

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **HAPPY 2009!**

#### **Rushing to the Wall (2009 style)**

(1 Corinthians 12)

##### **Introduction: The gift...**

I hope you had a great New Year's Eve and day - and that a week earlier, a wonderful Christmas.

Among Kathy's Christmas gifts every year are some especially yummy meals and desserts - and I dutifully ate my way through them all.

I also received a generous supply of sweet-tasting gum, which I've all but chewed up and a book I devoured within a couple of days.<sup>1</sup> Then she and I together received an external hard drive for our computer for picture storage that we are eager to learn how to use.

Like you, we know that gifts are meant to be neither ignored, shelved, nor admired. Gifts are to be put to use.

If you received an electronic toy this Christmas, it's probably already in service. If you got some clothing, it's likely already been worn. Books have probably at least been cracked. And food is certainly gone.

Well, consider this morning Christmas in January. For the next few minutes we're going to consider another gift - a gift direct from the hand of God - and you definitely don't want to shelve this one...

This morning we are going to focus our attention on a theme Paul develops in his first letter to the church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians is often referred to as an "occasional" book, meaning it was "occasioned" by questions folks in the church had posed to Paul. They asked their questions in a letter. He wrote this letter to address those questions.

They had questions about all sorts of things: divorce, remarriage, lawsuits, sexuality. They asked about other items, too, and chief among their questions were wonderings and confusions about **spiritual gifts**.

The topic of spiritual gifts is an important one. It was in the first century and it still is today.

Now those of you who have been around here a while may have wondered that I don't talk much about spiritual gifts. I do talk a lot about service and the need to be involved. But not about spiritual gifts.

The reason I don't talk all that much about spiritual gifts is that so often when we do talk about them we get pulled into discussions (read, arguments!) about some of the more controversial gifts and miss the **POINT** of the gifts - which is ministry!

Well, today, on this, the first Sunday of 2009, with strong urging from the Elders, I am going to speak to the issue of spiritual gifts.

We will look at 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, one of the prime New Testament passages dealing with life in the church and ministry and spiritual gifts. But I want to walk through the passage backwards.

Before addressing spiritual gifts at all, which is the first thing Paul mentions in this chapter, I want us all to remember the beauty of the church and of the unity we enjoy as God's people, which is the last thing Paul mentions in this chapter.

We are a diversified unity; or if you prefer, a unified diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> The Children Of Hurin by Tolkien. Pretty good book...

## **A Diverse Unity; a Unified Diversity (vv. 12-13)**

### **The Church is Like a BODY (v. 12)**

*[12] For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.*

The New Testament makes use of several analogies to picture what the church is like. The church is variously compared to a temple, a vine, a flock of sheep, a family.

But Paul's favorite is the "church as a body" analogy. And it is his favorite because in the human body, there is this amazing unity that prevails in the presence of a very complex diversity.

In the human body, each member is uniquely "gifted" to serve a certain role and is interdependent on other parts of the body to fulfill that role.

For me, that has meant in recent years that when my left knee hurts, my right knee takes more weight. Or when my lower back hurts, my "stooping" muscles take over. Or when my shoulder hurts - you get the idea. Interdependence. THAT, says Paul, is what the church is like.

We are interdependent and we are linked with each other by some fundamental experiences.

### **The Ties That Bind Us (v. 13)**

*[13] For by one Spirit we were all baptized<sup>2</sup> into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

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<sup>2</sup> There are a number of verses that speak to the issue of baptism of the Holy Spirit, all of them, except here in 1 Cor. 12, occur in the Gospels and Acts and either quote John the Baptist as predicting that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16) or recall John's words (Acts 11:16) or look forward to the event on the Day of Pentecost as the baptism by the Holy Spirit (Act 1:5).

Mentioned here are the two major ethnic bodies of the first century world - Jew and Greek. Paul says that the fact that we are *in Christ* is more important to our relating than our ethnicity.

He mentions the two major demographic groupings of the Graeco-Roman world - slave and free - and says that being *in Christ* is more important to our relating than our station in life.

We could think of other distinctives - sex, age, politics, talents and abilities, wealth, you name it!

None of them detract from the core unity that exists between Christians. The most determinative fact of our relationships is that we are *in Christ*.

You who are a Christian have been immersed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Therefore you are "in Christ" with every other Christian, making your similarities eternal and weighty and your differences trivial.

The church is a unified, diverse, interdependent entity and Paul highlights that interdependence in one of the more entertaining passages in all of his writings.

### **If the Church is going to function properly, it's going to need ME and YOU Working Together! (vv. 14-25)**

*[14] For the body is not one member, but many. [15] If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. [16] And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body.<sup>3</sup> [17] If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? [18] But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. [19] If they were all one member, where would the body be? [20] But now there are many members, but one body. [21] And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."*

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the foot does not compare itself with the eye and the ear doesn't compare itself with the hand. We are prone to envy those who have similarities to us, rather than those who are patently in a different class.

