

How the Church Works

by Ray C. Stedman

We are examining now Paul's great message to the church to be faithful to its calling. Today the church seems to have lost its sense of identity. Like someone suffering from amnesia, the church is asking, "Who am I, and what am I here for?" The apostle is calling us back to those great purposes of God for which the church was established and still exists. The church has never any right to determine its own goals; it is here because its Lord has put it here. The church is not here primarily to correct the evils of society, but it is here to declare and demonstrate the power of God in Jesus Christ. That will be the most effective thing it can do to correct the evils of society.

In order to act intelligently on this great purpose, every Christian must understand the nature of the church and the way it was intended to function. That applies to us whether we are old or young. I have greatly appreciated the many young people we have in our services Sunday after Sunday, yet I sometimes think there is a tendency on their part to feel that the truth mentioned here applies only to older people. Not so. Everyone who is a member of the church of Christ has a direct interest in what the Lord has to say about his body. I urge you to give careful attention as we see how the Lord himself describes the character of his body, and reveals what it is here for, and how it is intended to touch life. You will recognize that great confusion abounds in this area today. This whole matter of what the church is and how it works is a maze of conflicting opinions. If you try to get your theology from newspapers and magazines and other periodicals you will end up hopelessly confused. That is why it is so important to come back to the word of authority. It is time to call attention to the simple wisdom of that modern proverb, "When all else fails, follow directions."

In declaring the nature of the church, the apostle calls attention first to the basic element, the unity of the Spirit, the oneness that already exists in the body of Christ as created by the Spirit. It is not something that we need to produce, but something that is already there but needs to be maintained. If we have that clear it will help us much in understanding this present drive toward ecumenicity. Unity needs to be brought out from the confusion of many divergent viewpoints and schisms and factions within the church, but it is not something that needs to be produced. It is already there.

Let us be perfectly honest and admit that our body maintenance has not been quite all it should be. We have been divided externally many times, but the body of Christ has never been disjointed. As the old hymn rightly puts it,

"We are not divided,
all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine,
one in charity."

Now in the second section of this chapter, beginning with Verse 7, the apostle turns to the functioning of the body. Here he unfolds the great essential fact that makes a church able to function effectively within human society. That fact is the impartation of spiritual gifts to each member of the body of Christ.

Let us read them, in Verses 7-10:

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

**"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men."**

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)
{Eph 4:7-10 RSV}

In this section we face a most important question. How is the church expected to demonstrate the power of God and thus influence society? Is it by some miraculous, wonder-working, dramatic display of divine power? Is it something that captures the attention of the multitudes by miracles? Or is it by the power of numbers – getting people together to vote the same way and thus exert pressure upon the legislatures to obtain the right kind of legislation? Is that the power of the church? Is it by agitating for change by joining picket lines and sit-ins and walk-outs and rise-ups? Is it by attending conventions devoted to discussions of various things and the passing of resolutions? Well, you notice the apostle does not waste one moment on these kinds of activity. He suggests very clearly that the power of the church lies in each Christian discovering and intelligently exercising the spiritual gift that was given to him when he became a member of the body of Christ. That is largely a forsaken principle today, and that is why the church is so weak. If we ever recover the strength God intended the church to exert in human society, it will be by a return to that simple thing, the exercise of each person’s spiritual gift.

After all, is that not the way a physical body functions? In the body of flesh and bones, there are a variety of cells. There are nerve cells, blood cells, tissue cells, muscle cells, sex cells, hair cells, and many others, each having a distinct and different function. The body operates, not by the cells getting together and voting as to what is the best thing to do, but by simply functioning, by doing what they individually and particularly were designed to do. It is the function of the head to correlate this, and bring it all together, and make it operate effectively, but each cell gives itself to the task of functioning according to its design.

Certainly the body does not operate by the cells revolting. Did you ever experience a rebellion of the muscle cells of your stomach? We call it indigestion! Or a revolt of your brain cells? That is called insanity. It means that the body is sick,

something is wrong with it, it is not operating the way it was intended to do.

