

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-11

### MY ROLE IN THE CHURCH

“There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”<sup>1</sup>

**W**hy should you join a local congregation when you become a Christian? The answer, in part, is that Christians are divinely appointed to membership in a local congregation. There are great benefits in church membership, though I wonder if modern Christians are convinced of those benefits. Among the benefits that could be listed are that church membership **identifies the believer as genuine, provides a spiritual family, gives the child of God a place to discover and use spiritual gifts, places the Christian under the spiritual protection of godly leaders and gives the saint accountability.**<sup>2</sup>

Tragically, too many Christians appear to view membership in the local congregation as archaic—a relic lingering from an era far removed from the present. They see church membership as useless, or perhaps even detrimental to spiritual growth. Membership in a church is associated with paying dues and performing pointless rituals. However, it is in concert with and in reciprocity with other Christians that we are called to serve the Lord. Join me in exploring the role divinely assigned to each Christian.

**SPIRITUAL GIFTS** — “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” The passage before us speaks of *charismáton*, the plural genitive form of the noun *chárisma*, here translated “gifts.”

The text is essentially an iteration of **ROMANS 12:6-8**. “Having gifts [*charísmata*, plural accusative form of the noun *chárisma*] that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” The word *charísmata* in our text is a synonym for *pneumatikôn*, which is translated spiritual gifts in **1 CORINTHIANS 12:1** and **1 CORINTHIANS 14:1**. So what is under consideration are “grace gifts,” which are synonymous to “spiritual gifts,” or “gifts of the Spirit.” Understanding this, we can perhaps discover our role in the congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Stark, “Why Belong?”

<http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/clientimages/42652/sermonarchie/acts%2002.41,%2047%20%20why%20belong.pdf>

The Bible speaks of the “gift of the Spirit” [ACTS 2:38], the “fruit of the Spirit” [GALATIANS 5:22-24], and the “gifts of the Spirit” [1 CORINTHIANS 12:1; 14:1]. The “gift of the Spirit” speaks of when you actually became a Christian. At that time, the Holy Spirit took up residence in your life. Your body became the temple of the Holy Spirit when you were saved, and the Comforter began living in you. The “fruit of the Spirit” identifies character qualities produced in your life as a Christian by the work of the Holy Spirit. These fruits should be seen with increasing clarity as you continue your walk with the Lord. The “gifts of the Spirit” are enablement given by the Spirit of God to permit you to perform a particular and necessary function in the Body of Christ, the local congregation.

There is a further point of clarification needed before delivering the message. Paul speaks of gifts [*charísmata*], of service [*diakoniôn*], and of activities [*energês*]. The words, “though representing different perspectives, all refer to the same thing. What is from one point of view a gracious bestowal (gift) by the Spirit is from another a service [(service)], and from still another an operation of power [(activity)].”<sup>3</sup> The words speak of the gracious bounty of God, of the purpose God intends in granting them, and of the power at work in giving the gifts.

Think of some powerful truths concerning the “gifts of the Spirit.” One truth is that *God has ensured that the Body is diverse both in composition and gifts*. Another truth is that *the Father gifts each Christian*. Implicit is the truth that God values His people and has given each one the best gift that is necessary for a healthy Body.

Consider **the diversity demonstrated** within any given congregation of the Lord. Following our text, the Apostle writes, “Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

“For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell” [1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-17]?

God loves diversity. All one need do to verify that truth is look about and notice the differences that mark our physical appearance. Among us are people that are short and people that are tall, people that are slender and people that are more generously proportioned, people that are hirsute and people that are less furry. Among us are people that are light skinned and people that are more darkly hued. Our interests vary, our recreations vary and it should not come as a surprise that our spiritual gifts differ.

God has taken care to ensure that we are not identical, as though we were punched out with a cookie cutter. We are saved as individuals, and we are gifted individually. Each Christian is a gift to the congregation where he or she serves because the Spirit of God gifts each Christian. The gifts of the Spirit are distributed “to each one individually” [VERSE ELEVEN]. At the point you became a Christian, you were gifted. The purpose of God’s individual gifting is to ensure that a full ministry is available to the entire Body, and not simply a limited ministry repetitiously performed by a few.

