

Karl-Adolf BAUER

The Miracle of the Spirit and Her Gifts

“A miracle has taken place!” With this cry one Monday morning, a group of mentally handicapped children came running towards me from next door. What had happened? The day before, on Sunday, I had sung a little three-part round with them and other children in the children’s service. “Praise, o praise the Lord, you nations, rejoice in Him and serve Him willingly!” That evening they had tried in their children’s home to sing this tune again not only in unison, but as a round, in three parts; and - o miracle of miracles! - It came off well. By singing together, they discovered that they are more gifted than they thought! We are a choir, a body of sound, in which one voice completes and encourages the other, accompanying and spurring it on.

I. INTERCONNECTED

The spirit of the music had seized them and inspired them to sing and the Holy Spirit had been involved at the same time and taken them beyond themselves: to the delight of them all, and at the same time in praise of the Lord.

Yes, my mouth needs my hand. In too, my hand also needs my arm. My spirit needs my brain. My brain needs my stomach. In my body, everything is interdependent. No member can be missing, however weak and insignificant it may appear.

For one member completes and supports the other. My mouth needs my hand. My hand needs my arm. That is true far beyond the sphere of my body. We all have far more members than only those in our body.

When I was a baby, my mother’s hand became a support for my spine, which was still weak; otherwise, I would not have learnt to sit up and walk uprightly. Without people near me, who spoke to me, I would scarcely have learnt to speak myself.

The whole time, innumerable people, whom I do not know personally at all, act so that I do not starve or freeze to death. Like members of one body, we join to form society.

Nothing would be more foolish than the sentence: “I am self-sufficient, and I do not need anyone else.” Each person constantly needs others, who complete her or him and encourage, accompany and spur her or him on.

That is why a nation or human society has been compared to a body, whose members we all are. But all too often this image of the body has been used to appease those who work like slaves: you are of course also important, but as in the body, where there is a head above and feet below, there must also be an above and a below in society.

Before you know where you are, with the image of the body and its members, an unfair distribution of privileges and advantages is justified and unequal treatment in society covered up.

No, our social and political world is not simply a body with many members. This image is deceptive. Admittedly it cannot be denied, that in the social struggle of all against all for mutual recognition, one serves the other; even if it is against her or his will; and helps her or him to live.

However, our society as a whole is not yet a serving community. Into this world, still marked by the withholding

of equal rights and unequal treatment, God has through the power of the Holy Spirit, built his Church as a serving community of the Body of Jesus Christ.

Just as in a transplant, one member is transplanted from a dying body into a living body, and can from then on continue living in a new cohesion, so we have been transplanted through Jesus Christ into a new relationship.

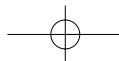
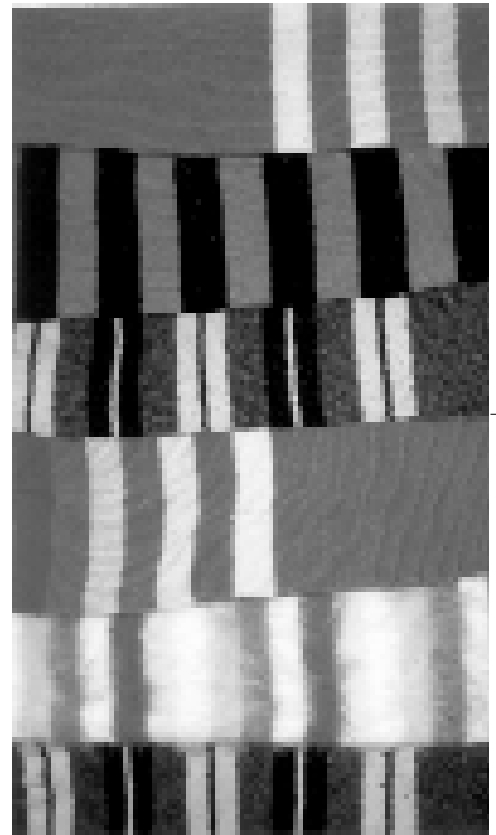
By His death, the old person in us has already died; the one who is sufficient to her- or himself. By His Resurrection, Jesus Christ gives us a share in the life of the new person.

