

*Designed
To
Grow*

**Exploring God's Purpose
For The Church**

Dave Taylor

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Introduction

Growth. Development. Maturity.

As we read the New Testament, the whole thrust of the message emphasises **onward movement, progress, moving forward towards the goal.**

Not only of individuals, but of the assembled company of those who have expressed their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ – the Church. We who have been brought into relationship with the living God have also been brought into relationship with each other, and this relationship is geared towards our mutual benefit. This is not some man-made society, another ‘self-help group’, but part of the plan and purpose of God himself. We are **designed to grow together.**

In these pages I have tried to put together some thoughts on various aspects of our shared life, particularly with regard to this Biblical emphasis on growth. Corporate growth is the main focus but inevitably that depends on – and overlaps with – personal spiritual growth. And **spiritual growth** is unashamedly the goal, from which all other aspects of personal and corporate development will spring – in a ‘naturally supernatural’ way.

Personal spiritual growth is not the main focus of these pages but is the **absolutely vital foundation** for corporate growth and I have written elsewhere about that.¹

Digging into some of the Bible passages about Church life as I was writing these chapters, I started looking in greater depth at what Paul writes about ‘Building the House’, particularly in **1 Corinthians**, and began to be interested in his use of words. Words that sometimes have not been very clearly translated, often because we have no direct English equivalent, with the result that our understanding has been hampered and the Holy Spirit has been restricted by our lack of clarity.

I make no claim to be a Greek scholar, but words have always fascinated me and I love to get to their really basic meanings, so this is what I have tried to do as I have looked at what Paul wrote. With the help of books and study aids over the years, I have started to ‘unpack’ some of these words and seeing how they are linked to each other has served to further emphasise the clear picture that Paul had of how the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ has been designed to grow. I believe that clear principles emerge which are as valid today as they were when they were written in the first century. Why would they not be?

So the *Building the House* chapter is a study in Paul’s understanding of ‘normal’ church growth. We do not know whether he ever read John’s account of the life of the Lord Jesus, but Paul’s passion for the life and growth of the Church seems to be second only to that of his Lord, as revealed especially in **John 17**.

Some may read what I have written and complain that I am trying to turn the clock back. On the contrary, the clock needs to be turned forward! For far too long we have accepted as ‘normal’, ways of meeting and ‘worship’ which owe much more to the old covenant under the Law given to Moses than they do to the covenant of new life in Jesus and the forward leading of the Holy Spirit. What we have sometimes branded as ‘progressive’ and modern all too often proves to be thinly masked legalism which leaves us with a formula of words borrowed from the New Testament, but in reality stranded in the Old Testament.

Although I have tried to put into words the things that are on my heart about several aspects of our Father’s purpose for the Body of Christ, please do not be deceived by any appearance of ‘completeness’ in these chapters. They are not complete by any means, and probably most of what I have pieced together here represents what I feel we **need** to see, rather than what is already in place and visible – **anywhere** ! The best these pages can do may be to point to more discovery, more seeking, more revelation. More real growth.

¹ There are many notes at www.justonecandle.uk , especially perhaps ‘*No Mere Remembrance*’, 2017 and ‘*First Steps to Maturity*’, 2018/19 and ‘*By His Doing*’, 2018/20

Each of these chapters stands on its own but relates to other parts and, inevitably, there is quite a lot of overlap and some repetition. This is perhaps more of a collection of related essays or articles, more than an actual book.

* * * * *

When we are faced with fresh understanding, we always have a clear choice: Will we respond to what we have received in the obedience of faith, or will we push it to one side and continue as we have done for years? Response is risky but holds the promise of growth and fulfilment. Refusal may look safer but carries the seeds of deterioration and decay – ultimately of death!

Dave Taylor
Lapford, Devon, U.K.
January 2023

“History will reveal that
the Church has gained or lost power
exactly as she has moved
toward or away from
the inwardness of her faith”

A.W.Tozer in *The Divine Conquest*

“Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad
and give the glory to Him,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come and
His bride has made herself ready.”

The heavenly multitude in *Revelation 19*

What Is Church Growth?

Ask any Christian believer, any church leader, what they understand by 'Church Growth' and you will get several different answers, often more than one from one individual.

Is it numbers? Not many Christian fellowships are content with the numbers of people who are involved. We would all like to see more folk interested in the message of Jesus and taking that interest further to the point of initial commitment – and then much further. We read the Book of Acts and hear stories of times of great blessing in years past or in other present-day situations and long to see the hundreds and thousands coming to real life-changing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we can't see hundreds and thousands, then even ten would be very welcome! **Yes, we would all like to see larger numbers . . .**

Is it activity? We probably all know, or have known, church fellowships where things seem to be 'humming', and perhaps remember times when we were involved where they were. There always seems to be something happening, whether with one age group or another, or maybe right across the whole fellowship! Perhaps we have been (or still are) part of a group like that? It can be really exhilarating, feeling that you are part of something that is really running as it should.

Is it spiritual depth? Whether from the speakers on Sundays, mid-week study times, prayer meetings or just the general level of awareness and fellowship, do we get the impression that this fellowship has some really solid spiritual foundations, that everyone shares a passion for a real walk with God?

Is it impact on the community? Is the local community aware of these Christian believers? Do we make a difference where we are? Folks may not agree with us, but do they know where we stand and that we are happy to help wherever we can?

Yes, all of the above – and some more!

But even if we added up all these factors and could make sure that every local Christian fellowship was exhibiting them all, would we have what our Father is looking for in the process of preparing a Bride for his Son?

I believe that there is much more to church growth than we have often realised. There are some aspects of growth that we have **missed by mistake**. Others we have **carefully, deliberately and repeatedly avoided**, fearing that they may threaten our established structures and comfortable routines. In both cases, we are the poorer as individuals and the Body of Christ suffers loss and arrested development.

I do not pretend to fully tackle all the areas of need in these pages, but I hope that at least some of these thoughts will be useful as we are "looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God"¹

¹ 2 Peter 3:12

Growth In The Church

The spiritual growth of the individual Christian believer is a subject that has attracted countless hours and pages of teaching over the centuries, and rightly so. Right at the foundation of any aspect of church life is the personal, responsive and inter-active relationship of the individual with the living God, through his Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

Take away that real relationship, and the whole edifice crumbles. History, both ancient and present-day, allows us to see the rotting hulks of former 'great works of God' where the machinery has taken over from the life. Eerily, the wheels still seem to turn, the language remains largely unchanged, but the reality of spiritual life that once characterised every aspect has now become desiccated into routine and apparent orthodoxy, "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power."¹

So, what is to be done? With so much failure in evidence, should we accept that everything we do will eventually decay into dying husks of man-made effort, or should we simply steer clear of anything that deals with corporate spiritual life and concentrate solely on the individual?

Many servants of God have chosen to focus their own ministry on the second option, though usually suggesting to the individuals whom they seek to help that they also seek out fellowship with others who believe. What shape that fellowship might take, how it might enhance the spiritual development of the individual or affect the surrounding community – these questions are too often left hanging in the air, simply with the vague advice that 'fellowship with other Christians is important' and therefore not to be neglected.

In the hope of finding such genuine fellowship, some new believers have joined themselves to structures which, although there may be real believers in them, even leading them, owe much more to tradition than to life, more to the organisation of man than to the working of the living God. Not surprisingly, most spiritual growth which these believers may experience will probably spring from their own exploration, rather than being channelled to them through the company they are part of.

In this day of online communication, some believers have no local contact at all; everything is online – evangelism, teaching, fellowship, prayer. Yes, all means of human communication are valid, but we definitely need more than this!

Another alternative has been to set up a system, seemingly based on Scripture, where everything is prescribed and ordered, often strictly according to the interpretation of one individual or a very small group of individuals. It looks good, it may function well, there may be recognition of gifts and ministry among those in leadership, but often alongside a level of 'authority' given to them to direct the lives of the others in 'their' fellowship, sometimes in worryingly fine detail!

Many of us have experienced some or all of these options but are not satisfied. Neither the old traditions nor the new systems seem to reflect the life of the church that we find in the New Testament. Is the quest hopeless? Should we just settle for what we can see around us or seek to find a better way?

* * * * *

I long for the transformation of our existing fellowships as we begin to see the reality of the Church and how our Father has designed for us to grow in fellowship. Not just to 'go to church', not even to be an active participant, but to grow and contribute to the growth of the church where we are – and so to the preparing of the Bride!² There seems little question that much – perhaps all – of our man-made structure will have to be put aside, but the real growth and development that has already started in small ways needs to be able to blossom and flourish to enable the Bride to 'make herself ready' . . .

¹ 2 Timothy 3:5

² Ephesians 4:14-16, Revelation 19:7

A Simple Process

So, is there some sort of mystique about spiritual growth in the Church? Or is it a taboo subject? Can we see it happening as it is supposed to?

In fact, to some extent it is already happening, though we may not have noticed it or given it the worth that it really carries.

The times when we have really felt that we have 'a word from the Lord' to pass on to an individual **and** have had the confidence to actually share it . . . helping by doing something for a fellow-believer . . . passing on Biblical teaching that has helped us . . .

And, of course, being on the 'receiving end' of any of these! Real refreshment! ¹

With refreshing simplicity, Paul sets out how the process of church growth works. Please note: he is not setting out how it supposed to work, or suggesting an ideal towards which to aim. This is a description of a **process which is already going on** in our fellowship contacts, in our sharing together, in the very real shared life that we have with other believers.

So what is this simple process?

"So that, no longer children – tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming – we would grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." ² (fairly literal translation)

Read these words and then perhaps re-read them a couple of times. Paul is saying that believers together **are** a body, of which the head is the Lord Jesus, and that we are to grow up in 'all aspects' into him. More amazing, perhaps, is that it is the body itself which causes its own growth as each individual part works properly.

You may know this passage already or have just looked it up, and perhaps you are already protesting that Paul is writing here about those with special functions in the Church – such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – and then protesting that you are not one of those people!

Yes, Paul **is** writing about those with special ministries, but in the context of the whole body growing together. For too long, this passage and others have been used to promote and preserve an elite of Christian 'leadership' which, though giving lip-service to the priesthood of all believers, actually elevates some specific people to a special position and thereby relegates everyone else to just being ordinary. Effectively, the 'clergy and laity' model is still preserved, believers miss out on large slices of their inheritance and the Bride does NOT make herself ready.

In fact, Paul is advocating the **direct opposite** !

Look at what he writes in the verses just before this passage: "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."³

He does **not** say (as the Authorised 'King James' Version has it) that he gave these special ministries "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ". That comma after 'saints' gives completely the wrong picture. It looks like those who have been given these ministries have to do everything:– make the saints perfect (!), do the work of the ministry and edify the whole body.

There are no commas in the original Greek, but the words themselves are clear:– the apostles,

¹ Philemon 1:7 & 20, 1 Corinthians 16:18

² Ephesians 4:14-16

³ Ephesians 4:11-13

prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are given ‘towards’ the equipping of the saints ‘into’ the work of service and ‘into’ the building up of the body of Christ, until we all reach maturity. So it is the ‘saints’ (that’s all believers) who are to be equipped for service to build up the body, and the task given to those with these ministries is not to DO the various things themselves, but to equip the church to do them!

This is not the mostly passive picture of ‘church life’ that we may be used to, where the leaders do almost everything, whether they are paid or not.

The passive model is not the church, but an over-active model is not the answer, either – trying to get everyone to join in and ‘do things’. Sadly many who are in leadership roles themselves often seem to have very little idea of the Lord’s purpose for his Church and may end up organising or managing rather than giving real spiritual leadership.

The biggest obstacles to real church growth are often our own ideas about it. Perhaps the most fundamental mistake is to equate the church with an ordinary human club or society, and to try to organise ‘our church’ efficiently so that we can run as many activities as possible and get the maximum number of people involved. When we succeed with that, there is often a buzz of achievement and a sense of getting somewhere. But we really need to stop and ask the Lord what he has in mind for his Body. The answers may be a little unexpected, but we need to get some important principles established along the way.

If we run all these activities, we will want them to be valuable and contribute to the spiritual growth of all the people who are involved. We may not be too sure exactly **how** that is going to happen, but naturally we hope that the Lord will use the opportunities . . .

. . . and of course he often does! But that does NOT automatically mean that our activities are fully endorsed by him, nor prove that we are necessarily on the right road.

* * * * *

Paul writes in ***Ephesians 4*** that the Body causes its own growth, as each part works properly and in relationship with the other parts. So this process will continue whenever members of the Body are together, relating to each other and working properly. This is not about activities, this is about sharing our lives, and the basis of that sharing is that we are together **in Christ**. Not that we belong to the same group – named or un-named – or share other loyalties, simply that we are in Christ.

So, What Is The Church?

Before we go much further, we need to establish what we mean by the Church and, more importantly, what the Lord means by it!

Perhaps then we can begin to understand what he means by the church in a specific place.

The word translated 'church' in the New Testament is not a religious word. It was applied to any gathering of people who had been called out in some way and had come together. The word 'ekklesia' simply means 'called out' and was used for both the riot in Ephesus and for the 'lawful assembly' (i.e. the courts) where it was suggested that any problems could be resolved.¹

The Lord Jesus used this word himself² and he was clearly referring to the company of those who believed and followed him.

In New Testament times, many Jews could not read Hebrew fluently, so the Old Testament scriptures were also translated into Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire, and this word 'ekklesia' turns up again in that translation (the 'Septuagint'), though this time with special meaning for the Jewish people as the nation who had been called out by God himself, and particularly in two settings:-

1) Referring to the time when the whole company of the people of Israel, who had just escaped from the slavery of Egypt, gathered at the foot of the mountain while Moses met with God and was given the Ten Commandments.³

2) Referring to the regular gathering of all of Israel to the place where God had chosen to show his presence, initially in the (very mobile) 'tent of meeting' and then in the temple in Jerusalem.⁴

Obviously, a gathering of people who have been called out depends on two factors: A call and the response to that call. There were occasions in the Old Testament when some of the tribes of Israel did not turn up at the gathering as they were expected to. Trouble resulted because there was a clear understanding that it was necessary to respond to the call and come together.

Equally, there were strict rules about who could and could not be part of the gathering. The most important of these rules was that you had to be part of God's chosen people, the Jews, although right from the start there was room for outsiders who wanted to be 'joined to' the Jewish nation. In identifying with the people of God, in a very real way they were also responding to his call.⁵ Throughout the whole Old Testament there are constant references to the congregation / assembly / gathering of Israel, translated into the Septuagint using the Greek word 'ekklesia'.

So, if you were a Christian believer in, say, Ephesus, when Paul wrote to you about something he called the church ('ekklesia'), you knew exactly what he meant: a gathering of people who had responded to a call. And as this was the 'ekklesia' of the Lord Jesus Christ, it was understood that each member had responded to his call. If you knew the Jewish scriptures as well, you had the additional benefit of knowing that this word also described the assembling of God's own chosen people over the centuries of their history. A rich word indeed!

How did you know whether you were part of that church? Simple! If you had responded to the call of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, you were in. If you had not responded, you were not in.

So (for example) you could define the church in Ephesus in just four words: **In Christ, in Ephesus.**

We shall come back to some of the implications of that beautiful simplicity.

¹ Acts 19:32 & 39

² Matthew 16:18 & 18:17

³ Deuteronomy 4:10, 9:10 & 18:16 and Acts 7:38, where 'ekklesia' is translated 'congregation'.

⁴ Joshua 8:35, 1 Kings 8:22 and many more!

⁵ Numbers 15:15, Deuteronomy 23:1-8, 1 Chronicles 13:1-8, Nehemiah 13:1-3

More Than Just A Holding Operation

We need to look more closely at the Church. Not just what it is or who is in it, but also to answer the question: 'What is the Church here for?' In other words, what is God's purpose for his Church?

A Waiting Room? In practice, many of us do not look at the Church as having any particular purpose. It's just there! Perhaps we may think of it as a kind of waiting room for 'going to heaven', something that Christians belong to in the meanwhile. And perhaps we think it doesn't make much difference how we live, what we do, or how much or little we do, while we are in the waiting room.

A Centre for Helping Others? William Temple said: "The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members." So he saw the purpose of the Church as being mainly outward-looking, an agency for making the world a better place. Over the centuries, Christians, both as individuals and corporately, have excelled in caring for others and there is absolutely no doubt that this is part of our calling. But is it our primary purpose?

A Religious Club? Some people like gardening and belong to gardening clubs; some like the game of chess and belong to chess clubs; others like singing religious songs and listening to speakers and belong to 'churches'.

There is a grain of truth hiding in each one of these, but our Father's purposes reach much further. He has two points of focus for us: future and present.

The Future of the Church is much more than (as some have put it) 'Pie in the Sky when You Die'. If we dare to take off our religious blindfolds, we can see throughout the New Testament that the whole focus is **not** on 'going to heaven', but rather on the future establishment of the kingdom of God on this earth, and the preparation of those who will inherit that kingdom alongside their Lord.

When we begin to see this, all the encouragement from Paul and others towards spiritual growth and maturity makes much more sense.

If we are just here for a short while in some sort of waiting room, and the main goal is simply to get us to our 'heavenly home', then there doesn't seem to be much reason for us to develop in our relationship with our Father.

On the other hand, if we have been brought into the kingdom of God, if that kingdom is going to be established on earth at some time in the future and we are to have an active role in it, then our onward development is a vital ingredient in our Father's strategy. Think of the Church as a company of people who are a government in training, waiting for the time when the true king returns, the usurper of the realm has been overthrown and "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever." (**Revelation 11:15**)

We need to realise that we will definitely share in that kingdom! It was prophesied back in **Daniel 7:18 & 22** that "*the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come*" and "*the Ancient of Days came and judgment was passed in favour of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom.*" And **v.27** "*Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him.*" Wow!

As we begin to see this, some of Jesus' parables snap into sharper focus, such as in **Luke 19:12-27**, where he tells of a nobleman who "*went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and return*", leaving his servants with resources to continue doing his business. When the nobleman returns, he rewards the diligent servants by giving them responsibilities in his new kingdom. They have been trained by their experience and have proved their worth, so he gives them additional responsibilities. Not just household management or even the boss's business interests, but governance of several cities!

We can't pretend that this parable is about anything else but the kingdom of God. In **verse 11**, Luke tells us specifically **why** Jesus told the parable: "*Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was*

near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately.” The nobleman clearly represents the Lord Jesus himself; his servants – the disciples (and therefore the Church) and the kingdom which the nobleman went away to receive – the kingdom of God. The main purpose of the parable was to clarify that the kingdom of God was NOT ‘going to appear immediately’, and also to describe the process that would take place while the ‘nobleman’ was away and what would happen on his return, when he had received the kingdom.¹

And then that reassuring comment by Jesus to the disciples “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom” (**Luke 12:32**).

When we begin to understand that God’s purpose is to see his own kingdom established here on this earth – rather than whisking people off to ‘heaven’ – then the whole New Testament takes on a fresh light. There is a real sense of **preparation**, of growth, forward movement and development with a specific goal in view.

The passing of 2000 years since the New Testament was written has tended to make us think that it will never happen or, if it does, it cannot possibly be in our lifetime. Why not? As we read the New Testament, there are enough references to the anticipated return of the Lord Jesus to help us to see that the early Church lived in expectation that he would be back soon to take up the kingdom that his Father had promised to him, and that his followers would share in it with him.

So what has changed? Why has the Lord Jesus not returned in glory after all these years? He himself said that he did not know the day or the hour of his return; only the Father knew that (**Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32**). But why the delay?

Let me share one possibility with you. You may think this is completely ‘off the wall’, but at least give it some thought.

There are several references to the Church as the Bride of Christ², and also to the ‘marriage of the Lamb’.³ **Revelation 19:7** says “. . . and the bride has made herself ready.”

