

## **“Members of the Body” (1 Corinthians 12)**

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I don't know about you, but I love superhero movies. Perhaps that's because superhero movies have clear villains who need to be defeated, and the heroes, however flawed they might be, prevail in the end. It's nice to see good defeat evil.

It used to be that superheroes worked alone. Think of the Christopher Reeve Superman movies, or the first Batman movie starring Michael Keaton. More recently, however, superheroes work together in teams. We've seen this in the X-Men movies and the Avengers movies and in *Justice League*, which features Batman and Wonder Woman, among others. These superhero movies have many different heroes coming together, each one using his or her superpowers to fight against a supervillain. The drama in these movies is not necessarily whether they will win; after all, the good guys always win in these movies. The drama comes from how the superheroes will work together. We, the members of the audience, wonder whether the superheroes will set aside their pride and coordinate their efforts, each using his or her strengths, in order to work together.

In one of the most recent of these movies, *Avengers: Infinity War*, one of the heroes acts selfishly. I don't want to spoil the plot of the movie, so I'll simply say that at one point some of the heroes are in a position to thwart the otherworldly villain named Thanos. The heroes are coordinating their efforts, working together to beat the bad guy, when one of the heroes lets his emotions get the better of him. And then Thanos gets away from their grasp.

These movies teach the importance of teamwork. Now, I realize not everyone may like superhero movies. But the same principles apply in other areas of life. Sports teams can have great athletes, but if they don't work together, those teams won't win. Coordinated teamwork is required in music, in the workplace, in politics, and even in the home. If we don't work together, using our strengths and covering up each other's weaknesses, we won't succeed.

The same is true of the church. All Christians should work together for the glory of God. We are not all the same. We don't all have the same talents, the same skills, and the same spiritual gifts. But we should all work together. When we don't, the church doesn't work well, and Jesus' reputation suffers.

If you're a Christian, my message to you today is to use the abilities that God has given you to help this church. If you're visiting, if you're not yet a Christian, you're going to see a picture of how Christians should work together. We often fail to work together this way. We're not Christians because we're perfect, because we're so good or because we've done a certain amount of good works. No, we're not perfect; we're perfect messes, saved only because God is merciful and gracious. But we should strive to be better.

To see how we should work together, we are going to look at 1 Corinthians 12. This is part of a letter written by the apostle Paul to a church that had a lot of problems, including problems getting along. We'll begin by reading the first three verses of the chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.  
<sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. <sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

From what we can gather, the Corinthians had written a letter to Paul asking him some questions. One of those questions was about spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are abilities that the Holy Spirit has given Christians so that they can serve the church. I think the language of "spiritual gifts" may sound a bit odd to non-Christians or anyone not familiar with our lingo. They're called gifts because, really, according to the Christian worldview, everything we have is a gift from God. Even our natural abilities, whether that is strength or intelligence or a good personality, are gifts from God. They're not things we're entitled to or things that we have created. Sure, we can develop those traits through hard work. But even the ability to work hard is a gift from God. Spiritual gifts are abilities or inclinations that are given to us through the Holy Spirit when or after we come to faith in Jesus.

Paul wants to make sure that the Corinthians understand spiritual gifts the right way. But he does this in an unexpected way. He first reminds them of their spiritual pasts. They used to be "pagans," or, more literally, "Gentiles." They once were not God's people, but now they are God's people.<sup>2</sup> They used to worship false gods, idols, which can't speak. Idols can't speak the truth, and those who worship them become like them. But now they worship the true God, and

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> The Corinthians would have been predominantly Gentile, not Jewish, Christians. Paul uses the Greek word for Gentiles (*ethne*) to describe what they were. They have now joined the true Israel by becoming Christians.

the Holy Spirit is the one who causes them to say, “Jesus is Lord.” You can’t first make a true confession of faith without the Holy Spirit first causing you to become a new type of person. And Paul’s subtle point is this: All Christians are spiritual, because they all have the Holy Spirit.

Paul makes that more explicit in the next couple of paragraphs. Let’s read verses 4–13:

<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup> and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. <sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup> For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup> to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup> All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Let’s break that down a bit. Paul says that in some ways believers are the same. They have the same Holy Spirit dwelling in them. Or, as Paul puts it here, Christians are baptized in one Spirit into the same body, and each one was made to drink of one Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the one, true, triune God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Christians serve the same Lord, Jesus Christ. Christians are empowered by the same God. Christians belong to the same body, the body of Christ.

So, in Christianity there is unity. They belong to the same God who has saved them from condemnation, empowered them, and adopted them into the one family of God. They are brought into the one body of Christ, and they all belong to each other. They are to serve the common good by serving each other in the church.

