

3. The New Humanity and the Life of God's Covenant Household

God's goal in the salvation of individual people is the formation of His own eternally-foreordained, everlasting sanctuary. It is true that Christians are individually God's dwelling, but only in order that together they should become the consummate temple of the triune God: Through ontological union with *Christ*, the Last Adam, Christians are being built into the dwelling of *God* in the *Spirit*.

If the essential nature and structure of the fulfilled "people of God" are corporate and communal, then the life and function of that people are grounded in those same realities. Form follows function, so that the communal form of the covenant household implies God's design that it should serve a communal function and operate in a communal manner and orientation.

This is exactly what the New Testament reveals: *The communal nature and structure of Christ's Body serve the cause of that Body, first in terms of its well-being and secondly in terms of its growth and maturation.* At first glance this may appear problematic in that it seems to assign to men the continuance and progress of God's Church.

- Didn't the Lord Himself say that He would build His Church (Matthew 16:18), and didn't Paul assign to the working of Christ's Spirit the life and progress of the Body (2 Corinthians 3:12-18)?
- The New Testament is unequivocal that the covenant community depends upon the presence and power of Christ's Spirit for its life, well-being, and advancement, but Paul, in particular, insisted that the *Body* causes the growth of the Body (Ephesians 4:15-16).

These apparently disparate truths are reconciled by understanding that the Spirit does His work in and through the members of the Church as the corporate Body and collective sanctuary. The Spirit of God is the effectual agent in building God's dwelling, but He doesn't work in a vacuum; He expresses His power and will and accomplishes His purpose through the earthen vessels into which He has been poured (cf. Acts 2:14-33; Romans 5:1-5; Titus 3:4-6). Though easy to overlook, the implication is clear:

If it is a serious error for the Christian to consider his identity in Christ in individualistic terms – and it is, it is more so for him to regard his Christian life and function in that way.

Set before them in this way, few believers would argue against the truth of this assertion, and yet perhaps the majority of them deny it *practically* by the way they actually order and conduct their lives in relation to the Christian community.

- Multitudes of professing Christians have no connection at all with Christ's Church, while many others have a merely physical association with it. They might "attend services," but they keep themselves and their lives detached from it.

- For many others whose lives are strongly committed to the local church, their relationship with it is largely, if not entirely, self-concerned and self-serving. The widely touted and embraced church-growth movement is founded upon the proven principle that discovering and meeting people’s “felt needs” will produce numerical growth. Whether a more comfortable environment, personally relevant messages, enjoyable music, “womb-to-tomb” programs, or the promise of a happier and more successful life, churches have found that giving people what they want insures success.
- Even among congregations that reject church-growth philosophy and methods, the tendency is still to perceive and order church life according to the principle of individualism. Churches are careful to posture themselves and their ministries in ways calculated to minimize discontentment, and they do so precisely because they realize that most Christians’ commitment to a local body goes no further than their own self-interest and personal agenda. Churches know all too well that a disgruntled congregant is as good as gone.

The dynamics of self-interest are so endemic in the Body of Christ that many Christians don’t even take notice of it; they aren’t at all surprised to find in the Church what defines the world. Others find it concerning, but resign themselves that this is simply “the way things are.” For its part, church-growth philosophy effectively exalts and celebrates individualism and self-interest, finding in them a useful tool for numerical growth.

This is a startling state of affairs in view of the fact that the Scripture knows nothing about such a conception of the life and practice of Christ’s Church. In fact, the New Testament openly repudiates it. The contemporary Church has largely adopted a radically unbiblical paradigm for itself and it is bearing an abundance of rotten fruit as a consequence. Again, personal, ontological union with Christ by His indwelling Spirit (not individual conviction or preference, commitment to an organization, doctrinal perspective, or sacramental participation) is the sole determiner of who is a Christian, and this vital union results in the Christian’s union with all other believers. The Church is the living spiritual organism comprised of all those – and only those – who share in Christ’s life by His Spirit, and its spiritual identity determines and defines its spiritual function.

