

Lesson 37: “Our Call To Interdependence” 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 Craig Crawshaw

1 Corinthians 12:27-31 *Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.*

OUR INTERPENDENCE

Our first word “now” indicates to me that what follows in verse 27 is some kind of summary statement, based on what has been said previously. So I am suggesting that “*Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it*” is a summary of what has gone before. So what has preceded it? Note verses 14 and 20.

Verse 14: “*For the body is not one member, but many.*” Here, and in the verses that follow, Paul is stressing the independence of each member of the church body. Just as in the human body there are individual, seemingly independent parts such as the hand or the ear, so in the body of Christ there are individual and seemingly independent parts such as the lead teacher and the one especially gifted in helps, for instance.

Verse 20: “*But now there are many members, but one body.*” Here, and in the verses that follow, Paul is stressing the dependence that each member of the body has on one another. In the human body the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.” And likewise in the church body the teacher cannot say to the helper, “I have no need of you.” Nor could the helper say to the teacher “I have no need of you.” We need one another. We are dependent on one another for the effective working of the body of Christ.

But independence and dependence together seem like a contradiction – how can both be effective at the same time? So often our independence makes us think, “I don't need the church – I can worship and serve just fine by myself.” And we all know a professing Christian who has rejected the need of the church body and “goes it alone spiritually.” And in the same way, our dependence on one another in the body might make us think, “I must safely confine my ministry and worship to the church, where I am comfortable and supported.” And thus, many are reluctant to venture outside the church in ministry and Christian influence and fail to let their “light shine” as they ought.

So, Paul in verse 27 summarizes the two concepts and brings them together in what I believe is a “call to interdependence.” Yes, you are Christ's body – a single unit that has each member dependent on the other within the body. We do need one another. But you are also unique individuals, with responsibility and ability to venture outside the church to be a representative of Christ and His church on the “outside.” You don't always need one another to be effective in your calling.

I see this verse 27 and the concept of “interdependence” to be a highly motivating and freeing concept in the use of my “spirituals” (spiritual gifts). I am to utilize these manifestations of the Spirit in building up the body within the church, certainly. But as an “individual contactor” spiritually speaking, I am to function in the Spirit outside the church walls as well, taking what I have learned and applied in the church to minister to my world. I am to use my unique personality and spiritual giftedness both within and outside the church for the glory of God. And in both arenas I can build up the body of Christ.

THE APPLICATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

This summary statement of interdependence in verse 27 is then amplified in the verses that follow it.

In verse 28, Paul gives us a list of some of God's “appointments” in the church – beginning with offices of (1) apostles, (2) prophets and (3) teachers. These 3 coincide with Paul's list of offices in Ephesians 4:11, where he also lists the office of evangelist.

Ephesians 4:11 *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.*

The office of pastor/teacher seems to be a combined office, probably the same as “teacher” in 1 Corinthians 12. Also, we should understand that the offices of apostle and prophet have passed, having been the foundation of the church from the beginning.

Ephesians 2:20 *[God’s household] having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.*

Apostles were those with first-hand contact with Jesus, and then given authority of special miraculous signs that accompanied them.

2 Corinthians 12:12 *The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.*

The office of prophet (foretelling the future with 100% accuracy and speaking the truth of God, preceding the completion of the written Word) was supplanted by the ministry of Jesus.

Hebrews 1:1-2a *God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son ...*

After having listed the 3 offices of apostle, prophet and teacher in verse 28 (using “first”, “second” and “third”), Paul then continues the list beginning with “then” (no longer offices, now gifts): miracles, gifts of healings, helps, administrations, kinds of tongues. Like verses 8-10, this should be considered as a partial listing to give example, not as a complete list.

His point in this list of gifts is clear in the two verses that follow. In verse 29 and 30 he asks a list of rhetorical questions (questions with an assumed answer – in this case “no”). The list of questions mirrors the list of offices and gifts given in verse 28, and are meant to teach that none of these office or gifts are had by all – specifically the gift of tongues and interpretation of tongues.

Are all apostles? – clearly “no.” Are all prophets? – clearly “no.” Are all teachers? – clearly “no.” Do all work miracles, or have gifts of healing? Again, clearly “no.” And these are all to set up the final questions about tongues that were particularly to instruct the Corinthian church about tongues not being a gift that all have been given by God. “All do not speak with tongues, do they?” and the implied answer is again “no.” And the same with interpretation of tongues.

