

From The Pulpit Of



What God Has Given the Church

No. 30

1 Corinthians 12:28-31a

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Series: 1 Corinthians

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Text

²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

God

“And God”... *the* God, the one-and-only. When the Bible says “God” it has in mind the Creator and Sustainer of everyone and everything, who exists eternally, who just is and is the only reason why there is anything else.

Appointed

“And God has appointed”... placed, determined, ordained. He is the sovereign ruler of the world, the one who oversees all things and orchestrates all things. He’s the one who assigns everyone his or her lot in life.

Church

“And God has appointed in the church.” God’s grand plan for human history that he is working out is to create a new people redeemed from the wreckage of this sinful world called out of every tongue, tribe, and nation and united in Christ called the Church. There is the universal Church that spans time and space and is comprised of all those who put their faith in Jesus. But this universal Church is made manifest in local churches, microcosms of the big ‘C’ universal Church. Paul sometimes talks about the universal Church and sometimes the local church, like the one in Corinth; the Mega Body of Christ and the smaller bodies of Christ that come together to comprise it.

Which is he talking about here in v. 28? It seems that he is referring to the universal Church, the whole Body of Christ at large. Why do I say that? Because the offices and gifts that Paul is about to list are not all found in every local church, even in Paul’s day. But Paul is saying that God has appointed certain components of the big ‘C’ universal Church. He has set things in place for the establishment and endurance of the Church in general. He is the architect and the builder, putting all the necessary pieces in place so that the Church would function and grow. Let’s look now at the pieces Paul mentions.

He lists three offices, followed by five or six sample spiritual gifts. Do you see how the first three items that Paul says God appointed in the Church are people, not activities? He lists apostles, prophets, teachers. He doesn't say apostolicity, prophecy, and teaching. No, it says apostles, prophets, teachers. It's referring to three classes of people who hold an office or title in the Church, the big 'C' Church.

Apostles

"First apostles." What is an Apostle? The word literally means 'sent one' and it can be used generically, like of someone that is sent on an errand. For example, in Ph. 2:25 Epaphroditus is referred to with the word apostle, although it's translated as 'messenger'. "I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need." The church in Philippi *sent* Epaphroditus to visit Paul, and now he is going back to them. I like to think of these as lowercase 'a' apostles.

But that's not normally what the NT has in mind when it uses this term. It's usually a capital 'A' Apostle, that is, someone who was specifically *sent* by the resurrected Jesus. The criteria were (1) being an eye-witness to the resurrected Lord, and (2) commissioned and authorized by Jesus to represent him. To be a capital 'A' Apostle was to belong to a unique order, a select group that held a key office and role in the capital 'C' Church.

There were the original Twelve Apostles, conferred with this title during Jesus' earthly ministry (Mk. 3:14). After one of them – Judas – defected and died, he was replaced with Matthias (Acts 1:26) to bring the number back to Twelve, a symbolic number echoing the 12 sons of Israel who constituted the foundation of the OT people of God. Then you have Paul, an Apostle abnormally inducted, but who met the resurrected Lord Jesus a bit later and was specifically commissioned by him (1Cor. 15:8). The Twelve recognized him as an Apostle also. And he introduces himself in this letter to the Corinthians in the opening verse as "Paul, called by the will of God to be an [A]postle of Christ Jesus" (1:1). Maybe Jesus' brother James also became recognized as an Apostle (Gal. 1:19)? Maybe Barnabas (Acts 14:14)? And then there's a debatable reference to Andronicus and Junia being well known among or to the apostles/Apostles (Rom. 16:7). I think that's it. Again, it's a small, select group that had a kind of special authority derived directly from Jesus himself.

Now the question becomes: are there still Apostles today? Is every local church supposed to have some Apostles in it? Well, definitely not in the capital 'A' sense. The original eyewitnesses have all died out. And it's interesting that the Apostles didn't ordain new Apostles to replace them. Instead, we see them installing and expecting the churches to have pastors/elders (e.g. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1Pe. 5:1ff), but not Apostles.

This makes sense of the ordinal numbers – first, second, third. "God has appointed in the [C]hurch first [A]postles, second [P]rophets, third [T]eachers." We're going to say something about each of these other offices and what they entailed, but in order to understand what Paul is meaning here, I think it would be really helpful to flip over to the book of Ephesians and notice how there is a similar ordering (whether of rank or sequence or both): Apostles, Prophets, then Teachers. Look at Ephesians 4:11 – "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers." It's almost the same list. It adds in this other class of people – Evangelists. And it connects

the Teachers together with Shepherds, which is the word for Pastors. Apostles, Prophets... Pastor-Teachers.