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<sup>3</sup> Curtis Vaughan and Thomas D. Lea, **1 Corinthians: Founders Study Guide Commentary** (Founders Press, Cape Coral, FL 2002) 127

Though the thought doggedly persists that churches hire ministers to do the work of the Lord, the revelation of the Word is that each Christian is a minister charged with responsibility to fulfil the service that God has assigned. Pastors have responsibility to shepherd the flock of God; but they are not responsible to exercise unilaterally all the gifts of the Spirit, thereby freeing members from responsibility to be ministers of Christ.

It is only as Christians work together, exercising their individual ministries and strengthening one another, that the fullness of the Body of Christ is revealed to the eyes of the watching world. It is not without reason that the Apostle refers to us as the Body in this portion of the Word. Christ the Lord no longer walks in the flesh throughout the world, but each church is identified as the Body of Christ.

Each congregation as the Body of the Lord in the world where that church serves has opportunity to reveal Christ to the world. Within the congregation are some who speak prophetically, revealing God's will to their generation, just as did Jesus to His generation during His days in the flesh. Among the people of a congregation are some gifted to be merciful, showing gentleness and compassion just as the Son of God showed gentleness and compassion during His days in the flesh. There will be some who are generous, some who are wise in administering the affairs of the congregation, some who are merciful. Together—and only together—do believers united in love and in service reveal the fullness of Christ to the watching world.

In our difference lies one of our greatest strengths. It is precisely because we make one another complete through our differing gifts that Christ is glorified as we strengthen one another and as we build one another in this most Holy Faith. Because we are not all identical, we have opportunity to grow, to change and to grow into a people that reflect the wholeness of the Living God.

There remains the question, **“Why has God gifted us as He has?”** Why did you receive your particular gift(s)? The text teaches that the gifts distributed by the Spirit are given in order that they may be invested in the Body of Christ. In our text, we are taught that whatever gifts we have received are for “the common good” [VERSE SEVEN]. In other words, the gift(s) you have received have eternal value only as they are invested in the Body of Christ—the congregation to which you have been appointed.

There is quite a list of gifts when we consider the appropriate biblical passages. The several lists are not meant to be exhaustive, but they are rather suggestive. Just as God is infinite and the facets of His Holy Character are infinite, so the Body of Christ will reflect His infinite character as the spiritual gifts are expressed through His people. However, reviewing the pertinent passages,<sup>4</sup> some knowledge concerning the character of the spiritual gifts is provided. Reviewing Peter's words [see 1 PETER 4:10, 11], categorising the gifts as *speaking gifts*, *serving gifts* and *sign gifts* seems appropriate.

The **SPEAKING GIFTS** include the gifts necessary to permit appointment to the offices of **apostle**, **prophet**, **evangelist**, and **pastor** and **teacher**. Additionally, the speaking gifts include the gifts of **prophecy**, **teaching** and **exhortation**. Obviously, appointment to the office of teacher will of necessity mean that the one appointed has the gift of teaching; but not all that have the gift of teaching will necessarily have the gifts required for appointment as a teacher. The same is true for appointment to the office of the prophet. Though some will enjoy the gift of prophecy, not all that have that gift will have the gifts required for appointment to the official office within the Body of Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> See ROMANS 12:6-8; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:8-10, 28-30; EPHESIANS 4:11; 1 PETER 4:10, 11

**SERVING GIFTS** include **administrating, helping, service, generosity, leading, acts of mercy, faith, the utterance of wisdom and the utterance of knowledge.**

**SIGN GIFTS** include; **gifts of healing, working of miracles, ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of languages, and interpretation of languages.**

It is important to keep in mind that each gift is intended “for the common good.” If a Christian gifted by the Spirit of God should fail to invest in the Body of Christ the gift the Spirit has given, she has prostituted the gift of God; the gifts of the Spirit were never given to make the individual feel good about himself or herself, nor were the gifts distributed for the sole or even the primary benefit of the one holding the gift. The gift(s) received are intended for the benefit of the Body of Christ where each one serves! Christ is to be glorified through the exercise of my gift among His people, the church.

If your ministry consist of grumbling about the length of the service, merely occupying a pew or being present at each and every potluck meal, you may be assured that you are failing to fulfil the ministry God intended for you. If that dreadful description applies to you, you are abusing the gift(s) you received and you are therefore depriving the congregation of the benefit they should rightfully expect from your presence among them. Each Christian is called to a life of service, and our service consists of exercising the gift(s) we have received to the glory of God.

