

Concerning Spiritual Gifts

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of June 2004. The preacher is Carol Elfverson.

Her sermon is entitled Concerning Spiritual Gifts and is based on 1 Corinthians 12, verses 1 to 11. Just displaying the outpouring of grief that's been occurring throughout not only America but the world. And in some ways I think I was sort of a little bit surprised at such deep, sincere expressions of the passing of this 93-year-old man.

I hadn't quite realised the extent of his popularity and how much people obviously had appreciated his years as president.

And when I looked at the pomp and ceremony of his funeral, of his coffin being carried by representatives of all the armed forces in America and the streets thronged with mourners, I sort of wondered to myself, what would his mother, if she were alive, think?

[1 : 25] Because he was this man who was born and grew up and started life really as a B-grade movie actor. And here he was.

He got to the top job in the United States of America as the president. And dignitaries from all over the world attended his funeral. That's the type of stories that I think cinema movie writers and magazine journalists just love to tell.

It's sort of the story of somebody who's made it from sort of rags to riches type of fame. And I think it's something we all love to hear too, that sort of it's appealing.

It's offering a sense of hope to many people from the ordinary and everyday slog. Again, Ray Charles' death this week, again, is another example of someone who rose from the slums to international celebrity status and success.

And I think in a way it appeals to our competitive natures too. It makes many think that, well, if somebody else can do it, then I can do it too. The thought of rising to the top being number one, of standing out in a crowd is present and it's what a lot of our advertising material appeals to in us as well.

[2 : 44] And, you know, the funny thing is, it's not just unique to our modern era. It was present back in the first century AD. And in fact, it was present in Corinth, the city in Greece, that this letter that we're going to be looking at today was present there.

At the time, the city was a bustling, growing and highly successful trade and business centre. And it sort of sat at the centre of trade to both the east and the west of civilisation.

And there were many opportunities for migrants and people born lowly to improve their social and economic status. Those who were prepared to work hard would usually prosper.

The city had many success stories to tell. People who'd escaped from their poor and humble backgrounds and had started to ascend the rungs of social success.

And the city had many of those stories to tell and public boasting and self-promotion had become an art form in the city as one person tried to be better than the next person.

[3 : 53] And Paul wrote to the Corinthians in response to a letter that had been written to him. Because in this church in Corinth, there had become many issues.

Many difficulties had arisen. Issues concerning their ethics, marriage and celibacy, meat associated with pagan temple worship, even the dress codes in public worship, divisions at the Lord's Supper, misconceptions about what's spiritual in the terms of gifts, and towards the end, it's misunderstandings and false teachings on life after death, the resurrection.

And the letter answers these questions much because of the behaviour in the church that had caused problems of disunity that was happening amongst the church members. And whilst disunity was the presenting problem, a bit like a dart mole on a skin can be the presenting problem for a

melanoma, the real problem was a lack of a proper biblical understanding about the various issues. They had not had the depth and teaching. And I think that happens even in churches today where there's a lack of acceptance of, perhaps of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, of God's grace, and of mutual respect and love for each other.

And that can often be at the heart, at the discord for churches here in the present world. Well, chapter 12 begins with Paul addressing one of the main issues.

[5 : 27] And if you want to follow along, it's on page 933 of your Bibles in the pew. And Paul says, now concerning spiritual gifts in verse 1.

The word itself can be interpreted as either referring to spiritual people or things of the spirit. It's a bit ambiguous and it can be used for either.

Living in a city where people were continuously striving for increased status, spirituality had become a way that the people in the church could try and exalt themselves one above the other in terms of their giftedness.

They were abusing the gift of tongues in public worship. And this is addressed both here and in the following two chapters. Such was the extent of the problem. It's an indication of their failure to love each other because it was being used, as I said, to try and gain superiority over each other.

And as Paul says later in the letter, he says it's not so much the gift of tongues that's the problem, but it was how it was being used or rather misused. In fact, in chapter 14, Paul goes on to thank God that he speaks in tongues.