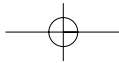
By baptism, the Holy Spirit has transferred us into the body of Christ, and in every celebration of the Holy Communion the Spirit joins Godself to us anew, and us to one another to be one body: God’s Body!

The words are true: “But you are the Body of Christ, and each of you a member” (1 Cor 12:27). Strikingly, it does not say: “You ought to be the Body of Christ!” The words of the apostle are not a challenge; they are an appointment!

With this appointment, Paul opens our eyes to the presence of the Spirit in our midst. “But you are the Body of Christ, and each of you a Member!” Seen from our point of view, the leap of faith into the bodily presence of Jesus Christ is as impossible as the step of Peter out on to the sea (Matthew 14:22–25).

Based on the word of Jesus Christ, however, Peter dared to leave the boat and walk out onto the sea. Because it is in He who calls with His body “given for you,” we can dare to live as gifted members of His Body. And that has consequences.





II. CONSEQUENCES

1. EVERY MEMBER IN THE BODY OF CHRIST IS GIFTED

There are no useless or superfluous members in this body. Each has received a gift. However much you contradict the fact and maintain: "That is not true for me; I am a failure," Jesus Christ does not agree.

His promise is for everyone: You are gifted! Get up, and discover the mutual gifts, with which Jesus Christ meets you, completes and encourages you, accompanies and spurs you on, through your sister and brother!

2. THERE ARE DIFFERENT GIFTS, BUT THERE IS ONE SPIRIT

God is a friend of original characters, and God's Spirit is a definite lover of variety. Before God all people are admittedly equal. In spite of that, there are differences of gifts. For God is an enemy of all uniformity.

The fact that there are different gifts is not a misfortune,

but rather a cause for joy: no one has to be able to do everything. Not everyone has to be able to do the same things. By this, I am relieved, and the other person is encouraged.

By this, the other person is relieved and I am encouraged through her or him: by the very fact, that she or he is different from me. Without differences, there would be no fellow-humanity and no reciprocal fulfilment and enrichment.

The differences of gifts and the variety serve to supplement one another. Variety serves life. Yes, the variety of gifts is an expression of the manifold and even colourful grace of God.

For in the gift granted to the other person, Jesus Christ Himself comes to meet me. Hidden but helpful, He comes to complete me, and, where necessary, to restrict me for my own good.

By letting ourselves and our gifts be seized, moved and inspired by God's Spirit, we become the handywomen and handymen of God's grace. In this sense, it is true to say: "Whatever gift each of you may have received, use it in service to one another, like good stewards, dispensing the grace of God in its varied forms" (1Peter 4:10).

3. GIFTS OF SPIRIT, GIFTS OF GRACE

When Paul speaks of gifts, one time he calls them gifts of the Spirit, and another time gifts of grace. By this, he makes it clear that they do not belong simply to the natural qualification of a person.

When we speak of "qualification," we mean a personal ability, which someone has trained for and acquired by hard work and skill. Her or his qualification is always the fruit of her or his talents and achievements.

It is, so to speak, her or his personal capital, which she or he can profit with, improve her or his career and finances, and possibly gain power. When we speak of a "gift of grace or Spirit," the language implies that it is dealing not with the result of human effort, but with a fruit of divine grace.

The individual never has this gift of grace from her or himself, but from God. Moreover, she or he never has it for themselves, but for others. A gift of grace is not capital, with which to make a career.

