

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part forty-two

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GIFTED BY GRACE, BUT DILIGENT IN MINISTRY

Romans 12:6-8 - "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; [7] if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; [8] 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."

We saw in our last study that when Paul pictures Christians with renewed minds and transformed lives he pictures them in the local church. **Verses 3-5** picture Christians in the only place the Holy Spirit can grow them - in the body of Christ. Each one is pictured as a part. And the parts - pick any part you want - can't exist alone. So we're meant to get the message: the only place we can be **unconformed** from the world and **transformed by the renewing of our minds** is attached to the other members of the local church, the body of Christ.

Today we discover more. It's not enough just to be **in** the church. The church isn't a **club**. Body parts can't just flail about randomly. And they certainly don't create a **body** just because they're in the same room, anymore than a ghoulish pile of body parts piled up on the floor is a living being. Each must be attached, filling its **purpose**. This is what makes a **church** different from a **crowd**. Each member is only a member of the body to the extent he or she **functions** in the capacity of that member's role. And Paul wants to make this very specific and practical in today's text.

It would be a mistake to assume we all get this truth. The most common question we get asked about our church betrays an unspoken defective picture of the role of members in the local church. We're usually asked, quite innocently, I'm sure, "**Which church do you attend?**"

There it is. The question implies church is the place to which you **go**. And, in a certain sense, it is. I mean, I hope we've all matured beyond that meaningless, mystical mind-set that just mumbles something about not **needing** to go to church because we're just part of the "**universal body of Christ**." As far as I can read, neither Paul, nor Peter, nor James, nor anyone else, for that matter, ever wrote an epistle addressed to no church in particular, just the universal church in general. So yes, we **do go to church** in a perfectly good and healthy sense.

But what else? Is that **all** there is to the church? Or is there something **more** about our engagement in our church? Paul says there is. Through Christ we don't just **go** to church. Our spiritual life is a **shared** spiritual life with the other members of the church. And not just **our** church, but all churches and Christians everywhere.

Only I don't **know** about all the Christians and churches **everywhere**. I simply **can't** do that. But I have a role to play in the lives of **some** Christians I **do** know in **my** local church. I see them. I know them. And they know me. I pray for them. I can weep and rejoice with them. I can forgive them when they wrong me - wrong me with a depth and a pain all the greater because they're not **strangers**, but close **friends**.

That's what today's text is all about. It's all about the way our lives find **expression** bouncing off the other members in the local church. Not that the local church - **any** local church - is the **whole** body of Christ. But it is the place where our membership **in** the universal body of Christ becomes **visible** and **meaningful**, sometimes **costly**, and always, **fruitful**.

1) **GIFTED MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH TAKES MUCH DISCIPLINE AND CONCENTRATED EFFORT** **Romans 12:6a** - "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...."

When ministry **doesn't** happen through a Christian's life, it's never because there is no potential or gift to be used. The first two words of **verse 6** are emphatic - "**Having gifts....**" We are all described as being in the state or condition of "**having**." That means there is no one who **doesn't** have. There is no one **not** having in Paul's wording. We all have been gifted by grace for service.

So when ministry doesn't happen through my life Paul will not allow for a passing of the buck. It's never **God's** fault. No Christian has been pre-selected by the Holy Spirit for perpetual uselessness in the local church.

There is an enormous amount of misunderstanding on this point. People equate **effective ministry** with **giftedness** in a way that makes the package look **automatic**. Perhaps we should say it this way. Prophetic ministry doesn't come from the gift of prophecy. You might **think** it would, but it doesn't. A serving ministry doesn't come from the gift of service. A teaching ministry doesn't come from the gift of teaching. And a leadership ministry doesn't come from the gift of leadership.

Prophetic ministry comes, not from **having** the gift of prophecy, but from **using** the prophetic gift. Serving doesn't come from **having** the gift of serving, but from **using** the gift of serving. And no church has a teaching ministry just because someone **has** the gift of teaching. A teaching ministry comes from someone diligently **using** his or her gift of teaching.

I think **verse 6** should be inscribed over the doors of every church sanctuary in the country - **"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...!"** How many churches are like great big warehouses - **packed floor to ceiling with inventory** - but nothing being shipped out to the body! Any business person will tell you that's a recipe for disaster. It's not what you have in the shelves that counts. It's what you're putting out into the marketplace.

2) **THE PROCESS OF SELF-DISCOVERY REGARDING SPIRITUAL GIFTEDNESS HAPPENS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH**

This is a subject of which there is no end of books and blogs and conferences. How do I know what my gift(s) is? Where is the manual explaining this process? And, if you're confining your search to the New Testament, there aren't any. Of course, there are scores of best sellers in Christian bookstores on the subject. There are lists and graphs and charts and tests. There are Christian counselors and classes and seminars. But in the New Testament, with some slight variation, what you will usually end up with is something like the wording of our text: **"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...."**

And that's about it. The **gifts** are listed and described. But, as far as I know, there is no process outlined for plotting and charting and graphing which is **your** gift. And I think this is divinely **intentional**. I think the New Testament is on to something the modern church is missing. And what we're missing is something virtually **assumed** in any New Testament consideration of the believer and his or her gift.

Let me explain. I'm personally convinced God never meant for me to find my gift by **intricate self-analysis**. I don't think I'll find it in some text-book. And, for the most part, I think it's a dangerous game for others to **tell** me what my gift is. There are some exceptions where that kind of guidance may be needed, but they're rare exceptions.