Now, two other times in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians he mentions "apostles and prophets." He mentions them together and in that order. One is in Ephesians 3:5. I'll come back to that in a second when I'm trying to define what a prophet is. The other is in Ephesians 2:20. Look at that if you can. He's talking about the capital 'C' Church, the big Body of Christ, the Household of God. He likens it to a Temple and he says it is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." A foundation is something that is laid at the outset, at the bottom, and is done. And then further construction can happen on top of that. The apostolic part of the foundation of the Church was completed with the lives of those first century eye-witnesses and emissaries of Christ called Apostles... plus the Prophets.

Prophets

So what are Prophets? "God has appointed in the [C]hurch first [A]postles, second [P]rophets." What is a Prophet in the Bible? A Prophet is a mouthpiece of God. A conduit of divine revelation. Someone who receives and reports messages with the weight of, "Thus saith the Lord." They could be foretelling or forthtelling, predicting the future or addressing the present. But "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2Pe. 1:21).

There were false prophets who spoke what their own imaginations cooked up (e.g. Jer. 23:16, Ezek. 13:2-3). But there were real prophets who spoke the word of God. Moses was a prophet, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and many others in the OT.

In the NT there is record that there were also prophets. In the book of Acts there's a guy mentioned twice who spoke predictive prophecies that proved true. His name was Agabus (cf. Acts 11:28; 21:10-11) and he is mentioned with other prophets (Acts 11:27). Two guys named Judas and Silas are mentioned as prophets in Acts 16:32, who "encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words." "[T]here were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers" (Acts 13:1). Phillip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8-9). And we see prophesying happening in Acts in 19:6. Paul mentions the activity in Romans 12:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:20 and 1 Timothy 1:18 and 4:14. And the book of Revelation, even though from an Apostle, is called a book of prophecy (Rev. 1:3; 22:18-19).

So again, what exactly is prophecy? Back to Ephesians, chapter 3. Here Paul, the Apostle, is talking about how something was made known to him by revelation. God spoke directly to him and revealed/disclosed knowledge that he did not know on his own or could find out naturally. Interestingly, Paul writes about it and expects people to read his writings and recognize it as special revelation. Listen to what he says in Ephesians 3:3-5 – "[T]he mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." So Prophets are non-Apostles who are still recipients of divine revelation. And divine revelation is by definition inerrant, infallible, authoritative.

So, the question becomes: are there new Prophets today? There have certainly been false prophets – Muhammed, Joseph Smith, etc... – people claiming, "God showed

me this, God told me that,” but they are quacks. But are there legitimate Prophets? Based on the concept of a foundation that has been laid/completed as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2 – “the apostles and prophets” – I’m strongly inclined to think that phase of prophecy is over. Why would we need more revelation? Jesus is the culmination of all the OT prophetic hope. And Jesus hand-picked a select few Apostles to establish the Church and write down his authoritative interpretation of the OT Scriptures that he had given them. And now that we have the canon of the NT, it would make sense that we don’t need to have some people who receive messages from God. To borrow a phrase from an old hymn: What more can he say? It’s all here.

Think about the situation of the church in Corinth. They had the OT Scriptures, but that was probably it. Paul is starting to write things down for them. But they didn’t have the full Bible. 1 Corinthians is one of the earliest written books of the NT. They didn’t have much to work with. They needed prophets there to pass on God’s word to them, to tell them what God says in their uncharted situation.

But that’s not our situation now. We have the 27 inspired, inerrant, infallible, divinely communicated books of the NT. And isn’t that preferable? Isn’t it better to have a book? Isn’t it nice that we aren’t coming together today and wondering what God wants to say to us and sitting around and waiting for someone to get a word? That we have these 66 books that are breathed out by God that we can clearly hear God’s voice in? An objective written deposit of divine communication is to be preferred to periodic ecstatic utterances.

So what do we make of people today who claim to get words from God? There are three buckets that I put that in – mistaken, misguided, mislabeled.

