

Holy Spirit to touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives. Amen.

This morning I want to focus on our Epistle reading. The section we read has 2 main sections, starting with a section on unity before moving on to a section about gifts. So those are the areas I would like to consider.

Unity

Unity is a subject Paul talks about frequently and there must have been a reason for this. I can only assume that the reason was that unity was a quality Paul saw as both essential and missing.

We see indications of the missing unity though passages such as 1 Corinthians 1, where there are divisions based on which apostle the groups saw as most important, and again later in chapter 11 where there were divisions in how they ate their fellowship meals.

When we think about the churches to which Paul is writing, it's not really surprising that there were divisions. These were first generation churches. They had been founded by Paul who spread the news to everyone that would listen, rich or poor, Jew or gentile, male or female. Not only was this a radical new message but it was a really mixed bag of people that responded.

We forget, having grown up in a country that has known the Gospel for centuries and that has equality laws, just how strange this group would have been. There would have been slaves and slave owners, sometimes including the owners of the slaves. These groups which would have traditionally stayed very separate were supposed to be worshipping together and they had to learn how. There would have been Jews with their monotheistic upbringing together with Greeks and Romans with their pantheistic upbringings and they had to learn how to understand each other.

There was also the fact that there would only have been a single church in a town. You couldn't just decide to go to a different church if you had a disagreement with someone else.

We are all here because we have chosen to come to *this* church to worship. For some of us it will be because it's the church we have always attended, for others it will be it's location as the local church and for others it's a choice based on the style of service and the people here. Whatever our reason for being here, we have to learn to worship together.

This is what verses 2 and 3 are talking about. "... Show your love by being tolerant with one another. Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together". Our unity is something given by God and it is up to us to do what we can to maintain it.

Note though, that this is a plea for unity, not uniformity. We are not expected to all be the same. We are not expected to all like the same things.

There will be times when something in the service does not really fit how you like things, maybe you prefer to use the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer for example, or to sing modern hymns, but we are urged to unity. Sometimes unity will require sacrifices on our part and sometime it will require sacrifices by others but unity is a requirement for the church.

Why? Why should we make sacrifices in order to maintain unity? I can think of 3 main reasons.

The first is that God is a union. Father, Son and Spirit live together in unity and we are called to be imitators of Christ (Eph 5:1).

The second reason is that we are much stronger as a single unit. When Jesus is accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan he points out that "a house divided against itself will fall" (Mt 12:25). If we as a church are not united we will be wasting energy and risk self-destructing.

Finally, if we are not united then there is no incentive for others to join us. If someone comes into one of our services and finds a group of people that can't stand each other they will turn round and walk back out. It is when we display love for each other that we will attract other in to join us.

Gifts

Let's now consider Paul's follow on subject, the gifts God gives us. The first thing I would like to point out is that "Each one of us has received a special gift" (v7). God is not stingy or mean, but generous; He delights in giving to His children. In this passage Paul mentions 4 gifts that enable people to be prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers so I guess we ought to look at those first.

The thing that is common between the gifts mentioned here are that they are all gifts given to some of his children to help them speak his words. Prophets speak his words directly, evangelists speak his words to those that don't yet know him, pastors speak his words to those who are struggling and teachers speak his words to all.

Why are these gifts in particular needed? Well Paul goes on to tell us in verses 12 "He did this to prepare all Gods people for the work of Christian service ... And so we shall all come together ... we shall become mature people". The gifts of speaking God's words are given to help all God's people to grow. It's not only a gift but a responsibility and it's ongoing. I have to keep listening to God to see what he's teaching me and what he wants me to teach.

But I need your help, we the leadership team, need your help. We need you to pray for us but we also need you to listen to what we are saying and compare it to what you have heard in the past.

My personal prayer when I preach is “May I preach faithfully in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”, but if I start teaching things that are inconsistent, then I need you to let me know, so I can check that I am preaching faithfully.

However, these are not the only gifts God gives. In other passages, such as Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul gives much longer list and includes other gifts such as encouragement and hospitality.

However ungifted you may feel, this passage assures us that you have received a gift from God, a special gift tailored to you. If you choose to ignore or not use that gift then the rest of the church is made poorer. In some of the lists he gives Paul says that some gifts are better than others, but that doesn't mean that any gift God gives is unimportant.

Verse 16 sums up what Paul is trying to say and links the 2 sections. “Under his control all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together by every joint with which it is provided. So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love.” We are the body of Christ and when we all work together and use the gifts we have been given then the church will grow in love and maturity. Lets make the effort together.