If you think of an ordinary human wedding, what is guaranteed to delay the start of the ceremony? It’s not often the bridegroom who keeps all the guests waiting. He is often waiting himself. But maybe the bride is not ready? She may be having second thoughts, or she may just not have quite got everything sorted out in good time, so she starts running late, and there is nothing that the bridegroom can do about it! He simply has to wait and hope that she will turn up. He is not going to go round to her house and chivvy her along to persuade her to come to the ceremony! It has to be her own choice and decision. The groom might perhaps send someone along to check that everything is OK and to help the bride to get ready, but he certainly cannot force her to come and marry him.⁴

The picture is clear, isn’t it? **If the bride has not made herself ready, the marriage will not go ahead.** Not on time, and maybe not at all!

When the Lord Jesus returns, he is coming back for a bride who will have made herself ready. If she is not ready, can we really expect him to come back?

In **2 Peter 3:11-12**, in the context of the coming of ‘the day of the Lord’, Peter writes: “*Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and **hastening** the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!*”

¹ For a series of simple studies on the Kingdom of God, see ‘[Revolution on Earth](http://www.justonecandle.uk)’ from www.justonecandle.uk

² Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7, 21:2, 21:9, 22:17

³ Revelation 19:7, 9

⁴ Friends have told me, very correctly, that I have described a typical Western wedding and not a Jewish one! The Jewish tradition was that the bride waited at her family home and was then led to the bridegroom’s home for the marriage ceremony. The picture may be different but the facts remain the same – the wedding can not and will not proceed until the Bride has made herself ready!

How can we possibly accelerate the return of the Lord Jesus? ¹ Let me say straight away that I do not believe that we can force God's hand and make him act faster than he wants to act. Watchman Nee wrote wisely that we can never speed up the work of God but we can all too easily delay it.

Imagine that you are driving along a nice clear road but your car does not seem to be going very fast, despite the fact that you have the accelerator pressed right down to the floor. What could possibly be wrong? How can you make it go faster? And then you notice that the handbrake is on; not fully on, perhaps, but on enough to hinder your progress, so you release the handbrake and the car immediately goes faster.

It seems to me that we are in a similar position. We can certainly not speed up what God is doing, but we **can** stop slowing him down. Perhaps we already know some of the ways in which we have the handbrake on at the moment, such as broken relationships which we are not dealing with, a lack of interest in real spiritual growth, an acceptance of dead religious practice or a refusal to face up to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. Those are just a few possible examples. There will be more.

¹ See 'Hastening His Return?' from www.justonecandle.uk

Unrealistic Inclusion

In our attempts to make people feel welcome in our meetings and various activities, we have often failed to say clearly who is in and who is not in the church. The result is usually the reverse of what we want, as those who are on the edges don't know whether they are truly in or not, and may 'hover' there, thinking that perhaps they are OK, perhaps they are members, perhaps they have been around long enough for others to accept them, perhaps even thinking that there is no line to cross and that absolutely everyone is included automatically!

That confusion is made worse and more complicated if there is any sort of membership scheme which people can join. It is quite easy to sign up to membership of a church fellowship and accept what would elsewhere be called the 'Terms and Conditions', simply because we want to be part of that group. Many of us accept Terms and Conditions (especially perhaps for the use of computer software) without even reading them. Hopefully, though, few would join a church fellowship without giving at least mental assent to whatever 'statement of faith' is put forward, but mental or even heart-felt assent to a set of doctrinal beliefs is still very far from being the same thing as real faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pity the poor leader of such a group, who tries to explain to a would-be member that, just because they are prepared to sign their agreement to the statement of faith, that does not make them a member of the church! In practice, many leaders may duck that responsibility, accept the new 'member' and hope for the best, that maybe they will eventually come to a real faith in the Lord Jesus!

Unless and until that happens, though, there is even more confusion and a growing lack of clarity.

So, let us be really clear. "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."¹ A very precise divide, spelled out for us by John, and simply following on from what the Master himself had said: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."² Jesus was very clear!

We do not become members of the Church by being part of a group, however spiritual that group may be. Each one needs to come into individual relationship with God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus himself called it being 'born again'.³

In the end, the only one who knows who is 'in' or not is the Lord himself, as Paul so clearly writes to Timothy: "*Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.'*"⁴ But, just because we ourselves are not in a position to accurately judge, there is no reason to be unclear. We can state very clearly that the Church consists only of those who are in living relationship with the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, and then seek to see real spiritual growth – individual and corporate – in all those who lay claim to that relationship.

The trouble is, we feel that we need to know who is in or out. We don't. That lies with the Lord, and only with him. If the church were a man-made organisation, then yes, we would need to know, so that we could get everyone's name down on our membership list and organise it all properly. But the church is a God-made company of people who have individually responded to the call of God by his Holy Spirit and have come to put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That same Holy Spirit is the one who undertakes any 'organisation' that may be needed and he has his own plans to join us together. His purpose is ultimate, so that the Bride will have made herself ready for the great marriage feast of the Lamb⁵, but his actions are immediate and practical, in our day-to-day interaction with each other and as we all meet together.

¹ 1 John 5:12

² John 3:36

³ John 3:3-7, 1 Peter 1:3 See also 'Reborn' from justonecandle.uk

⁴ 2 Timothy 2:19

⁵ Revelation 19:7

As We Meet Together – Pattern Or Passion ?

The believers in Corinth were an unruly lot. They were immature, there were divisions amongst them, there was gross sexual immorality . . . the list goes on!

BUT it is in a letter to this group of believers that we see the most complete example of a meeting in the early Christian Church. It is very different from what we may be more familiar with these days.

Please read **1 Corinthians 14:26-40**. Yes, if you can, please actually read it now, before you read on. This is a very brief description of an apparently normal Christian meeting. If Paul had been instructing them from scratch as to how a meeting might best be conducted, I am fairly sure that he would have gone into much more detail, but here he is describing a situation which is already familiar to the believers in Corinth.

In this part of his letter he is writing about the use of spiritual gifts and the main purpose of this passage seems to be to show how the use of these gifts fits in with the normal way that a meeting goes. So, in spite of the fact that these verses are not specifically aimed at telling us 'how to have a meeting', they are the most complete description of such a meeting that I can find in the New Testament. Other passages seem to fit with this, but none are so explicit.

The simplicity of meeting together without any 'order of service', written or unwritten, without even any plan of how the meeting will go, but leaving it all with the Holy Spirit to lead us as we wait on the Lord may sound to us either like a breath of fresh air, or else like the height of foolishness.

Our reaction is likely to depend very largely on experiences in our individual history, but maybe also on our reading of Scripture.

It seems that, right through the history of the Church, there have always been some groups somewhere who have stayed with this simplicity of meeting together. (See *The Torch of the Testimony* by J W Kennedy and especially *The Pilgrim Church* by E H Broadbent). Often, perhaps most often, these groups have been almost hidden and certainly not in the public eye.

But there have also been times when this approach has been thrust into greater public awareness. One such period was around the 1830s, when a large number of simple meetings were started and established in many parts of the world. Reading the accounts of those pioneers who were involved at the time, it is clear to see that they were convinced of this way of meeting for at least two reasons:–
1) because they could see something in the New Testament about how the early churches met together and
2) because they could see God at work in their midst in similar ways to what they could read in the book of Acts.

It does seem that the early churches met in this way and, although there is only this single passage that spells out in any detail the practice of meeting like this, all other passages seem to be in complete harmony with it. This gives the clear impression that this was the normal way in which believers used to meet, until – much later – different practices were introduced which effectively divided Christian believers into 'clergy' and 'laity', a division which has been inexplicably retained despite repeated cycles of reformation. With that division came the introduction of 'services' which were led by the 'clergy' and followed by the 'laity'. More about that shortly.

This false and anti-scriptural division was something that those 19th-century pioneers delighted to consign to the rubbish bin! They revelled in their freedom to 'break bread' together in simplicity, with no need for a special person to say special words to somehow 'consecrate the elements'. Theological training was no longer a prerequisite for a brother to teach from the Bible, and very effective evangelists and teachers emerged from humble origins. Small groups of believers were established, often initially meeting in homes, and many grew to become large and flourishing local churches.

A pattern was emerging, and it was a beautifully simple one! As long as hearts were on fire with the reality of a walk with God by his Spirit, the simplicity of this way of meeting and relating together was

certainly no hindrance to the Gospel, and seemed to be a positive catalyst to conversion and spiritual development.

Did the fire begin to burn less brightly? Did the framework of the pattern begin to be more important than the freedom of the Spirit who moved through it? Incredibly, did the simplicity which had once enabled so many now become a straightjacket of legalistic compliance? Sadly, in some places at least, it seems that all of these started to happen.

So, several generations pass, with the descendants of those original believers making up a large proportion of the ongoing fellowship, and the picture has a sad inevitability about it. Some of those whose parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had been passionate about the pattern could now only see a dying or dead husk of legalism and restraint. Those with a living faith looked for more, and often looked for it outside their familiar framework, not seeing any intrinsic value in apostolic simplicity. They could see the apparent blessing of God on other methods and so did not assign any great significance to the traditions in which they had been raised. Very understandable!

But what of the results? The 'open meeting', where no form is prescribed and there is no-one leading the meeting except the Spirit of God, has all but vanished. Where it still exists, it is sometimes an infrequent event. So infrequent that those present may have little idea or experience of how rich such a meeting can be. They are often so accustomed to being led from the front that they have not even considered the possibility that the Lord might want them to bring something to benefit the assembled company, let alone actively waiting on him in the hope of it.

As a result, very few participate and sometimes this sort of meeting becomes simply a 'chat time' to talk about 'what happened to me this last week'. Nothing wrong with that, but it is not what we see in **1 Corinthians 14**! Understandably, this sort of occasional 'open meeting' sometimes looks like a bit of a failure and so there is even less incentive to repeat the experiment.

If you have ever been in the position where you are in a meeting and feel that the Lord is giving you something to say – not planned or programmed – you may know the sense of a 'head of steam' building up inside you. Should you speak up and interrupt the meeting? Should you quietly go up to a leader and suggest that you have something to share? Would the setup of the meeting even allow the possibility of **either** of these two approaches? If you offered to share at some future time, would it be considered? Or do you just keep quiet and say nothing?

I am certain that, if you had been in that meeting in Corinth, you would have been free to share whatever you felt that the Lord had put on your heart. The 'head of steam' would not have built up very much because you would have known that all there were free to share as the Lord led them. No pressure, no awkwardness – just freedom!

As we read in the New Testament, these meetings seem to have been the prime opportunity for individual believers to exercise spiritual gifts for the benefit of the whole local body. In the process, those exercising the various gifts were also built up and encouraged.

Some may argue that there is **only one passage** in the New Testament that specifically describes what may have been a 'typical' church meeting. That is true, but there are repeated references to the exercise of gifts and the need for the church to be 'built up' by the effective contribution of each member. It is hard to see how any of our more organised meetings ('services') could provide any way for this to take place. If we remove the truly open Spirit-led meeting, we are denying a major opportunity for corporate and individual growth. If we retain it, but only on an infrequent basis, and especially if no scriptural teaching is given regarding the purpose of having an open meeting, then it becomes almost meaningless and nearly worthless.

The alternative is to continue with 'services', where the body of people is led from the front and more or less everything is arranged and done for them by whoever is 'leading the service', often one person or sometimes a small group of people. There is **not even one** New Testament example of any church meeting that looks like this!

In fact, the word 'service' itself should give us a clue as to what is going on. If someone performs a service for me, then they are doing for me something that I am either not willing or not able to do for

myself. That applies whether I ask a mechanic to check over my car or an online bookseller sends me a book in the post. They are performing a service on my behalf, something that I don't do myself.

So-called Christian 'services' are much the same – something done by one or more specially designated people on behalf of the vast majority. They do not exist in the New Testament, but the Law of Moses is full of them. They permeate all of the Old Covenant, as a specially-designated tribe of Israel (the Levites) performed all the ritual (including the music and singing) connected with the Tent of Meeting and then the Temple, and one single family from that tribe (the line of Aaron) were the hereditary family of priests who stood between the people and God, administering the sacrifices and therefore the ongoing relationship between the Israelites and the LORD.

There are some magnificent examples which can really lift our hearts: David bringing the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem (**2 Samuel 6**), Solomon dedicating the temple (**1 Kings 8**), Hezekiah restoring temple worship (**2 Chronicles 29**), Josiah reinstating the Passover (**2 Chronicles 35**). . .

But this was the old covenant, where priests were needed to mediate between the Almighty God and his chosen people, the Jews. The whole of the New Testament (perhaps especially Galatians and Hebrews, but a vast number of other passages too) is full of the fact that, as those who have put our trust in Jesus, we are in a completely new and different relationship with God as our Father, in direct contact with him through what the Lord Jesus has accomplished for us. We don't need human mediation to address God as our Father – we have direct access in Jesus' name!

It seems from history that the 'priestly' approach began to creep into the church surprisingly early, probably around AD 200, and it has been around ever since. The Catholic and Orthodox systems totally embrace a caste of priests and sadly it seems that almost all groups which have divided off from these systems have continued with some element of this human mediation. The Anglican system openly appoints people as priests, but even non-conformist groups appoint 'ministers' who lead 'services', both of which often bear an remarkable resemblance to the priestly model!

By the way, have you noticed a strange thing that often happens in Christian meetings? Whoever is 'leading the meeting' announces a song, which everyone then sings and, as we sit down again, the 'leader' says 'thank you'. I find myself asking "Why are they saying thank you? People say thank you when someone else has done something for them. What have we just done for the person leading the meeting?" All we have done is joined in with a song that they suggested. If that song has better enabled us to worship the Lord, why do they feel the need to say thank you? Surely, if anything, we should be saying 'thank you' to them for the suggestion! It can only be that the leader thinks that **we have** done something for them: we have gone along with their leading of their meeting!

How different from the picture we see in **1 Corinthians 14:26-40**, in fact in the whole of that chapter and also in **Ephesians 4:14-16**. In both these passages (as we shall see in the chapter, *Building the House*) Paul's emphasis is on the building up of the Body of Christ, and how it is the members of the Body themselves who all contribute to the building process, each one functioning properly and bringing their contribution to the benefit of the whole.

* * * * *

On a very practical note, a little while ago I had a conversation with a leader in a Christian fellowship in which the style of meeting has changed significantly over the years. More than twenty years ago, the default position was that all their meetings on a Sunday morning would be 'open', though occasionally different styles were adopted on a one-off basis. Quite often it used to be a case of trying to fit everyone in who had something to share and the meetings were full in at least two respects: 1) there was often only just enough time available to fit in all that different ones had to share and 2) there were not many spare seats in the small hall.

The situation has changed in that fellowship. The open meeting is now the exception rather than the rule and it often seems that people don't know how to handle it. Far from squeezing in as much as could possibly be managed, now the open meetings often finish early because of the lack of content and contribution. The much larger hall now holds many fewer people. (Personally, I don't think that is a coincidence!) The decision has been made to have 'services' and even the occasional open meetings are referred to as 'open services'! In defence of this change, the leader told me how

he recalled open meetings in which there were long silences of up to 15 minutes or so. We agreed that sometimes silences could be valuable but we also agreed that such long ones are not desirable.

So, what is the response? Should we stick with 'services' because open meetings 'don't work'? Or perhaps we have begun to see that the open style of meeting might, after all, be the most effective way to foster growth and mutual benefit in fellowship, not merely because it complies with an approved pattern but – crucially – because it is the way that the Lord says that it **does work!**

But, you say, what if it is not really working in practice?

If your car breaks down, what do you do? Do you say "I've had enough of cars! They always break down. I'm going back to using a horse and cart." Well, I suppose someone might do that, but most people would try to get the car fixed so that it works as it is supposed to.

So, if open meetings 'break down', what can be done to 'fix' them?

The answer is most definitely NOT to try to spice them up by adding some special ingredients! I suspect that approach lies behind many historical moves *backwards* towards organised services. "If we introduce this . . ." or "let's just get it started with . . ." and all too soon the meeting is precisely scheduled and planned, with little or no room for the Holy Spirit to add anything spontaneous. It might look like progress, but in reality it is moving backwards – back to the Old Covenant! ¹

Anyone who is exercising responsible spiritual supervision over an open meeting which is beginning to show signs of failing will know – in broad terms at least – where the problem lies: a lack of growth or, perhaps more accurately, **a lack of growing**. A process that is not happening – or, if it is happening, not happening enough.

I do NOT mean 'not having reached a certain level of maturity'. I DO mean a lack of onward spiritual progress. Young and immature believers who are moving forwards will have a much more beneficial open time together than a group who are NOT moving forwards, however mature or experienced they may be. The key question is not 'how far have you progressed?' but 'are you moving forwards?' And, of course, if we have already moved forwards into some measure of spiritual maturity AND are still moving forwards, the potential benefits are even greater!

A normal result of really 'live' open meetings can be profound spiritual growth. It is sad and ironic that the lack of ongoing personal spiritual growth is probably also the chief cause of the failure of open meetings. Another way of saying this is that growth produces more growth or, as the Lord Jesus said (recorded five times!): "*For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.*" ² I love that promise of abundance – but please don't ignore the warning!

¹ Philippians 3:3, John 4:23,24, Romans 7:6

² Matthew 13:12, 25:29, Mark 4:25, Luke 8:18, 19:26

Arrested Development

Most of us have probably met people who have suffered some form of arrested development. Perhaps their bodies have not grown or matured in the normal way, or maybe their mental capacity is limited at the level of a young child. Along with our feelings of sympathy and concern for them in their extremely difficult circumstances, we have probably also felt a strong sense of disappointment, perhaps even frustration, at the way in which a human life, so full of exciting potential, has been so cruelly confined and limited. Much credit is due to those who work intensively with these people to try to overcome as many of the obstacles as possible, in the hope of helping them to reach the very maximum of their sadly limited potential.

Our sense of disappointment is informed by the fact that **we know what normal development looks like**. True, there is a fairly broad range of what we might call 'normal', but it is plain to see that these unfortunate people fall outside that range – a sad fact for which they carry absolutely no personal responsibility.

It is hard to imagine that anyone would voluntarily embrace such a limited existence, would turn their back on normal physical, mental and emotional development and choose a life of near-total dependence and unfulfilled potential . . .

. . . and yet I believe that is precisely the condition of the overwhelming majority of Christian fellowships in the West. For the most part, we seem to be functioning at a much lower level than we are designed for. **Do we even know what normal spiritual development looks like?** What are the factors which are restricting our move towards maturity together?

1. Personal Immaturity

Please do not skip this section! I have written elsewhere¹ about the fundamentals of our life in Christ, and there are several books which deal with these essentials in much greater depth. Classics like *The Normal Christian Life* (Watchman Nee), *The Christ-Life for the Self-Life* (F B Meyer)², *Bone of His Bone* (F J Huegel) and *The True Vine* (Andrew Murray) all deal with what A W Tozer in *The Divine Conquest* called “the essential interiority of true religion” and we do well to listen to their words. More importantly, to follow their directions to respond to the call of the Master to make our home in him.³ If we try to tackle any other factors which restrict church growth, and yet neglect this first essential, it will all be a total waste of time. Yes, **total!** Not just less than it should be, but a complete and utter failure.

As a child, even as a teenager, I looked on maturity as something for other people, something which seemed out of reach for me. Many of us still do, even as adults. To think of yourself as becoming spiritually mature might seem to be presumptuous or arrogant, but maturity is the natural result of growth and we should each expect to reach at least some level of spiritual maturity. Tragically, much of what passes for Christianity actually stifles growth and consigns believers to remain in the nursery.

