

BaptistWay Bible Series for October 2: Use spiritual gifts for the shared good

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As a child, I enjoyed playing football. My parents owned a lot next to our family home, and this lot served as the football field for the neighborhood. Since football ran in my veins, I was entrusted with ownership of the actual ball.

Now, I am the youngest of four sons. Naturally, I saw life from a younger and less mature perspective than my brothers and many of the neighborhood kids. One afternoon on the neighborhood gridiron, I was having a particularly difficult day. It seemed as if I could do nothing right. After one particularly frustrating play, I had had enough. It was time for me to take my football and head into the house right in middle of the game.

On that autumn afternoon, my behavior was far from exemplary. I allowed my anger to control my actions in a sinful way. I was interested only in my feelings and not interested in what was best for the team or even for my friends.

In 1 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul addressed proper behavior in the church, specifically in the worship service. With 1 Corinthians 12, he turned his attention to proper behavior related to spiritual gifts. He began the chapter by giving the confession around which all believers rally, “Jesus is Lord.” This is the unifying theme for the entire section.

Why was unity important? The Corinthians were a divided church, as evidenced by Paul’s discussion in chapter 1. They separated over various issues including spiritual gifts.

God gives every believer spiritual gifts. These gifts are special abilities that enable each individual to serve God effectively and cheerfully. Every believer receives different spiritual gifts, and the key issue is different. Differences cause friction.

The differences among believers caused division in the Corinthian church. The answer for division is unity. Paul told the church they united around the same Spirit, the same Lord and the same God (vv. 4-6). Despite their differences displayed in their various gifts, the church was to be united.

Paul described the various gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10. This list of gifts should not be considered exhaustive but rather illustrative. Other gifts exist.

The existence of the spiritual gifts in the local community of faith gives each church its unique character. Some churches are known for their teaching, while others are known for their prayer ministry. Still others are known for their emphasis on evangelism or on healing.

The variety of individuals within a local church use their spiritual gifts for the common good of the church. This common good serves to further God's kingdom. The point here is that the variety of gifts all serve one purpose, and that purpose is God's purpose. Members of the local church, with their differences in gifts, unite around the confession, "Jesus is Lord."

With 1 Corinthians 12:12 Paul used his favorite illustration for the church, the human body. Just as the human body consists of many parts, so too does the church. One entity, whether human body or church body, that has many parts. All of these parts are different, yet they all work for the common good of the body, whether human or church.

Again, Paul stressed the unity of the church in 1 Corinthians 12:13-14. In these verses, the apostle stressed that the diversity of members in the church were united in their baptism. The diversity in the church came from

their differing spiritual gifts, but the diversity also could be viewed in their nationalities or social standing. The church consisted of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free individuals. Different people making up a united church.

At this point, the irony of the situation should not be lost. Each believer is given specific spiritual gifts that help make that believer a distinct individual. These gifts, however, are not used for the benefit of the individual, but for the church as a whole. The emphasis is not on the individual but on the church.

Paul ended 1 Corinthians 12 with another list of spiritual gifts. Some gifts appear in church members that seem to make them significant and prestigious such as “apostle” and “prophets.” Other gifts come out as less significant and prestigious such as “administration.”

Are some gifts, and therefore some individuals, more important than others? Paul seems to indicate all gifts and all believers are important to the church. He used a series of rhetorical questions to press home his point. A local church does not consist of just apostles or just miracle workers. Gifts of all varieties are needed in a church. Still, there were greater gifts the Corinthians needed with the one they needed most being love.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul addressed the issue of love. Although this chapter is read at weddings, romantic love is not the topic. Love within the local church is. How church members treat one another continues to be Paul’s focus.

Without love, a local church is nothing. Even if a church excels in utilizing its spiritual gifts in service to God, it still will not fulfill its obligation as a church without love. A church that fails to foster love within its fellowship fails God.

On the football field, I learned my limitations and knew I never would be a

star football athlete. I also learned to appreciate those individuals who had talent that differed from mine that enabled them to excel. Knowing one's place will help a team, and a church, excel in all of its functions.