But Paul also emphasizes diversity. There are various gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to Christians. There are different forms of service. There are varieties of activities. What Paul means is that though Christians belong together and worship the same God, God has not made us all the same. We all have different strengths. We will serve the church in different ways, according to the way that God has made us and the way that God has gifted us once we have become Christians.

What are the various gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to Christians? Well, some of them are rather ordinary, and some are more miraculous. Some seem to enhance natural abilities, like teaching, whereas others are more supernatural. The gifts that Paul mentions in this chapter are: utterance of wisdom, utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Later in the chapter, Paul will mention various people: apostles, prophets, and teachers. We might say that being qualified to serve in those offices is a gift from God, too.

Outside of 1 Corinthians, there are three other mentions of spiritual gifts. One is Romans 12:3–8, which is very similar to what we read here. This is what Paul writes in that letter:

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. <sup>6</sup> Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; <sup>7</sup> if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; <sup>8</sup> the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Again, Paul stresses that there is one body and many members who have different functions and gifts. Again, we see unity and diversity. In Romans, Paul mentions prophecy, service, teaching, exhorting, contributing, leading, and being merciful.

In another of Paul's letter, Ephesians, Paul says that Jesus gave certain people to the church to build it up and to equip the saints for ministry. That list includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, or pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). The ability to serve in those functions is a gift from God, too.

Finally, we read this in 1 Peter 4:10–11:

<sup>10</sup> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: <sup>11</sup> whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

There, we see two gifts that Paul has already mentioned: speaking and serving.

We can group all of these gifts into different categories. First, we have what are called offices. That is, titles given to various people who have served in the church in different ways. Apostles were with Jesus personally and were sent by him to tell others about him. Since apostles had to see the risen Lord Jesus personally, and since Jesus hasn't been on the earth for almost two thousand years, there are no more apostles. Prophets are those that spoke a message from God. It's debated whether prophecy ended early in the history of the church or if it's alive and well today. I'll get back to that in a moment. But it's worth considering what Paul says in Ephesians 2:20. There, he says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." You only lay a foundation once. Prophets might have served a temporary role, revealing God's will while the various books of the New Testament were still being written. Once the Bible was complete, there is no need to have a once-and-for-all, authoritative word from God for all of his people. Whether there is a lesser role for personal revelation is where the debate is.

We certainly still have evangelists. They are people who tell others the evangel, which means "gospel" or "good news." The gospel is the message concerning Jesus. It says that though all human beings (other than Jesus) have rebelled against God, have ignored him and dismissed him and failed to love, honor, and obey him, God made a way for his enemies to be reconciled to him. That way is Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who became a man over two thousand years ago (while still being God). Jesus is the only human being who lived a perfect life. He always honored God by loving him and obeying him and representing him perfectly. Yet though Jesus never sinned, he was treated like a sinner. In fact, he was treated like an enemy of the state, as though he were a threat to both the Jewish leaders of his day and the Roman Empire. He was tortured and killed on a terrible instrument of death, the cross. Though people killed Jesus because they didn't believe him and they hated him, ultimately Jesus' death was God's plan. Jesus bore the punishment that sinners deserve, so that everyone who trusts him will be forgiven of their sins, reconciled to God, adopted in to his family, and have eternal life. Trusting Jesus means believing his claims, that he is the Son of God, the God-man, the only one who can make us right with God. Trusting Jesus means knowing that he is Lord, King, Master, our ultimate authority.

This message needs to be shared, so we need evangelists. We also have pastors, or shepherds, sometimes also called overseers. They lead, guide, and protect the church. They also

teach and preach. The gospel needs to be taught. So does the fullness of the Bible. Some parts are easier to understand, some parts are harder to understand. Sometimes it's hard to know how to apply Scripture to our lives. Pastors, who have the gift and ability to teach, help the church make sense of God's word.

But there are many other ways to serve in a church. If we take all the spiritual gifts, we can group them into different categories. There are two types of gifts that deal with speaking. One category is related to teaching. This includes the utterance of wisdom and the utterance of knowledge. We don't know exactly what Paul means by utterances of wisdom and knowledge, since this is the only time in the Bible that these phrases occur. But the book of Proverbs says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). So, these utterances probably have to do with teaching people about God and how to respect him and live for him. That's a lot of what pastors do. "The one who exhorts," which is found in Romans 12:8, can also be translated as "the one who encourages" (the New International Version has something similar). You don't have to be a pastor to encourage other Christians. There are some people in this church who clearly have the spiritual gift of encouragement.

