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## Gifts for the Church

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*The gifts we possess differ as they are allotted to us by God's grace, and must be exercised accordingly: the gift of inspired utterance, for example, in proportion to a man's faith; or the gift of administration, in administration. A teacher should employ his gift in teaching, and one who has the gift of stirring speech should use it to stir his hearers. If you give to charity, give with all your heart; if you are a leader, exert yourself to lead; if you are helping others in distress, do it cheerfully.*  
(Romans 12:6-8 NEB)

## **GIFTS FOR THE CHURCH**

*Vincent E. Eriksson*

When we read Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:7-12, 16 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-14, 27-30, it is easy to take these passages in a passive and remote way. It is easy to acknowledge that God at some time and in some places provided apostles, prophets, workers of miracles, etc., for the Church.

On the other hand, there is the danger of taking the words to mean that all gifts and all offices were meant for all times and all places. Specifically, there is the danger that we feel that we today must have all the gifts and all the offices at each place.

It is important, then, to read the general verses: 1 Cor. 12:11, "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills;" Eph. 4:12, ". . . for building up the body of Christ . . .;" and verse 16, "from whom the whole body . . . makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." It is important also to note the emphasis upon the welfare of the whole body in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12. If we take seriously these statements which show the purpose for which the gifts were given, we will not be tempted to hold that all the offices or functions relating to all the gifts must necessarily be

reproduced in the Church in every generation: nor will we take a particularistic view of their appearance.

Is there not a place for examining our experience of the Church in the light of these general passages? In doing so we need not assume that our generation has the same needs and gifts as that of the first generation of Christians. We need not conclude that to be the true Church we must reorganize ourselves to simulate the primitive state and pristine quality, with all the early gifts, etc. To do so is to invite despair. One is apt to arrive at the feeling that, "All the world is mad, save thee and me; and sometimes I despair of thee," in thus attempting to recover "true Christianity." Such actions, and the spirit behind them, are contrary to the teachings of Christ and the apostles.

One need not engage in such an examination, however, in a way which is destructive of the Church or divisive in any way. It can be done in a way which affirms the Church. My suggestion is as follows: We need to believe, on the strength of the passages referred to, that in any particular Christian community God has provided, and does provide, those persons *necessary for its life and growth*. The Augsburg Confession, Article VII, describes minimal criteria for recognizing the presence of the Church. It does not set forth a maximal description of what God does in his Church.

I became aware of the above principle in my experience of a multi-congregation parish. In the larger congregation the Lutheran Church Women, Luther League, and occasionally other groups were organized complete with officers. In the congregation of second size these organizations were not present. Furthermore, to my initial dismay, the people steadfastly refused to organize them. As my experience of this latter congregation grew, however, I came to recognize that the people of that congregation *carried out the functions* of fellowship and nurture that were usually associated with the women's and youth organizations without being thus organized. The same sort of work was generally done by families working together, sometimes in a meeting, sometimes merely over the telephone. It emerged naturally out of their concern. They also had their leaders and promoters, even though these were not formally elected to such offices. The concern arose out of the presence of the Gospel among them and the concern produced leaders.

I recognized another facet of this principle in the larger congregation. Many times persons can carry out functions which would build up the body of Christ. They remain unused because we do not recognize them as having such gifts, or because they have not taken seriously the fact that God has given gifts for the rebuilding of his Church, some of which they might have.

One result of not recognizing the gifts that are present in oneself or in others is that a few willing persons tend to monopolize all the positions and functions in a congregation. These persons eventually complain about this and the results are detrimental. Such is the case not only because the complaints are destructive to the morale of the whole, but also because of attending results. The families of the "willing" workers may be neglected. Others, who are not asked, may feel shut out.

Perhaps most seriously, however, is the fact that the system is self-perpetuating because of the psychology which it builds up. On the one hand, it creates the

illusion that only special insiders, a sort of congregational establishment, the "they," are allowed to do anything for or in the church. On the other hand, it creates the impression that a person dare not volunteer for one job, because if he does, he may be pounced on and saddled with six.

Examination of the membership of the larger congregation which I served revealed persons who could and would carry out *one* function with a bit of training and encouragement, if they were assured that this was the extent of what was expected of them. Recognition of these hidden gifts enabled us to ease the burden on the multi-job couples, giving them more time with their families. Somewhat unexpectedly, it resulted in new work being done in the congregation which would have been impossible before. The persons who had previously been over-burdened with responsibilities could build on their previous experience in new capacities. Such a development would have been impossible if they had remained the overworked, willing-horses of the past.

Perhaps the latter experience is commonplace to most pastors. But putting it together with the different experience of the smaller congregation illustrates the principle that God does provide, as necessary.

I offer this suggestion at this time because we are contemplating merger and independence as Lutherans in Canada. Some have questioned our ability to carry out our mission effectively on the grounds that we will not have the necessary leadership, or the necessary contributions to support the leadership which we will need for our Church apparatus.

If we take seriously the idea that God *has* given and *does* give gifts for the upbuilding of his Church, then two applications follow: 1) we may not need all the apparatus, officials or functioning sub-institutions to which we have become accustomed from the image of the basically United States-style Church; and, 2) God will provide those persons, and the support of them, that are *necessary* for us *in our situation*, if we recognize that they are there.