



Moulding our Diversity

Romans 12:1-8

Being different. One of the things that I really hated when I was young was that my mother tried to make me wear things that she thought were really trendy. It was the seventies so I liked the flared jeans – preferably a bit frayed, faded with a few holes, the scruffy shirts with leather patches sewn on. She said I should be smart and trendy, so she got me a sports jacket, with purple shirt and flowery tie, with some sensible trousers. Trendy – maybe in 1967 but it was 1972!

After my complaining she decided to get something more conservative. On Saturday nights there used to be the Cardiff Christian Rally which a crowd of us went to. So she got me a blue jacket, black trousers and a very bright white polo necked sweater. She liked the sweater and made sure I always wore it on a Saturday. She washed it on a hot wash to make sure that it was bright white. “you don’t want to be known as the boy with the grubby sweater” she would say. I got to hate it, particularly when I got known as the “twit with the white jumper”. Why? It just wasn’t trendy. I was different. White polo necks were not trendy – they were stupid and impractical for a grubby teenager and they just weren’t hip. It made me different for the wrong sorts of reason and I didn’t want to be different.

We live in a society where people don’t exactly aspire to be different – in fact most people tend to follow the crowd to a greater or lesser extent. For youth, it is peer pressure. You don’t want to look different so you have the same shoes, listen to the same music, wear the same clothes, speak the same language as your peers. We laugh at the antics of youth but most people aren’t much different. We all aim to be the sort of people that follow the norms of the world so we don’t stand out. Or more precisely, we try to only stand out in ways that make us conspicuous and important. Any thing else, we keep our head down. We try to make our house look like the rest in the street.

We like uniformity and people vary in their ability to be able to cope with people different from them. Some folks are broader-minded than others. Of course there are some forms of behaviour that will never be acceptable, either by society or by God. If something is anti-social or just is not of God, we cannot broad-mindedly embrace.

But there’s lots of other things we just make a fuss about because someone’s different – the neighbour who annoys us because he rarely mows his lawn, people who never clean out their cars, people who don’t seem to care about the environment, the people who only Hoover their house once a week, people who eat fatty foods. I know of people who get very intolerant about these things.

Then what about those people that just don’t seem able to do basic things. Why is it that some people just aren’t good with money, or can’t fix things that break around the home, who can’t cook, who can’t use a computer. I also know plenty of people who get very upset and intolerant about that too.

The truth is that naturally as human beings we are diverse in our skills, our interests, on who we are in terms of where we are from, how we were brought up, how intelligent we are, how practical we are. We’re all different – in fact, we are all completely unique. We are genetically unique, we have developed into people in unique ways. We are like no-one else on earth.

Amazing isn’t it. That’s how God made humans to be. It’s natural and it’s right. And the way we were

created extends into the life of the church. We are all unique. But as we said last week, by His grace, God has given us the means to use our diversity to function and grow as His people – as part of His body. None of us are capable enough to self-sufficiently grown in Christ, but we have enough when plugged into all the other parts of the body of Christ, to grow and be amazing for God – to be moulded to do His good pleasing and perfect will.

That's where we got to last week I recall.

I could sum up what we did last week and the first three verses using someone else's analysis:

Peter Samuelson - *Being used as God's righteous instruments involves a transformation or metamorphosis of the mind (Rom 12:2). Like a butterfly that emerges from a cocoon, so must the mind change from being centred on the world to being centred on Christ. Paul knows that where the mind is, there will the body be also. "We have the mind of Christ," he declares (1 Cor 2:16). The metamorphosis is a present reality: "And we all with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed (transformed) into his likeness" (2 Cor 3:18). To the self-important Christian, this comes as a reminder that all have the same status in Christ, namely righteousness. No one can claim a superior righteousness, for in Christ everyone is superior. To reinforce this notion, Paul employs the image of a body, the body of Christ. Out of the sacrifice of many bodies (Rom 12:1) is made one body, each member with equal status and worth.*

Paul says

4 We have many parts in the one body, and all these parts have different functions. 5 In the same way, though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body. 6 So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us.

We are all part of one body and surprise, surprise, just as in nature, we are all different, unique. Somebody said: *Did you realize that 70 separate muscles contribute to hand movements? But in order to allow dexterity and slimness for actions such as piano playing, the finger itself has no muscles; rather, tendons transfer the force from muscles higher in the arm. If any one of those muscles failed to work properly the hand would not be able to play the piano or type on a keyboard or write with a pen.*

It's how the different parts work together in the church that make it work. The church has been described as "a diverse unity". Anthony Billington: *So far as the Bible is concerned, there is no such thing as an un-churched Christian. Christian isolationism is a denial of what it means to be in Christ.* We are members of one another.

Paul refers to gifts in verse 5. Those that study gifts call these "gifts of the Father" as they seem quite distinct from the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. The gifts here are very much a mixture of that which could be plainly miraculous such as prophecy, and gifts that are extensions of the sort of people that we might have already been before we came to Christ, or what we have developed into over the years.