Another category involves revelatory speech, or even supernatural speech. That includes prophecy, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Prophecy generally is considered "a word from the Lord." It can be a message about the future, or a message of guidance or direction. As I said earlier, it's debated whether this continues or not now that the whole of the Bible is complete. In fact, that happened by the end of the first century. The last book of the Bible to be written was probably the book of Revelation, most likely written in the mid-90s. In the early days of Christianity, people couldn't simply turn to the New Testament to read God's word, because it wasn't complete yet, and even the books that were completed existed only in handwritten copies. (This was centuries before the advent of the printing press, which made mass production of books possible.) I think the best argument against modern-day prophecy is that since the Bible is complete, no more needs to be added to it, and the foundation of God's word, revealed through apostles and prophets, has been laid once and for all. If there's any kind of "prophecy" that exists today, it might be of a very limited nature, directing someone or perhaps a church to make a certain decision. But if someone comes to me and says, "I'm a prophet," I'm very wary of that person. Ultimately, beliefs about prophecy rest on theological assumptions that I don't have time to unpack right now.

Much of what can be said about prophecy could be said about tongues, which could be foreign languages that the speaker doesn't know but is able to speak miraculously (as in the case of Pentecost in Acts 2), or some ecstatic language that no human knows, but is later interpreted by another. Some people believe this was only something that happened in the first century, and all other talking in tongues is either something faked or something that could even be prompted by evil spirits. I don't see a biblical reason why speaking in tongues can't happen today. But I also don't think it needs to happen. However, I have heard stories about people speaking in tongues in places where there is a great amount of spiritual warfare, or where the gospel is being preached for the first time. So, I can't immediately write off the idea that people can't speak in tongues.

If these revelatory and miraculous gifts exist today—and I'm not sure that they do—they are probably quite rare. Therefore, I won't spend any more time talking about them today.

Other gifts deal with leading. We have already considered the gift of being a pastor or teacher, which is related to the gift of teaching or speaking. In verse 28, Paul mentions "administrating." The Greek word that is translated that way refers to piloting or steering a ship. This is the job of the pastor or pastors. It's possible that pastors also discern between good and evil spirits, though this kind of spiritual discernment can be exercised by other people in the church.

Many of the gifts relate to physical service of some kind. Some of those might be miraculous in nature, like healing and working miracles. But most often, the spiritual gift of service will be a desire to serve in practical and mundane ways. In verse 28, Paul refers to it as "helping." "Acts of mercy," also found in Romans (12:8), may consist of physical acts of service to those in need. Or it may be an attitude of compassion toward the down and out.

"Contributing" (Rom. 12:8) refers to those who are particularly generous.

One spiritual gift is simply "faith." This doesn't mean the kind of faith that every believer has, which is also a gift. It refers to a special ability to trust in God and his provision, particularly when things don't look hopeful. We might call it "hope against hope."

I could go into more detail with each of these. But hopefully you can see that there are a variety of spiritual gifts. They aren't the same. Not everyone receives these gifts. But remember this, they are all given "for the common good (verse 7). "All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (verse 11). We don't decide

which spiritual gifts we'll have, and they are not for building ourselves up. They are for the benefit of the church.

And, as Paul will say next, each member of the church is needed. Let's read verses 14–20:

<sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

Paul's point here is simple and it's funny. The members of the church are like different parts of the body. We all need each other, just like the foot needs the whole body, and so does the hand, and the ear. Eyes are great, but if the whole body was an eye, we would be pretty useless. If we were all the same, the church wouldn't function well. If we were all leaders and teachers, there would be no one to lead and teach. There would be no followers and students. If everyone served in physical ways, but no one was equipped to lead, the church would be chaotic. Every member of the church is needed, and every member of the church should use his or her spiritual gifts to add to the church, just as every part of the body has its purpose.

Paul continues this theme in the next several verses. Let's read verses 21–26:

<sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, <sup>24</sup> which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

When I described the various spiritual gifts, you probably noticed that some of them are more flashy or prominent. Some are related to things that are easily seen, like teaching or leading. Some are clearly miraculous. But some seem rather mundane. After all, service and helping could be a person's desire to do dirty work to help the church or the people of the



church. It might be cleaning a floor, or mowing an older person's lawn, or something along those lines. But all the spiritual gifts are vital to the health of a church.

One person here once said that he was a foot, because he knew he wasn't a leader. I'm not *the* head of the church, because the head of the church is Jesus. But in a way, I'm a head of this church. And I cannot say to that man, so the so-called foot, "I don't need you." No, I need you. The parts that seem to be weaker are indispensable. We honor the parts of the body that the world might not honor, because each part is needed.

Each person must play his or her own role, according to the way God has made that person and according to the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given that person. Often, the gifts are just enhancements of natural abilities. People with the ability to teach probably already had some decent amount of intelligence, but the Holy Spirit gave them the ability to have special insight regarding God's word. People with the gift of service already have bodies that work, but the Holy Spirit gave them a desire to use their bodies to serve God. We don't need the foot to try to be the head, or the eye to try to be the ear. That often happens in small churches, and that isn't right. We often thrust people into some kind of leadership role when they aren't leaders. For some reason, this church has thought of service almost entirely in terms of committees, which is very strange, because committees are often tasked with making decisions, which is what leaders do. Pushing people into roles they're not gifted to do is like exposing an "unpresentable part." It's not appropriate, it doesn't work, and it often leaves people feeling frustrated. Each person should find a role in the body that suits them.