As an example, consider for a moment the common practice of using Bible reading notes as your **only** way of studying the Bible. Well-written notes are very useful for the new believer who does not know their way around the Bible, just as spoon-feeding is essential for a child who is being weaned onto solid food. But if you were still spoon-feeding your teenager, something would be badly wrong! We need to learn to feed ourselves, so why not try reading through a short book of the Bible (one of the shorter letters, for example) and ask the Lord to open it up for you by the Holy Spirit, just as the Lord Jesus promised that he would,⁴ but with no other resources. You may choose to go on using the notes for a while, but I reckon it will not be long before you discover where the greater riches lie!

¹ *'No Mere Remembrance'*, 2017. *'First Steps to Maturity'*, 2018/19. *'By His Doing'*, 2018/20, from www.justonecandle.uk

² Also from [justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)

³ John 15:1-16

⁴ John 16:13-15

This is not to decry the value of books written by other believers and other resources such as Bible dictionaries, concordances and computer-based study aids.¹ They can help unlock difficult passages and meanings and be very useful as we study and grow, but their primary value is to direct us back to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. “The worst thing a book can do for a Christian is to leave him with the impression that he has received from it anything really good; The best it can do is to point the way to the Good he is seeking.” (A.W.Tozer)

The writer to the Hebrews wrote: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”² He quite reasonably expected growth to have taken place as time had passed. It hadn't. In fact, it seems he knew that his readers had actually **started going backwards!** But at least there was still room for the delayed development to catch up!

2. Corporate Immaturity

Not surprisingly, if we are individually under-developed and immature, our shared life and meetings will tend to be ‘majoring in minors’, often concerned with relatively superficial matters and not capable of fostering real spiritual growth amongst ourselves.

Worse still, we may be tragically unaware of our condition and our need, like the church in Laodicea, to whom the Lord Jesus sent this message: “Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.”³

They genuinely thought they were doing really well and didn't know that they were ‘wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked’. The Lord does not write them off, but he does see the need to ‘reprove and discipline’ them, just as a child needs to be shown when they are going wrong and then trained to follow the right direction. The word translated here as ‘reprove’ is used in ***Ephesians 5:11 & 13*** in connection with light showing up what is wrong, and the word ‘discipline’ is the general word for ‘training a child’ – one who is in training for adult life! A child who learns from this sort of enlightenment and training moves steadily forward towards maturity. Are we ready for this – and together?

3. Lack of Unity

Several years ago, there seemed to be a fresh move – locally and nationally – towards effective Christian unity but recently it seems to have largely degenerated into a round of organisational meetings and activities – if it even exists at all! It seems to me that each group may have gone as far as it dares in the direction of real unity but has long since reached the point where to go any further would threaten its own continued independent existence, and so each one has pulled back.

Probably each ‘church’ or ‘fellowship’ could give a moving story of how the Lord caused their own group to come into existence, and/or recent examples of how he has led and blessed them. To most, these histories might seem to be sufficient evidence to justify the continued independent existence of each group. The problem is that there is no way that we can really function together as one body in any place while we retain our own loyalties to our separate groups.

Yes, maybe we get together for special meetings or for ‘set piece’ unity, perhaps to try to show our local community that ‘we are all one really’, but then we quickly revert to our own familiar routines and affirm our separateness. Perhaps we can't see it but, to the outsider, it stands out a mile.

We need to see that there really is only one Church, both globally and locally: those who are in Christ, whether in the whole world, a large city or a small village. Then perhaps we shall begin to realise that **it is simply not possible to try to build ‘our church’ as well as seeking to see the church itself built up.** However good our motivation, perhaps thinking that we can help to build the whole

¹ e-Sword is a comprehensive, free study aid which I have used for years. www.e-sword.net

² Hebrews 5:12

³ Revelation 3:17-19

by building up 'our bit', the net result will be continued division and missing out on what the Lord has in mind for his children to function together.

Paul, writing to the church in Corinth – which was suffering from divisions that demonstrated their lack of spiritual growth¹ – made a simple statement: *“Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.”*² That word ‘individually’ speaks of our individual membership of the body of Christ. Yes, corporately the Corinthian believers together were the church in Corinth, but they were members individually, not as groups or followers of any particular teacher – and they had a few of those!

Very relevant to them with their divisions that Paul speaks so clearly against – and also very relevant to us. The Church today is not made up of a collection of groups or denominations any more than the church in Corinth was made up of the collection together of the groups that said they followed Paul, Peter or Apollos – or anyone else. Instead of trying to build and preserve our own little empires, we need to seek to see the church built up as individuals who are joined to Jesus and as a result also joined to each other, not organisationally but in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

For those in positions of leadership in defined groups, this approach is challenging, even threatening. Position, influence and status are at stake, together with history and tradition. Even, we may think, ‘the way the Lord has led us’. But if we are to see the church established where we are, we need to put these vested interests aside and allow the Lord himself to lead us and put in place those people whom he has in mind to take up responsibilities – and those responsibilities will be primarily spiritual, NOT organisational!

I remember quite clearly, more than twenty years ago, sharing with a group of Christians how I was beginning to see that real working unity between all believers in a locality was essential to the growth and continued life of the church. One well-meaning voice commented that “It will never happen, David.” My response was “It HAS to happen.”

Twenty years on and it has not happened. The voice of the self-fulfilling prophecy that it would never happen has been proved right so far. That same voice also continued to repeat such comments as “we are all different and need to worship God in our different ways”.

But this is not about ‘ways of worship’. That speaks of form, procedure and liturgy and, yes, it has to be admitted that even the most radical approach can easily slip into established routine. The supposedly ‘open’ meeting where you know that each week some of the same people will say or pray pretty much the same things that they said or prayed last week! Just as deadly as the written formula of a prayer book, perhaps even more deadly because of the supposed ‘freedom’ of the meeting!

Saying that ‘we need to worship God in our different ways’ simply tries to justify and excuse our apparent determination to disregard the clear direction of the Lord Jesus and his apostles³ that we are all one in him and need to function on that basis. No amount of sophistry and word-play can hide the fact that, secretly perhaps, most of us also believe that ‘it will never happen’ that we come together simply as followers of Jesus, totally disregarding and rejecting any other loyalties.

If we DO believe that ‘it will never happen’, we are effectively saying that the Lord Jesus will be unsuccessful in preparing a Bride for himself. We are perpetuating the self-fulfilling prophecy. We may delay his purpose (Do we really want to do that?), but ultimately we will not frustrate it. Truly, it HAS to happen!

*“Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’ ”*⁴

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:1-5

² 1 Corinthians 12:27

³ See John 17:23, 1 Corinthians 12:12,13 for a start. There are many more!

⁴ Isaiah 46:9-10

The Process Of Growth

As I look back over the way that the Lord has worked in my life, I can see some patterns emerging in the ways by which he has moved me forwards. It may be useful to share these in the hope that they may help us to grow at a healthy rate – not too fast but certainly not too slowly!

At the risk of over-simplification, let me start with what looks a little like a mathematical equation:

Information + inspiration = revelation.

Just before the very beginning of my new life in Christ, I was presented with information about myself and about God and Jesus, but these were not just dry facts, there was something else going on as well, and it wasn't just emotions. They were there, of course, but they fell into place once the process had started, a result rather than a cause.

The facts were new – and not new! I was eleven years old and had grown up with plenty of information about the Lord Jesus Christ and the miracles he performed; also some of the things he had said. I knew that he had died on a cross and come to life again.

But none of this had seemed relevant to me personally, until that moment. 'Something' made me begin to see that I had needs, and that these needs were met in the death of Jesus. There was a blend of influences here. Firstly, I did not remember anyone ever previously applying the death of Jesus to me personally, and certainly no-one had told me about the availability of forgiveness from God. So some of the most relevant facts had been missing.

But that was not all. I had become aware of a sense of need, and I was told that those needs could be met by a response of faith and commitment. I hesitated. Did I really want to take the step? One day later, I did.

So, what was going on? What were the processes? Information, yes, but much more than that. I now know that it was the Holy Spirit who was taking the information and applying it to me. But he wasn't acting in a vacuum, he used people who passed on the information in a way that he could use in my life. And, of course, I needed to be ready to respond.

Here is a glorious paradox! At least some of the information that I needed had been available to me for years but I had seen no need of it and certainly seen no need to respond to it. It required someone to take that information and apply it to me personally in such a way that a door was opened for me to respond. Someone who would co-operate with the Holy Spirit in his work of conviction and enlightenment.¹

Paul describes the process in **Romans 10:5-15**. He knows from his own experience, presenting the good news of the kingdom of God to both Jews and Gentiles, how the process of faith unfolds. There are several verses in this passage that are familiar on their own, but we need to look at the overall picture . . .

First of all (**v.5-8**), he says, there is no need to go looking for some special and extra act of God to give us the necessary faith. The word is already right with us, near us, in our heart and even in our mouth. What word is that? *'The word of faith which we are proclaiming'* – so it needs to be proclaimed!

As a result of that proclamation, the 'word of faith' confronts us (**v.8-10**). We then need to take that word into our own mouth and heart. By believing in our heart, we are put into right relationship with God and (important step) by opening our mouth and 'confessing' that faith we are actually 'saved' – transferred out of the authority of Satan and into the kingdom of the Son of God.²

But that 'word of faith' is more than just a cold presentation of the facts about the Lord Jesus, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. True, there have probably been many occasions when

¹ John 16:7-15, 14:26

² Colossians 1:13

someone has come to faith by simply hearing or reading about what God has done for them in Jesus, but even that process needed someone to pass on the message in spoken or written form.

Paul writes that calling on the name of Jesus demands first that we should have believed in him (v.13-14). Again, he is making the distinction between believing and speaking out and says that both are necessary. Working backwards, he asks how can we believe if we have not heard, how can we hear unless someone proclaims the message and how can someone proclaim unless they are sent? (v.14-15).

So, as a result, he says, 'faith out of hearing and hearing through the word of Christ' (v.17, literally) and that 'word' is the Greek word *'rhema'*, which means 'what is spoken about something'. In other words, something topical and current. Exactly what is happening when we hear and respond to the message!

So, the first time I really 'heard' the message of Jesus, that was how it was: the word came to me fresh, topical and applied to me personally. It was the means of opening my eyes and enabled me to believe – 'faith out of hearing'. Paul calls it revelation (*apokalupsis* – the removal of a veil or covering, uncovering, dis-covering). Probably most Christian believers have had a similar experience.

It took me several years to discover that my onward growth depended on the same process. I got well and truly involved in all sorts of Christian activity. It seemed to be what 'keen Christians' did, and I wanted to make progress. But there was a big gap inside, which only began to be filled as the 'word' came to me afresh, in more eye-opening revelation.

I had fallen into the common trap of thinking that growth and progress come by doing things. As a young teenage Christian, I had enjoyed the obvious approval of older believers who saw how apparently involved and committed I was. And I actually did enjoy my involvement as well as their approval!

My first year away from home was one of spiritual drifting despite remaining externally active and involved in a Christian young people's group. My excuse was that I could not really continue with prayer and Bible study as I shared my lodgings with another young man, who was definitely not interested!

At the start of my second year, now in a study bedroom of my own, it was as if the Lord had me cornered, with no excuses. I started to read the Bible again, this time without the prop of printed notes, and it started to come alive as never before! I found myself asking questions and getting some answers – and then some more questions!

I won't take the space here to expand the story, but that time marked a significant turning point in my life. I had already been a Christian for seven years, but this was a new beginning as I started to know by experience that 'faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ'. I was starting to grow.

Paul records his heart-felt desire for the believers in Ephesus, *"that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him; that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe, in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come."*¹

So, this same process is right at the heart of our continuing growth and development towards spiritual maturity. Paul spells it out in all his letters, but perhaps especially in his letter to those at Colossae, where he voices a very similar prayer for them: *"For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;*

¹ Ephesians 1:17-21

strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.”¹

Those two words ‘so that’ are important. The excellent results in their lifestyle – which Paul so earnestly longs to see – will be the **results** of the spiritual process that he prays for. Again, it is faith that is based on the knowledge of God and his will. It is knowledge that is spiritual, not merely mental and, through the rest of this very full letter, Paul gives the Colossian believers more and more revelation which he trusts that they will ‘hear’ and so be able to step forward into more maturity.²

Have you finished growing? I hope not! Do you long for more spiritual maturity for yourself and for those with whom you share fellowship?

We have been designed to grow – together.

¹ Colossians 1:9-12

² See ‘[First Steps to Maturity](http://www.justonecandle.uk)’ at www.justonecandle.uk

Growth And Gifts – ?

I had read about spiritual gifts in the Bible. I had started studying the Bible when I was 11 or 12 years old, so, with the natural curiosity of every teenager, I often wondered about them. They seemed almost 'magical', like something out of a story such as *The Lord of the Rings*. They couldn't possibly be real – or could they?

Probably the first time that I went to a Christian meeting where there was any possibility of spiritual gifts being in evidence was when I was in my late teens. I don't think I realised what I was going to, just that I had been invited by an older Christian whom I had known for a few years. I don't remember any details at all. It was just very different, and I did learn one new song which I can still remember.

Please remember, this was the 1960s and I had led a fairly sheltered Christian life in moderately evangelical Anglicanism, combined with evangelical Bible classes and Christian Unions at school and college. Very few of the books I had read (and there were many!) even mentioned the possibility of the exercise of spiritual gifts in the present day.

Now, more than 50 years later, there will still be some Christian believers who find themselves in the same position as I was then, or nearly so. Nowadays it would be hard to have been a Christian for any length of time without having at least heard about the possibility of spiritual gifts, but for many they remain a 'no-go area', for various reasons.

For some, it will be much the same as it was for me all those years ago: Spiritual gifts seem unreal, imaginary, perhaps sounding like they are 'magic' and therefore not connected to our everyday lives.

Others will have been warned against the dangers of spiritual gifts, perhaps especially 'speaking in tongues', often on the grounds that these gifts encourage too much emotionalism instead of a solid faith that is built on facts, not mere feelings. That warning is perfectly valid! Sadly, there have been too many examples of people being influenced by emotional manipulation in the name of Christian preaching and teaching and many of these (but not all, by any means) have been in the context of encouraging the use of spiritual gifts. More about this in a later chapter.

The saddest group of all are those who previously have been involved in Christian fellowships where the use of spiritual gifts has been taught and encouraged. Perhaps they themselves have exercised some of the gifts but have then been disillusioned by some other aspect of the group they were part of, and so have written off the whole thing as a scam or self-deception. Again, sadly, there have been too many groups where this has happened. The 'dream' has been shattered! Typically, one or more of the group leaders may have tried to exercise too much control or may have been downright manipulative, and previously loyal group members and even previous leaders will have had enough and walked away, sometimes rejecting the whole of Christian faith at the same time. If they have stayed in the faith, their emphasis has often become ultra-rational, with a cynicism towards anything that they would now classify as 'super-spiritual'. Not surprisingly, they are 'once bitten, twice shy'.

'Pentecostalism' had started in the early 1900s and the 'charismatic movement' had its early beginnings in the 1960s, but it was not until a few years later that some more established Christian groups began to accept the possibility of spiritual gifts in the present day and in their own midst.

Until then, the often-accepted teaching was that the gifts described in the New Testament were uniquely for that time and were no longer relevant or available. Often this teaching linked the alleged cessation of the gifts with the completion of the New Testament itself. The stated logic of this position is that the gifts are no longer needed to convey the word of God, because he has already revealed all that is needed in the inspired scriptures. This seems to be the standpoint of many of those groups and individuals who do not accept the possibility or desirability of spiritual gifts today. Others might simply say that we seem to be getting along perfectly OK without them, so why bother?

And so the whole subject of spiritual gifts is often avoided, left on the shelf for a number of supposed reasons and, if anyone is rash enough to enquire about them, the reply may be either a dismissive statement that they are not relevant or a rather embarrassed attempt to say something about them,

often without much conviction or personal experience to add. Another alternative is to try to 'normalise' them by simply equating them with all the different natural abilities that we all have – in other words, to deny that spiritual gifts actually exist at all!

But – assuming that we are honest enough to agree that the spiritual gifts that Paul writes about are NOT just natural abilities – are we really 'getting along fine' without the exercise of spiritual gifts?

I am NOT saying that spiritual gifts are the answer. Quite the opposite! Personal spiritual growth is much more important than the exercise of spiritual gifts, but neglecting the possibility of these gifts means neglecting an important factor in the growth of both the individual Christian believer and the church of which they are part.

Perhaps we have not really appreciated what our Father has in mind for us . . .

The Need For Spiritual Gifts – ?

There was a time in the not-so-distant past when spiritual gifts were a taboo subject, especially in some specific Christian circles. The various references to them in the New Testament were often glossed over or else just avoided. **1 Corinthians 12** and **14** were somehow studiously ignored, while at the same time making much of **chapter 13**. We will look at this approach a little more in the next chapter.

In slightly more recent times, the so-called 'charismatic movement' made much of spiritual gifts – especially the gift of tongues – and so popularised them, sometimes to the extent that, in some circles, any reticence about spiritual gifts and their use would mark you out as some sort of spiritual outcast. Not all the results were good, by any means. More of that in a later chapter.

But the question remains:

Do we need to see spiritual gifts in the Church today?

In one way, we could argue that no, we don't, because many or most church fellowships get by without much or any use of them, even if our theology acknowledges their place in theory. We may also have other reasons for not wanting to see them in action – see the 'Abuse of Spiritual Gifts' chapter!

Writing to the believers in Corinth, Paul wants to make sure that they know the proper place and function of spiritual gifts as they get together. We'll look at the individual gifts, but first let's look at the underlying principles which Paul outlines as he writes.

In **1 Corinthians 12:1-11**, we cannot escape the repeated assertion that it is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, who makes the decisions about what gifts are given and to whom. Lots of variety but from one Giver (**v.4-6**). So, if we are unconvinced about the need for these gifts in the Church today, we might argue that, as God is the Giver and he does not seem to have given us any spiritual gifts, they are obviously not needed!

That approach just does not stand examination. **V.7** says it clearly: "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Clearly an expectation, not just that there will be variety of gifts, but also that each member will have something to contribute to the benefit of the whole group, literally as a 'shining out of the Spirit for the common good'.

Sandwiching his well-known chapter on love on each side, Paul underlines the need for these gifts and encourages his readers to 'earnestly desire' them. Some people have used **12:31** as an excuse to sideline spiritual gifts: "Earnestly desire the greater gifts" says Paul, "And I show you a still more excellent way" – and then he launches into **chapter 13**.

Any honest reading would have to agree that Paul is not playing down spiritual gifts in his 'ode to love', especially as he starts **chapter 14** by writing "Pursue love, yet earnestly desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy." He then goes on in detail about the exercise of various spiritual gifts in meetings of the church, in the context of the love that he has just been writing about.

His message is clear: Spiritual gifts are normal and the exercise of them in meetings of believers is not only normal but highly desirable, perhaps even essential. At the heart of all that he writes about using the gifts is this one overriding aim: to build up the whole church, every single member, by the proper exercise of each gift appropriately. Several times in this chapter he emphasises the 'greater gifts', especially prophecy, and urges his readers to seek them. Why? So that the 'building up' of the whole body of believers can be more effective.

So what ARE spiritual gifts?

Perhaps an easy way to start to understand the gifts listed in **1 Corinthians 12 & 14** is to compare them with those listed in **Romans 12**. There are differences, but there is at least one overlap!

Romans 12:3-8 contains a list of what we might call 'natural' gifts, with one notable exception, which Paul mentions first: prophecy. All the others look and sound like beneficial attributes which we might

expect to find in any group of people – not just amongst Christian believers – though Paul emphasises that we can only properly exercise these gifts ‘according to the grace given to us’. Some people call them the ‘grace gifts’, qualities that show up in our lives as a direct result of the grace of God at work in us.

