

From Exegesis to Sermon: 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

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The editor graciously invited me to contribute to this issue devoted to 1 Corinthians by selecting a passage from the epistle, providing a brief exegetical analysis, and offering in full a sermon growing out of that exegesis. For this exercise to be most helpful, it seemed to me that it should correspond as nearly as possible to an occasion of preparation and preaching in the work of the local minister. In other words, to provide an exegesis and sermon for an editor or even for unknown readers of this journal would be an exercise lacking in concrete context and reason. Sermons are not delivered into the air but to particular persons for particular purposes. What follows, then, is a brief description of a time and place and gathering to which I was invited to preach, an account of the exegetical work involved in preparation, and the sermon itself.

It is my hope that this procedure, which addresses the readers indirectly rather than directly, will be more, not less, meaningful. After all, is this not the nature of the impact upon us of the New Testament itself? Paul wrote to the Corinthians, not to us, but those who listen carefully to what he said to the Corinthians find themselves addressed by his words.

The Listeners

The invitation to preach came by both phone call and letter from the pastor of a suburban church. I had never been to that church, and I knew the pastor only slightly. He enjoyed the reputation of being a very nourishing pastor, having both the discipline of continuing study and the skills for communicating. His request was that I preach for his congregation on a Wednesday evening. The sermon would mark the end of an eight-week series of Wednesday evenings devoted to a study of 1 Corinthians. The pastor himself had led the series, focusing on major issues in the epistle, with each session consisting of a lecture followed by discussion. Attendance, he said, had been about 150 consistently, and I could expect the same. The sermon would be preceded by a fellowship dinner. Emphasis at the dinners is upon family participation, but children and youth go to their own programs following the meal. The adults remain in fellowship hall for the message, which is set between a hymn and a prayer. The pastor said they tried to honor the fact that it was a school night and conclude by 8:15. This would give me approximately twenty-five minutes. In response to my questions, he provided other details: dishes would be cleared; acoustics were not good, but there was a good public address system; a lectern would be set on

the head table; most of the people brought Bibles and were engaged in reading and listening; the people enjoyed each other on these Wednesday evenings together. He told me I was correct in assuming they wanted me to preach from 1 Corinthians, in fact, from 1 Corinthians 12. Why that chapter? Was there a charismatic group in the church, or a problem with speaking in tongues? No, that was not an issue, but chapter 12 elicited most interest and most questions. Was I expected to deal with the whole chapter in twenty-five minutes? Certainly not, I was to choose from it a portion or a theme and develop that. "Use your own judgment; we have spent one evening on the chapter," he said. "You can assume some familiarity and much interest." Jokingly I commented on his confidence in allowing a visitor to speak on a text and a subject which many found problematic and even divisive. He laughed, said he was not worried, and we concluded the conversation.

I felt comfortably clear about the listeners and the context. Those of us who are not pastors and are, therefore, always guest preachers always need this and any other information that will help us to be appropriate. Let me pause, however, to say that pastors also should think through these same questions as a regular procedure of preparation. Familiarity can blind a pastor and create as much distance from the listeners as exists between a visiting speaker and the congregation. No minister remains in a church long enough to outgrow the need to do an exegesis of the listeners in preparation for preaching.

It was important to me to ponder the fact that I would be preaching on a text and in a subject area to which the hearers had been recently and thoughtfully exposed and with which they were generally familiar. To be honest, earlier in my ministry I would have regarded their familiarity as an obstacle to my preaching. Regardless of how much I and others encouraged and exhorted the church to study the Scriptures, the plain fact is that much time in sermon preparation was in pursuit of what might be new and unfamiliar, some text or subject or approach that would "get them" because none of my predecessors had ever dealt with it, at least not in that way. In other words, the assumption was that the power of preaching lay in its novelty, in leaping off the pinnacle of the temple each Sunday. That assumption is false, nourished by the ego of the preacher who competes with rather than building upon what previous ministers have done. The message is the church's message; blessed is the church familiar with the message, and blessed is the preacher who accepts that familiarity as a boon to the pulpit. The most positive responses come often from those who know something about the subject. We go hear lecturers whose books we have read; we attend concerts hoping to hear the songs we have heard; we offer supportive "Amens" only to those whose messages we recognize as our own.

With these matters in mind, I moved to 1 Corinthians 12.

