

1 Corinthians 12:25–31

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

Schism and Sect — The Scriptural Distinction

The word *schism* in Scripture does not carry its common ecclesiastical meaning. A good English dictionary will give definitions shaped by centuries of ecclesiastical usage — which is not the scriptural usage. The scriptural use is already established in this same letter, at chapter 11:18, where the same word is translated *divisions*. Yet the Corinthian assembly had not split into two separate congregations; no one had gone down the street to set up a rival meeting. Schism is an internal rent or fracture — like a tear in a garment. The garment is not in two pieces, but it has a rip in it. The Lord spoke of patching such a rip making the schism worse — not mending a garment that had been torn in two.

The word that answers to an actual open break — where two assemblies are set up apart from one another — is the word in chapter 11:19 translated *heresies*,

which Darby renders *sects*. Kelly observed that the word *denomination* has been coined to hide the sin and shame of sect. Schism is within; sect is outside — an actual fracture that has become an open breach. And it is the schism, the internal rip, the estrangement of heart and mind between saint and saint, that leads on to the sect. The one prepares the way for the other.

One Member Suffer — One Member Honoured

Verse 26 is often before the thoughts in connection with suffering saints. It is a verse that inculcates sympathy, and calls for a readiness to recognise when others pass through suffering. God does not distribute suffering in even amounts across all His people. He knows what each can bear, and for His good purposes He allows, for our good, those sufferings through which we pass — sometimes more, sometimes less. And it is a good thing when the care of the members for one another is ready to recognise and feel that.

But the second half of the verse receives far less attention, though it is of equal length and full of content: *or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it*. Darby renders it even more strongly: *if one member be glorified, all the members rejoice with it*. The first and most prominent example of a member being glorified is the Head himself — and we may rejoice with Him, for He has been glorified. As for members still on earth being honoured: the apostle Paul himself wrote of receiving a thorn in the flesh lest he be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations. The question of his being honoured had arisen — and God dealt with that for his own good. There is also the truth that suffering and glory are proportioned together in God's purpose: *our light affliction which is but for a moment worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*.

Ye Are Christ's Body — Members in Particular

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul says: *Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular*. Darby renders it: *now ye are Christ's body*. A clergyman once insisted that the verse meant each local assembly is a body of Christ — and in effect read it as *ye are a body of Christ*. But that article is not in the original. The Greek has no definite article here, and the force is: ye have body character. Those gathered at Corinth, assembled on the principle of the one body, expressed that body there — not to the exclusion of members elsewhere, so as to make of themselves an isolated, independent body, but as a local expression of the one whole.

Membership in Scripture is never membership of a local assembly. No one has yet produced a verse showing membership in a local congregation. It is membership of Christ, membership of one body — and nothing smaller than that. The language by which people speak betrays their view: to say *I am a member of such and such a church* reflects a doctrine of local bodies. But if one holds to local bodies and also acknowledges one body on earth, the real meaning of the doctrine — whatever is said — is that the one body on earth is composed of many bodies. Some will say this openly: each assembly is a body. That creates a monstrosity — one head with many bodies — and it is not what the Scripture presents.

God Hath Set Some in the Church

Verse 28 states a sovereign fact: *God hath set some in the church*. There is no hint of consultation, no election, no appointment by men. God set them. And the question at once arises: what church? If this means the local assembly, one must ask what apostles were set in Corinth. No name has ever been produced. The answer is that this is the church on earth — the one body of Christ viewed in its completeness here. The apostles were not set in the local assembly where they happened to live. They were set in the church, the body of Christ on earth, and their character as apostles went with them wherever they went. Peter was not an

apostle only when at home, and a visitor somewhere else.

Notice also the precise wording: God has set them *in* the church — not *over* it. That is an immense difference, particularly when the people of God are viewed under the similitude of a flock. One set in the flock is a shepherd among the sheep. One set over the flock is of a different conception entirely. Peter's instruction in his first letter is plain: *shepherd the flock of God which is among you, exercising oversight — not as lording it over your possessions, but being models for the flock*. The oversight is exercised from within, among. That is how God has set His gifts in the assembly.

The Divine Order — First, Second, Third

The list in verse 28 has a striking feature: the first three items are explicitly ordered. First apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers. After that, no ordinal numbers are given — the subsequent gifts are simply listed. There is a divine order, and it is to be recognised.

