

October 21, 2012

Romans 12:3-8 / I Corinthians 12:27-31 / Ephesians 4:7-13

Equipped for Service: Grace Gifts and The Beauty of Unity Amidst Diversity

Last week we considered Paul's admonition to "keep (or maintain) the unity of the Spirit" in the Church. That is, the unity produced by the Holy Spirit. A unity that's almost always there initially. But becomes threatened when differences of opinion / and divergent personality types / and people with different giftings (who want a different ministry focus) begin to clash.

It's our human nature. We feel more comfortable around people who are most similar to us in their beliefs, preferences and lifestyles. / People who share the same opinion about the church / what it should stand for / what it should do / how it should be done / and who should do it.

Or put more simply, we could say: "*Unity is always easier to achieve when there is uniformity.*" It's true. As my dad used to say: "*Birds of a feather prefer to fly together.*" / And not just birds! That's also what we do by nature. / We tend to be like Canadian geese, who only fly with Canadian geese / or migrating blackbirds who drive away any crows or other birds that come near. We naturally gravitate to those who are most similar to us.

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Yet true as that is, that analogy breaks down when it comes to the CHURCH or I should say, it's supposed to! Because in the Church the ideal for unity is NOT uniformity! / It's NOT to make everyone the same! / It has NEVER been to make clones / or require everyone to fit into one mold.

Because as we've seen, the aim of the Church from the very start was to UNITE IN CHRIST Jews and Gentiles -- those whose differences made them hate and reject each other!

That was the "***mystery hidden in God from ages past.***" God's eternal intention was always to unite both Jew and Gentile as one in Christ, in the Church. NOT by making the Jews become Gentiles, nor the Gentiles become Jews, but by allowing them to retain their differences and yet be one in Christ.

And by doing so He has shown us that the Christian ideal (stated here and elsewhere) is NOT unity through uniformity, but unity despite diversity. A phenomena which I suggest in my sermon title is a very beautiful thing.

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One of the most beautiful of all the heavenly visions is found in Rev. 7:9. There we see (gathered before the throne of God in heaven) an "innumerable multitude" of the redeemed, comprised of believers from every tribe and people and nation and language on the face of the earth!

It's a picture of the CHURCH / or ALL THE SAVED in heaven. And notice they are all standing side-by-side as one -- blind to all their obvious differences! Black and white / Asian and Hispanic / European and Eskimo / African and Aborigine / Russian and Korean and Indian and Chinese and Caucasian -- all praising God in every language imaginable! All gathered together in complete oneness of spirit / affection / and purpose / despite their very obvious ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences.

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And LISTEN: One of the primary reasons that God gives us a picture of what things will be like in heaven / is because that's what He wants His followers on earth to strive for! / Churches where people from all those different ethnic and cultural backgrounds / and all those languages / commune together / and embrace one another in love -- as complete equals -- with no one group feeling superior or inferior to any other.

Which means the last thing on earth that any of us should ever want is for everyone in the Church to be the same! That would be so contrary to everything God wants for His Church as Rev. 7:9 assures us!

In fact, having just gotten through speaking of the unity or oneness of all who are in the church (with his chain of seven ones) -- one body / one Spirit / one hope / one Lord / one faith / one baptism / and one God and Father of all believers (as we saw last week) / he now goes on this week, not only to speak of the differences between us / but to show us how Christ is actually the one responsible for creating many of those differences, by purposely and sovereignly choosing to give different gifts to different people.

And YES: It IS true that unity through uniformity is always easier. / Birds of a feather do get along better together! / Yet we will never be stretched / or grow / or truly mature / so long as all we do is surround ourselves with people who are exactly like us! People of the same race / and skin color / and income level / and educational level -- having the same likes and dislikes / enjoying the same kind of worship and music / and having the same exact value system / and the same political views. How boring!

**Listen: As long as we are careful to surround ourselves only with people just like us, we actually stunt our growth / thwart our maturity in Christ / and fight the expressly stated purpose of God -- to unite ALL people (and all different types of people) under one head, Christ (1:10).**

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And YES, I DO KNOW that the "homogeneous unit principle" pushed by so many church growth experts, where churches are specifically instructed to "target" people of similar races, and interests, and academic or economic backgrounds because they will grow faster -- does work. The statistics prove it. A fact that confirms that people prefer to be around people who are just like themselves.