Exegesis

The first task of exegesis is selection of the text. Although good preaching

that can qualify as biblical preaching may back off from the text and develop major themes running through a body of scripture, it is generally the best procedure to have the sermon grow out of what is said in a particular text. In this way the preacher is giving the Bible to the people in a concrete way so that they can own both sermon and text. Such preaching also models for the listeners how they can honestly and fruitfully for themselves interpret scripture. And, of course, preaching of this type has its authorization in the text and not in the person of the speaker. Having said that, it remains the case that sermons which seemingly linger near the text can be offering another agenda entirely, one only apparently with the blessing of the text itself.

The choice of text in this case seems to be made relatively easy by the request that I preach from 1 Corinthians 12. In part this is true, but no preacher should week by week be foraging around in the sixty-six books looking for Sunday's text. A planned program of preaching is essential if the people and the program are to be adequately nourished with a balanced diet.

Given the limits of one chapter, decision still must be made as to what unit within that chapter will be the point of attention. In order to qualify, the unit should be of manageable size, should contain subject matter central and not marginal to the overall discussion of the passage, and should have its own integrity. By having its own integrity I simply mean that the text for the sermon should have a clear beginning and ending, expressing its own message. Otherwise, vague limits tend to lack the discipline to control the range of the sermon and increase the possibilities of that kind of preaching familiar to us all which wanders far afield from the intent or content of the text.

The chapter before us provides several units: verses 1-3, verses 4-6, verses 7-11, verses 12-13, verses 14-26, and verses 27-31. I rejected 27-31 because this unit really has its completion in chapter 13. I decided against 7-11 and 14-26 because these discuss the particular gifts being exercised in a congregation. The value of that presentation would depend very much on the transfer of the discussion from Corinth to the congregation to which I am to speak. As a stranger I do not know about this transference; I trust the pastor has handled it. It is now clear to me that Paul offers in this chapter two kinds of assessment and control in the church's exercise of spiritual gifts: practical and theological. The theological could be discussed by a visitor more fruitfully than the practical. The three remaining units are theological: 1-3, 4-6, 12-13. It is my judgment that verses 4-6 are not only a clear and distinct unit but that they state what is more central to the whole discussion than either verses 1-3 or 12-13. In fact, a treatment of 12:4-6 could well embrace the contents of the other two units, while neither of the other two have the breadth of thought to include verses 4-6 implicitly or explicitly. It is settled: the sermon text is 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.

Having checked the Greek text to see if there are any significant variants in the passage that require attention (footnotes in good English translations are

helpful in this regard), I proceed to a careful, open-minded, inquisitive, somewhat naive reading of the text. No commentaries or lexicons yet. Let all one's faculties of mind and heart be exposed to the text, while jotting down impressions, questions, and issues triggered by the text. The commentaries and other aids come later, after the preacher is knowledgeable enough about the text to regard scholars as colleagues, not masters, and after the text has raised its own questions to be taken to those who write on this passage.

Verses 4-6 are carefully structured in triads: varieties of gifts, varieties of service, varieties of working (RSV), as well as the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God. The trinity is present but not in the traditional form (God, Son, Spirit). The reverse order indicates an approach more functional than formal, one beginning with the immediate experience of the Corinthians. Variety in the church's experience of the Spirit is not a fact to be tolerated; it is a given in the very nature of God's equipping the church. That variety, however, is not "anything goes" but is governed by the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God. Why are Jesus and God brought into the discussion when the topic is gifts of the Spirit? Is Paul here quoting a trinitarian formula or creed that actually arose in another context? Are gifts, services, and workings synonymous here, or are the meanings quite different? What does it mean that God inspires (works in) them all in everyone? This expression is not used of the Spirit or of the Lord (Jesus). It is interesting that the Corinthians asked Paul about "spiritual things" (or spiritual persons, the noun ending here, being the same for neuter, masculine, and feminine) in verse 1 and that Paul answers in verse 4 by first changing the word to *gifts (charismata)*. *Gifts* relates one's activity to a source, a given, while *spiritual* is a general and often unclear description of a kind of person or activity.