Service. Putting yourself at the disposal of other people to meet their needs. Perhaps not as common as we would like to see in everyday life, but not the exclusive domain of Christians, by any means. Many people of differing faiths and none choose to do this in vastly diverse ways and it typifies the attitude of heart of trying to help, even at some personal cost. The Greek word *diakonia* (‘service’) has the same root as the word *diakonos*, translated in the New Testament as ‘servant’, ‘minister’ or ‘deacon’. Not the same as a slave, who has no choice in his service; *diakonos* is someone who chooses to serve. More about that later.

Teaching. Literally, the Greek word means ‘to cause to learn’, something that most teachers (of any sort) seek to do, and by which they may judge their success. Many people do this in all walks of life and probably most would say that the true reward of teaching is to see real changes in those who are taught – they have been ‘caused to learn’. In a Christian context, the rewards are multiplied when those who learn apply what they have learned and lives are radically changed as a result.

Exhortation, Encouraging, Comforting. ‘Being called alongside’ is the literal meaning of the word, which reflects a desire to share someone else’s situation and circumstances with a view to making them better able to cope. Again, welcome in all aspects of life and those who take on this role enrich the lives of others. The Greek word for someone who does this is *parakletos*, ‘someone called alongside’, the word used by the Lord Jesus to describe the Holy Spirit ¹ and by John to describe Jesus as our advocate with the Father ².

Giving. Contributing cash, goods, time or effort can sometimes be done in a fairly detached, even cold, way. The word here might be better translated ‘sharing’ – literally ‘giving with’ – which means real involvement with the gift. ‘With liberality’ say some translations, but the basic meaning of the word is ‘singleness’ or ‘simplicity’, so ‘sincerity’ also fits. Not with any ulterior motive for anyone’s approval. Jesus’s comments about the way to give seem **very** appropriate.³

Leading. ‘Standing before’ needs to be done with earnestness, diligence and eagerness, says Paul. No empty holding of a leadership ‘position’, but with real application, even speed!

Showing mercy, or having compassion. Not what we might have expected in a list of gifts, but there are some who are definitely gifted in this department, again right across all communities. Cheerfulness might not be what we would expect here, either, but this is essential, says Paul.

And so his list continues from **v.9** onwards but gradually moves from being a list of gifts into encouragement to live lives that overflow with the grace that is given to us . . .

. . . which leads us back to the first gift that he lists here, *prophecy*. This one does NOT fit into any non-Christian setting, as it specifically refers to the passing on of a direct message from the living God. It is also not in any sense a ‘natural’ gift, as the others could be described.

But prophecy is still very much ‘according to the grace given to us’. We definitely need that internal transforming process of God’s grace to us in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be able to function properly in any form of prophecy, simply because real prophecy is not just the mechanical transmitting of a message received but rather the sharing of the heart of God. We just can’t do that unless his grace has touched us and is working in us and through us as we share a word of prophecy. More about that as we look at Paul’s other list and further explanation in **1 Corinthians 12 & 14**.

First of all, Paul doesn’t really start this as a list! He says that he wants the Corinthian believers to be aware about spiritual things, and starts by making the comparison between their former pagan practices, when they were ‘led astray to the mute idols’ and their new life in the Holy Spirit. A few chapters earlier, he has already emphasised that, although idols are meaningless objects in themselves, those who sacrifice to idols are actually sacrificing to evil spirits.⁴ He knows that, as

¹ John 14:16, 26 , John 16:7

² 1 John 2:1

³ Matthew 6:1-4

former idol-worshippers, these believers have already experienced something of the spirit world – the wrong side of it – and wants to make sure that their current spiritual experience is valid and has its roots in the Spirit of God. Hence his simple guidelines in **v.3**. Valid spiritual experience has its basis in the open acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord.

Leading on into **v.4-7**, Paul writes: *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”*

Paul is writing about three aspects of these spiritual things: ‘gifts’, ‘ministries’ and ‘effects’. They are not in neatly separate categories, they overlap, but he says that each believer is given a ‘manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.’ I really like that word translated ‘manifestation’. It means a ‘shining out’. So each of us is given some way in which the Holy Spirit can shine out of our lives in a directly spiritual way.

So, here is the list: A word of wisdom. A word of knowledge. Faith. Gifts of healing. Miracles. Prophecy. Distinguishing spirits. Tongues/languages. Interpretation of tongues/languages.

They are all described as being given, so they are all ‘gifts’. The usual word for ‘give’ is a simple one but the word used here for ‘gift’ carries more meaning: A free gift, undeserved, with grace at its foundation. So, not dependent on me and my achievements or qualities, but ‘one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as he wills’ (**v.11**)

‘Ministries’ sounds important and official, but it simply means ‘ways of serving’. It is the same word *diakonia* that we saw back in **Romans 12**, where it is translated ‘service’. Some of these gifts are more obviously ways of serving that may continue over a longer period, not just as ‘one-offs’. We shall look at them a little more in a later chapter.

‘Effects’ are exactly what they sound like – things that work out, that have an effect. To some extent, we could say that all these gifts have ‘effects’, but two stand out: Gifts of healing and miracles. We must be honest here. Paul is not talking about the more familiar situation where we pray for someone and hope that the Lord will heal them. Rather, he is using the language which was used to describe ‘effects’ in the public ministry of the Lord Jesus : 1) curing people, making them whole and 2) performing ‘works of power’ such as feeding the 5,000 or walking on the sea.

These, he says, are part of the array of gifts distributed ‘to each one individually just as He wills’. So they are given to individuals, for individuals to exercise them, just like all the others.

Are we seeing these in the Church today? They are part of our inheritance. Were they seeing them in the church in Corinth? Maybe not enough! Evidently, Paul thought that they needed to see more of them, as he tells the believers to ‘earnestly desire the greater gifts’¹ with a special emphasis on prophecy.

Prophecy is right at the heart of all the spiritual gifts. If we look back at the Old Testament prophets, we can see them exercising some of these gifts but, right at the centre of their ministries stand four vital words: **“Thus says the LORD”**. Each one of the gifts Paul writes about in **1 Corinthians 12** is to some degree prophetic, God speaking and acting into our current daily lives.

As we shall see later, all these gifts are given for one purpose: **to build us up together in Jesus**. Not for any form of personal advancement or ambition.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, 10:14-22

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:31 & 14:1

The Abuse Of Spiritual Gifts

I have already referred to some of the negative results which have caused many Christians to want to avoid anything to do with spiritual gifts. Some readers of these pages may be trying to skip the chapters with direct (or even indirect) reference to the gifts of the Spirit, whether as a result of their own bad experiences or simply because they have heard so much about the problems that have sometimes resulted.

Whatever our feelings about them, we need to bring the whole question out into the open and find out whether spiritual gifts are part of God's provision for us today, or something irrelevant or even dangerous and therefore to be ignored or avoided. As part of this process, we need to face up to some of the darker history surrounding them. This chapter will try to look at some of the more significant points.

1) 'Spiritual Gifts Bring Division' This is one of the most often quoted reasons given for avoiding getting involved with the gifts of the Spirit. The commonest scenario is the one in which those who exercise any gifts (most often the gift of tongues) claim that all Christian believers should do the same and so anyone who does not cannot be a true believer. This is automatically divisive.

First of all, let's be clear: The New Testament does NOT say that all Christians must speak in tongues. Inferences have sometimes been drawn from the recorded events of Pentecost (**Acts 2**), Philip in Samaria (**Acts 8**), Peter with Cornelius (**Acts 10**) and Paul at Ephesus (**Acts 19**). In three out of these four occasions, it is recorded that they began speaking in tongues and/or prophesying after the Holy Spirit had 'come upon' them. In the case of Cornelius, the fact that 'the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message' was taken as proof that God had made it possible for Gentiles as well as Jews to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. See **Acts 11:15-18**.

So yes, all these events contained visible demonstrations of supernatural power, whether by miracles in the case of Philip or by tongues, prophesying and glorifying God in the other cases. Clearly, the Lord was at work in each case and the results proved it. But this does not mean that every situation will be the same. Look at all the other occasions.

We might expect that there would be some mention of tongues and prophecy when people came to the Lord at Corinth. After all, it is Paul's letter to Corinth that has all the details about spiritual gifts! But **Acts 18:1-11** says nothing.

In **1 Corinthians 14:16, 23-24** Paul writes about the exercise of the gift of tongues in church meetings and mentions 'the ungifted', saying that they will be unable to join in with someone giving thanks to God if that thanksgiving is in tongues, but that they will derive real benefit from hearing others prophecy in a language they **can** understand. He also mentions 'unbelievers' in the same verses, and the fact that he mentions both 'ungifted' and 'unbelievers' clearly shows that you can be a believer and be 'ungifted'. Not desirable, perhaps, but perfectly acceptable!

This fact needs to be borne in mind when looking at another verse which is sometimes used to try to prove that those without spiritual gifts cannot be true believers, **Romans 8:9**: "But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." Clearly, if it is possible to be a believer but 'ungifted', then it must mean that a believer can have the Spirit of Christ without exercising any gifts of the Spirit. This is, in fact, the experience of many Christians, including those who may later go on to explore and experience the gifts of the Spirit, and Paul draws a clear distinction between the new and changed life of the believer by reason of the Holy Spirit **living inside** and the supernatural endowment of the Holy Spirit **poured out upon** the believer.

2) 'Spiritual Gifts Are Just Showing Off' I remember one dear Christian lady who was most offended when some members of her congregation started raising their hands while singing some worship songs. They weren't doing anything else; no spiritual gifts were being exercised, but she felt that they were 'just showing off' to prove how spiritual they were. Was she right? She may have been! Perhaps we have been very moved in some situations, and have felt that raising our hands is a wonderful way to express our appreciation of the Lord. Then, on another occasion when we are

moved, having done it before, we feel free to do it again. Soon it may become a natural part of our expression of worship. So far, so good. But it is a very short step from enjoying the freedom of raising our hands in worship to thinking that those who don't raise their hands must obviously be on some inferior level of spirituality!

Perhaps we have started raising our hands in worship as a result of the Lord giving us an enriched appreciation of him, so we think that other people who don't do it must be on the same 'lower level' that we were on before. That is just plain wrong but, even if it were really true, it would still be no reason to look down on others who have not had the same experience. No reason to use raising our hands as a way of demonstrating (supposedly) how spiritual we are!

OK, raising your hands in worship is not the same as exercising a spiritual gift, but it serves to illustrate the point. If we can start feeling superior simply because we raise our hands in worship, how easy it is to do it if we have started to exercise a spiritual gift!

Yes, it is easy to slip into showing off but that does not mean that spiritual gifts are not valid.

3) Manipulation. We have probably all seen or at least heard about examples of people in positions of power who use their positions to bring pressure to bear on others. If we allow ourselves to start thinking of spiritual gifts as signs of spiritual authority, then we lay ourselves wide open to manipulation. The person who thinks that their spiritual gift gives them the right to 'lean' on people to get them to do what they want is on dangerous ground. There is a hidden threat that we will be judged to be unspiritual if we do not go along with the wishes of the apparently gifted person. Sometimes the threat is not hidden at all, but spoken. Believe me, it happens! We have been there.

4) 'Spiritual Gifts are Dangerous.' Immediately after Moses had set up the tabernacle in the wilderness, he performed all the rituals to set Aaron in place as the high priest and Aaron's four sons as his assistants. Two of those sons had only just been appointed when they took it on themselves to offer 'strange fire' before the LORD, not in line with the authority that Moses had received and had passed on to them all.² Perhaps Nadab and Abiram thought that they could use fire just as they pleased, but the right place for fire in the tabernacle was on the altar and according to God's directions, not to be used according to individual personal ideas, however well-meaning they may have been. Misuse of fire was dangerous for these two, as the judgement of God fell on them.

You may wonder why I have suddenly quoted this story, but it seems to me that it has some parallels with the abuse of spiritual gifts. Gifts used out of place, and especially according to our own ideas, can bring harmful results to us as well as to others. Paul repeatedly insists that the proper use of gifts in the church is for building up the body of Christ – *"let all things be done for edification (literally, 'building the house')."*³

Yes, there is a danger in over-emphasising spiritual gifts, especially if they are exalted to allegedly represent great levels of spirituality, as in 2) above. But there is more. There are many horror stories of people who have started by supposedly exercising spiritual gifts but who have then strayed into other allegedly 'spiritual' areas. This is where real spiritual discernment is vital and the assumption that 'anything which is spiritual must be from God' is dangerous in the extreme.

Any pressure to exercise spiritual gifts can cause people to open themselves up to anything that seems to be transcendent, apparently beyond the realm of their body and mind, and there is more there than the Holy Spirit of God! The reality of the 'spirit world' is often dismissed in Western circles but, though the evidence of its existence may be easier to see in other societies, I have no doubt that it is more than possible to become trapped in spiritual bondage in any cultural setting.

¹ See 'Manipulation' from www.justonecandle.uk

² Leviticus 10:1-3

³ 1 Corinthians 14:26

Gifts And Ministries

We have already seen Paul's reference to 'ministries' alongside 'gifts' in **1 Corinthians 12:4 & 5**: *"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord."*

What is a 'ministry' and is it different from a 'gift'? We have already seen that the word 'gift' here is full of the grace of God – a free gift, with no room for boasting or claiming personal glory.

The word 'ministry' probably needs to be 'taken down a peg'. We may think of church 'ministry' as something elevated and only for the select few. We think of those in national government as 'ministers', so maybe 'ministry' somehow conveys the same aura of high office and leadership.

'Ministry' means 'service'. Plain and simple! So having a ministry means having a way of serving. Whenever we exercise a gift, natural or spiritual, hopefully we are serving, doing something to help others in the church and seeing it built up. For some people, the way that they exercise their gift may also develop into an ongoing ability and then it becomes a gift to the church, not just to them personally.

Paul describes some of these in **Ephesians 4:4-16**, especially **v.11**. The context is important, so let's look at that first:

Paul writes about how there is *"one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."* Our Father is over us all in the church and works through us all. And then he goes on to specific ways in which he works: *"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift."*

As we shall see, these are gifts to the church, gifts **of** individual people, not **to** individual people. And they are gifts of grace, requiring that same exercise of the grace of God in our lives as we noted with the 'practical' gifts listed in **Romans 12**.

But they are also spiritual, in a way that goes beyond the 'practical' gifts. And they also go beyond the 'one-off' exercise of spiritual gifts that Paul describes in **1 Corinthians 12**. These are gifts of people to the church, people who exercise the supernatural quality of spiritual gifts which are repeatedly expressed **and** who carry those gifts in lives that are suffused with the grace of God.

It is misleading to say that an individual has received 'the gift of evangelist' or 'the gift of prophet', for example. It is **the church** that receives these gifts, and the gifts are people whose lives encapsulate these abilities, so that they are able to serve and enable the church. **Verses 12 onwards** make that abundantly clear.

So how can we describe these people? They have been given 'ministries', ways of serving the church, by virtue of the combination of the Holy Spirit working **in** them and being poured out **upon** them. Grace **and** supernatural working, together.

We can see the results of these ministries in the New Testament and also in present-day life. We may be reluctant to call anyone an apostle, but there are people who go into fresh situations, pass on the good news of Jesus, see people come to faith and then establish solid foundations in their lives in a similar way as Paul and others operated, seeing new churches being built.

Others have more than the occasional 'word from the Lord' in a meeting and seem to develop an insight and wisdom in the things of God and, although they might not always want to say 'thus says the Lord', we begin to trust that they often have the mind of God and are truly prophetic. Perhaps we would even go so far as to say that they are 'usually right' when they share what they believe the Lord is saying in a given situation. Not infallible but usually trustworthy.

We are all called upon to pass on to others what it means to us to be followers of the Lord Jesus, but there are some who are particularly able, with a combination of natural and supernatural skill, to

convey the message in such a way that people respond in faith. ‘Evangelist’ may seem like an old-fashioned description, but that is what they are doing.

Caring for one another is a basic role that we all have in church fellowship, perhaps coming alongside and looking after those who are in difficulties or pain – just as a shepherd would – but again, there are some in whom this ability is particularly well-developed, perhaps with clearer insight into largely unspoken heartache and sense of desolation. ‘Pastoral care’ is now used in other settings outside the Church, but the anointed caring – that looks to spiritual as well as other needs – is priceless.

Sometimes linked together with pastoral care is teaching. Often better understanding of truth is the best way out of problems and, again, each of us can share truth in a way that will open eyes and be generally helpful. Some have this ability in greater measure, very often closely linked with a passionate desire for more truth and increased response to it, and combined with growing knowledge of the Bible. As they share what they have learned, they are able to bring others into a deeper appreciation of vital Christian truth. “I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word.” (John Robinson to the crew of the *Mayflower*, 1620)

So all of these ‘ministries’ are those who develop their spiritual gifts alongside the development of real spiritual character, with the result of becoming people who are certainly gifted in themselves but, perhaps more significantly, are themselves gifts to the church – at least locally and often with wider scope.

As they develop their particular ministries, we find that we can trust them more and more to be ‘usually right’ in their areas of service, but that never allows us to stop exercising our own discernment. This is not another way of establishing a kind of ‘clergy and laity’ structure, where the ‘leaders’ are left to get on with everything and the ‘followers’ just fall in line behind them. Quite the opposite!

Taking the example of prophecy – a gifting and ministry that Paul writes about in some detail – we can see how it is supposed to function, in this case in a fellowship meeting, in **1 Corinthians 14:29-33**: *“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgement. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”*

He starts by suggesting that two or three prophets speak. He calls them ‘prophets’ so they probably already have an established ministry role in prophecy. As they speak, the others ‘pass judgement’. Does that seem a bit harsh? The word means to ‘distinguish thoroughly’, so evidently all those listening are intended to be weighing all that is said to see whether they believe the Lord is behind the words. And then, if someone else (not necessarily a recognised ‘prophet’) receives a ‘word’, then the ‘prophet’ who is speaking needs to stop and allow the second person to speak.

If this were a hierarchy of leadership, then the second person would probably be asked to keep quiet, to allow the ‘leader’ to continue. But this is **ministry**, genuine **service** which is designed to help the church grow, so anything that the Lord feeds into the meeting is valuable, whoever may bring it! And, as Paul says, it may end up with **everyone** in the meeting bringing a word of prophecy! No problem!

In fact, Paul says, the main purpose of these ministries in the church is to help **everyone** to grow and develop, not to create a little group of special people with special roles and positions:– *“He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”* (**Ephesians 4:11-16**)

Here is the heart of God for his people – ongoing growth and maturity. All those with these ministries have vital roles in seeing that maturity develop, which itself leads to **more** growth and maturity! Their key task is to equip other believers for ‘the work of service’, so that the church is built up and is increasingly able to build itself up in love. It seems almost inevitable that such ongoing growth will lead, not only to greater maturity in the members of the local church, but that more of those members will develop ministries and so be able to contribute to even more growth and maturity!

Going back to the verses which started this chapter: “*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.*” (1 **Corinthians 12:4-5**) The word translated ‘lord’ was an everyday word which you would use for your employer, your boss, the one who directed what you did when you were working for him. A new aspect of our relationship with the Lord Jesus comes into play when we begin to function with any spiritual ministry. He is not only our Lord in a personal sense; he is ‘the boss’ to whom we are responsible as we seek to be useful in **his** work – seeing the building up of the Body of Christ.

* * * * *

A word of warning here. Starting to develop a ministry is NOT a way to boost our own status or influence among other Christians. We need to be careful as we look at developing ministries, just as we do with spiritual gifts. It would be easy to think that ‘If I develop my spiritual gift to the point where I am generally recognised as having a ministry, then I will be able to be a leader and exercise control in the church.’ **Beware!** It is the Lord who places gifts and ministries in the church, and any attempts at manipulation like this will ultimately bring no benefit to the church and will almost certainly result in our own downfall. ¹ **Ministry means service not superiority.**

¹ See ‘[Manipulation](http://www.justonecandle.uk)’ from www.justonecandle.uk

The Gateway To Gifting – ?