[6 : 40] And he said he speaks in tongues more than all of them. But in public church, in public worship, he said, I'd rather speak five words that are intelligible for building up others than for 10,000 words in tongue.

Ironically, Paul says to a people claiming to have great knowledge and spiritual elitism with the use of their gifts is that he doesn't want them to be uninformed or ignorant in verse 1.

He then reminds them of their pagan past in verse 2 where they would worship idols who could not speak. And part of this pagan worship also would probably involve uttering ecstatic utterances or trans-like experiences.

And so I think Paul's also here reminding his readers that it's not so much these inspired utterances that's important, but it's the Christian content and context in which it's happening.

He says that no one who has the gift of the Holy Spirit can curse Jesus. Now whether cursing occurred during these pagan worship times, we're not sure whether during these times these people would curse the name of Jesus or perhaps Paul was also remembering back to when he was a Jew and as a strict Jew he would have remembered in the Torah, the book of the law in Deuteronomy, it said that anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed.

[8 : 13] And of course Jesus was hung on a tree on the cross and so perhaps back before his conversion he would have interpreted Jesus as being cursed himself. Now it's not all that clear but that's some understandings why or why he's saying that.

But what is clear is that Paul is beginning to answer the Corinthians questions about spiritual gifts by speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ so that whoever acknowledges Jesus as Lord has received the gift of the Holy Spirit and therefore whoever acknowledges Jesus as Lord is a spiritual person.

that's the criteria for judging who is spiritual and who isn't not whether a person has a particular gift such as tongues or not.

And in this way Paul shifts the emphasis from those who are receiving the gift to the giver the triune God himself. He's getting the Corinthians to put on what John Calvin refers to as the spectacles of faith.

He's getting them to look at Jesus and in doing this he's getting the people to see God more clearly to have their vision enlarged sharpened and the distortions about spiritual gifts corrected.

[9 : 31] Belief in Jesus as Lord is what unites believers and verses 4 to 6 are written in a parallelism in a parallel style to emphasise the diverse and Trinitarian nature of God himself.

There's now there a variety of gifts but the same spirit and there are varieties of service but the same Lord and there are varieties of activities but it's the same God who activates all of them in every one.

Notice the repetition of the word same in these verses underlining the fact that it's the one spirit who distributes the gift small and large according to God's sovereign purpose.

gifts are not narrowly defined. For example the word services of verse 5 is a word that can be used for all kinds of work waiting on tables the civil service and collection of the poor that same words found to refer to those throughout the New Testament.

Everyday acts of service are evidence of God's power at work in his people. And Paul uses the three terms gifts, services and activities in those three verses to describe what he calls spiritual gifts.

[10:52] And it's important also to see that he doesn't distinguish between the more charismatic more spectacular supernatural gifts than say the more non-charismatic gifts because all gifts services and activities he says in verse 7 are an expression of the gifts of the spirit's manifestation in a person.

And he says each believer is given this manifestation for the common good. While many people may have talents and abilities they only become gifts when they're being used to be building up each other in the church.

Those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord are therefore called into his service. Belonging to Jesus means one your status becomes that of a servant or slave.

It's the model Jesus himself used in his leadership whilst here in his ministry and of course in his death. And it's also the way that Paul describes both his and Apollos' ministry as that of a servant back in chapter 3.

Therefore I think a correct understanding of gifts is seen not as an opportunity of boasting or of promoting oneself as the Corinthians were doing but it's an opportunity to see a way of serving.

[12:12] Being gifted is this opportunity to exercise this service. Just as in Paul's day a slave would show their devotion to their master in obedient service we as Christians are called to show our obedience our love to Jesus by offering ourselves as servants to each other and for building up for the common good.

by putting a gift into practice that makes the gift real. As someone said it's not so much as having a gift but of being a gift. As believers we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit so it's also not a matter of waiting to see and waiting for something to come upon us in receiving a gift.

