

Review on Miracles

Last week we discussed the question of whether the miraculous gifts are still in operation. Since the primary purpose of miracles is to confirm new revelation that has not yet been confirmed, it's difficult to understand the need for miracles today.

We can observe a decrease in the mention and occurrence of miracles even as we progress through the NT.

And right after the NT, the Church witnessed a sharp decline in miraculous occurrences.

Origen (185-254): "Miracles began with the preaching of Jesus, were multiplied after His ascension, and then decreased. But even now some traces of them remain with a few..." (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.2 cited in 4 Views p.114)

Chrysostom (347-407) lamented the fact that this passage is hard to interpret because the gifts had ceased (Morris 167)

Over and over in the NT we are called to minister to one another in the areas of mercy, teaching, exhortation, leadership, giving, etc. But never are we told to minister to each other with the miraculous gifts.

You don't see commands like "Heal one another" or "Speak in tongues to one another" or "Perform miracles for one another" or "Raise one another from the dead."

The claims of miracles in certain churches today are...

1. Mostly not verifiable
2. Nothing like the miracles of Christ and the Apostles
3. Very similar to the kinds of claims made by charlatans and phonies.
4. Most prolific among those with the worst doctrine – just the opposite of what you would expect given the purpose of the miracles (to validate a message or messenger).

Those people teach that we should constantly experience miracles, and if we don't it's because of a lack of faith.

By I can point to someone who had plenty of faith – faith far greater than a mustard seed – surely the greatest faith of any man who ever walked the earth: Jesus Christ. And He went His first 30 years of life without experiencing any miracles.

Why the Ranking?

28 And 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.

The last few weeks we have been examining the question of why we have an apparent ranking of gifts in v.28. After a whole chapter on how no part of the body can exalt itself above the others, and no part of the body is expendable or unimportant, how is it that Paul now says "This gift is first, this one second...?"

One possibility is that Paul is thinking chronologically. It's true that the Apostles came first, followed by the prophets and teachers.

But even if that's the case, I still think there is a sense in which Paul is giving some preeminence to those gifts. Otherwise it's hard to imagine why he would bother with the ranking.

The fact that Paul gives preeminence to the Apostles is no surprise, given our study of Apostles

last week. Apostles are always first.

Eph.4:11-12 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service

Apostles were the highest authority in the church. To disobey an Apostle was to disobey God. Next in authority must have been the prophets, who spoke the words of God verbatim.

Together the Apostles and Prophets revealed the New Testament. And in doing so served to form the very foundation of the Church

Eph.2:19-22 Consequently, you are...members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple...

And next came the teachers in the local church (elders). Paul calls them teachers here because that's the part he's emphasizing.

He doesn't say "fourth..." He ranks the first three, then for the rest just says, "then..."

And there is another difference between the first three and the rest of the list. The first three are actually people, the rest are gifts.

The NIV smooths out the very awkward Greek:

28 And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, also gifts of healing, helps, gifts of administration, and different kinds of tongues.

In doing that, Paul highlights the offices of the first three.

No gift is superior to any other gift, but there are some positions of authority that are higher than others.

The point is that the ministry of the Word is to be preeminent. All authority in the Body is based in the Word of God.

The Apostles and Prophets had direct authority as the revealers of God's Word, and the teachers in the Church have indirect, relative authority inasmuch as their teaching correctly reflects the Word, they are authoritative.

The Rest of the List

miracles, gifts of healing,

Those gifts we have already examined when they appeared in the first list.

But then come two gifts that have not appeared yet in the chapter:

helps, gifts of administration,

The gift of helps only appears here and it appears without explanation.

Most commentators seem to think it has to do with helping those in trouble – so it would be basically another name for mercy.

Another possibility based on the way this term was used in other Greek literature is that it referred to administrative help – like what we refer to with the term "support staff."

Thiselton argues for the latter, and suggests that it would include the former (many of the administrative details involved helping the poor – Acts 7)

From the very beginning, there is an obvious need for people who can implement decisions that have been made, and set up and manage the infrastructure of the church.

This is a great gift for a deacon to have. An elder must have management and leadership skills to be qualified as an elder, but he is to give most of his attention to the ministry of the Word and prayer, and it is the deacons who enable him to do that.

Every leader treasures people with this gift. It's one of the most ordinary, non-supernatural gifts a person can have, and yet it's vital that we notice that it appears in this list.

Someone who can help with administrative details is a part of the Body who has been given

that ability and placed as that part of the Body by the Holy Spirit.