Having re-read through the last few chapters about spiritual gifts, I am very aware that I have said absolutely nothing about **how** we can begin to exercise them. Although these pages are primarily about our life in fellowship together, not about personal spiritual growth, it seems foolish to leave this question hanging in the air.

So, if we have begun to see the possible value of spiritual gifts in the life of the church but do not yet see them in our own lives or the lives of those around us, how can we move forward? Is there a process that we need to go through, some sort of threshold experience? Or can we expect the Lord to simply give us the gifts that he wants us to exercise, without the need for any special starting point?

As far as I can see, there is no specific instruction in the New Testament about how to start exercising spiritual gifts, but there are at least two significant passages which indicate that it is possible to be a believer in the Lord Jesus without receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The experience of many people, myself included, backs up this statement.

I am NOT saying that we only have the Holy Spirit living in us if we have come through a special experience. I know that the Holy Spirit was **at work in** me for about 11 years after I became a believer but before I began to experience his power **poured out upon** me.¹

In both **Acts 8** and **Acts 19**, we see groups of people who had apparently genuinely believed in Jesus but who had not 'received the Holy Spirit'. Both Peter and John in **Acts 8** and Paul in **Acts 19** evidently considered that this was an unsatisfactory situation and took the necessary action to make sure that they did so. In both cases, something visible happened, though only in **Acts 19** are we specifically told about 'speaking in tongues and prophesying'. But enough happened with the disciples in **Acts 8** that Simon the sorcerer could see that they had something which he wanted!

I cannot see any passages which indicate any specific need for a 'second experience' for all believers. This leads me to believe that these two cases were unusual. Normally, someone believing in the Lord Jesus would receive the 'full package', as promised by Peter in **Acts 2:38**: "*Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" Only when this had NOT happened did it become necessary for them to specifically 'receive the Holy Spirit' at a later date. But it evidently WAS necessary, otherwise Peter, John and Paul would have left the disciples in Samaria and Ephesus as they were!

For those in Ephesus at least, this was a 'threshold experience' through which they started to exercise spiritual gifts.

In **Acts 10**, when Peter went to share the gospel with Cornelius and his household, he was still speaking when the people believed and they received the Holy Spirit. Peter's explanation in the next chapter shows us that he was beginning to see this as being the normal situation: "*And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as upon us at the beginning*" (**Acts 11:15**)

So, is there a need for a 'second experience' in order to start exercising spiritual gifts? Evidently not, UNLESS our first experience was lacking. But, if it was lacking, then definitely we need to make good the deficit. Paul's question to the Ephesian disciples is relevant: 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'

Their answer reveals the main reason for their lack of experience. "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." **Lack of information!**

These days, there may not be such a total lack of information about the Holy Spirit, but there certainly seems to be a severe shortfall in the level of information that many of us receive when we first come to faith in the Lord Jesus. I am not suggesting that we need to be crammed full with loads of detailed doctrine within the first few days after we first believe but, on the other hand, 'receiving the Holy

¹ See '[No Mere Remembrance](#)', especially chapters 9 & 10 'Much More Than Proof' and 'Beyond the Resurrection . . .' Available from www.justonecandle.uk

Spirit' was one of the key points that Peter mentioned to those who asked him what they needed to do in response to his words in **Acts 2**. Evidently somewhere near the top of the priority list!

This is not the place to go into great detail, though this is a vital element as we look at the role of spiritual gifts in the life of the church. Perhaps enough to say that we need to know that we are joined to the living Lord Jesus Christ as he is NOW at the right hand of the Father, and that he has poured out the Holy Spirit on us in power as a direct result of his exaltation and our union with him.¹

I think it would be safe to say that most present-day Christian believers have not had much, if any, information or teaching about the fact that their lives have been joined to the life of the Lord Jesus Christ and that, as a direct result, they have been set free not only from the guilt of past sins and failures, but also from slavery to ongoing failure and the pressure of legalistic expectations. And that is just the start! We have also been given the life of the Holy Spirit living inside us – the only life which is guaranteed to be pleasing to the Father – AND the power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon us.

Little wonder, then, that many Christians crave more, even if they are not quite sure what that 'more' might be, and so many have jumped to embrace a 'second experience' which seems to offer so much more than they have experienced so far. And if that experience promises to usher them into spiritual gifts, so much the more exciting!

And then what? Hopefully, any experience of this sort will have been uplifting and will have given us a real sense of the presence and power of God in our lives. But if we have simply had an experience without knowing the basis upon which God has moved in our lives, we can soon find ourselves in one of a number of very undesirable positions: –

1) What you might describe as 'high and dry'. Able to look back on a wonderful experience of God in our past, but unable to see that experience continue in the present moment. Not knowing how to recapture the blessing and living with ongoing disappointment as a result.

2) Dangerously open to any 'wind of doctrine' or almost any offer of a 'repeat experience'. This is a point at which we can be seduced by apparently attractive teaching if it seems to present another wonderful experience, and we can end up simply trying to 'catch the next wave' without any real understanding of what the Holy Spirit has already done in our lives.

3) Self-deception. Kidding ourselves (but maybe no-one else!) that we are on some sort of higher spiritual level because of our past experience(s). Nothing takes the place of our daily 'walk' with the Lord. If past experiences feed greater depth and reality into that, fine! That's exactly what they are designed to do. Otherwise, such experiences have no particular value.

Please don't fall into any of these traps.

As we saw back in the chapter 'The Process of Growth', it seems that two factors usually need to come together in order for real spiritual progress in our lives: Information and Inspiration. In some situations where people have had a 'second experience', there may have been much 'inspiration' but much less 'information'. This can easily lead to a wonderful and uplifting experience at the time, but without any clear means of perpetuating it into our future walk with God. And, as the days pass, perhaps a little of the glory seems to be fading and we wish that we could somehow recapture it – which leads us all too easily into one (or more) of these three traps.

In the footnotes, I have already suggested some additional reading which may be of some help, but perhaps it will not go amiss to spell out here some of the basic foundations for an ongoing and real experience of the power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon us. In sharing these, I am very conscious of the danger of providing what looks like a 'formula', a routine to be followed which would

¹ There are several verses that point clearly to the link between the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Here are two key passages: **John 16:5-15** and **John 7:37-39**. For more detailed explanation, see 'No Mere Remembrance', (especially chapters 9 & 10 'Much More Than Proof' and 'Beyond the Resurrection . . .'), 'First Steps to Maturity' and 'By His Doing'. All available from www.justonecandle.uk. Chapter 8 of Watchman Nee's classic, *The Normal Christian Life*, gives very clear and helpful Biblical teaching on this subject. Strongly recommended! (Please do read the whole book!)

automatically bring us into the sort of ongoing experience which we are looking for. There is no such formula! We are each dealing with the living and personal God, who knows each of us as individuals better than we know ourselves, and he knows exactly what we need in order to move forward.

Nonetheless, some pointers may be useful, though again I must repeat that it is important that you listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and allow him to make these facts real to you. The key is a growing knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done, and I simply echo Paul's prayer as he wrote to the Ephesian believers: "*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him; that **the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know** what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe, in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*"¹

I believe that this should be the result of any genuine spiritual experience: 1) That we receive inner enlightenment, not just knowledge of additional facts and 2) that – as a result of that enlightenment – we **know** with a fresh certainty more of what it means to be **in Christ**.

For me, the central fact that has made the greatest difference is that Father God has joined my life to the Lord Jesus Christ. He did the joining – I didn't! ² Out of that enlightenment has flowed a growing awareness of my inheritance in Christ, not just in eternity, but now. Some years ago, I tried to put some of that together into a chart for a study group, and you will find a link below. ³ Of course, it is far from complete, but you may find it useful.

Specifically regarding the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, I had seen for some years before that the Holy Spirit is poured out on the Church because the Lord Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father (see the footnotes on the previous page). That was 'theory', if you like, good sound doctrine, but I could not find my way into experience of it! But then the Lord opened my eyes to the fact that I was **in Christ**, my life was joined to his, and so, as he was glorified at the right hand of the Father, the Holy Spirit was poured out on me as a direct result. From that 'eye-opening' came the faith to put my trust in the facts, and experience followed!

By the great grace of God, in the years that have followed that time, he has gone on opening my eyes and the 'knowing' has become stronger. But the irony is that the more you see, the more you realise that there is much more to see, more need for revelation, more need for 'the obedience of faith'. (See the earlier chapter, 'The Process of Growth')

¹ Ephesians 1:17-21

² 1 Corinthians 1:30

³ <http://www.justonecandle.uk/PDFs/RootsShootsChart.pdf>

The Building Process

So, how do we see the church being built?

I am not asking “How can we build the church?”, which might seem to be the obvious question, for one simple reason: We can’t do it!

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it” wrote Solomon in **Psalm 127**. The same Solomon who actually studied the vain and meaningless things in life and catalogued them in **Ecclesiastes** ! He knew ‘useless’ when he saw it!

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (**Matthew 16:18**)

Yes, it is the Lord Jesus himself who actually builds the church, but we have already seen that we are intimately involved in the process.

Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 3** about the roles that he and Apollos played in the beginnings of the church there in Corinth. Paul ‘sowed the seed’ and Apollos ‘watered’ it, enabling and encouraging that little germ of spiritual life to grow, expand and develop.

But Paul brings a note of caution to anyone who is continuing that building process: “According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.”¹

We shall look later at the importance of the materials used in that building process, but let us look at the character of that master builder. Selection of the right building materials is only part of the process. A bad builder is still a bad builder, even if they use excellent materials. So what was it that marked Paul out as a ‘wise master builder’?

There’s a little phrase in **Galatians 6:14** that reveals a vital aspect of the power of the death of Jesus, not only in Paul’s personal relationship with his Lord, but also in his relationship with the world system around him: “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which (or whom) the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Are we already aware of the fact that our old life is dead and gone? The basis of this is that we are joined to the death of Jesus, so that we like Paul can say “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me”.²

So that covers what Paul means by ‘. . . and I to the world.’ In other words, the world system has no more call on Paul, he is no longer under its control, any more than a dead person would be. This is not the main point in what we are looking at right now but, on a personal level, it is vital that we know **in experience** the release that comes from knowing that we really ARE dead to the power of repeated failure, dead to the coercion of legalism and dead to the subtle persuasion of the world system. This ‘death’, this release and freedom, is a vital part of our inheritance in Christ.

But what does he mean by saying “the world has been crucified to me”? Exactly the same, the other way around! In other words, just as Paul is no longer at the disposal of the world system, so the world system is no longer at Paul’s disposal. He no longer has access to the world’s way of doing things because that has been cut off from him, just as he himself has been cut off from the world’s system. The way he speaks, it is as if he has no choice in the matter. It’s settled; it’s done! Because of the death of Jesus on the cross, **and the fact that Paul knows he is identified and included in that death**, Paul says that there is absolutely no way that he can use the world system, with all its methods and approaches, in his life and ministry.

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:10

² Galatians 2:20. See also the whole of Romans chapter 6.

But how does that work out in practice? Paul explains a little more in **1 Corinthians 1 & 2** and **2 Corinthians 10**, but we can find more references to the way he worked, in the book of **Acts** and scattered throughout his letters.

“And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God”¹

If we look back in **Acts 18:1-11**, we can see how that worked out on the ground in Corinth. Paul started by finding that remarkable couple, Aquila and Priscilla,² staying with them, working with them at their tent-making trade during the week and then spending time ‘reasoning’ in the Jewish synagogue every Saturday, and ‘trying to persuade’ Jews and Greeks. Some of those Greeks may have been ‘proselytes’, non-Jews who had attached themselves to the Jewish faith, but the Jews themselves resisted the message that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Paul’s response to that was to tell them that he would now go to the Gentiles – and then he moved his teaching and preaching activities to the house next door to the synagogue!

The synagogue leader, Crispus, all his household and many other residents of Corinth put their trust in the Lord and were baptised, but Paul still needed reassurance from the Lord not to be afraid of attack, not to be silent but to go on speaking. **Acts 18:9 & 10** confirm **1 Corinthians 2:3**! And he stayed there in Corinth for 18 months, ‘teaching the word of God among them’.

In **1 Corinthians 1:18-31**, Paul goes into more detail about how he proclaimed the message, and his Corinthian readers would have been able to confirm his methods. ‘Jews’, he writes, ‘ask for signs’ (i.e. miracles that back up the message with demonstrations of supernatural power) and ‘Greeks search for wisdom’ (i.e. philosophical reasoning), but the message that he proclaimed provided neither of these, despite the fact that he had already seen miracles in his work and that he was quite capable of tackling philosophy! His ‘reasoning’ in **Acts 18:4** was not high-flying philosophical argument but discussion with his listeners as he presented and proclaimed the crucified Messiah.

To the Jews in Corinth (and anywhere else), the idea of their long-awaited Messiah being crucified was totally unacceptable. They may also have already heard about Jesus, the prophet who came from Nazareth, of all places! That despised town in ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’! Little wonder that they objected so strongly to Paul’s proclamation of him as the crucified Messiah!

Likewise, for the Greeks (and probably other Gentiles as well), this story about a prophet who had been executed by the Romans just would not add up as acceptable ‘wisdom’.

Many today have similar objections. Religious or mystical people may say that they want some ‘proof’, some demonstration of supernatural power, before they will consider the possibility of trusting in the effectiveness of reconciliation with God through what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Similarly, those who have either adopted a ready-made ‘philosophy of life’ or fitted together their own version may find it ridiculous to think of relying on the death of one person two thousand years ago to satisfy their needs.

Despite both of these apparently ‘built-in’ resistances, Paul persisted with ‘the foolishness of preaching’ (more literally, ‘proclamation’), knowing that God was ‘well-pleased’ to use that process. (‘Well-pleased’ is the same word used to confirm the Father’s approval of his beloved Son in **Matthew 3:17, 12:18, 17:5, Mark 1:11** and **Luke 11:32**.)

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

² Aquila and Priscilla make an interesting study in themselves. Jews with Roman names, born in northern Turkey and recently expelled from Rome when Paul met them in Corinth. We have no record of whether they were already believers in Jesus, but they travel with Paul to Ephesus, where they are effective witnesses, teachers and hosts for the church there – and then back in Rome again later. See Acts 18:18 & 26, Romans 16:3, 1 Corinthians 16:19 and 2 Timothy 4:19.

Why does he avoid signs and philosophy? Wouldn't they have been effective in backing up the message that he brought? The answer is simple: 'so that your faith would not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.'¹

We saw this same process in an earlier chapter, 'The Process of Growth'. Real effective faith comes as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit as he 'opens up' truth to us. And that truth needs to be presented in such a way that he can work on it. Which is why Paul spells out so clearly that he refuses to use the 'natural' tools that the world system offers.

He writes about 'foolishness' and there are two sides to that. Firstly, what we have just been looking at: The apparent stupidity of simply presenting truth rather than dressing it up with fine words of eloquent philosophy or dramatic demonstrations of supernatural power.

And then the actual content of the message! How could it possibly be the case that one man dying by the most barbaric form of execution could open up both reconciliation with the one true living God and also the fulfilment of philosophical searching for meaning and purpose?

But, as Paul says, "to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."² 'The called' he calls them – us! – the ones who have responded to the call of God. In other words, as we saw earlier, the church!

Paul has rejected the 'wisdom' of the world system, but he then presents a very different kind of wisdom, based on "Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification"³, and the scope of that wisdom is amazing – and limitless! We can read about it in **1 Corinthians 2:6-13**.

Verse 9 is often quoted by people who use it to say that we can't possibly know what God has done and has provided for us, but what Paul is saying is the **direct opposite!** He quotes from the Old Testament⁴ in **v.9**, but goes on in **v.10-13** to say that the things which **were** unseen, unheard and unimagined – the mysteries of God – are now revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, and that the things that he passes on in his teaching spring from that revelation.

I can't leave this passage without drawing your attention to the almost incredible facts in **v.9-13**. The Holy Spirit, being himself God, "searches all things, even the depths of God." I think of the way that fingers reach into a glove and 'search' right to the fingertips, with no gaps. In the same way, there are no 'gaps' in the Holy Spirit's knowledge of the things of God.

So far, so obvious, but Paul then makes this staggering statement: "*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God*". Far from the idea that we can't possibly know what God has done, Paul says that we have received that same Holy Spirit who searches right into the depths of God, so that we **can** know what God has given us. And, says Paul, that is the way in which he teaches, with words taught by the Spirit, in order to pass on what God has given us.

But, he says in **v.14**, not everyone can receive this teaching. If someone is operating from just human understanding, it will all seem like foolishness to them. On the other hand, to those who are 'the called' and are responding to the Spirit of God, it will be God's wisdom.

How do we approach proclaiming the word of God? Following natural wisdom, or the wisdom of God?

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:5

² 1 Corinthians 1:24

³ 1 Corinthians 1:30

⁴ Isaiah 64:4, 65:17, Job 9:10, 11:7

Leadership?

Not long ago, I heard a speaker refer briefly to the responsibilities of a church leader. He listed a number of things, including leading meetings, work with young people, running the drop-in centre, spiritual growth, and so on. Given more time to expand, and especially if he had been thinking of a larger group, I am sure that the list would have been much longer.

What does the New Testament have to say about church leadership? Perhaps we have already seen enough to realise that what we have thought of as 'church' is often not really in line with the Lord's plans, so it may come as no surprise to find that much of what we think is 'church leadership' is really something else altogether.

The professionalism of many modern-day church leaders owes much to the 'clergy – laity' divide which originated in the Roman Catholic and 'Orthodox' denominations and seems to derive largely from the framework of priesthood in the Old Testament. Whilst holding in theory to the priesthood of all believers, we have seen fit to elevate 'leaders' to a position which is very close to a priesthood, demanding that we follow them and obey their decisions.

When we think of leadership, we often tend to think of organisation and structure, positions of authority relative to other people in the organisation. We only need to spend a little time as an employee to become very accustomed to that whole approach. We may not refer to 'the boss' quite so easily as past generations may have done, but we find ourselves responsible to a 'line manager' who in turn is responsible to their line manager – and so on.

Perhaps we have also spent time in voluntary organisations, whether as 'leaders' or 'followers', and have found that very much the same sort of structure emerges, almost automatically. There is a need to have things running smoothly, so everyone needs to know what their own roles and responsibilities are. It doesn't make much difference whether it's the local darts club or an international humanitarian aid charity – organisation, structure and leadership are essential for efficient working.

And so, perhaps, if we are called upon to take some leadership responsibility in church fellowship, we may make the mistake of approaching the task in the same way – organisationally.

The church is different! This is not an organisation as we know them and church leadership is not organisational leadership.

The Lord Jesus even warned against taking leadership positions, alongside his own example. Was he a leader, **the** leader, of the twelve? Of course we know that he was, but can you detect any organisational structure in that leadership? It has been wisely said that the definition of a leader is 'someone who is being followed', and that is precisely the way in which he led his disciples. When a crisis of that leadership arises and some of his followers stop following, Jesus challenges the twelve and asks: "You do not want to leave also, do you?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." (**John 6:67-69**) Peter was a follower.

The scribes and Pharisees loved the recognition, respect and position of authority that people gave them because of their scholarship and correctness and it is precisely about this sort of 'leadership' that Jesus warns so strongly:

"Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: 'The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses. Therefore, whatever they tell you, do and comply with it all, but do not do as they do; for they say and do not do. And they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with their finger. And they do all their deeds to be noticed by people; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels. And they love the place of honour at banquets, and the seats of honour in the synagogues, and personal greetings in the marketplaces, and being called Rabbi by the people. But as for you, do not be called Rabbi (= 'teacher'); for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, he who is in heaven. And do

not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, the Christ. But the greatest of you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.’” (**Matthew 23:1-7** and see also **Mark 12:38-39** and **Luke 20:45-46**)

So, in the face of such dire warnings, what options does the New Testament provide as we consider leadership in the church?