Bucket 1 – Mistaken. These are wolves in sheep’s clothing. They are false prophets. They are either maliciously making up things because they’ve found that it can make them money or gain them power. Or they are messed up mentally, deranged and deceived and inventing stuff that they might believe, but it’s not from God. There were false prophets in the OT (see Dt. 18:22 or Jer. 28) and the NT. Jesus warned about them (e.g. Mt. 7:15) as did the Apostle John (1Jn. 4:1). And this is why in ch. 14 Paul is going to say that these people who popped up in the worship service and claimed to be receiving a prophecy from God had to be tested and what they said had to be weighed (14:29), weighed against what they had in the OT and any written or oral deposits of apostolic teaching they had gotten from Paul by that point.

Bucket 2 – Misguided. These are genuine believers who accept the Bible, but they are looking for something more. They’ve been taught to expect God to speak to them outside of or in addition to Scripture. And so they may pray and ask God to give them a word or an impression. I’ve even heard people encouraged to take a piece of paper and listen for God to speak to them and write down the words that pop into their heads. I think that is often from good intentions, but misguided. Should we glue that paper into the back cover of our Bibles? This leads people away from the Bible instead of further into it. I think it’s better to meditate on Scripture and ask God for growing wisdom in how to apply it. Which leads to the third bucket...

Bucket 3 – Mislabeled. I want to be charitable to my brothers and sisters who say they receive prophetic words from God. I think the canon is closed. I don't think we have need for new revelation today. But that doesn't mean that the Spirit is not active, that we don't relate personally with God, that he doesn't speak to us in a certain sense. I just think we're mislabeling it to call it prophecy or revelation. That's a misnomer. The concrete foundation of the apostles and prophets has dried. No new revelation, but lots of illumination, where the Spirit of God opens our eyes to behold wondrous things in God's written Word, powerful and tender encounters where we hear God's voice addressing us there, personally. Meditation. Application. Exhortation. What many charismatic friends do when they get a picture – "I see a table with a warm loaf of bread and I feel like God is saying to you that he wants you to eat and be satisfied" – I think that's a sanctified imagination ruminating on Bible passages like where Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life" and other times the Bible uses that image. I just think it shouldn't be labeled as prophecy or revelation. It's Spirit-wrought insight into what God's already said. I like to think of what my charismatic friends often do spontaneously as what Reformed preachers do in their study when they think of a sermon illustration. The Bible is alive. Our relationship with God is not cold, mental assent to dead propositions on paper. It's vital, in the Spirit, but mediated through Scripture. Or another label that may describe what people mislabel as prophecy is discernment. There are people who have trained their minds and hearts with Scripture to have highly sanctified intuitions. That's a real thing. I just wouldn't want to call that prophecy or receiving inerrant revelation. The Puritans tended to call preaching prophesying. I think that's a mislabeling too. I could go on, but I fear I'm getting too lost in the weeds. Let's move on.

Teachers

"And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers." There's an order here. It follows the same order Paul spells out in Ephesians 4:11. Apostles and Prophets and then Teachers. This is an office that does a practice of teaching. What is teaching? It's not coming up with new truth, new revelation. It's taking the deposit of revelation we have in the OT and through the NT Apostles and Prophets that God has preserved for us and relaying it and explaining it. It's what I'm trying to do right now. A Teacher isn't teaching his own thoughts, but expounding the Bible and suggesting applications of its truth to practical life.

It's what Apollos did in Corinth. Acts 18:24 says that Apollos "greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus." Paul talks about this sequence in the third chapter of this letter where he says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1Cor. 3:6). He said, "[L]ike a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it." That's what Teachers do. They build on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, and they must do it in ways that are consistent and congruent with the foundation.

Teachers definitely still exist and are needed today. We see in Ephesians 4:11 that Paul equates Teachers with Pastors. In other places he equates Pastors with Elders. And one of the defining characteristics of an Elder is that he must be "able to teach" (1Tim. 3:2). It is most ideal that every local church has Elders who teach the Word of

God to the congregation, helping them read their Bibles carefully, “equip[ping] the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12).

“God has appointed in the [C]hurch first [A]postles, second [P]rophets, third [T]eachers.” The era of the Apostles and Prophets has ended. But the time for Teachers continues. That is seen in the continuing office of Pastor/Elder/Overseer. But God didn’t just give offices to the Church. He’s given a host of other spiritual gifts throughout the global Body of Christ’s history.