The Scripture shows that function to be two-fold, *with both components being related to God’s ultimate goal of transforming the whole creation into sacred space*. The first concerns the Church’s responsibility to itself; the second concerns its responsibility to the world. It is primarily with regard to the former that the matter of spiritual gifts comes to the forefront.

a. Spiritual Gifts

The first and primary role of the Church is the well-being and growth of the Body itself. This is the matter of *edification*, and the Spirit has provided for it by bestowing spiritual gifts to the members of the Body. A few key observations are important to make in this regard:

- 1) The first is that spiritual gifts, like the makeup and function of the Church itself as the Body of Christ, have individual and corporate aspects. Individual salvation and indwelling serve the cause of corporate indwelling (the Church as God's sanctuary), and so it is with the Spirit's bestowal of gifts to His people: Every individual Christian is given spiritual gifts, but these aren't for his own good; they are for the "common good." *Spiritual gifts represent the Spirit's power in the Church for maintaining and advancing its corporate well-being as it "grows up in all things into Him who is the Head"* (Ephesians 4:1-6; cf. Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-25, 14:1-26).
- 2) Thus spiritual gifts are endowments ordained and designed to edify Christ's Body. As such, they represent *spheres* of gifting rather than discrete gifts. Examples include the gifts of service, helps, and administrations. Even where they are more specific, such as teaching and exhortation, spiritual gifts are still broad in their scope and application.

Despite the Scripture's presentation of spiritual gifts as generalized categories, Christians tend to conceive of them very narrowly (one cause of this is spiritual gifts "tests"), resulting in various negative outcomes:

- Believing that spiritual gifts can be precisely catalogued, many Christians find themselves unable to discover their own gifting.
 - For others, their sense of a specific gifting leads them to take stock of the local assembly of which they're a part and conclude that it has no need or opportunity for the use of their gift.
 - Still others use a narrow conception of spiritual gifts as an excuse to not serve the Body. God would have them to use *their* gift, and they will do so when the need for that particular gift presents itself. ("I can't serve in the nursery because it's not my spiritual gift.")
- 3) The problem is compounded when Christians think of "ministry" in terms of formally sanctioned programs. Recognizing that spiritual gifts are to be used in ministry, many believe that means giving themselves to officially defined and prescribed areas of service. A common complaint in churches is that there are no places for people to use their gifts. It rarely occurs to such individuals that the Spirit bestowed spiritual gifts for edifying the Body long before there were church programs and designated "ministries."

The remedy for these things is to understand that spiritual gifts consist of broad arenas of gifting devised and allocated by the Spirit to serve the spiritual "upbuilding" of the local assembly of believers. Christian ministry exists wherever Christians exist, and the only thing required for believers to use their gifts is their authentic connection with and concern for their Christian brethren.

Whatever their nature and specific orientation, all spiritual gifts without exception serve the cause of mutual edification in the Church – “*each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good*” (1 Corinthians 12:7). In this sense, they are given **to the Church**, not the individual.

- The fact that spiritual gifts are given for the good of the Body is another evidence of the fallacy of individualistic Christianity. Autonomy and individualism in the Church not only preclude the use of the Spirit’s gifts, they effectively amount to a denial that such gifts even exist. It is an absurdity for a Christian to think of his spiritual gifting except as he conceives himself as a vital, intimate member of Christ’s Body.
- And so, however sincere and close a person’s connection with a local church, unless he is purposefully ministering his gifts to that body of believers, he is “grieving the Spirit,” robbing the saints of that which he rightfully owes them, and denying his own identity and calling. *The Christian who doesn’t minister in Christ’s Body is living a lie.*

Even as the members of a living organism function naturally for the well-being of the entire organism, so also the members of Christ’s Body are to labor through the instrumentality of the gifts for the good of the whole. Conversely, as the failure of one part of an organism brings significant (sometimes fatal) detriment to the organism itself, so the wrongful use of gifts – or the neglect of their use altogether – causes Christ’s Body to suffer loss and languish in infirmity (12:15-26).

b. Faith Working Through Love

It is precisely because spiritual gifts serve the good of the Body that the greatest chapter on Christian love stands at the center of Paul’s instruction regarding them (ref. 13:1-13). All Christian interaction is to have its conscious, express goal in the edification of the other party, and that means it must be directed by love (Romans 15:2; 1 Corinthians 10:23-24; Ephesians 4:29). The reason is that love always seeks the true and highest good of its object; for a human being, the truest good is his conformity to Christ (Colossians 1:28-29; cf. Philippians 3:1-14).