Yet Paul's emphasis in this passage is a different kind of growth. NOT growth in numbers / but growth in maturity. / A maturity that requires that we learn to love / and accept / and embrace / and harmoniously working side-by-side with people who are often vastly different than we are.

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As I've mentioned before, my church in Honduras had people from all over the world, and from every imaginable denomination. I had highly educated, somewhat educated and barely-educated. / I had rich and poor and everything in between. / I had ambassadors / and CIA operatives / and military personnel / and builders / and business professionals / and lawyers / and doctors / and missionaries / and school teachers / and high school dropouts / and even maids / or the occasional taxi driver!

And trying to minister to such a varied group WAS NOT EASY BY ANY MEANS! But that's the point! It's the hard things that stretch us! It's the challenges that grow us! / It's the difficult things that mature us -- not the

easy things! / It's in striving (for Christ's sake and for the honor of God) to live in love and peace and unity -- with people very much UNLIKE us -- that we truly grow and mature in our faith.

And we grow, because in "making every effort" to dwell in unity, despite our differences, it forces us to listen / and seek to understand people. It means we must learn to overlook certain things / and agree to disagree / and respect / and mix / and love / and be considerate of / and embrace / and work side-by-side with people who are very different from us / and in some cases seem to have nothing in common with us but Christ!

Yet THAT'S the whole point of the passage! Determining to love people very different from us forces us to grow and mature.

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So, with that as our entry into the text, let's see what Paul wants us to learn, beginning **FIRST** with v. 7 where we read: "**BUT...** (that is, we are all one in Christ, BUT... ) **to each one GRACE has been given, as Christ apportioned it.**" And obviously in this case, "grace" does not refer to the grace of salvation, but to particular spiritual gifts (as we see from vv.11-12). Grace that is given to us by Christ, for the express purpose of being used for the building up of the Body of Christ on earth.

So what do we have? We have Paul going from the oneness of the Church as a whole / to the diversity of all the individuals in it. A diversity sovereignly overseen by Christ Himself who purposely makes us different by giving to each one of us "grace" -- in the form of different spiritual gifts -- as He Himself apportions it / chooses to dole it out / or distribute it.

It not only tells us that CHRIST is the one who gives this grace / but that HE HIMSELF also determines which particular gift is given to each believer / and the AMOUNT of grace given (some getting more than others). It's the same idea conveyed in Rom. 12:3 where Paul tells us to have a "sober estimate of ourselves." One that is in accord with "the measure (or the amount) of faith we've been given."

These "graces" (or "gifts" ) come FROM Christ and are to be used FOR Christ. And they are given with the expressly stated purpose that "that the body of

Christ (or the Church on earth) might be built up" (v. 12) / and become "unified" (v. 13a) / and "mature" (v. 13b) -- "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Which means that in order for any Church to be mature, and attain the whole measure of fullness in Christ, the individuals in it must have a vast diversity of gifts! Paul lists only four (some say five) in this text: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (or better, pastor/teachers).

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Yet there are many more gifts! There are also the gifts of service / mercy / administration / leadership / preaching / pastoring / discernment / celibacy / dreams / visions / gifts of healing / tongues / interpretation of tongues / words of knowledge / words of wisdom / signs / wonders / exhortation / intercession / giving / faith / martyrdom / craftsmanship / music / and so forth!

And although you may earnestly desire various ones (as I Cor. 12:31 tells us): We must do so remembering (as this text tells us) that it is Christ in His sovereign wisdom and ongoing oversight of the Church He loves which ultimately determines which gifts we get and to what degree we get them. Because it is He that distributes them -- *as He sees fit* -- since He alone knows what His Body needs to be healthy and grow and function most efficiently and mature.

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In fact, to Paul's repeated questions in I Cor. 12:29 there is only one correct answer: **"Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?"**

And the obvious answer is what? "No! Of course not! God wouldn't want it that way! Because to give everyone the same gift would be very unwise!"