Our tendency to think organisationally shows itself again as we usually look past spiritual qualifications and turn our attention to organisational ability. But let’s look initially at two or three functions that are sometimes labelled as ‘leadership’ :– deacons, elders and overseers.

The Greek word *diakonos* (sometimes translated ‘deacon’) simply means a servant. Not a slave, but one who chooses to serve and who, as a servant in a normal household, would be considered as an employee. The senior ‘*diakonos*’ in a large household would be the ‘*oikonomos*’, (usually translated ‘steward’) who would be responsible for all the domestic arrangements and finances as well as the other servants and slaves and would be directly answerable to the head of the family.

The word *presbuteros* (‘elder’) simply means that: an older person. From ancient times in Judaism, and still in many cultures today, the older generation were (or are) regarded as sources of wisdom and sound judgment, usually turned to for guidance and direction.

Episkopos means someone who oversees what is going on, an overseer or supervisor. On a building site, we would probably call them the foreman, the clerk of works or the site agent. Linked to this ‘job description’ is the word meaning ‘to oversee’, translated ‘see to it that . . .’ in at least one passage, so supervision with responsibility to get things done. Some Bible versions translate this word as ‘bishop’, which is a meaningless jargon word associated with religious organisational hierarchy, leading to more confusion. ‘Overseer’ describes the function of the role.

In our rush to formulate nice tidy structures, ‘elders’ and ‘overseers’ are often bundled together as being the same people in the church. They may well be, but let’s not be in too much of a hurry to put everyone neatly in their boxes. Let’s look at ‘function’ before we look at ‘position’!

Many people consider that **Deacons** in the church were invented in **Acts 6**, when there was an urgent practical problem that would have taken up too much time for the twelve apostles. There is no indication that these men held any position in the leadership of the church, nor that their appointment was seen as anything long-term, though they were evidently men of significant spiritual stature. They sorted out the problem and then went on with the rest of their lives. Stephen and Philip are the only two from the original seven that we hear any more about, and on those occasions there is no reference to their being ‘deacons’, except that ‘Philip the evangelist’ is referred to as being ‘one of the seven’ in **Acts 21:8**.

Paul refers to himself as a servant (*diakonos*) of the churches ¹ but it is clear that he did not consider himself to have any organisational position – or leadership role – in any of them.

The word *diakonos* is used a total of 29 times in the New Testament but is translated ‘deacon’ in only 3 passages ², where it seems to refer to people with responsibilities (but not really leadership) in the churches. It is not used at all in **Acts 6**! Confusingly, in the old Authorised (King James 1611) version, *diakonos* is translated as ‘minister’ in 20 passages, and other more modern translations have often repeated the mistake. ‘Minister’ may possibly have meant ‘servant’ in 1611, but it certainly does not now! This may have led to a misunderstanding that deacons are ‘ministers’ in a religious sense. The word has no such meaning, and there seems to be no implication of leadership by deacons, simply that they are there to serve the church fellowship, initially (in **Acts 6**) in the distribution of food to needy members and then probably in various different ways in different practical situations where ‘service’ might be needed.

So, if we look at the (fairly limited) evidence for ‘deacons’ in the New Testament, it seems that their role is primarily functional, to get things done and especially to serve in practical ways. People, male or female, with definite responsibilities and certainly needing to be spiritually mature in order to serve the church, but with no leadership responsibilities.

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:5, 2 Corinthians 3:6, 6:4, 11:23, Ephesians 3:7, Colossians 1:23,25,

² Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8, 3:12

Elders and overseers are most likely the same people, with two different aspects to their functions. Eldership implies age and experience, combined with wisdom and understanding, taking forward the long-established traditions of 'village elders' and the like. In a young church, 'age and experience' would necessarily be relative, so Paul and Barnabas will have been looking for those showing greater spiritual maturity when they sought to appoint elders in the churches in **Acts 14:23**. These believers were all young in the faith but Paul and Barnabas did not import someone from outside and leave them there to lead the young churches. They prayed and fasted, seeking to have the Lord's clear leading about who to appoint as the 'older ones' **from their own number** to lead these young churches. Out of their greater maturity would spring their ability to oversee the life of their church fellowships but, as the Lord Jesus had said all those years before, "you are all brothers", so there was to be no sense of hierarchy.

(In passing, as I have used that word 'hierarchy' a couple of times, it is interesting to note its original meaning: 'rule by priests or a priesthood'. In other words, religious organisation, usually in several levels – an example of what Jesus warned against!)

It is worth looking at Paul's directions to Timothy in **1 Timothy 3** and to Titus in **Titus 1:5-9**, where he passes on the guidelines which he used himself when looking for suitable overseers in church fellowships. He also touches on the role and requirements of deacons, male and female, once more with the emphasis on service.

Which brings us necessarily to the consideration of gender. It seems likely from **1 Timothy 3** that there were female deacons, plus Paul refers to Phoebe "who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea" (**Romans 16:1**) and the word translated 'servant' is *diakonos* again. But, as we have already seen, there is no indication that deacons exercised any leadership.

It is currently an unpopular view to say that the New Testament teaches all-male leadership in the church, but I cannot find any reference to female leadership. Paul is sometimes unfairly characterised as misogynistic, but in fact his teaching promoted greater equality between the sexes. In **1 Corinthians 7:4**, for example, he says that neither marriage partner has authority over their own body, but that – in each case, both husband and wife – that authority lies with the other partner. Not just revolutionary in Paul's day; applying that today would cause quite a stir! And then there is his insistence on unity and mutual submission and his teaching that there is 'not male and female' (**Galatians 3:28**).

Paul's clarity about equality does not contradict his teaching about the proper relationship between man and woman in marriage, specifically that the man is the 'head' of the woman in the same way that Christ is head of the church, and that therefore the same sort of relationship exists, one of the wife 'placing herself under' her husband (the basic meaning of the word usually translated 'submit'). See **1 Corinthians 11:1-16** and **Ephesians 5:22-33**. Yes, the same letter to Corinth in which he wrote about equality! Interestingly also, in the verse immediately before the passage in **Ephesians**, Paul tells all the believers in Ephesus to 'submit to' (= place themselves under) each other. Paul is also very clear (if a bit blunt!) about not allowing any woman to teach or exercise authority over a man (**1 Timothy 2:12**). That would obviously rule out women from leadership in the church fellowship, where an ability to teach is a valuable quality in an elder/overseer. See **1 Timothy 5:17**.

Taking all of this together, it seems impossible to write off Paul's attitude to women in leadership in the church as being based on prejudice, ancient tradition or just the custom of the times. He seems convinced of both true equality between the sexes **and** the inappropriateness of women exercising leadership **over men**, but he actively encourages older women to show leadership towards younger women. See **Titus 2:4-5**.

I think I have probably heard all the arguments in favour of women in Christian leadership, but those who put them forward must necessarily have a problem with these verses. If you decide that we can ignore them because 'that was just the custom of the time', where do you stop in making your own decisions about what parts of the Bible to disregard?

I had a similar discussion some years back with a female pastor. She said that she actually agreed with me, but that the problem was that there were not enough men willing or able to take on leadership roles. Very much a case, she said, of Christian men responding to a call to Christian service with

that old classic: “Lord, here am I – send my sister!” Faced with that level of honesty, I found myself able to work with her, remarkably easily.

Back in 1988, David Pawson wrote a short but controversial book entitled *Leadership is Male* and Elisabeth Elliott wrote the Foreword to it. Whether you agree with the title or not, reading it should help you to sort through this question and I thoroughly recommend it, though I don’t necessarily agree with him on every point!

* * * * *

Coming back to the need for leadership in the church, it is worth repeating that it is **spiritual** rather than organisational leadership that is the primary need. It is interesting to see that the appointment of church leaders was **not** the urgent priority for Paul and his co-workers. Yes, it was necessary and important, but it seems obvious that there was sometimes a time gap between the birth of a local church and the recognition and appointment of elders within it. The passage of time was probably useful to allow those with greater maturity to become recognisable.

It was not until Paul and Barnabas were retracing their route through Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch that they appointed elders in the churches which they had seen born on their initial visits.¹ We would probably have been in a hurry to set people up in leadership roles or perhaps we would have stayed on ourselves or imported someone from elsewhere to lead them. Paul and Barnabas prayed, fasted and appointed elders, “commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” – and then went away!

When Paul writes to Timothy about the appointment of elders in the church, Timothy is in Ephesus, where a church has been established for some time already, before Paul left him there. Timothy’s main role there is to make sure that the church there is protected from false teaching, but Paul also includes the guidelines for eldership that we have already seen in **1 Timothy 3**. Obviously, there will be the need for fresh elders to be appointed from time to time.

Titus in Crete seems to have the task of appointing elders, either for the first time or to reinstate churches where things have gone wrong or fallen apart. Paul’s comment that “*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you*”² does sound rather like picking up the pieces and getting things on a proper footing once again.

Both of these passages make it clear that elders/overseers were not just for the early days of a church’s life, but needed to be present and active as they moved forward together. Our tendency to concentrate on **organisational** leadership has had the effect of pushing responsible **spiritual** leadership back into the shadows, as if we assumed that we don’t need it any more.

* * * * *

So, what does spiritual leadership actually **do** ? We’re not going back to the list that started this chapter, and not even trying to have a different list with a different ‘spiritual’ emphasis. Yes, there are specific aspects of leadership to look at, but probably the most essential characteristic of any leader is that they are **moving forwards!** The Lord Jesus had followers because he was moving forwards in line with his Father’s purposes and his passion was for those followers to share in those purposes. To see that happen, he was ready to pour out his whole life and serve them so that they could grow and function properly. Read **John 17**, the whole chapter – yes, now, if you can – and see the desire of his heart for his disciples and for us, too. Perhaps we have seen this chapter as something special – and it is – as Jesus pours out his heart to his Father. But look at it again as the prayer of a leader for those who follow him.

Paul was also constantly moving forward and had the same passion to see growth. Two of his letters were written to believers whom he had never even met, in Rome and in Colossae. Where would generations of Christians be without the extensive teaching contained in Romans? And listen to his intense passion as Paul writes to those in Colossae: “*We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labour, striving according to His working, which works in power within me.*”

¹ Acts 14:21-23

² Titus 1:5

'Our Church'

Whenever you travel and meet Christians, you will often be invited to get together with them and 'their church'. This might be in someone's home, in a simple building or in somewhere a little more ornate but, wherever they meet, they will usually be insistent that the building is not the church (even if they refer to it in that way!) but that it is the people who really are the church. So far, so good, even if there **is** that tendency to refer to a building as a 'church'!

Let's get that one out of the way first. Early Christian believers had no special buildings, but it was not long before these started to appear. They needed somewhere to meet regularly and perhaps borrowing or hiring a space became difficult or expensive, or perhaps one of their number had access to suitable property where a new building could be erected or an existing one modified.

This history has been repeated down the centuries. As soon as the numbers of believers grew, they began to see a need for a building to meet in. The history of Christian evangelism in almost every country can be traced by the appearance of meeting places. Completely understandable and often necessary for various reasons.

How the name 'church' began to be transferred from the body of people to the place of their meeting is less clear. No reference to the church in the New Testament can be honestly interpreted to mean the physical meeting place of believers, but perhaps they are only short steps from going to a meeting of the church in a certain place – 'going to a church meeting' – to 'going to church' and then beginning to attach the name of 'church' to the place and not the people or the meeting.

Short steps indeed, but along that short journey the understanding of the nature of the Church is lost. It is hard to see – before 'church' started to be used for buildings – how anyone who truly understood the nature of the Church could have allowed their use of words to become so twisted that they would then begin to call a building a 'church'. Anyway, it happened, and throughout the world, it seems, we have become lumbered with a word that means one thing in the Bible and something completely different in the present day, at least to most people.

* * * * *

But getting back to where we were . . .

We have already looked at 'unrealistic inclusion' and know that the church, in Biblical terms, means a body or group of believers, those who have personally come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. All of them, and only them. Sometimes it can mean the **whole** Church, every single one in the world who belongs to Jesus. Sometimes it can mean just the believers in one small place.

And then sometimes we talk about 'our church'. What do we mean? Usually, simply just those people, fellow-believers, with whom we are involved, but then it begins to get complicated . . .

'Our church' begins to have an identity of its own. Almost inevitably, it has a name, though there are some ways to try to minimise 'brand loyalty'.

About 35 years ago, a fellowship which met in a small rural building felt that the building's name was old-fashioned and perhaps gave out the wrong messages, so an attempt was made to find a new name. In the end, a very wise suggestion was taken up: not to name the fellowship but to re-name the building. OK, it didn't completely eliminate the problem, but it helped a little. No-one could say "I belong to X fellowship" but rather "I meet with the folk at Y chapel". Sadly, of course, that all too easily changed to "I belong to Y chapel" – and they were back almost where they started!

Then some people wanted to have a membership list of those who 'belonged'. One reason given was so that each one would have the contact details of everyone else, but that was not really necessary, because everyone had the local telephone directory and email had not yet become commonplace. It was to be a membership list, with the clear aim of defining who was a member, despite the fact that the fellowship had absolutely no membership arrangements, formal or informal. There were some who did not like the 'membership list' idea and, in the end, a list was compiled of

the 'Friends of Y Chapel', which included other believers in the area and so masqueraded as a useful contact list. But everyone knew what it really was: a membership list, pure and simple.

Another fellowship, a few years earlier, in the London suburbs. Again, no formal structure, no membership lists, just a growing network of friends who all put their trust in Jesus and wanted to learn together how best they could follow him, individually and collectively. No corporate building, just private homes. No name at all: people involved just referred to it as 'the fellowship', and perhaps that is where the problem began . . .

As contact with other local (and not-so-local) Christians developed, how could they refer to 'the fellowship' ? They wanted a name, a label to attach to it.

And so the headed notepaper came into being – with a name, of course!

The sequels to both these stories are different but similar. After several years, the rural fellowship sold its rather dilapidated hall as a building site and started to meet in the village hall. It adopted a name (for the fellowship, not the hall), drew up a constitution and initiated formal membership. One reason given was the opportunity to register with the Charities Commission and so gain some tax advantages.

The suburban fellowship also formalised. A letter was circulated to all, which they were asked to sign in agreement with a number of key points, including that they would follow the direction of the leadership even if they felt that they were wrong. Quite a number, including some who had been involved from early days, decided that they could not continue. Now more than 35 years later, one of those early participants, looking at the present situation of this and many of the other so-called 'new churches', writes that they seem to have reverted to 'same old, same old' and become like the 'old churches' from which so many of their members had escaped in the early years.

But what's so wrong with having a name, having a clear identity, a membership list, a constitution or a building? Let me suggest a different approach. To some, it may seem familiar. It may also seem old-fashioned – or totally impractical ?

A fellowship that consists entirely of people who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. They relate to each other first of all on the basis of their relationship with him and then friendships develop from there. There is an absolute minimum of organisation; perhaps the most basic essentials are agreeing a convenient time and place to meet – and even those details may be a little flexible!

Again more than 35 years ago, and once part of that same suburban fellowship, an old friend of ours said that he would like to start a 'deliberately nebulous church' and I think I know what he meant. No structure, no hierarchy, just relationships with the Lord and each other.

I can almost hear the howls of protest that such a fellowship would be intensely impractical and that nothing would ever get done! Most of us have never seen anything like that. We are familiar with fellowships with names, formal structures, leadership teams and membership lists.

I can't see anything like that in the New Testament. In fact, Paul condemns groups naming themselves and so separating themselves from others in the same place, telling them that they are 'dividing Christ' and behaving like 'mere men' ¹. He tells Timothy that 'The Lord knows those who are his' ² and the Lord Jesus himself spoke clearly against accepting titles of leadership ³.

Names for fellowships create loyalties – and divisions! Many of the names given to various 'moves of God' over the generations have been attached to the fellowships by those who were outside them, and often as pejorative terms. Even the first believers to be called 'Christians' probably got that name as a mocking reference to their repeated reference to their leader, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. ⁴ The Wesleys had the name of 'Methodist' attached to them because of their methodical approach to Biblical instruction. In the first half of the 19th century, various groups of Christian brothers met together as disciples of Christ, taking no name to label themselves, but soon found that others had given them the name of 'Brethren'. In the 1970s, groups of believers started

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:11-13, 3:3-6

² 2 Timothy 2:19

³ Matthew 23:10

⁴ Acts 11:20-26

meeting primarily in each others' houses, and became known as 'The House Church Movement'. And so on . . .

Paul tackles party spirit head-on as he write to the believers in Corinth, especially in **1 Corinthians 1 and 3**. He is deeply concerned as he writes:

"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

These believers were still very much part of the one church in Corinth. All that they were doing was stating their allegiance to one particular leader. Probably even those who said 'I am of Christ' were saying it in a way that implied that the others might not be 'of Christ'. Paul classified this behaviour as 'divisions' and 'quarrels' and encouraged them – invoking the name of the Lord – to agree, to have no divisions, to be made complete in the same mind and judgment.

Even this level of division – still within the same church fellowship – was definitely not acceptable. How much less the situation with which we are all too familiar, which in reality we now treat as being normal, of having totally separate 'churches' in close proximity to each other, with varying degrees of contact between them, but with each one commanding loyalty to 'our church'!

Paul spells out the simple remedy in **1 Corinthians 3:21-23**: *"So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God."* They thought that they belonged to Paul, Apollos or Cephas (Peter). Paul says, 'No, it's the other way round. You don't belong to them; they belong to you'. The Greek is simple in both **1 Corinthians 1** and **1 Corinthians 3**. The 'belong to' of **ch.3** is actually just the same simple 'of' which is found in **ch.1**.

Is this just **too simple** for us? To see that we do not 'belong' to any group? To see that our admiration for any individual does not mean that we have to 'belong' to them or to their group, but simply realise that they belong to us; they are part of our Father's rich provision to us in the one Church of which we are all part, as those who **belong** to the Lord Jesus Christ! ¹

Taking our stand on this simple New Testament basis will not be without its perils. If we refuse to give our loyalty to the organisations that are called 'churches' but instead simply concentrate on our relationships with each other in the Lord, we will probably be called divisive. The irony of that situation would be funny if it were not deeply tragic – that we should be called divisive because we refuse to accept the party loyalties that actually define Christian disunity!

I remember a situation many years ago, when we were deeply involved in one fellowship but also ran an informal home study group with people from different fellowships in the immediate area. One busy week, not all the home study group could make their usual evening but they were all free on the night of the fellowship's regular Bible Study group, which we also led. Simple solution, it seemed: all get together on the same night! So we did, and had a good time together, but there was trouble! Not – as you might expect – from the leaders of the other groups, thinking that we might be 'sheep stealing' some of 'their' people to 'our' fellowship, but from the other leaders of 'our' fellowship, because 'our' fellowship's meeting had been compromised in some way. I was puzzled then and, as I think about it again, I am still puzzled now!

¹ See also '*The Third Alternative*' from www.justonecandle.uk

No Real Existence

Some years ago, I was feeling very concerned about Christian disunity. Something that has troubled me for many years, and which I remain convinced is deeply and painfully etched on our Father's heart. Especially since I started looking carefully at the Lord Jesus' words in **John 17:20-21**, where he says *"I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me through their word; that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me."*

That was Jesus praying for you and me, not for the Twelve (eleven by then!) nor even for the great numbers of followers he already had. He was asking that we should be **that** united – as united as the Father is with the Son – with the result that the world may believe. And the opposite is also true: If the world cannot see that we are united, then they have every right NOT to believe that Jesus was sent by the Father, the one true God.