It's a matter of being willing to seek and to serve and to get in and do things and in that way we see our gifting grow. So in the first seven verses Paul gives two criteria for assessing the genuine work of the Holy Spirit in a person.

The first one is the commitment to Jesus as Lord of our lives in verse three and the second is the gifts of a person who is using them for the common good using gifts to serve others not self fulfilment or status or for public affirmation.

I wonder if I gave you all out a survey here today and asked you to tick a box. What box would you tick? You could tick the box that said I'm aware of my gifts and I believe that I'm fully using them or would you tick the box that says I think I know my gifts but I'm not quite sure how to use them or where to use them.

[14:02] Or perhaps you might tick the third box that said I don't know about my gifts. Well recently an organisation called the National Church Development conducted a survey in the United States of America and it conducted a survey of over 12,000 Christians and they were asked if they could identify their gifts and the answers came back that over 80% of people ticked the box saying they weren't sure that they had a gift or they weren't sure of their spiritual gifts.

And so I sort of thought well I wonder how everybody here would rate that. Because after all surveys indicate also that a growing and developing church is one and a growing and healthy church is one where people are exercising their gifts.

There's many tools and books in the marketplace and I've actually got one here. I had a look at one here that is full of boxes that you can tick and they're quite helpful, can be helpful in just helping people to look at the broad scope of gifts.

Just looking at and through ticking various surveys or quizzes showing how you may be able to identify your gifts.

Some of these are quite helpful. They can be a bit of a problem and they may define, try and put you into a pigeonhole and sometimes our gifts are more diverse than that. So there's some pros and cons but they can sometimes be a helpful start in thinking about your gifting as well.

[15:37] Diversity is important in churches as Paul points out in his letter. He says the varieties of gifts and the varieties of services and the varieties of activities but it's all the same God who activates these in everyone.

So the emphasis again is not so much on the gifts but on God the giver of these gifts and on our response to him. In looking at gifts it's helpful not only to look at the lists in the passage here before us but also there are other examples that Paul when he's speaking of gifts he uses differently. He lists other ones both in this chapter and later in chapters 13 and 14. In his letter to the Romans in chapter 12 he also adds ministry and exhortation giving.

And leading and compassion as gifts. And also in Ephesians chapter 4 again he lists prophets, apostles, pastors, teachers and evangelists as examples of gifting.

And if you compared the lists of all of them you'd see that no two lists are identical. And I think this means that the list itself is not meant to be exhaustive.

[16:49] nor are they necessarily ranked in order of importance. Prophecy for example which is listed first here is listed sixth in this passage is in Romans it's first.

But you also need to bear in mind when we're looking at this passage about gifts is that Paul's writing as a correction for abuse. gifts. And so in a way it's not meant to be prescriptive of gifts per se.

But it is helpful to see it as a representative of the diversity of the spirit's gifting. Like musicians in an orchestra the people of God are diversely gifted so that the whole church, the whole body of Christ can grow to maturity working and growing together with Christ as our head.

Not only do we offer our gifts but we also must be willing to accept them and sometimes it's harder to receive than to give. And this often is a matter of overcoming pride and accepting a sense of humility.

There are members of this church who felt called to exercise the ministry of prayer for others. And so when facing major surgery or death of crisis in a family people ask for prayer and often it's through the prayer circle or others.

[18:13] And many who receive this prayer testify to the peace and comfort they feel knowing that people are praying for them during that critical situation, during that critical time.

It's an example perhaps of people exercising the gift of faith so that when whilst others are feeling weak perhaps in their faith, perhaps when going through a really difficult time they know others are upholding them during this time.

prayer. It's also a way of exercising the ministry of healing by praying for healing for people who are recovering from various illnesses and surgery.

And we see miraculous answers to prayers very often and we give praise and thanks to God for that. And I think Esther just recently is an example of that, of seeing a prayer and she certainly has felt very upheld by people's prayers and by God throughout her time.

But what about the more ordinary and everyday situations that people face throughout the weeks?