This is the whole problem with the church today. In so many places it has forgotten it is a body and has tried to operate as another human organization, therefore it has no more power than any other human organization at work in the world. But the apostle reminds us that the fundamental secret of the operation of the church is that each true Christian has a gift.

“Grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” It is our responsibility to recognize and fulfill that gift. He lays emphasis here on the word *each*. In the original Greek it is *each one of us*, and the word *one* is in the emphatic place, the first word in the Greek sentence. He is tying this all in with the unity of the Spirit which he has just described. There can be no exceptions to this universal gift – receiving. If you are a Christian, if you have received Jesus Christ, if you are born again, if you have new life by the Spirit of God by faith in Jesus Christ, you have a spiritual gift. Whether you are old or young, rich or poor, or quite regardless of your status in society, you have a spiritual gift. If you do not have a spiritual gift, you are not a Christian. The church begins to live, and exercise its impact and influence upon society, when you begin to exercise your gift.

We need to note immediately that there are two kinds of gifts mentioned here in Verse 7. One Paul calls the measure of the other. “But grace (that is the first gift) was given to each of us, according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” Or more literally, “the gift of Christ.” I put it in that order because the gift of Christ is the more basic of these two and it is really Christ himself. He is not talking about something Christ gives us, but something God has given us, which is Christ, the gift which is Christ himself. As Paul says in First Corinthians, “Thanks be to God for that unspeakable gift!” {1 Cor 9:15}. Because Christ is made known to us by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, it is equally right to call this the gift of the Holy Spirit. Scripture uses that phrase as well. The basic gift is the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ within each believer. That is what makes us Christians. If the Spirit of God is not there, we are not Christians at all. As Paul says to the Romans, “He that hath not the Spirit of Christ is none of his,” {cf, Rom 8:9 KJV}. Though he is religious, though he is a member of a church, though he attends all the

meetings and has signed his name to the register and goes through all the ceremonies, if he has not the Spirit of Christ he is none of his. That is essential.

But now there is also this “grace” which is mentioned here, “grace was given to us.” This is the gift of the Spirit to each Christian as a special ability or capacity for service. It is to be exercised according to the measure of Christ’s presence within. Now, we will see more of that in a moment, but right now I want to look more closely at this word, *grace*. The Greek word is *charis*, which means simply “grace,” and is used that way many times in Scripture. There is also a related word, *charisma*. Now you hear a great deal these days about the “charismatic movement” and the “charismatic gifts.” People who use those terms almost invariably refer to the exercise of the gift of tongues (or at least that which purports to be the gift of tongues) today. But that is piracy of a title. The *charisma* is not just the gift of tongues. Tongues, in fact, is at the very bottom of the list of *charismata* in First Corinthians 12. The charismatic gifts include all the gifts of the Spirit beginning with those mentioned here: apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers, as well as other lists elsewhere in Scripture. These are the charismatic gifts, given to individuals in the body of Christ as special abilities or capacities to serve. You will find a partial list here and another, more complete list, in First Corinthians 12; still another list in Romans 12 (including duplications); a brief list in First Peter 4; and isolated references elsewhere in the New Testament.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to his son in the faith, Timothy, and said, “Stir up the gift that is in you, which was given to you” {cf, 2 Tim 1:6 KJV}, he uses this very word: *charisma*, “‘the grace’ that was given to you.” Of himself, he said in Ephesians 3:8, “To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” The gift of preaching was one of his gifts.

- Do you know what your gift is?
- Have you ever asked yourself this question: “What is the gift God has given to me since I am a Christian? What does he want me to do as a general area of ministry?”

- Do you know how to recognize a gift?
- Do you know how to develop it once you know what it is?

The impact of this church in this area is directly related to how you answer those questions. Your own joy and fulfillment as a Christian depends on how you answer those questions.

In the next message I want to look at these gifts in detail. We desire to be helpful in this area by pointing out exactly what these gifts are. We shall take these various lists and unfold our Lord’s plan to develop these and use them according to the Lord’s intention. That is what makes a church strong, what makes it powerful, what makes it possible for a church to change the life of its neighborhood and make an impact upon society.