It's a Spiritual gift, and it's just as much a mighty work of God as the ability to make a blind man see.

It's an under-appreciated work of the Spirit, because it seems like such a natural ability.

But again, you don't measure how much God is in something by how miraculous it is. Maybe the person had administrative skills before becoming a Christian. But when he becomes a believer, it becomes a spiritual gift, in that the Holy Spirit takes that ability and uses it as a vital part of the workings of the Kingdom of God.

If you were a hand before becoming part of the body, so what? A hand is only useful as a part of the body.

In the last century much of the Church has responded to the gifts with the same, erroneous attitude as the Corinthians – the more miraculous a gift is, the better it is.

So we have had the tongues movement, and prophecy movements, and healing movements...

I find it interesting that there is never a helps movement or mercy movement.

Movements are always centered on the more showy gifts. But whenever there is a tongues movement or miracles movement or prophecy movement, all that does is diminish the importance of the other gifts.

Hand movements and eye movements have intimidated a lot of feet and ears into thinking their gift is less important.

gifts of administration

I realize this is a little confusing, since I have defined **helps** as **gifts of administration**. The NIV translators defined this word that way.

This word is κυβερνήσεις (*kuberneseis*).

This is the Greek word from which we get our word "cyber" in cyber-space. It was coined in the 50s by the guy who invented the term "cybernetics," having to do with the electronic transfer of information.

I'm really not sure what his reasoning was for using this root, because the Greek root *kuber* means "head."

It's a term that has to do with leadership. It's used only here, although the masculine noun appears in Acts 27:11 and Rev.18:17. In both those passages it refers to the captain of a ship.

The term implies giving direction and guiding the ship away from the rocks.

These two gifts are vital for elders and deacons – especially *kubernesis* for elders and helps for deacons.

It's interesting that the teachers are placed above the leaders and administrators. I think that's significant for two reasons:

1. The NT gives no other leadership office besides elder and deacon. Those are the only two biblically sanctioned leadership roles in the church. So in an official way, the leaders and the administrators would be elders. And yet the elders are the primary teachers.

The teachers are above the leaders even though they are the same men.

The point is that an elder carries much more authority in his role as teacher than he does in his role as administrator or leader.

When I as a pastor stand behind the pulpit and expound the Word of God, that is the most authoritative thing that ever takes place in the church. To the degree that I am faithful to what the text is saying, that is direct authority from God.

If a pastor is teaching something that is a correct interpretation of Scripture, then the authority behind that is absolute.

On the other hand, my role as an administrator and as a "captain" of this ship, while it is still authoritative, is placed under the teaching of Scripture.

Don't misunderstand – God still calls the Church to be generally submissive and responsive to the leadership of the leaders – including administrative type decisions.

Nevertheless, there is still a big difference between me preaching to you and saying, "**And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be**

alert and always keep on praying for all the saints (Eph.6:18), and me saying, “At Creekside the corporate prayer time is Sundays from 6-7 pm.”

Both are authoritative. The Church is called by God to be submissive to both, but there are different kinds of submission, and out submissiveness direct preaching of the Word of God is one much higher order.

So there is a sense in which I, as a leader, am under the authority of my own preaching.

2. A second point of significance is that I believe there is the implication that more people are doing leadership and administrative work than just the official leaders.

And that makes perfect sense. There are all kinds of leadership roles that are not official. Every event, every little group that gets together, everything that involves more than a couple people requires some amount of leadership, and generally someone in the group steps forward and provides that.

And it’s usually someone with these gifts.

different kinds of tongues.

Paul keeps placing that last.

Diversity & Dependence

29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

In the Greek, Paul actually included the answer to each of these questions. They are not open questions. Literally it would translate, “Are all apostles? μή (No) Are all prophets? No.”

The point of that is the same point he’s been making all along - since not everyone has every gift, we need each other. You need the Body, and the Body needs you.

One of the most successful advertising campaigns ever was the Marlboro Man. It was successful, because we idolize guys like him.

Tough, rugged, and above all – independent. He’s out there in the rugged all by himself – just him and his horse. He doesn’t need anyone or anything.

He’s entirely on his own and doesn’t need a soul (except for the convenience store guy to sell him the cigarettes).

We idolize people who do things single-handedly. When the NBA wants to captivate the imagination of millions of young watchers they don’t show role-player off the bench making a great pass or setting an important pick.

We idolize those who are independent, because of our falseness. That’s part of our sinful nature.