Miracles

“Then miracles.” Miracles are supernatural interventions of God that break from the typical (and yet still glorious) way he sustains his creation and guides it through ordinary providence. A miracle is unmistakable. A mighty work, a sign that shows God’s power and glory. It is by definition unusual. The Bible records many miracles – the parting of the Red Sea, Naaman being cleansed of leprosy, the floating axe head... But the Bible spans several millennia. Miracles are not an everyday occurrence and they are generally clustered around significant moments in the advance of salvation history.

There were a lot of miracles in the ministry of Jesus – healing blind eyes, walking on water, feeding the 5,000... He was “a man attested... by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in” public view (Acts 2:22). And he gave his Apostles authority to perform miracles. We see several miracles happening in the early church recorded in the book of Acts – healings, exorcisms, raising from the dead or striking people dead. As the Church expanded into new territory, miracles often accompanied the proclamation of the gospel as the church was established.

The book of Hebrews reminds the believers there that salvation “was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Heb. 2:3-4). So we have many miracles recorded for us at the outset of the Church that confirmed the message of the gospel. Each time it was astounding because even then the people did not expect them.

But there is also in the Bible a warning against putting too much stock in miracles. There is a temptation to get fixated on the miraculous and miss the meaning and the message. Clearly the main miracle that is given for all to know that the gospel is true is the resurrection of Christ. It confirms everything!

Do miracles happen today? Obviously God can do anything, anytime. I think there are credible accounts of miracles happening throughout the history of the Church. I think they are rare. I think it makes sense that they happen on the frontier of gospel advance. They are to get people’s attention so that they will listen to the main message of Christianity about sin and salvation by faith in Jesus. I don’t think someone’s pain going from a 8 to a 3 after prayer counts as a miracle. I think we shouldn’t confuse sweet providences with miracles. But I believe miracles can still happen.

Recently, Dr. Matthew Milliner, a professor at Wheaton College, gave a talk entitled “Miracles on Roosevelt Road”¹ where he started at the Field Museum and traveled along Roosevelt Road westward and discussed different potential miracles that have happened along that route. It was intriguing. Not sure what to make of all of it. But I emailed him and told him he missed us. I said, “[W]e just celebrated a baptism, which was the dramatic portrayal of the conversion of a man in the neighborhood – the

miracle of regeneration is still happening here!” I don’t want to down play that. It is the most significant miracle that is still occurring all over the place – spiritually dead people being born again, coming to faith. It’s a miracle!

Healing

“...then gifts of healing.” I kind of covered this under miracles. Miracles is a broader category of mighty works that can include displays like authority over nature (calming a storm with a word) or making someone blind as an act of judgment or casting out demons. Healings refer to a more specific sub-category that restores health to a human body. God does this through his providential blessing of medicine, but can do it supernaturally. We pray for both, and still trust him even when neither happens.

Helping

“Helping.” God gives people the desires and strength to go above and beyond and care for the needy and serve others. This is often an unnoticed, behind-the-scenes yet critical gift in the church. There is so much that needs to happen in the body. The church is way more than just the Teachers. If the word is going to be Taught publicly like this in the service, there are tons of helpers that are needed to make it happen. Someone has to pay the mortgage and heating bill for the building. Someone to drip the pipes in freezing weather and change the furnace filters. Someone has to set up the Lord’s Table. Someone prints the bulletin. Thank you to those who are running sound and slides in the back. Praise God for the gift of helping. This is still very much a necessity and reality in the church today. The people who demonstrate this gift are often (but not always) recognized as Deacons.

Have you ever experienced the blessing within body life of people helping you? Last week we saw that in a body, when “one member suffers, all suffer together” (v. 26). Just this week my family experienced people checking in on us, praying for us, bringing us food, buying and chopping fruit for Abby’s birthday party yesterday as a way to help us. Thank you for helping!

Administrating

Paul mentions “administrating.” Again, this isn’t an exhaustive list of gifts God apportions for his Church and churches. There are other gifts mentioned in vv. 8-10. And others in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11. But this gift of administration is such a great gift, isn’t it? It comes from a word that’s used to talk about steering a ship. It’s a kind of leadership that’s attentive to the details. The church needs people that think in terms of systems and structures and are able to keep them functioning. Who schedules the people that help by setting up the Lord’s Table or running A/V? Who sets up the Care Calendar for bringing meals to the Stuckeys who had baby Ezekiel this week? Praise God for people with the gift of administration!