There we all were, in our own little separate boxes, following our own little separate programmes, talking unity but living division. Prepared to go a little way to express our oneness with Christian brothers and sisters, but not ready to lose our precious little individual corporate identities.

"Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God" wrote Bob Pierce, founder of the World Vision international humanitarian organisation, and I have echoed that prayer many times since I first read a book with the same title back in the 1960s. For Bob and for World Vision, it was and is the dire physical situation of impoverished people – especially children – throughout the world.

But, as I was beginning to see with greater clarity, God's heart is profoundly broken by the man-made divisions that we have erected between our different groups. We all have our excuses (we call them 'good reasons') why we cannot possibly abandon our particular loyalties. Of course, other people are very welcome to leave their groups and come and join ours, but the other way round? No way!

And then, as I was reading, I came across **1 Corinthians 8:4**. If you look it up, you will see that Paul is writing about food offered to idols and whether Christian believers should eat it. How on earth did this verse cast any light on my growing grief about Christian disunity?

"Why look at idolatry?" you ask, "that's got nothing to do with Christian unity – and no-one offers food to idols these days! Maybe in other places, but certainly not in this country!" Bear with me for a few moments.

* * * * *

Several years before this, back in the late 1960s and early 70s, I had been privileged to spend some time in India. India's Hindu temples have no lack of statues and images of the vast pantheon of Hindu gods, and of course there are many worshippers who make devotional food offerings to these images.

One day, I talked with a Hindu man who was prepared to enter into two-way discussion with me about his religion and my faith in Jesus. It was an interesting and challenging session, certainly for me and hopefully for him also. One of my top questions was about idols and I asked him how he could possibly worship something that was simply a physical, man-made object. Running round in the back of my mind were verses from the Old Testament such as *"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them."*¹ How could this intelligent man really treat an image or a statue as if it were really a powerful supernatural being?

I expected him to start making excuses, but his answer was incredibly useful to me and helped me to begin to see idolatry from the viewpoint of an idol-worshipper. "Of course", he said, "I know that an image or a statue is only a piece of man-made artistry. It cannot possibly be a god in itself. But,

¹ **Psalm 115:4-8**

by directing my external devotion to the image, I am better able to channel my inner devotion to my god.”

That really opened my eyes to his understanding but, needless to say, it did not encourage me to follow his example, and particularly not to have any interest in any of the Hindu gods! The tangible presence of evil around many places and objects of devotion to the Hindu pantheon had already left me in no doubt that what Paul writes is 100% true: “*What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? But that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.*”¹ That gives a very clear picture of the real direction of idol-worship. It provides an open door for Satan.

But now I had begun to see why idolatry, which to me had always seemed so obviously stupid and illogical, could be represented as a perfectly acceptable channel through which to try to approach ‘God’.

And, gradually over the following years, the Bible’s depiction of idolatry has become clearer to me.

One of the earliest examples: The Israelites, having been delivered 3 months earlier from 400 years of slavery in Egypt – by the very evident power of the one true and invisible God – found themselves in the wilderness at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses, their charismatic 80-year-old leader, had gone up the mountain and had not been seen for days. Aaron, Moses’ elder brother, was easily persuaded by the people to make a golden image, which he represented like this: “*This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.*” He even arranged a feast day in honour of this image and called it “*a feast to the LORD*”, using the personal name of God which had been revealed to Moses at the burning bush!

Obviously, Aaron and the people would all know that it was not this newly-made golden calf that had actually brought them out of Egypt 3 months earlier. After all, he had only just made it, and from their own golden jewellery which he had melted down! The people had demanded that he should make them a god who would ‘go before’ them. They wanted a symbol, something to follow, perhaps something to focus on in the same way as my Hindu acquaintance. Aaron fell into the trap. He made the image, the people worshipped it and gave sacrifices to it. Read the whole story in **Exodus 32**.

A vital and often repeated command from the LORD was to have nothing to do with any imagery as a vehicle for worship. That was one reason that he had not allowed himself to be seen by anyone. Moses reminded the people in **Deuteronomy 4:12, 15-16**: “*the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form – only a voice. . . . So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. And not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.*” So, a clear command not to worship anything man-made and not even the sun, moon and stars which God himself had created.

It is a short step from this ‘representative’ idolatry, where an image is supposed to focus attention on the ‘god’ to be worshipped, to animism, which is ‘a belief that objects, places and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence’ (*Wikipedia*). Some people believe that animism is probably the most basic form of human religion. It certainly turns up in many cultures which we call ‘primitive’ and strong hints of it show in some modern popular philosophies. Perhaps there is even a remnant of it in our tendency to humanise non-human objects or events. As I write this paragraph, there have been three violent storms over the UK in the last week. They were all given names . . .

Back in my time in India, I gradually grew accustomed to seeing graphic representations of Hindu gods in every possible situation. Perhaps the most mundane was the proliferation of advertising calendars issued by all sorts of companies, which would have these pictures emblazoned in vivid

¹ **1 Corinthians 10:19,20**

colours, maybe to convince the customer of the religious orthodoxy of the firm's proprietor and also to encourage their veneration of whichever 'deity' it might be on this particular calendar. It was not unusual to see several such calendars on the walls of a single household. (Just search for 'Hindu Calendar Art' on the internet to see examples.)

More disturbing still was to see the way that nominally 'Christian' firms would also produce their own calendars in the same style and possibly for the same reasons. Invariably they would depict a very western, fair-haired 'Jesus', often with a superimposed 'sacred heart', a favourite symbol of Roman Catholicism.

So, all of these images, whether on paper or sculpted in metal or stone, are created to promote devotion to a 'god-figure' of some sort and inevitably end up as objects of veneration themselves. Some religious people also show their devotion by bowing to such images and/or 'making the sign of the cross' when they see them.

And yet Paul still says "*we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world*"!! Anyone who has lived in a country like India that is full of idol images might disagree strongly – "of course there are, they are all around us!" A margin note in my Bible said (as do some other translations) "*we know that an idol has no real existence*", and as I read that, I began to understand . . .

The ornately fashioned statue, the hyper-realistic painting, the iconic image – of course they do have a real existence. They are physically 'there'. You can pick them up and touch them. Even electronic versions of them have some reality of existence, even if it is not strictly physical.

But **what they represent does not exist**. There is no 'god' behind any of the representations, and not behind the supposedly 'Christian' imagery, either. On the one hand, they are of no consequence because there is nothing there but, on the other hand, they pose an enormous risk because they provide a path towards spiritual evil. The devotees open themselves up to dark spiritual forces as they 'worship'.

Read Paul's warnings to young believers living in a society where idol-worship was commonplace and the meat that was sold cheaply in the market place might well be cheap because it had already been offered in an idol's temple: **1 Corinthians 10:13-31**. He treads that same fine line between being clear that 'an idol has no real existence' and jeopardising someone's conscience because they might still regard the idol as being real – PLUS the fact that, in reality, those offering the meat to the idol were in fact in slavery to evil forces. A very difficult and delicate situation!

* * * * *

So, I was beginning to see something of the reality behind my agonising over Christian disunity.

These divisions, these labels, these boxes in which we place ourselves and other believers, **have no real existence**. Like physical idols, you can see them and touch them. But, also like idols, **there is nothing behind them**. In God's scheme of things, they do not feature at all.

The Church does not consist of all the various denominations and group labels, carefully glued together. Most attempts at 'Christian unity' are based on trying to get all the groups to work together, to do as many things as possible together, to present a 'united front' to the puzzled world around.

In reality, the Church simply IS. From God's viewpoint, all the believers in a village, town, city or area are already one, because they have all been born again into his family. Imagine the father of a large family, whose adult children all live in the same community but who belong to many different clubs and societies in that community. If he wants the family to get together, does he need to get all the clubs and societies to join forces and meet together? Of course not! He simply calls all his offspring to forget their club allegiances and meet as **family**. A problem only arises if they regard their club memberships as more important than their family relationships. Yes, they are actually still one family, but if their club loyalties are more important to them, they remain effectively disunited by their refusal to respond to their father.

Understanding Christian disunity in this way does not eliminate the problem. Far from it! But it does take the focus away from trying to engineer organisational 'unity' and directs it towards seeing the

¹ **1 Corinthians 8:4**

true unity which we already have and the total irrelevance of the various names and labels which we hide behind.

So, how can we move forward? We need to face the fact that the cost may be high, especially personally. Each individual believer, and especially each one in any form of leadership in any of the many groups, will need to recognise that the group loyalties that we have adopted need to be abandoned. Yes, **abandoned**, not just played down or temporarily shelved. These party loyalties are the dividing factors which keep us from effectiveness as the Body of Christ.

It is so tempting to think that **our** group will be OK; it can continue; all the others need to dissolve and join with us. But where is our loyalty? To our group, or to our Father?

Many of us want to see the Body of Christ built up, and we may think that we are doing that by building up 'our' part of it, our group – whether it has a name or not. In reality, such 'building up' can often be divisive, just as the named loyalty groups in first-century Corinth were. Paul had no time for them, even including the group that adopted his own name and teachings as their rallying point. See **1 Corinthians 1:11-15** and the whole of **1 Corinthians 3**.

So, how can we really start to see the Church being built up, starting from where we actually are?

Concentrate on spiritual life and growth. The Church is made up of those who are **in Christ**, who have been born again into a new life in relationship with God the Father through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in whom the Holy Spirit is at work. These essentials need to be emphasised and reinforced, and we need to see continual spiritual progress as the normal situation in our lives. There is always more!

Open out to all fellow-believers, no matter what their own background and/or allegiances. Yes, it is vital that we abandon our own petty allegiances, but we can't demand that everyone else simultaneously abandons theirs before we will openly share with them as brothers and sisters in Christ. There really is *"neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (**Galatians 3:28**) Someone who joins with us from another background, even temporarily, is **just as much** our brother or sister in Christ as someone with whom we have been friends for many years. Again, it is that ongoing and living relationship with God through Jesus that is the vital factor.

Refuse any exclusive approach. This is the other side of the coin to the last point, but it needs emphasis and explanation. It will mean the total denial of loyalty to 'our' group, a genuine recognition that, in God's eyes, our group has no real existence and the only 'group' that does truly exist is the family of those who have been born again into new life in Jesus.

Will our separate groups vanish instantaneously? I doubt it, but if we all begin to realise that the Church is the only thing that we are part of which has any real existence, and as we grow in our understanding of our Father's plan and purpose for that Church, I am convinced that the boundaries which have divided us will become increasingly invisible. We won't need 'organisational unity' because the organisations will have ceased to be relevant. In time, they will probably cease to exist.

Does this all seem like some sort of impossible dream? Why? What is so wonderful about our group loyalty that it is more important than seeing more of the fulfilment of God's plan for the Church?

There is a desperate need for us to abandon our petty party loyalties and begin to learn to function together as believers, united by being in Christ. You will remember from an earlier chapter that I was sharing this with a group of Christians several years ago when one voice, from an older man whom many respected, said "It will never happen, David".

My response remains unchanged: It simply **must** happen! What alternative is there?

Building The House

Before we embark on this ‘study’ chapter, let’s look at a few of the Greek words used in the New Testament, and especially by Paul as he explains the purposes of God in building his Church. Greek was the ordinary everyday language of the whole Roman empire at this time so, although local languages could be used as well (for example, Jewish Aramaic in Israel), anyone travelling further afield could be certain of being understood if they spoke Greek. It is fairly certain that the Lord Jesus, growing up as he did in ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’, spoke Greek as well as Aramaic and of course he could also read Hebrew, the language of most of the Old Testament scrolls.

οἶκος oikos; **a house, a dwelling, a household**

οἰκεῖος oikeios; from οἶκος oikos (*a house, a dwelling*); **in or of the house: - a household**

δῶμα dōma; from δέμω demō (*to build*); **a house, a housetop**

οἰκοδόμος oikodomos; from οἶκος oikos (*a house, a dwelling*) and δῶμα dōma (*a house*); **a builder:**

οἰκοδομέω oikodomeō; from οἰκοδόμος oikodomos (*a builder*); **to build a house**

οἰκοδομή oikodomē; from οἶκος oikos (*a house, a dwelling*); and δῶμα dōma (*a house*); (the act of) **building, a building**

συνοικοδομέω sunoikodomeō; from σύν sun (*with, together with*) and οἰκοδομέω oikodomeō; (*to build a house*); **to build together : Ephesians 2:22**

ἐποικοδομέω epoikodomeō; from ἐπι ἐπι (*over, upon*) and οἰκοδομέω oikodomeō; (*to build a house*); **to build on, build upon : 1 Corinthians 3:10-14, Ephesians 2:20, Colossians 2:7, 1 Peter 2:5, Jude 1:20**

Please do not be put off by the Greek words. Understanding these basic meanings will help us to grasp the same meanings that will have been immediately obvious to anyone (even the illiterate) who heard what Paul said and wrote. From here on, I’ll stick to the English script, but it is useful to know what we are considering as we look at the use of these words in the New Testament. Interesting to see that the words for a builder, a building and the process of building are all made up of the same two basic parts:

One part (*oikos*) concentrates on the house as a dwelling for a family. In fact, although its main use in the New Testament means ‘house’, it is frequently used to mean home and household and occasionally to mean the family itself.

The second part (*dōma*) is based on the actual construction of the fabric of the building and is apparently linked specifically to the roof or housetop. Shelter seems to be a significant element of the meaning – which is, of course, the basic reason for construction of any house!

Oikodomeō is the word which the Lord Jesus used in **Matthew 16:18**, when he said “upon this rock I will build my church.”

All of this background is enlightening as we read what Paul has to say about ‘building the house’ in **1 Corinthians 14**. The old translations of ‘edifying’ and ‘edification’ may seem dry and dusty and sound as though they relate to the imparting of knowledge that may be ‘good for us’ rather than being of any practical value. Far from that, having already described himself as a wise master builder or architect (**1 Corinthians 3:10**), Paul is emphasising how the Church is built together as it needs to be and also showing how the Lord has put in place the necessary means by which that building process can go ahead as intended.

These are not special words. The Lord Jesus certainly used *oikodomeō* when he said that he would build his church (**Matthew 16:18**), but if you look through the New Testament, these words are used for ordinary, day-to-day references to buildings, builders and the process of building. So the believers

in Corinth knew exactly what Paul was talking about:– the process of seeing a home being built, where the family lives and enjoys security and shelter.

The aim of that building process is aptly summed up in what he wrote to the believers in Ephesus: *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”* (**Ephesians 2:19-22**)

That word ‘dwelling’ is precious! The Greek word does not just mean somewhere that you stay for a while; built into this word (*katoikētērion*) is the understanding of **permanent residence**. Paul is telling the Ephesians that what God is doing there in their city is building them together (*sunoi kodomeō*) into a place for himself, to stay in and make his home. The whole building, he says, is like a holy temple. In other words, the **whole** Church, all the believers that there are in all the different places in the world, is one enormous holy place in which God’s presence may be found. But he also makes his home there, locally, in their midst in Ephesus!

As Paul said when speaking in Athens *“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands”* And yet, his purpose **is** to make his home among us, so that we, as his Church, are a temple where his presence is found!¹

There are parallels with what Solomon asked the LORD to do, to take up ‘local residence’ in the temple which he had built, even though the whole of the heavens and all creation could not possibly **contain** him. See **1 Kings 8:1 - 9:9, 2 Chronicles 5:1 - 7:22**. Solomon asked the LORD to make the temple a sort of ‘local headquarters’ for his presence, and the LORD agreed!

Evidently, being built together into a local ‘dwelling of God in the Spirit’ is not just some happy by-product of individual people coming to faith in Jesus. **It is the main purpose.**

Look around at modern-day Christianity and you would not believe that to be true. We are so caught up in our various ideas and programmes that we ignore God’s priority – the building up of the Church. Often we are really unclear about what the Church is, let alone having any idea of what it means to see it ‘built up’. If asked to define it, many Christians would immediately mention increased numbers and then, perhaps as an afterthought, a ‘deepening of faith’ – whatever that might mean!

Somehow, we have the fond notion that if we just go on having our ‘services’, getting interesting speakers and running some activities for young people, perhaps adding in some home groups and some prayer meetings, then ‘God will bless’ and the Church will be built up. True, the Lord will use every opportunity he can to reach us and change our lives but, in order to move towards achieving **his own specific purpose**, he does need our co-operation with that purpose!

If we look at the passages in which Paul uses these words that mean ‘building up the church’, perhaps we shall gain a clearer idea of what the Lord has in mind . . .

1 Corinthians 8:1 *“Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies (oikodomeō)”*. Paul is writing in the context of the need to be aware of other believers’ areas of weakness and not just acting on hard facts alone, in this particular case of those who previously used to worship idols having difficulties because other Christians were eating meat which had been offered in idol temples.

1 Corinthians 10:23 More about the same situation. *“All things are lawful, but not all things edify (oikodomeō)”*. Paul is still writing about the ex-idol worshippers and the need to help them to be built into the church fellowship. In effect, he is saying ‘Yes, it is true that idols don’t really exist as gods, but please concentrate on seeing these brothers and sisters are built up together with you, rather than confuse them by eating this meat.’

1 Corinthians 14:3 *“. . . one who prophesies speaks to men for edification (oikodomē) and exhortation and consolation.”* Here we are in the passage where Paul uses these words most frequently. He is writing about what goes on in the normal get-togethers that churches would have, in Corinth and elsewhere.

¹ Acts 17:24, 1 Peter 2:5

We need to be clear what he means by ‘one who prophesies’. He is NOT writing about someone foretelling future events! All the way through the Old and New Testaments, ‘prophecy’ and ‘prophets’ refer to someone simply speaking out what God is saying into the situation at the time. Yes, occasionally there is reference to the future (in both Old and New Testament examples) but even that future glimpse almost always has direct relevance to the current situation of God’s people.

So here are some Christian believers meeting together. That is the context of the whole chapter, and Paul describes various ways in which the Lord communicates with his people, always with the aim of **being built together into the house of God**. The process continues in every aspect of their lives, not only in the context of the regular meeting together, but that meeting is the focus for all of them, probably the only time when they are all together on a regular basis.

In **1 Corinthians 2:12**, Paul also writes that “*we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.*” Read the whole chapter and see that Paul is writing about his own ministry, but he says ‘we’ have received the Spirit who is from God, so he is saying that the same access to ‘the things freely given to us by God’ is open to the believers in Corinth – and anywhere else!

Perhaps we tend to think of **1 Corinthians 14** as just ‘the spiritual gifts chapter’. If we do, then we are in danger of missing much of what the Lord has for us here. Yes, of course, it **is** about spiritual gifts, but the setting is in the ordinary meetings of the local church. And the emphasis of the whole chapter is not so much the gifts themselves, but the way in which they are designed to be a vital part of the process of ‘edification’ (*oikodomē*) – **each one being built into the house of God**.

So, in the next verse (**14:4**), Paul writes about one of the spiritual gifts that some of them were exercising, ‘speaking in tongues’. Controversial, then as now, a gift by which believers pour out their hearts to the Lord, using words of a language not known to them. There have been modern-day cases of other people hearing those words and understanding them because they are in a language that **they** know, even though the speaker doesn’t, but it is clear that the gift of interpretation of tongues does not mean a natural ability to understand such speech. Rather that the interpretation is given to the one who has that gift, bringing into the local language the meaning that was otherwise unintelligible in the tongue. If we think of tongues and interpretation as ‘two-stage prophecy’, we shall not be far off the mark.

Perhaps a few more words about prophecy will not be out of place. Modern-day use of the word usually implies some element of predicting the future. We need to step back a few paces from that to see how the Lord has used prophecy down the ages and so see what it is really about.