It was apparently important for Paul that the Corinthians see their activity in relation to the source of their life and work and not simply as a quality (spiritual) they possessed. Nowhere in the text is Paul inclined to deny the reality or the source of the various ministries being performed in the church. He seems primarily concerned that the gifts be set in proper theological and practical contexts. The first theological guideline is the confession "Jesus is Lord" (v. 3). No gift is of the Holy Spirit which denies that. Another theological guideline is the understanding that, regardless of background, we are all members of the one body of Christ (vv. 12-13). No gift is of the Holy Spirit which violates that. In verses 4-6, however, somehow the whole experience of charismatic gifts in the church is set within the trinitarian formula: Spirit, Christ, God. What really does this mean? Were the Corinthians so caught up in the Holy Spirit that Jesus and God were neglected or treated as peripheral to their immediate experience? If so, exactly what correction is being made, what reminder is being given, by Paul's tying the Spirit to Christ and to God?

It is clear by now that the last question is the one to govern the sermon. Verses 4-6 do not alter in any way the preceding or succeeding discussions of the

nature and function of gifts of the Spirit. This unit simply affirms the variety of such ministries while repeatedly insisting on one single source. This unit calls these ministries gifts, services, and workings (energizings), all of which are terms of function, not titles or offices or positions. And clearly in all this the unit is controlled by the triadic formula: same Spirit, same Lord, same God. Apparently it is very important that the expression close with reference to God as energizer (inspirer) "all in all." That last phrase seems to set gifts, Christians, ministries, church, everything in the ultimate and final context. One suspects that charismatic ministries in Corinth had gotten "out of hand" because they were being performed "out of context."

At this point I go to the commentaries. I usually begin with that of Hans Conzelmann because of its great detail and its references to other helpful sources. From there I turn to the works of C. K. Barrett, F. F. Bruce, Carl Holladay, and Walter Schmithals. These studies help with the overall argument of 1 Corinthians and provide a clear structure within which chapter 12 is set. This chapter is a part of the larger unit in which Paul answers questions about which the Corinthians had written (7:1). The opening phrase of 12:1, "Now concerning spiritual gifts," is the literary clue that Paul is still responding to their list of questions. Since the religions of their pagan background involved "spiritual gifts" and ecstatic experiences, including tongues, it is no wonder that the activities in their new religion were confusing many. How is all this different from our old religion? Chapter 12 is a part of a smaller unit (chapters 10-14) dealing with the confused and distressing state of worship and the assembled life of the church. The discussions center primarily on the Lord's Supper, the role of women in the assembly, and the exercise of gifts, most especially glossolalia. So problematic and significant is this last subject that Paul devotes to it chapters 12-14.

Although there is difference in scholarly opinion about whether much is to be made of differences between gifts, services, and workings, most commentators remark upon the fact that the *charismata* in relation to the Spirit are called gifts, in relation to Jesus Christ are called services or ministries, and in relation to God are called workings. And although there is disagreement as to whether Paul is here quoting a trinitarian formula or creating the expression for the situation, there is general consensus that Paul is concerned that Holy Spirit talk and activity not be isolated from faith and obedience to Jesus Christ and from the foundational conviction that all life and all activity is energized by God, who is source and sustainer of everything. The expression "all in all" or "all in everyone" (RSV) is found rather often in Paul (1 Cor. 8:6; 15:28; Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:15-20) and was in his day a technical term for the totality, all that is, visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. In other words, Paul begins his discussion of charismatic gifts with a crisp, clear statement of the frame of reference. We are, he says, talking about a variety of gifts from the one Holy Spirit, a variety of services and ministries in obedience to Jesus Christ, and a

variety of workings or activities nourished by the one God whose creating and sustaining energy operates not only in the Corinthian church but in all the universe, in all creation.

For a congregation which has already studied 1 Corinthians 12 I am now ready to prepare a sermon developing the theme of verses 4-6: one function of the doctrine of the Trinity is to inform and to provide norms for the life and activity of the church.

The Sermon

Long before 1 Corinthians was a book in our New Testament it was a letter from a missionary to a congregation on the frontier, far from the church's hearth and home. The church was born in Judaism, nurtured on tradition, scripture, and common faith in God, scaffolded by temple and synagogue until the foundation and walls were well fixed. But out on distant frontiers the background was pagan, and there were no mothers and fathers in the faith to give clarity and stability. There were preachers passing through, to be sure, but that's just it; they were passing through. The church had experiences for which they had no texts and problems for which they had no precedents. Some concerned members wrote to the missionary who started the church, and their questions were many, touching on marriage, divorce, litigation, support of local shrines, proper foods, leadership of women, order of worship, and the nature of a resurrected body. What a list! And among the questions was this one: What are activities of the Spirit?