It’s driven by pride. God is the only independent being in existence. He is the only one who doesn’t need anyone or anything.

The rest of us were created to be dependent, and we find out truest fulfillment and meaning and satisfaction as a piece of a greater whole.

And it’s a sinful thing when we try to rise above our level of creation

And if you want to see the ugliness of the evil of independence, just watch when someone in your family decides to be independent. (I’m not talking about a child growing up and moving out on his own. I’m talking about someone living in the home who just decides to check out of the family).

He no longer cares about the rest of the family – he’s just into his own thing. Ironically, when a family member decides to become independent, he becomes a far greater drain on the family than he ever was before.

And the reason for that is no one can just become independent. He is just as dependent and needy as ever. He doesn’t stop taking from the family; he just stops contributing.

That’s sin. The Marlboro man should stop goofing around on his horse, get into town, get a job and start making a contribution to society.

When just sit back and take a look at my library, I am staggered at how dependent I am upon those who have gone before. I have been given so much by the Church, sometimes I’m

overwhelmed with a sense of just wanting to give something back.

And you can give something of priceless worth back – through your spiritual gift.

So don't seek independence. Don't aspire to rugged individualism. Seek to function as part of the Body for the building up of the Body.

And since God has arraigned all the parts of the Body, to devalue your gift or someone else's gift is to criticize the Holy Spirit.

When there is a blizzard a lot of business send home all the non-essential personnel. I always wonder about the psychological impact of that on those people. "Send home all the people who aren't really needed." "OK – you can go."

If we ever had a real bad blizzard on Sunday morning and decided to send home all the non-essential personnel, you would all have to stay here.

This is part of the unity of the Spirit from Eph.4. He unites us by making us all dependent upon each other, and giving each of us responsibilities to the rest.

We have people today that bounce from church to church to church and fade in and out, and disappear for months at a time...

The only way that's possible is that they are not ministering their gift and fulfilling their role. Because if they were embroiled in carrying out their responsibility to the Body, they wouldn't be able to do that.

Probably the Corinthians were trying to urge people to seek the gift of tongues rather than just be content with whatever gift they already had, and v.30 shows the folly of that.

Desire the Greater Gifts

31 But you eagerly desire the greater gifts.

The big question on this verse is if it is a command or a rebuke. Is Paul saying, "Obviously not everyone has every gift, and yet you turkeys are lusting after the more showy, spectacular gifts!"

...or is he saying, "Everyone has different gifts, but you ought to seek the greater gifts."?

At first glance, you might think it's the former. All along it seems like he has been arguing against seeking greater gifts. Why would he suddenly command it?

But if we look closely at what he says, I think it very likely is a command.

I say that mostly because of the word **greater**. If Paul is talking about the more showy gifts, or tongues, I can't imagine Paul would refer to those gifts as the greater gifts – especially in light of the ranking he just gave (where tongues is dead last).

If we want to know what Paul means by the greater gifts, it seems to me the place to look is in v.28, where he just got done telling us which gifts were first, second and third.

Not only that, but if we look at how Paul uses the phrase **you eagerly desire** in the near context, we see that it's a command.

We see the same form of the same word twice in ch.14.

1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

There they are being commanded to desire gifts, and to especially desire prophecy. And the reason is in v.5 **He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues** (The word **greater** is the same word as in 12:31)

So he starts out ch.14 by telling them to seek the greater gift of prophecy. Then look how he ends the chapter:

39 Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.

The phrase **be eager** is the exact same term translated **you earnestly desire** in 12:31 and 14:1.

So I think it's best to take it as an imperative. Paul is introducing a new thought – no one should disparage anyone's gift, but all of us should seek after that which brings us revelation from God.

Paul will elaborate on that in ch.14.

I don't think he is saying we should exalt the Apostles, prophets and teachers above everyone else. The point here isn't so much the people as much as the gift.

I also think it would be a mistake for us to read this and think, "I've got to figure out a way to

get the spiritual gift of teaching, or Apostleship.”

The point isn't that you as an individual should seek to have the greater gifts. The point is that we as a church should orient ourselves to seek after those ministries that bring us the Word of God.

Some have criticized us at Creekside saying we are focussed more on Scripture than we are on ministering to the poor, or social involvement, or music, or outreach events...

And they are right. We are more focused on the preaching and teaching of the Word than we are on all those things, because God's Word is supreme above everything else.

And now I will show you the most excellent way.

The gifts are all to be held in high regard. And the ministries that bring us the Word of God are greater still. But now he's going to show us that which is greatest of all.