*[22] On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; [23] and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, [24] whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, [25] so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.*

Bottom line? YOU are necessary to the proper functioning of the church **AND** YOU need the rest of the church in order to function properly.

The church is not preaching. The church is not an Elder Board or a Deacon Board. The church is not a Sunday School program. The church is not missions. The church is not youth ministry. The church is not music ministry. The church is not Care Groups.

The church is a BODY in which many people and many ministries all contribute to the proper working of the whole, to the glory of God. That's the church!

And with this understanding, we can now consider spiritual gifts. Turn back to the beginning of the chapter and listen as Paul takes us to square one. He says that a consideration of spiritual gifts drives us to Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

### **It's All About Jesus (vv. 1-3)**

*[12:1] Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. [2] You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. [3] Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*

In the first century, the bumper sticker most commonly plastered on chariots was, "Caesar is Lord."

If you had "**Jesus is Lord**" on your chariot in first century Rome, you did so at your own risk.

That statement supplanted Caesar and let people know that you submitted to Jesus, not Caesar. To say, "**Jesus is Lord**" identified you as an enemy of the state!<sup>4</sup>

In our own day, anybody can flippantly say, "Lord Jesus." But both today and in the first century, the words "**Jesus is Lord**" are only said with sincerity by a person under the influence of the Spirit of God.

Today, this is our common confession. We shout it out and mean it - **Jesus is Lord!**

This Jesus is the sovereign Lord of history, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the second Person of the Trinity - and therefore the only One who can make a legitimate offer of salvation.

And certain things are true of everyone who has placed faith in the sovereign Lord Jesus.

Among those things that are true about Christians is that our sins are forgiven, we are reconciled to God, we will go to Heaven when we die, we are a son or a daughter of God, we are united with every other believer.

There are lots of other things that are true of all those who trust Jesus. But Paul wants to make one point in particular here.

He says that everyone who understands that Jesus is the sovereign Lord and has trusted Him and Him alone for their salvation has received a spiritual gift from God, a special empowerment to serve.

Spiritual giftedness is a "God thing." Specifically, it is a "Holy Spirit of God" thing.

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<sup>4</sup> As well, when in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament God is referred to by His proper name "YHWH," it is translated "Lord" (kurios) in Greek, the same word used for "Lord" here in 1 Corinthians 12:3!

## Spiritual Gifts, 101 (vv. 4-11)

### **The Tri-une Equippers (vv. 4-7)**

*The Spirit gives variety of GIFTS (v. 4)*

**[4] Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.<sup>5</sup>**

Every Christian has a spiritual gift. But different Christians have differing gifts. It is the Holy Spirit who gives one Christian this gift and another Christian that gift.

Understanding that one truth does away with all feelings of rivalry and superiority and inferiority. Boasting about our spiritual gift makes about as much sense as boasting about a present we got at Christmas.

You have been given a spiritual gift by God the Holy Spirit and your gift will not be the same one that I have.

I have a teaching and a pastoral gift. Maybe you have a gift for leadership or giving or service or encouragement.

The source for your giftedness and the source for mine is the same. The Holy Spirit gave both of us our gifts. Merry Christmas!

Second, spiritual gifts are a “son of God” - a Jesus - thing.

*The Lord gives varieties of MINISTRIES (v. 5)*

**[5] And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.**

Just as the Spirit hands out a variety of gifts to Christians, so the Lord Jesus determines in what ministry context that spiritual gift is to be exercised.

There may be ten Christians who all have received the same gift from the Holy Spirit and there will be ten settings in which that one gift is exercised.

Let’s say these ten Christians all have the gift of teaching.

One will exercise that gift in a Sunday School class, another in one-on-one discipleship. One will teach four year olds and another High Schoolers and another will speak at a men’s homeless shelter downtown.

There are dozens of settings in which a Christian might put his or her gift to work for the Lord. And it is Jesus who is actively creating ministry contexts in which we can put our Spirit-given gifts to work.

Third, spiritual gifts are a “God the Father” thing.

*God the Father gives a variety of EFFECTS (v. 6)*

**[6] And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.**

God the Father is the One who gives the results from the exercise of our spiritual gifts. And what a freeing truth that is! Results are up to God.

One missionary will travel to Guatemala or Costa Rica and see hundreds or even thousands of people turn to Christ in a few short years. Another goes to China or Pakistan or Morocco and invests twenty years to see four people won to faith. God is in charge of the results both of these missionaries see.

Without totally dismissing the importance of our planning, strategizing and preparation, the key determiner of results for the exercise of any spiritual gift is NOT our planning, strategy, or preparation. It is the sovereign pleasure of God.