Unlike some of us, Paul was not intimidated or thrown on the defensive by the question. He welcomed it as deserving a careful answer. After all, Paul spoke often of the Holy Spirit and regarded the Spirit as the prompter of the confession of faith, the source of Christian character, and the enabler of Christian ministry. Certainly he did not wish to shut down their enthusiasm. Himself a man of abundant energy, he would have considered lifelessness a complete contradiction of Christian faith. Paul, however, knew the difference between enthusiasm and indulgence. Just as there is indulgence of the flesh there is indulgence of the spirit, and to bless that wallowing in one's feelings with claims about the Holy Spirit could be dangerous for both the believer and the church. Everything truly genuine has its counterfeits and everything truly Christian has its pornographers.

In answering the letter from Corinth, Paul is not at all interested in dealing with events in the church services there as a question of whether these Spirit activities really happened. Whether an unusual, an extraordinary, or even a miraculous event really happened is a question we would ask, not they. We operate as though believing something really happened is faith and believing it did not happen is doubt. More to the point in the early church, however, was the question, did God do it? Did the Holy Spirit do it? In other words, they assumed extraordinary events occurred; the issue was whether they were acts of God.

Jesus spoke of those who prophesied, cast out demons, and worked wonders who were not of God. In Samaria, one Simon the sorcerer wowed the people, but he did not have the Holy Spirit. And, of course, we recall from the Old Testament how the magicians in Egypt matched Moses frog for frog, louse for louse.

Before he can answer the question as to whether certain activities and behavior patterns are of the Holy Spirit, Paul feels the need to change the word used in the letter to him. They inquired about “spiritual things”; Paul wants to talk about “gifts.” Some years ago someone broke into the church, pried open the door to the room where the vocabulary is kept, and stole one of the richest words the Christian community possessed. The word was *charisma*. It was peddled on the street and soon came to be used by everybody for everything: an exciting personality, a particular hairstyle, photogenic face, stimulating speech, provocative style of leadership. The word is a form of *charis*, grace, from which we get eucharist, and is the background word for charity. Charisma is gift, and it is Paul’s insistence that when we talk of these matters, we call them what they are—gifts of God. Apart from that association with God and grace, we might as well be discussing magic and horoscopes.

And the word for Paul is plural, *charismata*; there are varieties of gifts. By its repetition it can be assumed that diversity of gifts is Paul’s insistence. Perhaps the divided and confused state of the congregation was prompting some of them to wish to quiet dissenting voices, to bring order and unity to the church by demanding that all have the same gift, the same grasp of the Holy Spirit. And surely that thought comes to sincere minds: whatever it takes to still the storm, whatever it takes to clear up the chaos, let’s do it. Politicians call it granting emergency powers to the leader; it means a benevolent dictatorship, temporarily! Let us not deny it; that it is a swifter, cleaner, easier path to unity makes this a tempting solution. But Paul says no. Even a quarreling church must not relinquish its diversity, opting for unity on the grounds of one common experience. And the reason? Because diversity is not a condition we tolerate, up to a point; diversity is a given in the very plenitude of God, whose grace is boundless.

But what if things are out of hand? The answer, says Paul, does not lie in tighter control but in setting the experience of the church back into proper context. That context—are you ready for this?—is the Trinity. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone” (vv. 4-6).

My first response is: How clever of Paul! Why can’t I be that quick witted? When called upon to deal with an incendiary issue, surrounded by persons with high emotional investment who have already decided the conclusion of the discussion, introduce the Trinity. One can escape before the fog lifts!

We expect more from Paul, however, and we get it. Nothing could be more

appropriate to the understanding and enriching of one's experience of the Spirit than the clear association of that experience with Jesus Christ and with God. Look closely at the text for a moment. Notice the order is not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That would be proper for a class lecture perhaps, but Paul begins with his listeners and with their experience of the Spirit. Here we have doctrine with a reason. Notice also that the accent is not upon the nature of the Trinity but upon function: *gifts* of the Spirit, *service* of Jesus Christ, and *energizing* of God. Here we have doctrine with a will to do. But still the question remains: What has the Trinity to do with charismatic activity?