- The purpose for spiritual gifts is the edification of the saints, but there is no authentic “upbuilding” except where love is present and operative. Indeed, Paul’s point in this chapter is that *all* spiritual activity and accomplishment – no matter how spiritual, sacrificial, exhaustive or praiseworthy – is empty and useless apart from love.
- Thus, in discussing the matter of spiritual gifts and their operation in the Church, Paul saw “greatness” in relation to those gifts as residing not in a particular gift as such, but in the way in which it is understood and applied. Regardless of a gift’s apparent grandness and notability, love is what makes it excellent and effectual (12:27-31; cf. Ephesians 4:11-16).

- The supremacy of love in Paul’s argumentation reaches beyond spiritual gifts to embrace every aspect of the life of the Church. Whether the place of women in the public assembly (11:1-16), the ministry of the gospel (9:1-23), the administration of the sacraments (11:17-34), the exercise of corporate discipline (5:1-6:20), or personal fellowship between individuals (8:1-13), Paul was adamant that they all must proceed upon and be directed by biblical love. Only then will all things be done “*properly and in an orderly manner*” for the edification of the Church (14:1-40).

The crucial necessity of love in all things lies behind Paul’s declaration in Galatians that the only thing that matters in the Christian experience is “*faith working through love*” (ref. Galatians 5:1-7). This brief statement effectively summarizes Paul’s extended argumentation concerning love in 1 Corinthians 13, but it also serves to develop it.

Most notable is the fact that Paul here speaks of authentic love as the effusion of faith; *love is the way in which faith properly expresses itself*. In and of itself, Paul’s statement doesn’t rule out the possibility that love can exist apart from faith, but his larger theology makes the case that faith in Christ and love are inextricably joined together (cf. Romans 8:28, 13:8-10 with 3:19-20; also Galatians 5:19-25). Beyond Paul’s instruction, faith as the necessary ground of love is affirmed by Jesus’ teaching regarding the counterfeit quality of “natural” love (Matthew 5:43-48) and John’s insistence that only those born of God – those who possess the faith of regeneration – are able to love (1 John 4:7; cf. 4:19).

Love not only is grounded in faith, it is the *work* of faith. Love is what faith *does* – not coincidentally or properly, but according to its very nature. The implication is that, *just as there is no love in the absence of faith, there is no faith in the absence of love*. Love is the life of faith; where love doesn’t exist, faith is dead.

This is true first and foremost in relation to **God**, and gets to the heart of James’ assertion regarding the vital connection between *faith* and *works* (2:1-26). Faith in Christ is antithetical to the partiality of “natural wisdom” precisely because such favoritism reflects the absence of love (ref. 2:1-9). True faith “works” in love. So Abraham’s faith expressed itself in the “work” of his love for God in the offering of Isaac; he trusted God’s veracity in spite of what seemed to argue against it.

Faith expresses itself in love for God, but this extends outward in love for **people**. Thus Rahab demonstrated her faith by her “work” in preserving God’s spies from death (2:25). Her devoted faith in God provoked an act of love for His servants (1 John 2:7-11, 3:10-24, 4:16-5:1; cf. Galatians 6:9-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13).

In the new creation in Christ, all that matters is “faith working through love” (cf. Galatians 5:6 with 6:15). So it must be with spiritual gifts: They, too, must express the working of love as it flows from those who believe God. Trusting Him for the progress and perfection of His true sanctuary, the faithful labor in His Spirit toward that end.