I don't think the list is in any way prescriptive here. The message isn't about finding your gift – but recognising that what God has made you good at doesn't separate you from people or cut you out of things, but makes you an essential part of the body and you should find a way of using what you are good at to the maximum that your faith allows to benefit the body of Christ – because others won't grow without you.

William Loader - I am sure Paul would be highly amused to see how some people have tried to make his illustrations in 12:6-8 into a rigid set of categories designed to label "spiritual gifts"! Paul is asking for a maturity that goes beyond such counting and classification and includes all that we bring and offer to God and to each other.

Interestingly, you'll remember last week that I said that the concept of the living sacrifice wasn't about offering our bodies as a living sacrifice wasn't just to God, but to one another. Our gift allows us to serve one another to the extent of our faith – to be a living sacrifice to one another.

As we have been given some examples, let's look at the, They are here specifically because they most likely would have been issues for the church in Rome at that time. What we're going to find is that actually we are all capable of all the things listed here. In fact I would encourage everyone to not hesitate to do any of these things if moved to do so. I guess some people think they don't need others because this is possible, but it becomes quickly apparent that in any fellowship, there are people who are gifted to do the task much better – why – because God has gifted them to do so. So what I would say is, never omit to do something because it isn't your gift, but recognise those that are gifted and don't hinder them, instead, dovetailing your gifts in

with theirs.

Incidentally, before I go into the lists, I would say that often I've found people who have more than one gift – who are good at a few things so don't feel limited to one – seek how God wants to use your gifts, or even develop new ones in you.

Prophecy seems to be a prominent part of gift lists in the NT. Why? Because church needs to know God's will and hear His voice. God raises up people for that purpose. You can look at prophecy having two roles - fore-telling and forth-telling. Foretelling is just that – telling people, or warning people that something is going to happen. Sometimes it's unconditional e.g. the prophecies about Jesus, or conditional "if you don't do this then, something will happen to you".

Forth-telling is speaking what God says. The word of God is our principal forth-telling tool. There is one sense in which we use the Bible to preach but there is another in which we seek to hear God's voice. Prophecy does not replace the Bible but being prophetic allows us to use it effectively by applying it correctly to our situation in a way that's of the Spirit, not of the flesh. Interestingly, even though prophecy takes an important place in the gift lists, it's a Cinderella in the modern church.

Serving is a self-explanatory gift. There is a sense in which being a living sacrifice means service to one another but it's clear that there's some people that just have a knack of effectively serving the spiritual and practical needs of others.

Teach we know and are clear that there are those that are good at teaching – at being able to explain the word of God to others in an effective way. One of the interesting things about teaching is that anybody can be trained to teach, but some people do it naturally and others that just never get the knack.

Encouraging: yes, it really is a gift. Again it's something we can all do, but to be able to lift people and move them on is a gift of God and there are people that do it extremely well.

Contributing – what is contributing? The NIV calls this 'contributing to the needs of others', which could be providing for the needs of others by sharing your own things, or it could be responsibility for distributing things within the church; whatever, it's about helping practically with people in need. (Billington). It may seem a strange thing.

Again, we are all called to give and be cheerful givers, but there are some people that just seem born to give in order to help others. I've found that people with this gift aren't necessarily rich: their just extraordinarily generous and will always be there when needs arise.

Leadership is one of those gifts in which people easily recognise their gift or otherwise.. *The word means "to stand in front of a group." This gift enables a person to take charge of a group or a meeting and lead that group in a positive, productive direction. People with this gift should do their work eagerly, gladly, with energy and full commitment.* (Ray Prichard). Actually in Baptist circles at promoting leadership – we are self-effacing about it, preferring to suggest how it is a form of service. It is in one sense, but we must also understand that in any group, someone needs to take charge, to organise, to take responsibility. There's nothing wrong in that and God raises up people to do so.

Showing Mercy: who would have thought this one up. Yet one of the characteristics of our God has been to show us mercy – therefore we show it to others. Again, it's one most of us could do at a push, but we all know those exceptional people that seem to be able to gravitate to those who need mercy and we think "I could never do that". Probably not, that's why it's a gift.

As I said earlier, the passage does not focus on the gifts themselves; although these cover most of us. What they are about is encouraging us to recognise our diversity, stop trying to be like someone else, and recognise our own role within God's church.

Let me ask you a question? Do you know where God has gifted you? If so, good? Do as Paul says, and use it to the best of the ability God has given you – of it's serving, serve. If it's teaching, teach. If it's encouraging, encourage.

However you might like the idea, don't do something that isn't your gift. As I said, we can all do most of these things a bit. Recognise what isn't your gift, recognise what is and see how what you've got fits.

Finally, has God gifted you in some way and you've never developed it for whatever reason? Maybe you

don't even realise you've got it. See what others see in you. Seek the opinion and encouragement of others in the church. Find your gift or gifts. Develop them. Use them to the measure of the faith God has given you.

Let me close with the words I started off with last week. It's Romans 12:2 from the J B Phillips translation. It reminds us again, that God needs to re-mould us to make our minds conform to Him. Then we will be the people of God, we will use what He has given us and we'll give Him glory in our lives.

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity. Rom 12:2 (JBP)

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