

Study 19. 1 Cor 12:1-31

Mike Paget

Big idea: in the status-obsessed world of Corinth, the church has been playing like a bunch of soloists, and the end result has sounded pretty hideous.

Introduction

I used to play a great deal of football (soccer, for the parochial) until my prospects of international stardom were dashed with a knee injury that led to surgery. And then more surgery. Truth be told, I was never a great player. Worse than that - I was a 'back'.

Many players will deny it, but there is a definite hierarchy on the football field. The strikers score all the goals, and earn all the glory (in fact, the most famous defenders are largely famous because of their goal-scoring, too). Chances are that even if you've never watched a game of football in your life, you'd recognise the names of some of the greats, like Pele and Ronaldo. The top-10 highest paid players in the world are mostly strikers (or at least forwards).

Backs rarely rate a mention.

But you can't win a game with only strikers. That's the story of every under-5s game every played.

It's true for orchestras, too.

I used to maul a clarinet. We loved to look down on the trombones who, in turn, happily condescended to the tuba. But all of us played in the shadow of the strings. The cellos, first. And above them, the viola. But at the apex, the very tip of it all, were the violins. The prima donnas and virtuosos of every high school orchestra.

But as N.T. Wright points out, sooner or later you encounter a moment when everyone depends upon the instruments that were usually looked down upon: 'you can't start Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* unless the trombones are in good form.'

Here's the problem: in the status-obsessed world of Corinth, the church has been playing like a bunch of soloists, and the end result has sounded pretty hideous.

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Cor 12:1-6. In v.1 in the NIV, 'gifts of the Spirit' is probably better translated 'spiritual things'. The Corinthian church, fascinated with spirituality, assumed that anything 'spiritual' must be from God. How does Paul say you can tell apart pagan and Christianity 'spiritualities'?

In vv.4-6, Paul could seem to be immediately reversing his position. 'All spiritual things come from the one God.' But 'spiritual things' (v.1), 'speaking by the Spirit' (v.3) and 'gifts' (v.4) are probably all describing the same thing. If actions speak louder than words, then, what do all gifts of God 'say' (v.3)? How might they do that?

How many ways does God describe the singular divine origin of the unity and diversity of gifts in the church (vv.4-6)? What do you think Paul wants us to understand about both God and church from this?

Read vv.7-11. Is anyone weirded out yet? That's OK - breathe. Here's what we hard-bitten late-modern materialists need to remember: God is not like us. If something is from God, then it does make much sense to worry if it doesn't look like it comes from human beings.

Which of these spiritual gifts have you seen at work in the church? What does Paul say they are for? Does this help explain why not all gifts are seen in all churches?

Read vv.12-26. Paul really speaks to two common experiences: our tendency to look down on those who don't have what we have, and our equal tendency to envy those who have what we don't have (but really want). How does Paul address each of these experiences?

Application / Implications

As a group, take some time to explore how you believe God has equipped each of your fellow-members. Remember: 'to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is give for the common good.' If you aren't sure, pray for that person that God will make it clear.

Are all of you using your gifts for the common good in the church? Talk about how you might do that better.

Which of the gifts are we at Barneys likely to prize more highly? Which do we need to take more care to honour? How could we do that better?

Prayer ideas

Pray for each other and our church.