

How God Gets Out

By Dr. Dave Neale

Behind the Text

Think back to what you were doing 20 years ago. That will give you a sense of how long it had been since Jesus' resurrection.

Acts 18 describes the establishment of the church at Corinth with the talented Aquila and Pricilla, who had arrived there in 49 CE. We know that as a fact because Claudius had ordered all the Jews out of Rome in that year. Paul connected with them because they were all tent makers, or perhaps the word means people who worked in leather. Acts tells us that Paul spent 18 months ministering in Corinth. This was quite a long time for such a restless fellow as Paul.¹

After a while, the usual conflict over the preaching of the resurrection arose in the synagogue where Paul was attending. It was from this point on that he began to speak intentionally to Gentiles in addition to Jews (Acts 18:6ff). It was the Corinth experience that really shaped his future ministry. It was here in Corinth that the gospel burst the confines of its Jewish context, inviting all people in the Roman Empire to embrace the Risen Messiah. That is what Paul did.

It is quite a swing to go from Advent to a nuts and bolts topic like this in the life of a particular Mediterranean church in Corinth.

Our chapter is about "...propriety and principles in communal life, especially worship, in a group with many different gifts..." (OSB p. 229).²

In the Text

Let's talk about spiritual gifts this morning.

The main point of this passage is that the exercising of our gifts is how God gets out into the faith community.

It really shapes our view of life if we understand that the **varieties of gifts** (v 4) are **the manifestation of the Spirit** (v 7). Paul put exactly this idea in a different way when he said we live ... **so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh** (2 Cor 4:11).

The **first three verses** of chapter 12 are a preface to Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts. I'm not really sure what verse 3 means, except that I take it to be an assertion about the importance of what we **say**. So idols can't **speak**. But when we speak the consequences are of tremendous importance. **No one speaking by the Spirit** can "curse Jesus." Similarly, **no one can say** that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

It clearly means, at least, what we **say** is important. And that what we say originates from our spiritual condition. So this is the preface to his teaching on gifts and it is an exhortation about how we comport ourselves. It is very practical.

An important theological observation is the trinitarian way in which Paul describes **how** God is made known through the gifts. So we have **vss 4-6** in which Paul says that even though there are many **varieties of gifts there is only one Spirit, varieties of services but only one Lord** and **varieties of activities but only one God**. In Ephesians 4:4-5 he says the same thing: **There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord... one God and Father of all**.

¹ "...the vivid picture it brings us of the actual life and problems of a particular local church in the middle of the first century" (Oxford Study Bible, p. 229).

² Again... "In settling these local problems Paul has bequeathed to the Church universal some of the most exalted chapters in his correspondence..." (OSB p. 229).

It seems really meaningful to me that through the exercise of the gifts in the faith community we experience, we see manifested the wholeness of the Godhead.

To put it in another way, the whole epiphany of God, from the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to the transcendent majesty of God Almighty is made known in this perfectly mundane matter of the way we exercise our gifts.

Paul says 'I don't want you to be ignorant about the πνευματικός, the "Spirity" things,' they are, as Paul says "spiritually discerned" 1 Cor 2:14. That is, not just natural knowledge.

There are two lists, as it were, in 1 Cor 12. The first one is three *categories*:

- Gifts (v 4,
- Services (v 5)
- Activities (v 6)

The second list is vs 8-10 where the "gifts" are delineated (χαρίμα, *charisma*, *charismata* is the plural). This is a weighty word in our vocabulary of faith. We perhaps recall the words of Romans 6:23, **For the wages of sin is death, but the free χαρίμα of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** It is not just that the Lord gives particular gifts, the entire relationship is a gift.

A gift is "something given voluntarily without payment in return, without regard to merit, as to show favor toward someone...a special ability or capacity..."