But now, a word about the second gift which is mentioned here as the measure and limit of the *charisma*, the special ability given by the Spirit. Why does the Apostle Paul introduce in this connection these words about Christ’s ascension and his previous descension to the earth?

Why does he quote from the 68th Psalm these words, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men?” {cf, Psa 68:18}. Why does he lay this emphasis on Christ’s triumphal march, his leading of a host of captives in his train? It is because Verses 8-10 are an amplification and an explanation of the phrase, “according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” He is telling us what this means. A gift is one thing; the power to operate it is quite another. Now he is bringing these two together. Gifts are specialized functions, as we will see when we come to the various lists. They are the ability to do certain specific things, such as teaching, preaching, helping, administering, ruling, etc.

These gifts are like so many electrical appliances. What a variety of appliances are available today! There are electric toasters, toothbrushes, mixers, irons, razors. I even saw an advertisement the other day for an electric shoestring tier! But if you look carefully at these electrical appliances you will see that though they are vastly different in what they do, there is one thing in which they are always exactly alike: They all have a cord with a plug on one end, designed to plug into a receptacle by which they utilize the same power. No matter how different the appliance is, the power is the

same. If you look at the appliance very carefully you will also note another difference. Each appliance uses a different degree of power. Some are marked for 50 watts, some use 100 watts, some 200 watts, some 500 watts. The degree of power that is needed to operate the appliance is usually stamped on each.

At wedding showers young couples are often given many different electrical appliances. As they go through their gifts the things begin to stack up (many of them duplicates), three or four toasters, two or three irons, and when they get through they could well say what would amount to a parody of this verse, Ephesians 4:7, "But appliances were given to us to use according to the measure of the power needed."

Now that is exactly what Paul is saying. Graces, he says, are given to us to use according to the measure of the power available. What kind of power do you need to operate the gift which God has given to you?

- Do you need the power of a strong personality? There are evidently many who think so. There are many people who are not using the gift God has given them because they think it requires a strong personality to do so, that in order to be useful to Jesus Christ, they must be some kind of an extrovert. If they have an outgoing, extroverted personality they can expect to be used, but not otherwise. But if that is the power that is required, obviously there are many who never stand a chance. Even those who have that kind of a personality will find occasions when they do not feel very outgoing.
- Well then, is it the power of positive thinking? We read much about that today. Do we need to read certain books and develop our inner attitudes in such a way that we are always thinking positively and never negatively, and thus become able to be useful to Jesus Christ? Well, if that is the kind of power it takes then obviously it is never available if we happen to be in a depressed or negative mood.
- Then is it the power of keen intellect, a well-trained, educated mind, sharpened and honed to the ⁿth degree by the resources of modern knowledge? Some of us have never had these

advantages; others are born with a low IQ. No, it is none of these.

We need a power different from any of these and superior to all circumstances. We need power that is not affected by education, either the presence of it or the lack of it. We need power that is independent of moods or feelings. Is there such a power? It is mentioned at the close of Chapter 3:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think. {Eph 3:20 RSV}

Do you believe that the church has a power within it that is able to do abundantly above all that we ask or think? Paul claims it for himself in Chapter 3, Verse 7,

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace [there it is again, 'a grace' given to him] which was given me according to the working of his power. {Eph 3:7 RSV}

What kind of power is this? Remember the word in Philippians 3 where the apostle is speaking of the great desire of his heart, and he cries, "O that I may know him and the power of his resurrection!" {cf, Phil 3:10}. There it is. The power of his resurrection! That is why the apostle links the gift of God with the descent of Christ, incarnation, and his ascent again to the throne of power after his resurrection.

It required all that in order that you might have the gift. All the mystery and marvel of the incarnation are involved in the fact that you have a spiritual gift given you when you became a Christian. Though it may be lying neglected and unused in some backroom of your personality, it is the most precious thing Christ has ever given you. It took his descent from glory down to this earth, and all the pain, anguish, heartache and sorrow of his life, culminating in the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross, and then the resurrection and ascension in triumph into the heavens to receive from God the Father these gifts that he might give them to you.

