

Spotlight on the early church: Church leaders - Life lived in the Service
A Sermon preached at
Plymouth Presbyterian Church, St. Helens, OR
By Pastor Peter J. Blank
On July 14, 2024

Are you in the service?
1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 27

We continue to spotlight the early church as it faced new challenges like replacing it's leaders as they aged or worse yet died. I have chosen this passage from 1 Corinthians 12 where the Apostle Paul lists God given gifts for leadership. Let's dive in.

Anyone here remember what they used to call places where you went to put gas in your car? They weren't called "gas stations," or "mini-markets with gas pumps," but "service stations."

When you pulled in, someone (or even more than one) raced out to greet you, ask what you needed, and proceeded to fill your gas tank with fuel. While you sat, warm and comfy in your car, the "service station" attendant washed your windows, checked your oil, even checked your tire pressure. After filling up the tank they took your payment and wished you well and waved you off.

"Service stations" also used to give out gifts after so many gallons of gas had been purchased. I will bet that a lot of us here this morning grew up drinking from juice glasses provided by Shell or Texaco or Chevron.

What is the first thing that comes to mind today when someone asks if you ever were "in the service?" There used to be two primary meanings of that phrase "in the service." **The first** was military service the "service" given by all those men and women who "served" to defend and protect our country.

The second association of being "in the service" was made bare in a hit television show, now ended it's fifth season. Any fans of "Downton Abbey" out there? What did it mean in the early twentieth century to be "in the service?"

Of course, it meant being a "servant" to others. "In the service" meant a life lived in service to others whether a butler, a governess, a cook, a maid, a footman, and probably not receiving a whole lot of accolades for doing what you're doing. Service has always been part and parcel of being "in the service."

"Downton Abbey" was a huge hit in a castle, the British Isles as scenery, World War I as a backdrop, quirky characters, and enough plot lines to sketch out the Milky Way.

The call to be "in the service" continues. Not for serving the newly rich as a "butler" but to be "in service" for all members of the family of God. Even if you have never worn a uniform; never gone through boot camp; never saluted a superior officer: if you are a baptized Christian you are "in the service." No matter what your background, whether it is silk sheets or back streets or corporate spreadsheets, we are one community in service to each other and to the world.

Paul's lesson on "spiritual gifts" in this week's epistle reading wasn't only about the variety of spiritual gifts that might be available. Paul loved lists, and his lists of "giftings" were not meant to be exhaustive and definitive, but expressive and suggestive. Paul's lesson on "spiritual gifts" was to teach the community that whatever their individual gifts might be, they all

came from the same source, and that all who were gifted by the Holy Spirit should be governed by the Holy Spirit the same Spirit that calls us all to be “in the service.” There is an old saying: Many folks want to serve God, but only as advisers. Paul would have none of that.

All Christians receive the Holy Spirit at the moment of their baptism. The giftings of the Spirit are not to make us feel good, or feel superior to others in our faith community. Whatever is graced and gifted to us is for one purpose only — for “the common good.” We are graced and gifted not for ourselves but for a life “in the service” ... “In The Service” of others, for the common good, with the Body of Christ.

We are still nervous in speaking about “spiritual gifts.” As hard as Paul tried to disarm the Corinthians’ claim to “special gifts,” that particular stigma has been historically hard to un-stick. In the twenty-first century, claiming a “spiritual gift” sounds strange in the ears of the world.

Paul, in the first century, popped all those bubbles. Spiritual gifts were not individually oriented. In fact, in Paul’s mind they would never elevate the individual. Only the “ignorant” and those not quite with-it among the Corinthians would judge them as such. Instead, Paul showed the new Christian community of believers in Corinth (almost all of them Gentiles) that the Spirit of God they had received at the moment of their baptism transformed them, gifted them, by making them into “body builders.” At baptism we put service over self. At baptism, the question changes from “What can I get out of this?” to “How can my faith help me to serve God, the body of Christ and the common good?”

The “body” we are called to build is, of course, the Body of Christ. The church, the temple of the Holy Spirit, is Christ’s fullest human presence in this world. In body-building there are no insignificant, no unimportant roles. If Paul were writing to encourage the mutuality and reciprocity of all spiritual gifts for today’s church, his list would probably include: insurance advisor, tech-support guru, systems’ analyst, day-care director, after-school education mentor, orienteering through the health care maze master. Maybe these don’t sound like “spiritually” significant gifts, like the ones Paul listed, like “wisdom,” “knowledge,” “faith,” and “healing” — but they are absolutely essential to the spiritual life and health of Christ’s body in the twenty-first century. Spiritual gifts are whatever makes it possible for the members of the community of faith to add to the well-being and life of the community. “In the service” means there are no personal ends to serve, only the “common good.” The Catholic Knights of Columbus have a great motto: “In Service to One, In Service to All.”

Every Christian, when asked if they have been or are “in the service” should answer, “YES!” At the moment of our baptism we are all joined together into a community of service — we only await the directive from the Spirit to lead us into our path of service. As leaders in the Presbyterian Church USA, Teaching Elders, Ruling Elders and Deacons have a ministry of serving others for the common good of the church body.

In this spotlight on the early church that started as the replacement of the Apostles has shifted and changed somewhat over the centuries with divisions, denominations and the desires of congregations. So let’s bring “lives in the service” up to date.

Models of Church Leadership

Divisions within the church are not new. The best-known rift is Martin Luther’s Reformation and the split from the Roman Catholic Church. There have been other splits as well. Because of these splits, churches have different models that define their leadership style and expectations. Within each of these models are differing expectations and roles of the leaders and their congregation.

1. Congregationalism (leading from the bottom)

Congregationalism is the belief that each church should have the power to determine its future as

long as they are led by the teachings of God. Each church following the principle of Congregationalism is independent of the rest. The Puritans were the first Congregationalists and fought for their independence from the Church of England. Today, Quakers, Baptists, and Methodists all follow the model of Congregationalism.

2. Presbyterianism (leading from the middle)

The Presbyterian church started with Martin Luther and the Reformation. The word “Presbyterian” means elder, and so, churches that follow this model are governed by elders. Church officers elect Church leaders in these churches who lead the congregation.

3. Episcopalianism (leading from the top)

Episcopalians continue their connection with the Church of England and are more formal with their leadership. The man with the highest authority in this church is the Pope, followed by Arch Bishops and Bishops. The hierarchy of this leadership model is clearly defined. The best example of this method is the Catholic church. The Roman Catholic Church remains the largest Christian church worldwide.

In the Presbyterian Church USA, we have been recognizing the God-giftedness of women in leadership and ordaining them to be Ruling Elders since 1930, and as Teaching Elders (Ministers of Word and Sacrament) since 1956.

When our lives are lived in service to others we change the world one life at a time. A room-service waiter at a Marriott hotel learned that the sister of a guest had just died. The waiter, named Charles, bought a sympathy card, had hotel staff members sign it, and gave it to the grieving guest with a piece of hot apple pie.

“Mr. Marriott,” that guest later wrote to the president of Marriott Hotels, “I’ll never meet you. And I don’t need to meet you. Because I met Charles. I know what you stand for . . . I want to assure you that as long as I live, I will stay at your hotels. And I will tell my friends to stay at your hotels.” (Told in *Turned On* by Roger Dow and Susan Cook [Harper Business, 1996].)

Those who are in the service change one life at a time.

So, are you in the service? And all God’s people said, “Yes I am!”