The truth is that if you're a Christian, you belong to the body of Christ. Jesus himself isn't divided; therefore, there shouldn't be division in the body of Christ. Everyone should work harmoniously together. That's why people who are divisive can be removed from a church, because divisiveness hurts the church. You should care about the rest of the body. If one member of the church is suffering, we should all suffer together. If one is honored, or has something to celebrate, we should all rejoice together. We're in this together.

Let's read the last portion of this chapter, verses 27–31:

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Paul once again says that we are all members of the body of Christ, and that God has appointed people to serve in different ways. He then asks some rhetorical questions. Are all apostles? No. Are all prophets? No. Are all teachers? No. Do all work miracles? No. And so on. We're not all called to do the same kind of service, and if you are a foot, you're not less valuable than a head. Paul does say to seek the so-called "higher gifts," like prophesying (1 Cor. 14:1), but he points them to "a still more excellent way" in the following chapter, when he talks about love. If we have spiritual gifts but don't use them to build each other up in love, we are nothing.

Now that we've gone through this chapter and talked about spiritual gifts, I want us to think about how this teaching relates to this church. As I said last week, the New Testament presupposes that Christians will belong to a local church in some recognizable way. And one of those ways is in service, in using one's talents and spiritual gifts. I would urge us all to serve this church by using whatever God has given you. You may not know exactly what your spiritual gifts are, but I can tell you that a lack of commitment is not a spiritual gift. Approaching church as a consumer, merely taking when it's convenient to you, is not a spiritual gift. Approaching church on your own terms and not on God's doesn't come from the Holy Spirit.

Now, if you're feeling God nudge you in the direction of service, you may wonder about your spiritual gift. Some people spend a lot of time worrying about this. This week, a timely article was written by a New Testament scholar and a pastor named Tom Schreiner. He says this: "if you get involved in the lives of others in your church and love as Jesus commanded, then you will discover your gift." He then elaborates:

Some might say they still don't know their gift. But knowing your spiritual gift isn't as important as exercising your spiritual gift. Surely many believers in history didn't know their spiritual gifts or think much about them, and yet they exercised those gifts in powerful ways. If you aren't sure what your spiritual gifts are, I wouldn't worry about it. If you give yourself to other believers in the church, you will inevitably be using your gifts.<sup>3</sup>

I think that's great advice. Just get involved and the spiritual gifts will become clear. If you see a need, try to meet it. Perhaps you'll try something that doesn't fit. That's okay. In time,

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Schreiner, "How (Not) to Discover Your Spiritual Gifts," *The Gospel Coalition*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-not-discover-spiritual-gifts/>

you'll know what your gifts are. Usually, other people will recognize them in you. I can tell you that there are people here who obviously have the gift of encouragement. Others are servants, ready to do physical tasks. I'm sure there are some who contribute generously. Some are particularly merciful.

My sense is that most of us will hear this message and walk away without thinking about how they can serve this church. I would urge you not to do that. This church needs your help. How can you serve? Let me list some possible ways very quickly. We need people to serve in ways that help our meetings every week. We need people to help take care of children. Someone offered to help a few weeks ago in that area, and I appreciate that. We need people to help count the money offered. We need people to maintain the building and grounds. We could use a lot more help with yard work and painting and cleaning and fixing things. We could use help from people who have skills with technology. We could use help from people who are evangelists, or people who have connections in our community that might help us do outreach. In a couple of months, we'll participate in West Bridgewater's Park Day again, and we need help with that. We need people to contribute generously to this church; at this point in time, we really need more help with that, just in order to maintain and improve this building, but also to do more ministry.

And that doesn't include the ways that the members of the church might need help. I'm sure there are people here who need help in their homes, in their lives, with their families, with situations that are overwhelming them.

The point is that we should all be involved in the life of the church. God expects this. If you're not doing this now, please come and talk to me. Talk to me about joining the church and seeing how you can get involved. Talk to the deacons. Talk to people around you. Don't leave here today, shrug your shoulders, and forget about what you've heard. If you're a Christian, remember that you were bought with a price, which is Jesus' death on the cross. You were saved from condemnation, from eternal death, not so you can live a comfortable life, but so that you can serve God.

And if you're not yet a Christian, I urge you to turn to Jesus. You have heard the gospel message. Trust Jesus—trust that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done. No one else can make you right with God. Jesus laid down his life for his people. You, too, can become part of the body of Christ today.