Not long after I became a Christian at the age of 11, I was in a school ‘Scripture’ lesson (it was the late 1950s!) and the teacher was taking us through part of the Old Testament. He asked the class what we thought the main role of the prophet was and I, being ‘keen’, piped up that it was to foretell the coming of Jesus. Kindly but firmly, the teacher agreed that that was **one** of the tasks of an Old Testament prophet, but told us that their main function was to bring to the people God’s word for those days. I preferred my idea at the time, but I have to agree now that Mr Gilbert was right.

We still very definitely need to hear from the Lord, individually and together in fellowship, and the freedom to share what the Holy Spirit is laying on our hearts allows him to communicate with his people. Especially appropriate as we are meeting together to worship him and break bread together!

Paul says that the person who speaks in tongues ‘edifies himself’, but the one who prophesies ‘edifies the church’. Speaking in tongues is personal between the believer and the Lord, and Paul does not say that it is useless, quite the contrary, he wishes that they would all speak in tongues! It is just that it only benefits the speaker, *unless* there is also an interpretation, and then the church ‘may receive **edifying** (*oikodomē*)’ (**v.5**).

In the next few verses, Paul continues to deal with speaking in tongues, but we need to hear his deep motivation here. It is not primarily about tongues and interpretation as compared to prophecy, but about seeing **the building up of the ‘house’**, as he emphasises in **v.12**: “*So also, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the **edification** (*oikodomē*) of the church*”.

The message is clear. Spiritual gifts are an important factor in building the house, and the setting is very different from what we may be used to, as we can see in **v.26**. This is not an organised meeting, at least not organised by human means, but one in which the risen Lord is able to communicate with his people by the use of these various spiritual gifts. Paul says that ‘each one’ has something to contribute to the gathering. Wow! How often have we been in meetings like that? Sometimes, perhaps, but it seems to be ‘normal’ in Paul’s experience, and again the overriding principle is *“Let all things be done for **edification** (oikodomē).” (v.26)*

If we expect anything in our meetings, often it may be a combination of ‘feel good factors’, such as ‘a sense of the Lord’s presence’, ‘sharing fellowship’, ‘uplifting singing’, ‘a good word’ from a speaker. All good, certainly, but do we share Paul’s urgency to see the house built?

For him, it was a defining characteristic of the ministry that God had given him. He spoke and wrote with an authority that the Lord had given him, but Paul is clear about the purpose of that authority. It was not to organise people into his ways or his structures, nor was it negative, destructive or manipulative, but to enable them to be built up together, as he writes in **2 Corinthians 10:8, 12:19** and **13:10**.

We have already looked at **Ephesians 2:19-22** : *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are **being built together** (sunoikodomeō) into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”* In this letter, where Paul says much about the church, again he comes back to the Lord’s central purpose – building his people together into a place for him to make his home on earth.

And again, the **means** of that building is the church itself, along with those who have been given specific functions in the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors & teachers. See **Ephesians 4:11-16**. Modern practice is to expect those with these responsibilities to **do** the building-up themselves, but once more Paul is clear: Those who exercise these special functions do so *“toward the equipping of the saints into the work of service, into the building up (oikodomē) of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12, literal translation)*. Those with these special functions are not designed to do the building-up directly, but rather to equip the ‘saints’ to build themselves up.

That goes against the modern trend, doesn’t it? Increasingly, it seems, present-day Western Christian practice seems to be geared to performance, whether it be spoken word or, often, music. For each one to be called upon to contribute to the building-up of the local fellowship of believers may seem like a step backwards, moving our meetings away from the smooth presentations which we may have become used to – or actually aim for – and towards times when we actually wait on God and expect to hear from him as he speaks to us and through us.

In fact, it is a vital step **forwards** and Paul goes on to describe that building-up process and the results of it:– unity, increased knowledge of the Son of God, maturity, even the ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (**v.13**) – Wow!

If there is any negative side of that growth, it is the reduction or removal of our childish immaturity, so that we are not susceptible to the ‘wind and waves’ of the latest doctrines, not taken in by man-made tricks or crafty deceitfulness. (**v.14**) Just as much need for that sort of spiritual stability now as there was then, perhaps even more! And when was the last time we were encouraged to aim for spiritual maturity, or even to consider that it might be possible?

Not just possible, says Paul, but essential and normal, as we are real, genuine and truthful with each other in love, that we should ‘grow up in all aspects into him who is the head, Christ’. (**v.15**)

And then he spells it out in **verse 16**. This is how this process works; it all starts with the Lord Jesus. From him, the whole body causes its own growth, so that the ‘house is built’ in love. How does that work? ‘Fitted and held together by what every joint supplies (literally ‘through every joint of the supply’), according to the proper working (literally ‘working in measure’) of each individual part.’

I like that: 'working in measure'. Each one an essential working part, yes! A vital 'joint of the supply'! But each one working in measure, in their own ability according to the grace and gift which they have received, not trying to match up to what they, or someone else, thinks they **should** be like!

This is not just theory that Paul is putting forward. In **4:29**, as he works through some of the practical implications of spiritual growth, again he mentions 'edification' (*oikodomē*) – building up. No rotten words to leave our mouths, only words that will build up and be a source of grace!

With all that in mind, I begin to ask myself: **Just how useful are our meetings and 'services'?** If everything is to be directed towards 'building the house' – our personal and corporate spiritual maturity – to what extent do we follow that requirement? Is everything that we do in our times together geared towards that goal?

* * * * *

Let's go back briefly to consider those with special functions in the Church, especially the apostles and prophets that Paul has already mentioned (***Ephesians 2:20***). He says that they are part of the foundation of the Church. That is not some historic aspect for us to look back to and celebrate, as if they were just heroes of yesteryear who have left us a magnificent heritage!

At the time that Paul is writing, apostles and prophets are current and up to date, they are functioning all around him as the message of the gospel is spreading and churches are being established in many different places. Apostles are needed to be sent out with the message and to lay foundations in the new churches which they help to form. Prophets also need to be there, hearing from God and passing on what he is saying to the church, locally and sometimes further afield, also laying foundations.

Both apostles and prophets lay those foundations, which are particularly important in the early life of any local church, as the local believers are just beginning to discover and develop their own gifts and ministries. We are not talking here about setting up routines and local traditions, patterns for the believers to follow slavishly, but making sure that each individual – and the life of the Church as a whole – is solidly based on the one true foundation and being built up on it – on him!

That one true foundation is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, as Paul makes 100% clear in **1 Corinthians 3:10-15**, where he also warns of the need to build on that foundation with the right materials.

Back to those materials shortly, but first let us look at the passion and commitment with which Paul worked on the foundations. In his two letters to Corinth, perhaps more than anywhere else, he reveals more of himself and the depth of his concern for these believers.

Just two examples: 1) He considers himself committed to them as a father is to his children (**1 Corinthians 4:14-17**), prepared to go through the anguish of confronting them when they need it. In fact, he says, when he proclaimed the news of Jesus to them, he actually fathered them into Christ. 2) Another way he describes his role in bringing them to faith in the Lord Jesus is to say that he betrothed them to Christ, presenting them to their bridegroom as an eastern father would present his daughter, 'as a pure virgin'. He describes what he calls 'godly jealousy' as he wants to make sure that they do not stray away from that betrothal commitment. (**2 Corinthians 11:2**) His commitment to the foundation-building process in Corinth was deep and all-consuming.

Not just in Corinth, either! A few words later in the same chapter, when he is listing some of the hardships he has endured: ". . . the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches . . ." (**2 Corinthians 11:28**)

No question about it; Paul was deeply and passionately committed to seeing every single believer in Jesus firmly and securely built up on the one true foundation, ". . . *admonishing every person and teaching every person in all wisdom, so that we may present every person complete in Christ.*" (**Colossians 1:28**) Here he is again, taking on the responsibility and the difficulties, but looking forward to being able to present each one to Jesus!

Hopefully, that gives us some idea of an apostle's view of the importance of true foundations in Christ. With that sort of basis, how vital it is that whatever is built on it is 'gold, silver and precious stones' and not 'wood, hay and straw'. (**1 Corinthians 3:12**) The word Paul uses for 'build on' in this chapter, **v. 10, 12 & 14** is *epoikodomeō* again, 'to build a house upon'.

We are probably familiar with this passage, which describes how only the gold, silver and precious stones will survive the 'revealing' of fire on what Paul simply calls 'the day'. We can see the need to build with the right materials, but how can we be sure what materials we are actually using?

Let's start at the bottom of the scale: straw. Straw is useful to farmers and some other people, but it is a by-product, usually used for animal bedding. Perhaps a thatcher might look at a field of grain and see it as a field of straw for thatching (though he would probably prefer to use 'Norfolk reed' instead), but almost everyone else sees it as a field of grain, with straw as something to be separated from the main crop and maybe discarded. If we do want to use straw to make something, it will not be hard to find or expensive to buy, and we shall not have to wait too long for it.

Hay, on the other hand, is valuable in itself. These days, many livestock farmers will concentrate on silage as a stored feed for their cattle, but many still prize good quality hay as the best feed for their animals if it is available, especially for horses and high-value stock.

A hay harvest needs much more care than a straw harvest. Straw is a by-product, but hay needs to be cut at the right stage of development, then turned and dried in the right weather conditions and finally stored well to provide long-term as well as good quality nutrition. If we want to use hay, we will need to wait longer and pay more than when we buy straw.

Wood takes much longer to grow than either straw or hay. Years rather than months, so it occupies land for much longer, entails greater effort and expenditure to grow and harvest, but is strong and solid, especially when a master craftsman builds with it. It looks like a permanent solution, except that we are looking at the judgment of fire and we know that wood burns very well. Not so fast and furious as either straw or hay, but it burns all the same.

We know that all these three share the same weakness; they are destroyed by fire. But what else is common to all of them? We can produce them to order, as we want them, even if we have to wait a few weeks, months or years for them. We can't exactly **make** them, but we can **produce** them and get more or less as much as we want of any of them, on demand.

Gold, silver and precious stones are very different. Not only are they fire-proof, but their supply is limited, which is what makes them valuable. If I want some gold, I can't just make some, or go and grow some in a field. The same is true for silver and precious stones. They are created, part of the planet as it came into existence. No-one is making any more of them! The result? If we want them, we need to go and find what is already there, or pay someone who has already done the searching and finding.

So what is Paul saying here? If any one is seeking to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ, whether in the life of a single individual or in the life of the Church, the materials to be used are not those that can be produced on demand, man-made or man-engineered. They need to be those things that God has already brought into being, which can only be **found**.

And how can they be found? Not by any scheme that we might dream up, or by some special study programme to learn God's building methods and then apply them mechanically to our own situation. Some of the ideas may look excellent, but they are valueless if they miss out on one vital ingredient: the eye-opening revelation of the Holy Spirit.

Which may explain why, as he seeks to see believers built up in Christ, Paul keeps coming back to the need for the revelation of the Spirit. Here is no man-made system that can be learned, followed and applied without the direct action of the Spirit of God in each individual situation.

In fact, this approach did not start with Paul at all; the Lord Jesus spelled out how it would be when the Holy Spirit came: ". . . *the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you*" "*When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own initiative, but whatever he hears, he will speak; and he will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify me, for he will take of mine and will disclose it to you.*" (**John 14:26, 16:13-14**)

All of this is in direct contrast with the old Jewish covenant of laws and sacrifices, just as the prophet Jeremiah had written, 600-odd years before the birth of Jesus: "*But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,*" declares the LORD, "*I will put my law within them*

and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbour and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (**Jeremiah 31:33-34** and quoted in **Hebrews 10:16-17**).

So Paul, writing to the believers in Ephesus, tells them of his prayer for them, *"that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the (true) knowledge of him, the eyes of your heart being enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints . . ."* (**Ephesians 1:17-18**)

And to those in Colossae: *" . . . that you may be filled with the (true) knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding . . ."* (**Colossians 1:9**)

" . . . that your love may abound still more and more in true knowledge and all discernment . . ." (**Philippians 1:9**)

Peter joins in the same theme in **2 Peter 1:3** : *" . . . seeing that his divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence"*.

The word translated '(true) knowledge' goes further than just 'knowledge'. It implies recognition, acknowledgement and discernment, not merely 'knowing about'.

Paul says that the whole of his work and ministry is based on this working of the Holy Spirit. *" . . . the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but through revelation of Jesus Christ."* (**Galatians 1:12**) *"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual with spiritual."* (**1 Corinthians 2:12-13**)

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Paul was writing about the function of special people in seeing the church being built up, and they were visibly active all around at the time that he was writing. Do we tend to think that 'that was then, but the situation is different now' – ? Don't we still need foundation-layers and those who will build on those foundations with the right 'materials' ? Of course we do, perhaps even more urgently in the light of the present situations in the church and in the world around. We may be cautious about giving anyone the title of 'apostle' or 'prophet', but we certainly need those functions, and we need them desperately!

The Long Road Back

An old friend of mine used to tell the story of how he was on his way from Canterbury to a wedding in Barnet and had lost his way. So he stopped the car and asked a man in the street which way he needed to go to find his destination. The man looked blank but then went to ask his mates whether any of them could help. Maurice watched while there was an animated discussion in the little group and then the first man came back and said with an air of finality: "Sorry, mate, you can't get there from here."

"Where else do you expect me to start from?" Maurice replied.

Obviously, the man's reply was not true. Maurice did eventually find his way and arrived safely. But the man and his mates were evidently convinced that there was no road that anyone could follow which would take Maurice from where he was to where he wanted to go.

As we have considered a little of the Father's plan and purpose for his Church and how he has provided the means for it to grow in his way, perhaps we feel the same: "You can't get there from here."

Perhaps at an earlier time in our experience we may have tasted some of this reality but now we have 'moved on' from there and have settled for a pattern of church life and meetings which does not fit with the vision we once had. Maybe we now look back and think of it as an 'idealistic vision', something that is not possible now and maybe never was – ?

In an earlier chapter, I referred to my discussion with another friend who is now in a church leadership position, as we talked about the virtual disappearance of the 'open meeting' and the general move towards a 'led from the front' style of meeting. For several years, a couple of decades earlier, we had both shared in the same open meetings together, although he was not able to be in those meetings as often as I was. They were the normal style of meeting each week. For me, the significant memory is of times of blessing, when the Holy Spirit was very evidently directing us and often what one had to share would fit very neatly with what another had on their heart. Sometimes we would have such a jam-packed meeting together that we would go on well beyond the normal finishing time – and there would still have been more to share!

He acknowledged that, but also drew attention to the opposite situation: when silence descended on the meeting for long periods. Not those valuable silences in which you sense the presence and working of God, but rather the awkwardness of being in a room together where nobody really has anything to share, but having committed yourselves to staying there for a time. I don't remember many of those times, but he evidently did.

He is now in leadership in the same fellowship and the 'led from the front' style of meeting is the current default. They do sometimes have 'open worship services' (as they now call them), but they are not much like the meetings I remember! I get very little sense of 'building the house' and perhaps that apparent lack of purpose is the most disconcerting factor of all. Interestingly, though, my friend now acknowledges that he now finds these open times to be very valuable. Perhaps there is a slight wind of change?

This is just one situation but I am sure that there are many which are very similar.

Is there a way back? Can we 'get there from here'? Do we actually WANT to? Perhaps that last question is the most significant one! Discussing the situation with the same friend a few years back, I suggested that the fellowship had lost ground in the intervening years. He disagreed; as far as he was concerned, they had made significant progress. Obviously, the style of meetings was not the only change but, for him at that time, any resumption of open meetings as the norm would have been a backward step.

I disagree profoundly. Historically, one really backward step was the move by maybe the majority of fellowships of believers to have 'church services', something totally foreign to the New Testament and much more like Old Testament practice, as we have seen. It happened hundreds of years ago

and has been perpetuated, despite numerous cycles of reform. 'Services' have robbed us of an ongoing expectation of God being able to speak to all his people and work through them effectively. Truly open meetings are certainly not the only aspect of church life which needs to be restored, but they are a really key element in our fellowship together, chiefly because they are the times when we are together, can hear from the Lord together and can grow together.

For those in fellowships where the Sunday morning meetings have always been 'services', the definition of their success hangs on how 'good' the service has been, measured perhaps by a combination of several factors such as how much the listeners appreciated what the speaker said, how fluently the service was led or how enthusiastically people took part. All good factors, often giving the reason to say 'we had a good time together', but we also need to be moving ahead, with a real sense of purpose and 'building the house'.

For these folk, there is no memory of open meetings to which they can return. Truth be told, even in the other situation, there are now very few who remember those rich times of 20-odd years ago, so both groups are in very similar positions. If no-one sees the overriding value of meetings rather than services, then services will no doubt continue, perhaps seeking new ways to enliven and add new dimensions, but still with the idea of doing something for God, rather than putting ourselves at his disposal so that he can do something with us.

Taking 'the long road back' may seem like turning our back on progress, but I believe that in fact the opposite is true.

'Services' are Old Testament in nature, as we have already seen. If we have moved to them from 'open meetings', we may have made the excuse of moving with the times but, in reality, we are admitting that the open meetings did not work for us any more.

Why not? Could it be that we stopped hearing from the Lord and so had little or nothing to pass on? Or that we thought that we could arrange a meeting better than he could? Or were we just afraid that perhaps he would not speak to us and so we had better come up with our own format to fill in the gaps? And then, of course, our own format took over and there were precious few opportunities left for the Lord to fill!

Or, if we have never been accustomed to open meetings, does the prospect of dropping the well-planned meeting in favour of 'waiting on the Lord' just seem like so much foolishness? Is it so very ridiculous to suggest that the Lord is perfectly able to lead us in our times together?

Either way, what do we have to lose?

Back in **2 Chronicles 25**, the Judean king Amaziah had 300,000 crack troops ready to go to war with the Edomites, but he paid out 100 talents of silver (maybe about £22,500,000 in today's value) to hire an extra 100,000 'valiant warriors' from the tribe of Ephraim in nearby ungodly Israel to help in the battle. But the LORD sent a prophet to tell Amaziah to send those warriors of Israel home, because "the LORD is not with Israel nor with any of the sons of Ephraim".

Amaziah's reaction? "But what about all this money I have spent?" – and the answer came back clear: "The LORD has much more to give you than this." (**2 Chronicles 25:9**)

We may think that our ideas of church life are better than the Lord's, or that we just need some 'reinforcements' (as Amaziah thought – wrongly!) Or perhaps we have just got too much 'invested' in the way we do things now to even consider any change. In either case, the answer remains the same: The Lord has much more for us than this!

Whatever our earlier experience with different styles of church meetings, however many brilliant – or depressing – meetings or services we may have joined in with, are we prepared to consider the possible benefits of dropping the 'service' and making ourselves and our times together available to the Holy Spirit so that we can learn to be led by him?

Simply changing the format will not work! Please don't think that there is any 'magic' in the open meeting of itself. It only 'works' when we are open and receptive to hearing and responding to the Lord, and you can be sure that any attempt to manipulate such open times for our own objectives will sooner or later result in judgement. Even a well-meaning change of format that is introduced

without preparation is 99.9% certain to fail. I well remember trying to do exactly that back in the early 1970s, and I was naïvely surprised when the experiment fell flat on its face! I had seen the value of open sharing with each other, but I had not taken the time and trouble to make sure that the others in the fellowship were even familiar with the idea, let alone ready to try it.

In the end, we need to ask ourselves some questions and listen carefully to the Holy Spirit, as his objective is always to 'lead us into all truth' – and 'truth' means 'reality'.

Has our Father redeemed us with a purpose in his mind?

Will the Lord Jesus actually return to rule on the earth?

Is God only interested in personal salvation, or does he have a plan for his Church?

What does it mean for the Bride of Christ to 'make herself ready' ?

Can the 'marriage supper of the Lamb' take place if the Bride is not ready?

When we begin to see the importance of the goal at the end of the journey, perhaps the long road back starts to look rather shorter . . .

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