

individual but to build up the Body. Sometimes this understanding of the life and mission of the whole Body helps people discern the specific part of that mission to which God is calling them.

How does my gift help and support another in the exercise of a different gift. How do our gifts work together to build up the Body? How effectively is the Body fulfilling the commission given by the Head (outside as well as inside the Body)?

There is a saying that “teachers are born not made, but they aren’t born made.” A similar principle applies to gifts. Each gifted person needs (and should welcome) opportunities to grow in understanding and exercise of their particular gift. Something is wrong if a passion to grow and learn is absent.

As elders, we are to encourage such growth. In our “up front” leadership role, we will, however, want to ensure that books, tapes, conferences... are guiding people in a way that will promote the unity and growth of the Body, rather than lead to fragmentation and division.

Where are the members of our congregation in their understanding and exercise of their spiritual gifts?

What steps can we take to endure the recognition, nurture and exercise of gifts for the health and mission of the whole Body?

7. Equipping

Bible references: Eph. 4.1-16; Romans 12.3-8; 1 Corinthians 12.12-31

Referring back to our diagram in the first session, we had “nurturing” and “equipping” in the same circle. “Nurturing” is in the “coming” phase of church life. “Equipping” is part of the “going” of the church.

It is important to recognise the relationship between **nurturing** and **equipping**. If the mission of the church is the function of the whole body of believers, nurturing must lead to equipping, and equipping must be founded on nurturing.

Note this statement from the *Basis of Union* – “Baptism into Christ’s body initiates people into Christ’s life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit” (para. 7).

And here are some further significant statements – “The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ’s Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ” (para. 13).

“If the mission of the church is the function of the whole body of believers, nurturing must lead to equipping, and equipping must be founded on nurturing.” Do you agree? Reflect on this statement.

One Body, Many Gifts

Paul’s favourite image of the church is the Body of which Christ is Head and Lord. Without a body we are not equipped for life in this world. So Paul is saying that the church, Christ’s Body, is “the completion (or fullness) of the one who completes (or fills) all things everywhere” (Eph. 1.23).

That is not to say that Christ does not work directly in the consciences of people through the Holy Spirit or that he may not use a whole variety of “natural” circumstances to fulfil his will.

Cornelius was “a devout and God-fearing man” (Acts 10.2). He had a vision of an angel. But the angel didn’t announce the gospel to him. Rather – “Send men to Joppa (about 55km as the crow flies) to bring back a man whose name Simon who is called Peter” (v.5). The good news of Jesus was given through a member of the Body.

The same was true of the Ethiopian official – the Holy Spirit didn’t do the work independently of Philip (8.26-40). The Lord Jesus himself appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, yet here again he brings Ananias into the act (9.1-19).

The Body is a diversity-in-unity. My body has eyes, ears, nose, mouth, arms, legs... The life and functioning of my body depends on this diversity. But the diverse parts of my body need to work together in unity in response to “me”.

- There is a temptation to describe the Christian church as a “unity-in-diversity.” But it is better to call the church a “diversity-in-unity.” Why?

Spiritual Gifts

In the Corinthian church each person was very proud of the particular spiritual gift he/she had.

This led to conflict and chaos because there was no awareness of the Body. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul begins by acknowledging the variety of gifts the Spirit has given to individual members. Then he says, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ” (v. 12). The parts of the human body need one another, he is saying (vv. 14-26). “Now you [all of you together] are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (v. 27).

As he goes on to list the gifts again, he is emphasising order and leadership in the Body. He removes any idea (clearly present among the Corinthians) that one or other of the gifts made anyone a “superior” member of the Body. “In the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” (vv. 28-30).

So it should never be a matter of “Look at me! I have a gift of miracles (or helps, or administration, or tongues...)!” The different gifts all have an honourable place within the Body. They complete the Body and enable the Body to function healthily. Without love, they count for nothing (13.1-3).

In chapter 14 Paul was particularly concerned about the disruption being caused by those with the gifts of prophecy and tongues. He concludes, “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (vv. 39-40).

In Ephesians 4, Paul does not enumerate all the gifts. He does emphasise, however, that “to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (v. 7) – just as every part of a human body has a “gift”, the ability to function in a particular way for the benefit of the whole body. And Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (v. 11b). We tend to see these as special “up front” leadership gifts. In a sense – as in his Corinthian teaching – these gifts have a key role in the healthy functioning of the Body. He goes on to spell this out – “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vv. 12-13).

Note that the “up front” gifts are for the purpose of helping all God’s people to be ready to use their gifts – not as a substitute for them. In the healthy Body all parts are functioning properly!

Romans 12 contains another section of teaching on gifts. Here Paul is counselling them to be modest in their thinking. Using the image of the Body again, he writes, “in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us...” (vv. 5ff). Modesty doesn’t mean not using the gifts, but using them with reference to the Giver – as Paul himself illustrates in v. 3a. As in 1 Corinthians, Paul goes on in v. 9 to speak about “love”.

- Sadly, the modern church has often been divided on the issue of “spiritual gifts.” This is caused, on the one hand, by teaching which denies the so-called “charismatic gifts,” but on the other, by teaching which invalidates the Christian faith and experience of those whose gifts haven’t included, for example, the gift of tongues. Reflect on this as an issue in our congregation. To what extent are both extremes in danger of limiting the work of the Holy Spirit?

[Note the additional resource, *Ministry Together*, which gives a brief account of the modern pentecostal / charismatic movement and seeks to address this issue in the local congregation.]

Equipping

Our “equipping”, then, is on the basis that the Spirit of God endows believers with gifts for ministry. Our role is to help people to recognise their gifts, to enable them to understand the life and mission of the whole Body and to provide opportunities to understand their gifts and to grow in exercising them.

Note carefully that the purpose of the gifts is the wholeness of the Body in fulfilling its Christ-given mission. We all have a different gift or gifts, so that the Body can be complete when we work together in harmony. This has nothing to do with personal power and prestige – or with the effectiveness of one’s Christian life. These are unhelpful side-tracks which have led again and again to division and disharmony in the Body.

Many people need help in recognising their gifts. This has occurred when the church leadership has focussed mainly on “abilities” and “skills”. But it has also happened when people have felt “ruled out” by “charismatic” stereotypes.

We should not put down “natural abilities.” These may well need to be acknowledged as unrecognised “spiritual gifts” which need to be encouraged, empowered and released into the life of the Body in a new dimension. People need to be set free from stereotypical views to discover and grow in the ministries to which God, through his gifts, is calling them.

As people recognise their gifts, it is vital that they understand the life and mission of the whole Body. Spiritual gifts, after all, are not given to boost the