Every Christian, then, has received a giftedness from the Holy Spirit of God, a special enablement. Every Christian has also been given a ministry context in which to exercise that gift. And every Christian will see results - of some kind and to some degree - by the exercise of that gift, courtesy of the Father.

All gifts - Christmas and birthday and spiritual - are given for a purpose. The purpose for which we have received these spiritual gifts is that we might bless others for God’s sake.

<sup>5</sup> Except for one usage in 1 Peter 4:10, “spiritual gifts” is exclusively Pauline.

## **Summary: The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts (v. 7)**

***[7] But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit FOR THE COMMON GOOD.***

Is there great enjoyment in the exercise of spiritual gifts? Of course. But *that enjoyment* is not the point.

You (the verse says “*each one*”) have been blessed by the Spirit with a special enablement that will benefit the cause of Christ.

Unlike the exercise equipment many people received on Christmas that may soon be collecting dust or serving as a clothes rack, your spiritual gift is to be put to use. Vigorously. Enthusiastically. Now.

OK, so spiritual gifts sound pretty cool. Exactly what are we talking about? What might a spiritual gift look like?

### **A Spiritual Gifts Inventory (vv. 8-11)**

It’s pretty easy to count the gifts Paul lists in our passage. He gives us nine. Great. So there are nine possible spiritual gifts. Not so fast...

The matter is complicated by the fact that there are other listings of spiritual gifts in the New Testament. We find the lists at Romans 12, (here) at 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4.

All four of these passages list different gifts and they list gifts differently. That is, none of the lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament are identical. And each list lists gifts by different kinds of categories.

- In Romans 12, Paul mentions prophecy, faith, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership and showing mercy - a very similar kind of list to what we find in 1 Corinthians 12, but with very little overlap.
- In Ephesians 4, the list includes apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers - a listing of primary leadership gifts given to the church.
- In 1 Peter 4, the apostle Peter divides Christians into two camps, listing those who are gifted to speak and those who are gifted to serve.

Now, this diversity of listing means, at the very least, that none of the lists should be viewed as a comprehensive list.

But I’ll go further than that and suggest that EVEN TAKEN TOGETHER, we don’t have a comprehensive list of the gifts the Holy Spirit might give to a Christian.

I think that what we have in the four lists are “for instances” of the ways in which the Holy Spirit has gifted His people.<sup>6</sup>

I think that what Paul has done in the list before us is to generally affirm that there are special ways in which each Christian has been gifted to bless the Church and to move the purposes of Christ forward.<sup>7</sup>

With that background, here, then, is the list Paul gives us in 1 Corinthians 12 -

***[8] For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit [9a] to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10] and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.<sup>8</sup> [11] But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He<sup>9</sup> wills.***

That’s a great list. And so are the lists found in Romans, Ephesians and 1 Peter. And the question that may come to your mind as you hear any of the lists of the gifts is, “*I wonder which gift is mine?*”

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<sup>6</sup> Paul’s use of the term “spiritual gift” (charisma) elsewhere, as in celibacy and marriage in 7:7, like his use of a variety of terms for spiritual gifts in 12:1-6, suggests that the concept is not as fixed or technical an expression as some have made it out to be.

<sup>7</sup> To see this list or the other lists as a strict classifying of the gifts risks imposing artificial categories that the apostles likely would not have endorsed.

<sup>8</sup> Some believe that Paul listed the gifts in descending order of importance. Maybe. And, if so, it would fit well with Paul’s thoughts in chapter 14 about the relative value of tongues. However, it would also put healing and miracles ahead of prophecy, something which most non-tongues speakers would not appreciate.

<sup>9</sup> The personality of the Spirit is brought out with the concluding “*as He wills.*” The New Testament presents the Spirit as a Person, not an “it.”

Recently (and I mean within the last couple of generations), various diagnostic tools have been developed (mainly by Americans) to help believers determine their spiritual gift.

Some of these tools are relatively simple and some are quite sophisticated. All of them can be helpful in confirming suspicions and suggesting new possibilities.

BUT, throughout the history of the church, most Christians have not had access to these tools, and the church has somehow muddled along.

So, knowing what we know about spiritual gifts, what do you and I need to DO in light of the fact that each Christian here today has been gifted by God to serve?

We need to do what Christians have done for the past two thousand years.

- **1 - PRAY FOR WISDOM FROM GOD**

Nobody cares more passionately that you serve in the arena of your giftedness than God. After all, He's the One who gave you your gift in the first place (Holy Spirit), has created a ministry setting for the exercise of that gift (Jesus) and will bring results when you exercise that gift (the Father)! Prayer is the first step to take prior to jumping into service.

But it doesn't end there. The proper end of prayer is to launch us into ministry and the use of our spiritual gift. (think Nehemiah).

