that the church as it grows and develops is to grow into a corporate sense of 'oneness' to be 'complete' in the Lord—i.e. individually, and corporately.

Now, that inevitably does not mean that we are all to be the same.

Let me explain: I make no excuse for the fact that both Kathryn and I have, over the years, been quite significantly impacted by what has become known as the charismatic movement. But, of course, like all movements—be it church or secular—it has inevitably had its extreme manifestations. However, as sections of the Church have railed against such extremes, it—the church—has, in my mind, failed to listen to the message of that movement. Even to the extent that I have even heard from some sections of the Church publicly proclaim that both the Charismatic

and Catholic branches of the church are (quote); ‘the enemies of the church’, and sadly it has not always been a one-sided debate!

Just to show that I try to be balanced, I actually used to tell my students that worship in Heaven is Anglican Prayer Book in tongues. Ah well, moving right along . . .

One of the catch phrases of the charismatic movement, although not exclusively to that movement, was and is to: ‘find your gift and use it’. Gifts are for the building up of the church into ‘one body’. Thus, the concept is as each person discovers their God-given gift, they can use that as their main contribution to the church’s life. In so doing the church develops into one united team—each person’s gifts complementing the others.

This inevitably has many benefits. It removes any sense of competition between members. As each member feels a greater sense of fulfillment in what they do they can appreciate each one another. And, importantly, encourage and build each other up. The church’s model is one of community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All working in complete unity.

(As a digression, I also believe that that is the true model for Christian marriage; two people with different gifts, abilities etc. working together as one. Not, I believe, as some would have it, that one is the ultimate authority. After all, Scripture does preface the oft quoted ‘submit’ bit with the prior call at the end of the previous chapter to: ‘submit to one another’. But that’s another story) So how can this gift business work in practice? Let alone how to discover and practice those gifts.

Firstly, in relation to the ‘gifts’ of God’s people, a kind of negative thought to preface the more positive and practical suggestions. One writer on the subject stated that the difficulty for some churches that have sought to encourage members to find their gift often produced a series of questions for folk to answer and subsequently, having answered those questionnaires, there would—almost magically—produce something like:

‘According to your answers, your God-given gift is...’.

However, that writer also suggested that the trouble in those days was and is that there were and are vestry cupboards around the country crammed full of those questionnaires with no one seeming to know what to do with them!

Thus, a couple of suggestions:

Ask yourself what you think is the most important task of the church? What do you think would most help to cause the church to grow? This in itself can be a little complicated, because it is so easy for churches and their members to get so overwhelmed by the immediate needs of the church that those needs can so easily overshadow the desire to discover and practice their gifts: think in terms of: more money? more members? more helpers?

And rather than having time to develop the team concept, it is all too easy to be overwhelmed by those apparent immediate needs. And thus, too often leading to what one somewhat cynical clergyperson once spoke of as the ‘PPP’s’: ‘Pathetic Pleas from the Pulpit’.

Now this is not to deny the obvious immediate needs of the church—but is there any time or energy left for “the building up of the body of the church”? Please note, those immediate issues are real and I am not denying the reality of those immediate needs—which, by the way, are actually common to most churches no matter what their size.

So, what to do?

Firstly, where possible, if someone discovers or rediscovers what they feel might be their gift, try and find ways to help them practice their gift by prayerful support and opportunity to practice their gift. Have a system whereby as that member is prayed for and given opportunity to practice their gift, they are also given opportunity to report back. Thus, there is gives opportunity for both accountability and affirmation.

Secondly, sometimes you might feel moved to suggest to another member what you feel might be their gift—rather than simply saying: ‘this is your gift’.

Two other thoughts. (1) This does not suggest that only members so identified can exercise that specific gift. (2) The gifts are given to the whole church, it simply means that as each person discovers their gift, they are most likely to have the most effective ministry within that gift.

I always remember one church member who had an amazing gift of welcoming new folk to the church. Now it is good—even important to have some system to follow up new attendees to the church. However, sometimes new or visiting folk can feel somewhat badgered if that ministry is not exercised well. On the other hand, the lady that I have mentioned had, as far as I can remember, almost a 100 per cent success rate of bringing new members into the church as a result of her ‘following up’ any new attendees.

Now, theologically speaking, some would differentiate between the list of gifts in Ephesians—which we have heard today and are titled by some as: ‘leadership gifts’ and that those in 1 Corinthians 12 are more personal gifts. Even, others would argue that the gifts ended at the end of the Apostolic era. Again, it is not helpful on this occasion to delve into these debates. To be honest I do not think that that is really helpful because, as in so much of Scripture there would seem to be valid arguments supporting and disputing various teachings and understandings.

What is certain is that in the church we need to be aiming for doing more than just the apparent immediate needs which, as I have acknowledged, are none the less necessary and important. But, one must ask: “Is that all that the church exists for?”

What I do believe is that God has given the church different gifts to different people and that not only spreads the load in order for all aspects of ministry to be exercised, but it is also, in my mind, the only way that we can fulfill the words of Jesus when He said: “*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”*

Now, I hope that you do not think that I have tried to do a sneaky kind of charismatic commercial today that might appear to be ignoring the most pressing needs of a church That is truly the furthest of my intentions. However, one of the main purposes of us hearing from Scripture each week is, surely, to lift our eyes to think beyond the immediate humdrum everyday needs of both ourselves and the church.

In the Old Testament reading, the people grumbled against God saying, ‘we had a vision to travel to a new land and we believed that you were leading us . . . so . . . they felt that the whole vision from God had disappeared, and they felt cheated’. BUT God had not deserted them. And the Psalm nostalgically remembered how God had not deserted them after all.

Hebrews 13:5 [NRSVUE]: “*be content with what you have, for he himself has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’”*

This church has had and has now a vision, *and God has not and will not desert you.*

All that we need to do is remember that old favourite:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.*

Amen.