Paul’s point is about interdependence. We need the gifts of one another (dependence) but we are also independent representatives of God who each have a unique gifting – not all the same. This is an important point. Many Christians today, like in the Corinthian church, wrongly believe that speaking in tongues is the gift of the Spirit that all believers are to manifest.

Recall in Acts 2:38, Paul speaking to the 3000 who responded to his call to salvation, saying, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” What was the “gift” of which he was speaking? How you respond is critical to your understanding of “spirituals.” The “gift” of the Holy Spirit is not some specific manifestation of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues. Rather, the “gift of the Holy Spirit is THE HOLY SPIRIT! HE is the gift!

And HE – the Holy Spirit – makes us interdependent, that is, dependent on one another in the body of Christ with gifting that benefits all, and yet independent representatives of God with unique gifting that is to be used within the church and outside the walls of the church as well.

THE CHALLENGE TO UNLEASH ALL THAT GOD HAS GIVEN US

In the final verse of chapter 12 Paul urges them and us to earnestly desire to manifest these “spirituals.” And we should indeed strive to let all that God has given us come forth in fullness.

What is curious to me is that most all translations record: *“But earnestly desire the greater gifts.”* I take the “greater” gifts to be those that are the most demonstrative and recognizable, such as prophesy (14:1) and sign gifts such as miracles, healings and speaking in tongues. And yet this urging to desire certain gifts seems to fly in face of the consistent teaching of chapter 12, which is that it is the Spirit alone who places the members (v. 18), composed the body (v. 24) and appointed the gifts (v. 26). And “the Spirit distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (v. 11) makes me think I should be grateful for what I have been given, rather than desire what I have not been given.

In the Greek, v. 31 can be translated in one of two very different ways, depending on the context. One way is the way most translations have it: “But earnestly desire the greater gifts” – a command to do so. But the other equally possible way to translate it is: “But you earnestly desire the greater gifts” – a statement; and a statement that would imply, “but you wrongly desire the greater gifts, and shouldn’t do so. These two possible translations are diametrically opposed! So which is it – well it depends on the context. And the latter of the two seems to make far more sense to me in the context of what the chapter is teaching about the Spirit giving these “spirituals” as He chooses.

I will leave it to you to decide which is correct in context. But you have my opinion on the matter.

Nevertheless, Paul goes on to say: “And I show you a still more excellent way.” Rather than pursuing greater gifts, Paul wants us to pursue LOVE – the unconditional love of God, which is a supernatural “spiritual” of greatest importance. And this is what chapter 13 is all about, which we will explore over the next two weeks.

But for now, I want you to focus on the challenge to unleash all that God has given you – to “earnestly desire” to let loose all that spiritual energy, service and grace that God has given you as His child.

It is in Paul’s second letter to Timothy that he urges his disciple:

2 Timothy 1:6 ... *Kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.*

I ask you at this time to participate in something a bit unusual, but very Biblical. Please bow your head and close your eyes. I have asked the members of our church Council to go among you and place their hand on your shoulder at some point as I pray. And as they do so to you, I want you to consider it as an anointing of God to kindle afresh those spirituals, those strengths and abilities that God has given you to supernaturally benefit the body of Christ. This is not a time for false humility, thinking you don’t have much to offer. God has supernaturally given you a special anointing of His power, which He wants you to unleash within this body. Some of you are already using that gifting, and for others that gifting is yet latent – untapped and unleashed. Would you allow this laying on of hands and moment of reflection to be your moment of commitment to “fan into flames” the supernatural gifting of God?

Dear Heavenly Father – giver of the Holy Spirit to all Your children, and giver of a unique blend of spiritual gifting to each of your children – would you take what has been latent and unleashed within us, and cause that we would be willing to actively allow you to use each of us to manifest your spiritual power in our midst. We anoint each of your servants to spiritual service in the fullest. Would you accept the commitment that each makes here and now, to “fan into flames” that which has been but smoldering embers? Would you help us each to seek with all our heart to unleash in this body the full manifestation of your glorious Person that you have given to us as a gift? May we not hold back anything that you have for us. And may we believe that You will indeed work in fresh ways through each one for Your glory. Amen.