**The gift(s) we receive are precisely what are required** for a healthy congregation. Since the gifts are apportioned as the Spirit wills, it follows that God desires that we will function together as one Body, with Christ as the head of that Body. Throughout the New Testament are admonitions to live in harmony with one another [e.g. **ROMANS 12:16**], to agree with one another [see **2 CORINTHIANS 13:11**], to have the same mind and to be in one accord [**PHILIPPIANS 2:2**] and to have unity of mind [**1 PETER 3:8**]. Clearly, God places a premium on harmony within the Body of Christ. In the same way, it must become the desire of each member to see the Body of Christ working in concert with each part functioning properly. We are not an organisation, but we are a vital, living entity. As a church, we are not a mere collection of individuals, but rather we are unified in Christ. The church is not a democratic expression of individual will, but it is one powerful Body composed of gifted men and women, whose gifts are sourced in the Godhead.

This is the impact of Paul’s illustration of body parts that fail to work together. He writes, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require.” He then adds the self-evident corollary, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together” [**1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-24a, 26**].

The body of a finely trained athlete responds to the demands of the game played. Feet and hands move in unison as simultaneously the eyes survey the playing field or the rink to assess threats to scoring or as the athlete determines what is required to accomplish the goal of the game. The muscles and ligaments work together as they contract and relax in concert to propel the body forward to meet the requirements demanded. Similarly, the church that is functioning as the Body of Christ moves in concert to fulfil the will of the Master, as each part fulfils the role assigned, responding to the demands of the moment.

No part of the human body is superfluous; each part has a necessary and vital role to play. Likewise, no part of the Body of Christ is dispensable or unnecessary; each member of the Body has an essential and crucial role to perform to make the Body work smoothly. And though the Body may function with one part not fulfilling its assigned role, it is handicapped and incapable of performing at peak levels. The congregation that has one part failing to fulfil the responsibility assigned will never quite reach the level of peak performance expected by or worthy of the Master of the church.

It is the intent of the Spirit that each congregation work as a unit, performing those tasks that glorify the Son of God. After all, one major role of the Spirit of God is to glorify Christ [JOHN 16:14]. Therefore, we should anticipate that as He distributes the gifts necessary for the health of the congregation, those gifts are given in a determined fashion to ensure that Jesus our Lord is glorified as the Body functions in unity.

**DISTRIBUTING SPIRITUAL GIFTS** — “There are varieties of gifts, but **the same Spirit**; and there are varieties of service, but **the same Lord**; and there are varieties of activities, but it is **the same God** who empowers them all in everyone. **To each is given** the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... **All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit**, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” Paul stresses the principle of unity in diversity when he states that the gifts of the Spirit all have the same source. Each gift is divinely determined as being precisely what is necessary and best for health and wholeness for the Body.

Maintain a focus on the source of gifting; we will be transformed by the knowledge that God gives the gifts. Earlier, the Apostle asked, “What do you have that you did not receive” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:7]? The question has great validity then in the realm of spiritual gifts—there are no spiritual gifts that have not been given!

This raises the need to distinguish between talents and gifts. ***Talents are abilities that have been obtained and honed through personal effort.*** Perhaps one can play a musical instrument, but practise was required to learn to play that instrument in all likelihood. Moreover, if there were no instruments in a church, it would still be a church and that congregation would still be able to be strengthened. A talent is an ability that is not critical to the growth or maintenance of a church. Usually, a talent is associated with physical capacity or with physical abilities.

However, ***spiritual gifts speak of those abilities that were not previously present in an individual, the absence of which would be detrimental to the spiritual health of the congregation.*** Spiritual gifts always speak of an ability that previously was not resident in the individual, but that following salvation has become a part of the individual’s life and potential for service. Those spiritual gifts are critical to the spiritual health of and to developing the full spiritual potential of a congregation. As we saw previously, spiritual gifts are usually associated with communicating the Word in a powerful and effective manner, with service to the Body of Christ or through the Body of Christ, or with the demonstration of spiritual power through signs.