If everyone in the Body had the same gift, the body would be both unhealthy and unable to function -- just as a body made of nothing but eyes / or nothing but feet / or nothing but mouths couldn't function properly.

For instance: It's nice to have evangelists in the church. But if everyone were an evangelist, who would disciple / or care for the poor / or administrate the

church / or visit the shut-ins / or care for the dying / or train pastors. / Who would preach the whole counsel of God to the gathered flock every Sunday, and not simply evangelistic messages to the unsaved?

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You see, the biblical message is that although diversity is hard, it is good and necessary and an integral part of God's plan for His Church! For the truth is that without diversity the church can't be healthy / or built up / or grow / or be unified / or mature / or attain to the whole measure of fullness in Christ -- showing us that the divine order is NOT unity by uniformity, but unity despite diversity -- the beauty of unity amidst diversity!

Anyone can get along with people just like them, but only divine grace can enable us to love and live in unity with those very much unlike us. It will be hard. It may even stretch us to our limit. But as we saw in v. 3, God calls us to make the effort. Better yet, to, ***"make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."***

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Then **SECONDLY**, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18, as a way of sharing the same truth found in Matt. 28 and Phil. 2: That as a result of His humbling Himself by coming to earth / and taking on human form / and being obedient unto death (even death on a cross) -- God highly exalted Him / and gave Him all authority in heaven and on earth / including the right to distribute to the people in His Church / the gifts He deemed necessary for its growth.

So what is meant by verses 8-10? As a result of His humiliating death on the cross / where He defeated the powers that opposed God's rule ("binding the strong man / plundering His house / and taking his minions captive") He was exalted and ascended on High -- not only being given the position of all authority in heaven and on earth / but that of filling the whole universe!

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In the divine scheme of things, before Christ could ascend to the position of exaltation, He had to descend to the place of utter humiliation -- to the "lower, earthly regions." Not Hell or Hades in my opinion, but the grave, though the first two can't be ruled out entirely in light of I Pet. 3:17-20.

Jesus descended to the earth in His incarnation and to the lower earthly regions when He died and was buried in the tomb. But after that He was exalted to the highest place and from there (and this is Paul's point) He gave gifts to men -- the spoils of His victory over sin, Satan and evil on the cross and in His resurrection.

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Which brings us to our **LAST** point -- the purpose of His giving gifts to the Church. Gifts which come to us, not only in the form of gracious spiritual enablements, but in the form of people who have been given those gracious enablements.

When I consider Billy Graham, for instance -- a man who had a great influence upon my life (and whose crusade reruns I still watch on Saturday nights!) -- I'm not only thankful for the gift Christ gave him (to be an "evangelist") I'm thankful for him as a person -- for *he himself* was a gift to the Church.

In fact, the ESV Study Bible says of verse 11: "***The gifts given by Christ, actually turn out to be the Church leaders described in 4:11.***" And though it made me shake my head (because I've never looked at it that way) I realized he's right.

The verse doesn't say: "***He gave some the gift of apostleship, and some the gift of prophecy***" (making the gift nothing other than the enablement). It says: "***And He gave some to be apostles, and to be prophets and to be evangelists***" -- making the gift both inseparable and indistinguishable from the person who receives it and exercises it in the Church.

And why does Paul do that? Because by connecting the gift to the person, it aids in bringing about the purpose He has in mind -- the building up of the body of Christ in unity and maturity. / For if the "gift" is the only thing one considers valuable -- totally apart from the person Christ has be-stowed it upon -- then it doesn't matter how you treat the person who has it.

I saw this in the charismatic circles I was converted in. The focus was so exclusively on "the gift," that the people exercising the gift were some-times overlooked or treated poorly -- causing much disunity.

For instance: I appreciate all Randy's musical gifts (and other gifts). But even moreso I appreciate him and how they come out through him. Other-wise he wouldn't really matter and in a very utilitarian way I'd simply settle for anyone who could play the piano well.