The decisions, whilst not catastrophic or even major perhaps, but they could be important and things that people are facing every day in the workplace, at home, amongst neighbours, tensions that are arising, changing jobs, retiring, moving houses, medical conditions.

[19:39] How often are these things shared with others and prayed about? Every week we have two people rostered as part of a prayer ministry team here to remain in church after the service to pray with people and I think it's Dorothy and Mel who are listed today.

And yet week after week this ministry seems to be underutilised, under-exercised. And I sort of think well, nobody really needing prayer this week.

Or I wonder if people still go away carrying their burdens, their decisions, sometimes their grief tightly within them. Perhaps it's because they think their prayers aren't worth bothering others about.

Or perhaps they think these situations aren't really worth bothering God about. But Jesus said, ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be open to you.

And what about when prayers are answered? How about sharing these, coming forward and sharing these with the prayer ministry team? Coming and giving thanks. Giving to God, not only about petitioning God, but it's also about coming and giving thanks.

[20:49] And this is another way of great encouragement to others. prayer group. And perhaps out in the workforce, forming a prayer group where you work amongst other Christians is a way of exercising and growing your own giftedness, both in prayer and if you're leading the group, growing your giftedness in leading as well.

And then as you see answers to prayer, you may be able to share those answers with your non-Christian workmates and friends. And when you see them going through difficult situations, offering to pray for them.

And in this way, what can be growing in you is the gift of evangelism, of outreach. And this is just one example of spiritual gifting in everyday situations.

And again, you could perhaps start with other Christians reading your Bible, forming a small Bible study group once a week to encourage each other. and as an opportunity for others to start looking at the Word of God.

People in a nearby retirement village, some in the congregation here, have done that within their retirement village and meet each week to study God's Word and in praise and in song and in prayer.

[22 : 10] Practicing the gift of hospitality could mean volunteering to host the next hospitality Sunday, lunch or afternoon tea. could also mean inviting others back to your place for lunch after the service.

Could mean putting your name down on the morning tea roster or becoming part of the casserole ministry. It's also the gift of generosity. Could mean you give above and beyond for the building up of the church, perhaps for missions, for the training of theological students or to support the ministry here at Holy Trinity and elsewhere.

The gift of prophecy was understood to be in relation to Joel chapter 2, 28, available to all believers, where the gift of the Holy Spirit is available to all believers through his outpouring.

There are messages of scripture to edify and encourage those believers. The gift of discerning of spirits is probably related to the prophecy.

Believers are called to test the spirits elsewhere to see whether they are of God, to weigh up against the words of scripture. And this discernment may be necessary, especially in the interpretation of prophecy and also in the gift of tongues.

[23 : 30] So gifts of the spirit are for the upbuilding of others. And there's no lack of opportunity, no lack of God's gracious giving and provision to enable this to happen.

And I think these past celebrations last week and the lead up to our 150th anniversary celebrations were a great example of how gifting can be shared and can be used.

I think the quilt out there is one example. The wonderful music and musical items that we had here last Sunday was another example of people using their gifts to help and encourage others.

So if you're wondering about your gifts, perhaps you could speak about it in your Bible study groups or with your leader there to be able to help you identify your gifts. Speak to myself or any other staff member.

Pray to God about it. And if you're interested and still wanting to find out more, encourage each other. If you see each other exercising a gift, mention it to them.

[24 : 36] Tell them they're doing that so that people can become more aware of their gifting and are encouraged to use it more often. In that survey that I spoke about before, it was interesting that whilst 80% of the people questioned were uncertain of their gifts, it then later went on to say that when they spoke to others in their congregation, many of them were able to identify the gifts of others.

So they're not necessarily able to recognise our own, but they could recognise that others were using their gifts to bring glory to God. And I think that's the whole point.

If we're there to be bringing glory to God, the gifts are there to bring him glory as well. The main thing is not for the gifts themselves, as the Corinthians were in error of thinking, but in seeking to bring him glory and to serve each other.

And this is the duty of every person who calls Jesus the Lord. Amen.

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[25 : 51] . . .