There is a common inversion of this order in much of Christendom. The gifts that produce the most striking outward effect — miracles, tongues, healings — are brought to the front, made the subjects of emphasis and advertisement, while the first three recede or disappear. If there were a billboard by the highway, the flashing word would be *Miracles*. But what a perversion of the order the Spirit of God has set before us. The first is apostles — now passed. The second is prophets — who address the state of conscience before God. The third is teachers — who open the Word. These come first. And a prophetic voice that addresses the state of the Lord's people faithfully is often resented, disliked, and subjected to character assassination for doing exactly what God has placed him to do.

It is worth noting that in saying apostles have passed, it is possible that some of the other gifts listed here have also passed — that is a proper inquiry. But one cannot say that because apostles have passed, nothing else can have passed. The

Irvingites faced this very issue early in the Brethren movement — attempting to restore apostles along with other gifts, while holding a seriously defective doctrine of the Lord's person. The Lord is the Holy One: as we read in Luke 1:35, *that holy thing which shall be born of thee*. He took holy humanity, not carnal humanity. His impeccability rested not in a thin wire welded to a strong pillar, but in the holiness of His person itself — He is holy, and His humanity is therefore holy also.

Helps and Governments

Helps — the word carries a nautical sense. In Acts 27, in the storm, the sailors undergirded the ship: they passed a rope beneath the hull and pulled the two ends tight, causing the planks to hold together more firmly. This is the same word. So the helps spoken of here are not just general helpfulness scattered in every direction, but the kind of help that binds the saints together and strengthens the mutual expression of their unity. Phoebe is described as a helper of many — precisely that character of gift. Helpful acts used to establish favouritism or personal influence would be the opposite of this.

Governments carries the sense of pilotage — the pilot who comes aboard a vessel approaching harbour, knowing where the shoals are, and navigating the ship safely through. It has to do with guidance, and it is a gift wherever the one who has it is found in the body. This is distinct from oversight, which is a local charge: *ordain elders in every city, as I commanded thee*. The gift of government is in the body; the office of overseer is in the city.

Are All? — Rhetorical Questions That Demand a No

The rhetorical questions of verses 29 and 30 build to a clear point: by the time all are asked and answered, the answer to each is No. Not all are apostles. Not all are prophets. Not all are teachers. Not all work miracles. Not all have gifts of

healing. Not all speak with tongues. Not all interpret. The Spirit of God expects that answer, and the Corinthians, in their state of disorder, were acting as though the answer were Yes — as if any who opened their mouths would find a tongue there.

Those who insist that speaking in tongues is the evidence of the Spirit's indwelling must put a Yes to that final question. One may work through the whole list — are all apostles, no; are all prophets, no — until arriving at the tongue question, and there the answer shifts to Yes. There is nowhere to go with that. It is not bowing to the authority of the Scripture. And what they make the distinguishing feature of their Christianity is placed toward the lower end of this list, not the higher.

Covet Earnestly the Best Gifts — And a More Excellent Way

Covet earnestly the best gifts — this is addressed to the assembly, not to the individual seeking self-promotion. The thrust is that the assembly might desire that God would raise up among them the gifts that most build up the body. One Pentecostal writer, reading this verse, proceeded to pray for God to make him this gift and that gift — going through an entire list for himself. That is taking the verse in precisely the wrong direction. Self is at the centre of it. But the assembly might pray: Lord, send us a teacher. Lord, send us a prophet. Hannah's prayer for Samuel is the right spirit — she desired a good thing for the sake of Israel, for the sake of God, not simply for her own gratification as a mother. Corinth could have prayed in those days for the Lord to send them an apostle — and He actually did, in the person of Paul.

And yet — *I show unto you a more excellent way*. Darby renders it beautifully: *I show unto you a way of more surpassing excellence*. Excellence is very high. Surpassing excellence goes beyond it. And more surpassing excellence goes beyond that again. The recommendation in those words could not be stronger. It

points to what has been greatly lacking at Corinth throughout the epistle — tremendous self-occupation has controlled everything, including the abuse of gifts addressed in chapter 14. What follows in chapter 13 is the display of God's own nature. There is nothing higher than what God is in Himself — and God is love.

— *Study ends* —