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Yet Paul tries to steer us away from that error when he says: ***"It was He (the exalted and ascended Christ) who gave (from the spoils of His victory on the cross) some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastor / teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service -- SO THAT -- the body of Christ may be built up, until we ALL (as a group) reach unity in the faith / and in the knowledge of the Son of God / and become mature -- attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."***

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So, what's God's purpose in giving gifts to His Church, in the form of people with those gifts? It's threefold.

**1st)** It's to, "prepare God's people for works of service." The job of Church leaders is not (and never has been) to do all the ministry themselves. That's an unfortunate consequence of high church policy where "ordination" is made into something it never was in the Bible / and the "clergy" is seen as a "professional calling" high above the ordinary laity. / Or again, where the "pastor" is seen as an employee of the church -- or the one paid to do all the ministry.

Yet that's NOT the biblical model. For as Hoehner points out: ***"The concept that the ministry belongs to clergy is foreign to this text, because every saint is given a gift (v. 7) and every saint is involved in ministry"*** (or at least should be, according to Paul).

The "gifting" of apostles, and prophets, and evangelists, and pastor-teachers is: "To prepare God's people for works of service." Or literally, in the Greek: It's to, "equip the saints for the work of ministry."

And for clarification: Paul here uses the word "saint" in the biblical sense of all truly born again believers / and not the Catholic sense of super-holy, super-gifted, super-spiritual people -- which is foreign to the Bible.

So what am I according to this passage? I'm a pastor-teacher. And why has Jesus gifted me with that "grace"? He says it very clearly: ***To equip YOU, the saints, to DO THE WORK OF MINISTRY.***

Which means I'm only the pastor (or "the pastor-teacher"), but you are the ministers! So the next time someone asks you: "Are you a minister?" What should you say? "Yes!" Because that's what you are, according to Paul!

"But I never sensed a call to the ministry," you say. LISTEN: If you are a "saint" then you've been given a call to the ministry! Paul says in v. 7: ***"To each one of us grace has been given..."*** Grace in the form of a gift to be used in the service of Jesus and His church! You received it simply by becoming a Christian or being converted!

And my calling as "pastor-teacher" is simply to prepare / and equip / and train / and help you become competent in your calling to "do ministry." And then exhort you (despite any possible resistance) to get busy doing it!

Because according to this passage there is no such thing as a believer who DOES NOT have a "calling" to "do the work of ministry!" Each believer's calling to "ministry" is different, but hear me well: If you call yourself a Christian, you have a call to do some type of ministry.

And my job is simply to help you discern what gift Jesus has given you / and then train you to use it / and then encourage you (or prod you against all possible fears, concerns and hesitations) to become active in your calling!

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So I ask you: What is your gift? / Do you know? / If you don't, come to me and I'll help you figure it out. / And if you do, what work of ministry are you training for or carrying out?

Because according to this verse you need to be doing one or the other -- either training to do ministry, or doing it, because there's no such thing as a believer who isn't called to do ministry! Doesn't exist folks! Never has!

And I'm not talking about merely attending ministries that other people already have up and running. I'm talking about doing ministry yourself. / Because that is the personal divine call on the life of each person here.

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Then **2nd**) Paul tells us that the purpose of YOU doing ministry, is that the "body of Christ may be built up." Which means that these graces or gifts of the Spirit are NOT given for our own self-edification. / They're given primarily for the edification or building up of the Church -- both in number and maturity.

"Apostle" and "evangelist" are church multiplication or numerical growth oriented gifts / and the rest are oriented toward growth in maturity -- but they are ALL oriented toward God's purposes for the Church.

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And Last) we are ALL to exercise the ministry gifts each one of us has been given, because in doing so it will bring into the Church a unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. There's the emphasis again, just like last week -- Unity.

God's desire for His church is always unity -- unity between people, unity in the faith, and unity in what we know, teach or proclaim about Jesus.

And Listen: As the Church functions in unity -- and ONLY as she functions in unity -- does she come to achieve her ultimate goal: That of attaining, as an entire church, the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then and then alone does she become: A Christ-centered / Christ-saturated / Christ-obeying / Christ-honoring church.