The source of the gifts is the Spirit of God, and each Christian is recipient of the gifts that the Spirit chooses. Several important truths flow from this knowledge. Since the gifts have the same source, they should not be a source of rivalry or discontent or feelings of superiority. The gifts are not the privilege of a spiritual few, but they are the blessing of each Christian. Finally, being satisfied with your gift honours the Giver.

If we are envious of the ability of another, we have little reason to continue in jealousy of a talent. We can do something about our own lack of talent. We can train ourselves and invest the time preparing ourselves to perform whatever task it is that makes us jealous. We will likely learn that there is an inequality of natural ability, however. We are not all identical, but we are all of equal worth. We are not all equally talented, but we are all equally loved.

However, if we are speaking of a spiritual *gift*, we cannot change the mind of Sovereign God simply because we want what another has! Because the Spirit gifts His people as He wills, **there should be no sense of rivalry**, discontent or superiority or inferiority. God has given what He deemed best, both for us and for His Body, according to His will. Actually, this knowledge informs us that there are no second-class gifts and that there are no second-class Christians on the basis of their giftedness. This is why we Christians are admonished to bear with one another [EPHESIANS 4:1-3] and cautioned against acting from “rivalry or conceit,” but rather we are urged to “in humility count others more significant than yourselves” [PHILIPPIANS 2:3].

I noted that **the gifts of the Spirit are not the domain of a privileged few**, as though there were some spiritual elite; rather the Spirit’s gifts are a blessing conferred on each Christian. No Christian is neglected; none are overlooked in the distribution of gifts. When you became a Christian, the Spirit of God gifted you. There are no exceptions.

While ministering in the City of San Francisco, I made the acquaintance of a sweet woman named Sue Dollin who was a member of that congregation. Mrs. Dollin was advanced in years, but she was faithful to the congregation, praying faithfully and fervently for the pastor and for all who laboured in that congregation. I recall one occasion when she spoke with me, bemoaning her loss of opportunity that accompanied advancing years. She could no longer do all that she had once done, but she was still such a blessing and such a source of hope and power for the people of God.

“I once worked with the children,” she stated, “but I must wear this hearing aid now, and I can’t understand the little children when they speak. Their shrill voices are just noise in my ears. I can’t do anything but pray.”

Dear me, she could do nothing but pray! Would to God that the congregation had been blessed with a dozen like Sue Dollin! What power was in her prayers. She was a woman of faith, and her prayers were mighty before the Lord. The pastor was blessed through her prayers. I was blessed to have such a godly and powerful woman mentioning my name before the throne of God. All who knew her benefited from the gift of faith that God had bestowed upon that gracious woman.

Just because you are not appointed to stand openly before a congregation does not mean that you are not needed, or that your presence is secondary to the mission of the congregation, or that you are not vital to the health of the people of God. Those who are least visible are often the most powerful and the most necessary to the continued health of the church. You may be assured that your gift is vital and that it is necessary to the cause of Christ the Lord; otherwise, He would not have placed you here.

This points to another truth that is sometimes confused among the people of God. **There is no one gift that is the universal mark of the child of God**; neither is there a single gift that marks some as elite among the people of God. Instead, each Christian is specifically gifted for the benefit of the Body in which that child of God is placed. God gifts His children as He chooses for His glory and for the benefit of the whole Body.

There is a further truth that I am compelled to impress on your minds, and that is that **being satisfied with your gift honours the Giver**. Recall the words of **VERSE ELEVEN**. “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” How would you, as a parent, feel about your child should you give a gift at Christmas only to have the child complain about that gift? Perhaps you had carefully considered what was beneficial for your child, and you sought to make the child happy, and so you gave your child a particular gift that you carefully selected only to have the child complain that it was not appropriate or that the child actually wanted what another member of the family had received. The loud wails and truculent demeanour would not make you disposed to listen to the child until there had been an adjustment of that child’s attitude. Just so, when we accept what God has given and determine that we will wisely employ His gift, we honour Him who gives all things generously. This leads me to consideration of the final point of the message.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING YOUR GIFTS** — In **1 CORINTHIANS 12:24, 25**, we read, “God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.” The members of the Body, though differing in gifts and differing in service and differing in demonstration of spiritual power, are to have the same care for one another. In so doing, the entire Body will be strengthened and glorify the Lord Christ.