Now for the specific list of gifts: ***To one is given through the Spirit [the gift of]...***³

- The utterance of wisdom
- The utterance of knowledge
- Faith
- Healing
- Miracles
- Prophecy
- Discernment of spirits
- Various tongues
- The interpretation of tongues

From the Text

Is a spiritual gift simply God using a pre-existing natural ability, or is it a special conferring of something new in our life? My gift is teaching. I'm naturally inclined to it, and have spent a life-time developing it and using it. At the end of life I hope that it might be said that God added the grace to it all. So there is the natural talent and also the way God imbues that natural talent with his grace.

The answer is "yes." It can be both of these things.⁴

It is a very powerful idea to think that you, with your native abilities and talents, are in possession of a gift of God, that it isn't something you need to acquire. **You** are the gift. This means what you are good at and what you love to do **are** the

³ This list of gifts in this passage isn't exhaustive, see Eph 4:11 where there are the gifts of pastoring and evangelism and teaching, for example. And there may be many others not listed in Paul's brief treatment. Ephesians is, by the way, the location from which Paul writes 1 Corinthians, so this revealing of God within a faith community was a topic that was at the top of his mind.

⁴ The natural ability *is* the gift. With some of the gifts, such as, say prophecy, tongues, miracles, healing are benefices. Abilities that come only by the Spirit.

gift of God and the gift to the community. Put another way, your human talents are activated and employed by the Spirit for the common good. This is a very moving notion – it affirms that the image of God in already, the *imago dei* in you, the innate presence of the divinity in you *remains intact*. Ready to be vivified by the Spirit.⁵

Sometimes it takes a while in life to realize what these gifts are. Let me give you two examples.

- In my many years as a professor I counselled countless students about their future. In post-secondary you have this moment when you discover the meaning of life... it is called “declaring a major.” It is that crucial moment when one moves from *not knowing* what the future looks like to *knowing*. It’s transformational! Suddenly you admit you want to be a nurse or a doctor or a teacher, or... an unemployed person who knows a lot about art history or psychology! Some students discover a new the meaning of life every year – always changing their major. Somewhere in there they discover what their unique gift in life is.
- My second example is from my own family, and how this process of discovering one’s natural gift can take years. My son Thom did a degree in Political Science at Point Loma and a law degree at Hastings in San Francisco. When he grew bored in that career in his early 30s he took a free online course on Python programming. Boom, the kid has a super human gift for coding and now works as a cyber security architecture guru at a large defence firm in Boston. He was well into his 30s. It is his gift. God is in it.

What is your gift? You probably know, but if you don’t we’ll connect you with some help. I’m aware that getting involved in sharing our gifts in the faith community is a big commitment and a serious decision for us. Think about what that meant for Christine and me as we contemplated coming out to employ our gifting at this late stage of life. It isn’t always a big decision, but it can be. And I appreciate that reality. It’s important because this is how God gets out.

[Musicians]

I think the most important words in our passage today are found in vs 7: ***To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.***

The verb here is *συνμμερω*, *sumpherō*. Literally, “in being continually helpful.” This is our “principle for communal life” here in our faith community. No need to get all fancy – it is just being continually helpful.

Do you know why you feel joy and community and personal fulfilment when you are using your gifts in the community (faith community, yes, but also the civic community)? Because that is how God gets out among us. That is epiphany – God showing up among the ordinary.

If what we do isn’t for the common good then I question whether it is the Christian thing to do. What ails us not just in the church but in society-at-large is that sense of commitment to the common good, as opposed to the selfishness of insistence on personal rights and preferences.

There is one and only one way that God gets out among us. And that is when we are using this expression of the presence of God in us for the common good.

God calls us to protect and defend and to work for the common good in every situation our lives touch. And in this the fullness of the Godhead is made known. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen

⁵ Augustine and then Milton in *Paradise Lost* thought of it this way, that the wisdom and knowledge were possessed by Adam before the fall. He had a “super intellectuality,” a surpassing gift of wisdom (Fowler in *Paradise Lost*, p. 289). So to discover your gift is, as it were, to be restored to a condition before sin impaired us; a re-emergence of the image of God in you.