So how do I discover my gift? Let's start with the basics. In the context of our text, my gift **fits me into** my ministry in the body of believers in my local church. Paul simply **assumes** any discussion of spiritual gifts is meaningless apart from the believer's entrenched commitment to a local **body** of believers in some local congregation.

This is what Paul has been putting forward in **verses 4-5** - **"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."** Very well. We're all a part - **some** part - of this body. And our gift is tied in with which part we are. But how do the parts find their place? How do they determine their role?

Well, let's think about the way a physical **body** works - **any** physical body. And let's focus especially on how the parts of the body learn **their** role and begin to function. Because this is the only approach the New Testament takes in describing and identifying each believer's place and function in his or her church with an accompanying spiritual gift.

I'm picturing a National Geographic special. I'm picturing the birth of a newborn impala on the African Serengeti. They're miles from the graceful creatures we see floating across the plains in full stride. The newborn is nothing but a gangly, mucus covered assortment of uncontrollable, disproportionate limbs. There's a lot of motion and commotion. But nothing is moving where it's supposed to go.

But he quickly learns. First, crawling along, legs splayed, finally propelling himself on nothing but knees. This can't be right. Then, wobbly all over, two legs semi-straighten. Then three. Then back to two. Then finally all four. Then down. Then up again. Finally there comes a faltering walk. And before long, a full run.

But there weren't any books **telling** how the body parts are to be directed. No manual about the legs working better **under** the frame of the body rather than out to the side. The body **feels its way along**. The parts **fit themselves** appropriately as they are **used**. And they **find** their proper use only as they are attached and moving **with** all the other parts of the body in tow.

That's the key point. And, I think, that's why Paul uses the illustration of the **human body** as a picture of how we fit our giftedness into the rest of the church. Key to it all is you don't **remember** a time when you weren't regularly **with**

the whole body. In loving fellowship and mutual humility and submission you found out where things fit. You discovered how everything moves along together. And at the same time you learned, not from a book, but from this spiritually guided body experience, where **your** gifts helped make the **whole** body stand and walk and run.

The point is, people who aren't **in** the body in regular disciplined fellowship - who just float around in the universal body of Christ, wanting to splash around their gift - never come to **know** what their life and their ministry is really for, what it's all about. One part of the body can only come to self-understanding **in relation** to the **other** parts of the same body. Gifts **click** in to place more like Lego than an individual work of art. All the pieces are meant to snap into a specific place and attach, not be hung alone in a gallery for admirers.

3) THERE IS ONE MORE KEY TO DISCOVERING YOUR GIFT IN THE LOCAL BODY OF CHRIST - HUMILITY

Romans 6a - "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...."

Here is one final key in the process of maturing in spiritually gifted ministry. All of the gifts come to us only on the basis of **grace** - "**Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us....**" Tell yourself this over and over. Gifts don't come from spiritual merit - like a reward for being holier than the next person in the pew. We never **qualify** for any gifting from the Godhead. They aren't like badges of merit. God just gives them to us out of His boundless mercy. They are no more earned than salvation is earned.

I know we all think we know this, but there's a reason Paul emphasizes it right at this point in his teaching. If gifts are **for** the local body, and if we **learn** our place and use of them in **interaction** with the other members of the body, it just stands to reason we will all make **mistakes** somewhere along the way in this learning process.

But there's potential for a huge problem here. **Proud** people don't learn well from others when they make mistakes. Proud people don't like being corrected or even gently helped along. Proud people are usually **independent** people. And independent people run amuck with spiritual gifts. Churches are never blessed by **proudly gifted members**.

But God has a plan. He tells us all, right up front, that our gifts only **feel** like they're ours. They're really not ours at all. They come from God. He gives them, Paul tells us elsewhere, to whomever He wills. That means we can use them **diligently**, but never **arrogantly**. We're **all** learners together. And because we never **qualified** for any gift with our spirituality we aren't **measured** by our gift or gifts either.

And this releases a life-giving, observable **freedom** in any church. Let me close with just one New Testament picture of this humble freedom in action. Paul describes it in **1 Corinthians 14:29-33** - "**Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. [30] If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. [31] For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, [32] and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. [33] For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints....**"

We'll look at prophecy more in our next study. But for now note just one thing. Several people are involved in this account. One has something God has placed upon his heart. He finds an orderly way to share this that is appropriate to that church's practice. And everything is fine. Unlike a lot of churches today, Paul has no denunciation of this gift being used.

Then, for whatever reason, someone senses something isn't quite right. Perhaps the first speaker is going on too long. The congregation simply can't absorb it all. Or perhaps the message, which started out fine, is wandering and becoming empty and out of focus. But for whatever reason, a second speaker begins to say something that makes the first sit down.

And here's the point. The first speaker submits. He simply sits - quietly and humbly - perhaps before the entire congregation. There's no argument - "Who made **you** king of the prophets!?!?" No. There's just a beautiful, humble, Christ-like spirit.

My point is simply this. If it's in the body that we discover and learn to use our gifts, we will **all** have to learn by making mistakes. We'll all try things that don't pan out. We'll have to step out sometimes if we're to obey Paul and **use** the gift we've been given. And as long as we're **linked together** in mutual love, **committed** to using the gifts we've been given, and **humble** enough to learn and submit to one another as we mature and grow, the Holy Spirit will bring about fruit beyond our wildest imagining. He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.