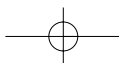
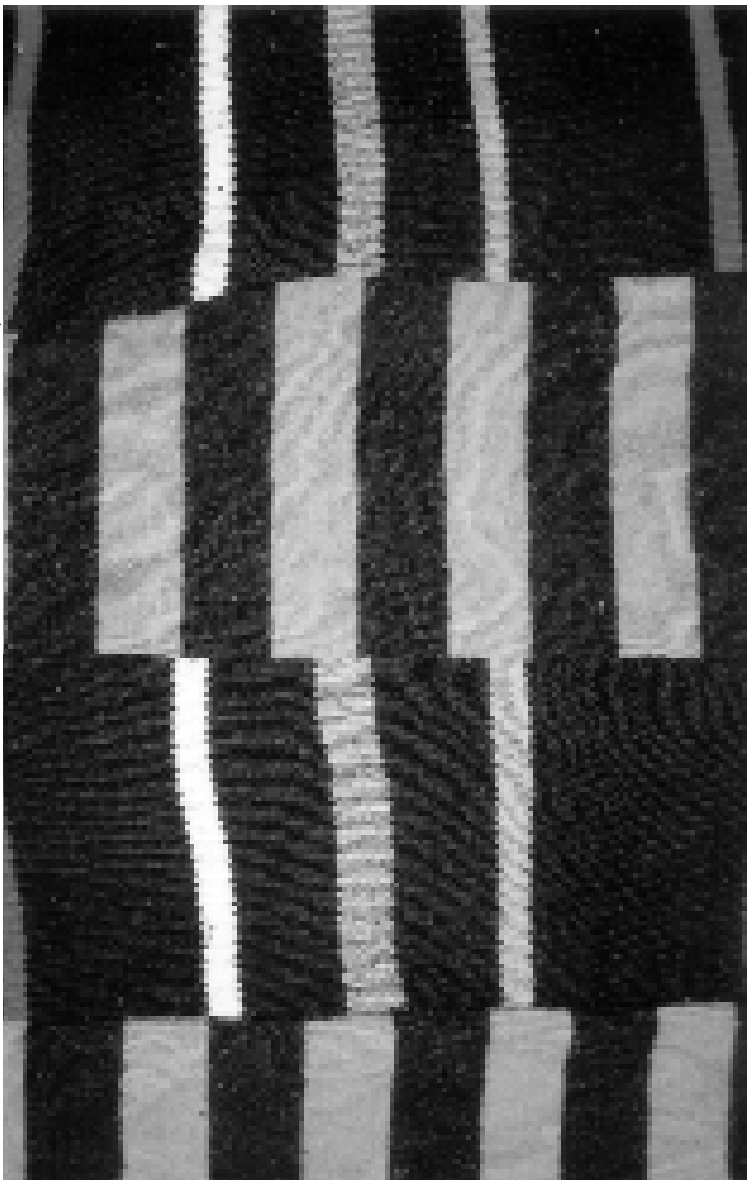
It is a gift of relationship and only comes to life when it is able to serve human relationships. You cannot hoard God's gifts and use them for yourself. You can only give them away and use them in the community of the Body of Christ, and in the encounter with other people.

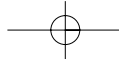
Only in this way do they acquire the character of gifts of grace. Only in this way do they serve not separation and isolation, self-edification and self-enhancement, but rather fellowship and reconciliation. In short, the building up of the Body of Christ.

4. BUT IT IS ONE SPIRIT

The apostle pleads for unity in diversity, not in uniformity. It is only the variety and diversity of gifts that makes living and viable unity possible. For if only "birds of a feather flock together," as the proverb says, then similar types become indifferent to one another and make each other superfluous.

Only the abundance of the various gifts serves life. Any uniformity in thoughts, words and works makes the congregation dreary and bores other people to death. Only unity in diversity makes the congregation an inviting Church!





In the midst of the abundance of different gifts in the congregation, however, at Corinth the apostle has reason to remind them of unity: "But there is one spirit." You see, divisions had arisen in the congregation already there: "I belong to Paul, I to Apollos, I am Christ's."

The division continues: "I am Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, and Methodist. In addition to these denominational divisions, there are different groupings in every denomination.

One group commits itself above all to passing on the gospel; others are more concerned on behalf of foreigners and asylum-seekers in society. Behind these church divisions and group formations and reaching into nearly every congregation, is not merely our human need to be valued.

Nor is it only our human sinfulness in general. Rather, the situation is this: when the Holy Spirit blows and moves people, even whole churches and groups, there arises immediately the danger of party politics and division.

For the activity of the Holy Spirit is Giving. The Spirit distributes different gifts. One person can convincingly proclaim the gospel. Another has the gift to bring relief and healing to the sick and distressed. Another can pray in such a way that something happens when she or he asks.