So in addition to prayer, we should follow the passions of our heart and do what we want to do for God.

- **2 - DO WHAT IS IN YOUR HEART TO DO FOR GOD**

My own experience and the experiences of those I've known best convinces me that Christians serve most effectively when we are doing what we love to do.

So let me ask you: Is there something that you'd just love to do for God? Some way in which you'd love to serve Him? Is there a "thing" you know how to do that blesses others and brings glory to God that you just love to do? Well, do that!

For instance, after Tadd Chapman left our staff, there was a hole in the leadership of our coffee shop, Community Blend. A couple of weeks after Tadd's departure was announced, Michael Chandler approached me and asked if he could lead Community Blend.

We talked. I found out that Michael had not ever run a coffee shop, but that he had done similar things. And he had a vision for a ministry oriented coffee shop. He took the ball, ran with it, and Community Blend is doing great.

Your "thing" might not be a coffee shop. It might be sports. It might be music. It might be computers. It might be plants and flowers. It might be finances. It might be anything.

Wouldn't it be just like God to allow you to leverage your interests and abilities in some creative way to serve Him?! He wants to take your life skills and use them for His Kingdom.

Then, to discover your gifting, I'd further recommend that you try your hand at different things.

- **3 - TRY YOUR HAND AT DIFFERENT THINGS.**

Let's bring a spirit of adventure to the ministry table this year. I'd like to see 2009 be a year of experimentation for us here at Northwest. May this be the year when we try lots and lots of new stuff.

Did you know that in twenty six years I've never brought a sermon series specifically designed to answer the questions of unchurched folks about life and God? It seems like I probably should have. But I haven't.

Next Sunday, I'm going to try it. It's an experiment I'm calling "Show Stoppers" - the idea being that there are some questions that are so crucial we can't get on with life properly until those questions are addressed. (You might want to invite a friend or two. You might pray for me, too...)

Another new thing we're trying is the live video feed of the worship services to Community Blend. You've seen the camera set up in the Worship Center in recent weeks and you've known that we are doing this thing. The official "kick-off" is next Sunday.

The live video feed is the brainchild of Michael Chandler and Chris Addington (our Deacon over technology). The idea is not that you, our church's regular attenders, will see this as a way to avoid the rich worship we enjoy here in the Worship Center so you can enjoy a cozy cup of coffee in Community Blend. That is NOT what this experiment is about!

No, the idea is that you, a Northwest regular, will bring your friend or family member who might be uncomfortable in the Worship Center but could really thrive in Community Blend. I think it is a wonderfully creative idea and I'm praying that the Lord will use it greatly. But for it to succeed requires that you invite friends who might be freaked out by church and sit with them through a worship service in Community Blend.

When we placed the "wall" on the wall back in November, a big part of the idea was to say that you could sign up and serve where you want to serve and that you can be creative in expressing where you wish to serve.

We're going to keep that wall up for a while. Some of you may not have yet signed it. And some of you who have signed it may not as of yet contacted the leader of the ministry represented by the stone you signed to let him or her know of your interest in serving.

I'm confident that you've got ideas, too, of ways to maximize our facilities and ways to serve our community that we can launch this year.

Who knows but whether you are gifted to serve in this or that way until you try? Part of the process of discovering what we might be gifted at involves taking the risk of trying something different.

And one more thought about discovering your giftedness. Ask for feedback.

- **4 - SEEK FEEDBACK FROM FRIENDS ABOUT YOUR GIFTEDNESS**

Where I have a blind spot in seeing where I am being most effective (or least effective) a trusted friend will shed helpful light. If I really want to know, I'll ask. (Of course, as Jack Biros says, if you don't really want to know, don't ask me...)

Years and years ago, I was put in a position of having to choose the paint color for the women's rest room in the upper end of the building. Calling to mind a memorable scene from **Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade**, you could say that I chose poorly. Nobody has asked me since to be involved in the selection of a paint color. It's not my gift.

I love to provide pastoral care, to pray with and for people, and to walk with people through valleys. I've received feedback from people over the years that the Lord has used me in these settings.

But counseling is not my strongest gift. I've received feedback from people to that effect. Teaching is a strong gift for me. That's been validated by folks through the years.

So much of what I know about myself I have learned from those who have given me frank and honest feedback. So much of what you can learn about yourself and your giftedness will come from honest, loving feedback from people who know you. Seek it out. Ask!

### **Conclusion:**

Your world is filled with need and God has provided a way for you to respond to that need. He has given you a gift. And He wants you to put that gift to work.

I challenge you to unwrap that gift. Pray for wisdom. Do what is on your heart to do for God. Try your hand at different things. Seek the counsel of friends.

And then you, with your unique, powerful, Spirit of God-given gift, can jump in and make a difference "*for the common good.*"