First, let us remind ourselves that it is Paul more than any other New Testament writer who personalizes and internalizes the experience of the Holy Spirit in the church. But Paul is aware of the dangers here. A subjective experience without an outside point of reference can easily become a trap, a tender trap to be sure, but a trap of feeling, mood, intuition, sensation. Certainly no one wants to go on record as opposing heartfelt religion, but what happens to the gospel's engagement with law, science, business, politics, and all human affairs if the game is moved to a new park where only feeling can play—the heart? Who will keep the store open and try to transact a little business for the Kingdom? Some may sincerely think the heart became the stronghold of the faith, but in reality it became a hiding place.

Paul provides a guard against such a reduction of our faith by adding to the first article of his affirmation, "There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit," a second: "There are varieties of service but the same Lord." He has already said that the Holy Spirit inspires the confession, "Jesus is Lord" (v. 3), but here it must be repeated: all experiences of the Holy Spirit must come under the guidance and instruction of the incarnation, God's act in history, in Jesus, for human beings, for the salvation of the world. This is to say that the life of the Spirit which I now experience is a continuation of that life which was in the world, sharing, giving, serving, suffering, dying. Spirituality that stands under the cross does not waste its enthusiasm into the air but harnesses it in service for the common good. From time to time in the history of the church Christian spirituality has tried to hide from the historical Jesus by evaporating Jesus through mystical interpretations of the gospel records. Jesus is born in our hearts; the Sermon on the Mount is observed in our hearts; Jesus enters triumphantly into our hearts; the temples of our hearts are cleansed; Jesus is crucified in our hearts; and if you ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart. What hearts! But in the meantime, back in the world. . . .

And finally, Paul provides an even larger context, encompassing both Spirit and Jesus: "And there are varieties of working [empowering, enabling], but it is the same God who inspires [works in] them all in everyone." The phrase "all in everyone" is really not large enough to convey what Paul says. The phrase means the complete totality, all that there is. Earlier Paul has used the expression to speak of God as the One from whom are "all things" (8:6); and

later he will say that after death is defeated, Christ will turn the Kingdom over to God and God will be "the Totality" (15:28).

Now Paul is making us think big thoughts here. He is asking us to be aware that all worship and activity of the Christian community is responsible finally to God. No claims, real or imagined, about the influence of the Holy Spirit can justify behavior or preaching or teaching that is not appropriate to the one God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all life. He is asking us to grasp the dimensions of the realm of the Spirit's work. If God is energizing the totality, then the arena of the Spirit's activity is too narrowly defined if it excludes any of God's creation. Those members of the Corinthian church, or any church, who removed from the list of "spiritual" concerns all issues domestic, sexual, legal, or social were, and are, in error. If the Holy Spirit means anything, it means something where people live. Paul is also allowing us to catch the hope of the final vision. That final vision was of a God who had reclaimed all things, of a time when the realm of creation and the realm of redemption would be coextensive. This is no faint wish; even now God is at work enabling the totality. The church which catches that vision is inspired by the Spirit to sing with Paul: "From God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever."

Before saying amen, however, let us warn ourselves one last time. I spoke earlier of persons hiding from the world by centering upon experiences of the Spirit within the heart. Let's be fair. There is no less a danger of hiding in the totality, the world in general, life in general. Many Christian programs have been discouraged and finally aborted by those who immobilized the church with broad descriptions of how great the need, how deplorable the conditions, how urgent the pleas from all over the universe. Overwhelmed by the totality, the church can easily disregard as puny and ineffective the cup of water, the loaf of bread, the small chapel, the family altar, the covey of children listening to a Bible story on Sunday evening. Hear a parable:

It came to pass that there was a certain minister who preached to his little flock of "the world today," "the twentieth century," and "the human race." A layman complained of not being addressed by the sermons, but his complaints were turned aside with admonitions against small-mindedness and provincialism. In the course of time, the minister and the layman attended together a church conference in a distant city. When the minister expressed anxiety about losing their way in the large and busy metropolis, the layman assured him there was no reason to fear. With that word, he produced from the rear seat of the car a globe of the world.

Of course, God is at work in all things. Of course, the whole of creation is the object of God's love. Of course, Christ was lifted up on the cross to draw all people to himself. But I thought I heard him say, as he was hanging there, "Take my mother home."



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