Another shares her or his possessions with the poor. Around such people gifted by the Spirit, others willingly gather, who themselves have received the same spirit or are fascinated by the gift of another.

However, these gifts are never given for our own use, and for our intimate circle. No, the one Spirit always has the whole in view! The Spirit wants to strengthen the whole Church, and bring her to life, and into line with the profession of faith in Jesus Christ, the One Kyrios and Lord (1Cor 12:3).

Typically, before we know where we are, tensions can arise between the groups with their gifts. Each considers her or his gift to be the best and the most important. Thus, the competition for the best gifts is in full swing!

That was the case in those days in Corinth; and all too often, that is what it is like today in and between our denominations, congregations and their groups. What was said with regard to circles in our own denominations and congregations can also be used about the relationship of the denominations to one another.

Each denomination, too, has received different gifts from the Spirit, revealed through the course of their life. Mischief and division arise when the gift of grace, which is entrusted to a denomination, is made into a privilege or special good, through which it dissociates itself from the others or even maintains that it is superior to the others.

That is what it had come to in Corinth. There, one group with its gifts played itself off against the other, and vice versa. With this presumptuousness, they grieved the Spirit and wounded the unity of the Body of Christ.

5. THE SPIRIT MAKES MUSIC

And what does the apostle do? "But one Spirit." The one Spirit makes music. The Spirit joins the different gifts together to make a choir. Like a good conductor, the Spirit sees that the individual voices are brought in at the right time, so that all the voices complement one another and join in one song: to the joy of all, and the praise of God.

It is well known that one sings best in a choir when one does not only hear one's own voice, but also the other voices, and when one is aware of the harmony of all. Otherwise, singing together cannot succeed.

Just as in the choir one voice limits the other, so also in

the concert of gifts in the Body of Christ! One's own gift is always limited, and sometimes even humbled by the gifts of others.

Under certain circumstances, it must wait until its time and entry comes. It is necessary to see it plainly. It is crucial that the different gifts complement one another and combine for the building up of the one Body of Christ. For building up means joining.

6. UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Denominations and congregations are split by the temptation to compete for the better gifts, with which people seek to outdo one another. Paul's reply to this (1Cor 13) is unconditional love.

Where love is lacking, everything that we have received from God in the way of different gifts, even if they are the very greatest, becomes fruitless: "It profits me nothing" (1Cor 13:5).

If we share our spiritual knowledge with others, if we care for the sick and needy, and commit ourselves to social justice in our community, if we have received the gift of organisation or leadership, and are committed to it in the congregation or fellowship ...

If love is missing, then the situation of others is perhaps a little improved, but only in material terms. Then the situation has not become more human. Not until we devote ourselves to the love that Jesus Christ gives us, can the gifts of the Spirit develop fruitfully for the benefit of the whole Church.

Yes, love alone counts! In 1519, Martin LUTHER published a document in which he set forth the fruit of the Lord's Supper, the "sacrament of fellowship, love and unity" (Sermon of the Reverend Sacrament of the Holy, True Body of Christ and of the Brotherhoods).

In this document, the reformer explains that in the Lord's Supper, we are "incorporated" in Jesus Christ, and amongst one another, we become members of His Body. Called to share with one another all the gifts and good things we have received from Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, and to bear all the burdens and sorrows with one another. At the end of this little document, he says with reference to the bad state of the Church at that time:

"The more it turns out that you are incorporated in Christ and the Fellowship of His Saints, the better it is for you. That is, if you establish that you are strong in the faith of Jesus Christ and His dear saints; that you are certain, that they love you, and stand by you (with their gifts) in all the troubles of life and death, and that the suffering of the whole of Christendom, or the sin of every Christian is your concern, that your love is granted to everyone, and that you wish to help everyone, hate no-one, have sympathy with all, and pray for them, then the work of the Sacrament is well."

Wherever the Gospel resounds and we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, God has promised that the miracle of the one Spirit and God's different gifts will happen among us. When we keep ourselves open to receive this miracle, we must reckon with surprises: even in the ecumenical movement.

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