This is no common thing.

The gift that you have is not merely a natural talent, as many others in the world have as well. It is a divinely-given ability requiring resurrection power to exercise it. Resurrection power is the

kind that operates in the midst of death. It works when everything around it is dull, dead, and empty, when there is no need of stimulation that comes from circumstances. It is the kind that needs no props, no outside support, and pays no attention to obstacles, even as Christ paid no attention to the stone in front of his tomb when he came bursting forth. It cannot be stopped or thwarted by any power known to man. That is resurrection power.

That was the way the Apostle Paul operated, it was the power that he found. That is why, as he writes to the Philippians, he can say, “though I am a prisoner, held here, limited by Caesar, the word of God is not bound. Things are happening, the gospel is going forth. Every effort made to stop it is turned by God into an opportunity to advance it,” {cf, Phil 1:12-14}. You cannot stop resurrection power. The only limit the apostle ever found was the limit of his faith to take this power. As faith grew, his effectiveness grew. He did not always see the results, but he knew they were always there. He could say to the Colossians, concerning Christ,

Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me. {Col 1:28-29 RSV}

That is resurrection power.

Here in our church there are many yet undiscovered gifts. There are unused ones. There are people who have been coming here for years, who have been sitting and listening to these great transforming truths, but have never begun to operate for Jesus Christ, have never stepped out and acted in resurrection power, utilizing the gift that God has given them. To that degree the body of Christ in this place is weak and faltering, unable to touch the world around us.

How much have you learned to put on Christ, to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might?

This is how the church moves, this is how it works. This is how the Christian changes society.

Some are called to open, public ministry; others have a ministry more hidden and obscure. Some have simple gifts; others more complex. But every one of them is needed, without exception. Your gift is greatly needed.

All require the same kind of power, and everyone can have as much as he needs if by faith he takes it. This would be the most important thing in the world to us – more important than our standard of living, our success in business, our desire for travel or romance, or whatever.

We know that each of us shall some day stand before the Lord Jesus and the question he will ask us will not be, how high did we get in our company, or how much money did we make, or how well-known did we become, or how extensive our holdings were. The question will be, “What did you do with the gift that was given to you?” You may have turned in a most remarkable performance but did you miss the point? Were you concerned about the development of the gift that cost our Lord the incarnation, his death, and resurrection to obtain for you? Have you used it?

There is nothing more important than what our living Lord has given you as a special gift of his grace. No one else can exercise that gift. No one else can do in the body of Christ what you alone can do.

I think there are some who are afraid to look for their gift for fear they may find it. We do not care to ask ourselves what God has given us because, if we find it, we know we must do something about it and that interferes with the plans we have made. But, as we come to the Lord’s Table, let us come with this one question before us:

- Am I building my life around the gift the Lord has given me by his cross and his resurrection?
- Is this an important matter to me?
- Do I celebrate this Lord’s Table, saying in my heart, “Lord, by thy blood and thy death I have been brought with a price; I am not my own. I have been given a gift and my task is to find it.”

It would be easy to sing, “Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way,” but I tell you, I am sick of singing, “have thine own way.” It is time we stopped singing and started doing, started obeying!

There is a sick world around us, a world that is desperately in need, and the symptoms of that sickness are apparent on every side. We need to hear our Lord saying to us, as he said to his disciples in

the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.”

Listen to these words from Romans 13:

... the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us cast off the world of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. {Rom 13:12-14 RSV}

Prayer:

Our Father, help us take these words seriously. Forgive us for our selfishness, our desire to live our lives our way and at the same time turn to thee and say, “Lord, we love thee and want to do what you want us to do.” Save us from this kind of hypocrisy. No wonder the tension mounts in our lives, no wonder we feel empty, defeated, and frustrated, while we live such split lives. Teach us to have a single eye, centered on thee and thy word and thy glory. In Christ’s name, Amen.

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