So, we are gifted differently, and in our difference lies a strength that is often undiscovered. How should we use our gifts that God has entrusted to each of us. In the first place, note that **it pleases God when we are aware of your spiritual gifts**. The Apostle began this portion of his letter to the Church of God in Corinth, by writing, “concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed” [**1 CORINTHIANS 12:1**]. The Apostle was responding to a question concerning spiritual gifts. The Corinthians wanted to know how to use what they had, and the Apostle wanted them to know how to use what God has entrusted to them. Earlier, Paul had declared that this church was “not lacking in any spiritual gift” as they waited for the revealing of Christ [**1 CORINTHIANS 1:7**]. They were richly gifted, and God clearly wanted them to know how to use what they had.

In a similar manner, God wants us to know what we have and how to use what we have. Among the churches, there is a virtual industry designed to assist people to discover their spiritual gifts. However, the Apostle does not spend any time in discussing how to discover the gifts God had entrusted to the Corinthians, he told them to use what they had. If you wish to know what your spiritual gifts are, ask a Christian whom you respect—one who knows you—to tell you what they witness God doing in your life. It is likely that your fellow worshippers are more spiritually perceptive of what God has done in your life than you. They are, after all, the beneficiaries of your ministry!

Likely, this step will suggest the area(s) in which God has equipped you to serve. The second step is to take inventory of what you most enjoy in your service before the Lord. Those areas of service that benefit others and that bring the greatest amount of fulfilment to your own spirit are likely the areas in which you have been gifted. Instead of investing undue time considering all the varieties of gifts and applying psychological and sociological assessments of your interests, take the simple steps of asking a brother or sister whom you know to be filled with the Spirit to tell how your service has benefited them. Consider what you turn to automatically when you are free to do what you will.

Take time to become aware of your gift(s), but don't obsess over what your gift(s) might be. The second point of instruction for using your spiritual gifts is to be aware that **the use of your spiritual gift(s) is meant to be constructive to the whole Body**. God gifted you for the benefit of others. God placed you among the people that will benefit from your gifts. Surely, this is a strong argument for membership among the people of God; and surely, this is a strong argument for responsible ministry among the people of God.

Later in this same book, the Apostle contrasts two gifts—speaking in another language without an interpreter present and prophesying. One of the gifts under consideration is a speaking gift and the other is a sign gift. This is what the Apostle has to say in contrasting the exercise of those two different gifts. “The person who speaks in another language is not speaking to men but to God, since no one understands him; however, he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. But the person who prophesies speaks to people for edification, encouragement, and consolation. The person who speaks in another language builds himself up, but he who prophesies builds up the church. I wish all of you spoke in other languages, but even more that you prophesied. The person who prophesies is greater than the person who speaks in languages, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:2-5].<sup>5</sup>

The guiding principle for the exercise of your gift(s) is whether you are building others, or whether you are building yourself. There is no excuse for promoting your own self-interests above the welfare of the Body. As a Christian, your first responsibility is to build the Body of Christ, and that means that you must think of the benefit to others.

I suppose that I need to take time to assert that the Apostle did not say that speaking in another language is useless. He did say that the exercise of this gift must benefit the remainder of the Body, and that is impossible if there is no interpreter present. If we take this message home, we will do well—***build others and not yourself***.

I would also urge you to understand that each individual Christian is not only gifted, but that he or she is a gift to the assembly since the Spirit places each one where He wills. The Holy Spirit gifts each member to benefit that particular congregation, and He places them where they will be most beneficial to the work God does. Therefore, we must not think that a church is an organisation we can join and leave at will; rather, honour the congregation of the Lord as it truly is—the Body of Christ. Similarly, we must receive each one whom the Spirit places among us as gifted members of the Body, treating them with the honour that they deserve as God's gracious gift to us.

Are you a Christian? How are you serving? How are you exercising the gift(s) that God entrusted to you? This is an obligation imposed upon each of us as recipients of God's grace entrusted to us at the point of salvation. If you are not a child of the Living God, though you may be ever so involved in church activities, you are not benefiting the people of God. You need to be born from above, receiving the Lord Jesus as Master of your life, believing that He died because of your sin and that He rose to set you right with the Father.

The Word of God declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Believe this message of life and be saved today. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)