Tongues

Lastly, and probably for a reason,² Paul mentions “and various kinds of tongues.” Can I just punt that one two weeks ahead? Theo will explain what this is about when he preaches on ch. 14.

What's the Point?

So there I just tried to give a lot of definitions, trying teach this text and help you understand what Paul is talking about when he wrote to the church in Corinth that “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating,” etc... Now let's try to zoom out a bit and see what Paul's argument is here. What's his main point?

Let's read vv. 29 and 30. He asks a series of questions essentially going back over the different offices and gifts that he has just mentioned that God has given to the Church at-large. “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” These are rhetorical questions that Paul expects us to easily recognize the answer for them all is – No.

Not everyone is an Apostle. In fact, that circle is around 15 at most. But praise God that he gave us the Apostles that gave us the NT! Not everyone is a Prophet. Who knows how many were operating in those early days of the church when the foundation was being laid and they didn't have the NT writings. But even in the local church of Corinth, not everyone there was a Prophet. And not everyone is a Teacher, in the sense of operating in the official capacity of an Elder/Pastor who stands up on Sunday morning and does this for the church. That's reserved for qualified, vetted men. Not everyone can be an officer in the church. And that's just fine.

And similarly, not everyone has every gift. Not everyone performs miracles. In fact, it is by definition a very rare thing. Not everyone is going to experience praying for people and seeing them healed. That's okay. Don't freak out. Not everyone is remarkable at helping. That's not an excuse for selfishness, but don't compare yourself to that person who just always seems to be especially wired for meeting others' needs with warmth and palpable compassion. And you know, you know, that not everyone is gifted administratively. Can I get an amen? And the vast majority of Christians throughout history have never done anything that could be considered speaking in tongues, let alone interpreting them (whatever that is referring to), and that doesn't mean they are not Christians or are lesser Christians.

So what's the point? What's Paul getting at? Despite all the possible differences of interpretation on subpoints in this text, the main point is clear. It's just this: **no one can do it all**. No one person has everything they need to function in the Christian life. Anthony Thiselton sums this up well when he says, “since none on his or her own receives this extensive range of necessary gifts, *you need others, and others need you.*”³ **No one can do it all!** You can't be a Christian on your own, you need the Church, as experienced by being a member of a local body.

You can't know God salvifically without the Apostles and Prophets, that is, without the message expressed in the completed Bible. And you can't just sit in your room with your Bible (if there's the option of a church). It's important to sit under Pastor-Teachers and have the Word of God preached to you regularly. You can't grow and make it through the Christian life by yourself, you need the whole body with all the diversity of gifts scattered within it. You need others and their gifts. And they need you and yours. You don't have them all. And you can't achieve the mission of spreading the gospel all by yourself; you need the variegated glory of the whole church to advance God's kingdom. Lean in to the church. Don't think you're self-sufficient. Let others

serve you with their gifts. And be content with your limited gifts. And use whatever you have to serve others.

Higher Gifts

The last thing Paul says here is – “But earnestly desire the higher gifts.” What does he mean here? There’s debate over whether this is a command or a statement, an indicting statement that the Corinthians are obsessed with trying to get the flashy gifts and they shouldn’t be. It seems to me, based on the way Paul uses this verb in ch. 14, v. 1 and v. 39, that it is a positive thing. And it’s referring to a desire that people should have that they might have a certain gift, not merely that they might value and appreciate others’ use of the gift.

So what does it mean that we should earnestly desire the higher gifts? He doesn’t want us to be discontent. It’s God who gives the gifts as he wills (v. 11). He doesn’t want us to compare ourselves to each other and feel like we’re better, we have better gifts than others. “[G]ifts are given for service, not for status.”⁴ So what might he mean by ‘greater gifts’? Well in chapter 14 he’s going to recommend that people seek the gift of prophecy above the gift of tongues. Why? Because prophecy is more edifying for more people. I think we should be seeking gifts that are useful for building others up, not just making us feel good or spiritual. The first, second, and third mentions in this section were all word-based ministries. I don’t think anybody now can be an Apostle or a Prophet, and not everybody can be a Pastor-Teacher. But everyone should be seeking to grow in their understanding of the Word and teaching it to others. Not everybody has the title of Teacher, but every Christian has opportunities to speak God’s Word to others. I think you should earnestly desire God’s grace to equip you to be able to do that, more than merely personal wow experiences or spectacular displays that don’t really help others and may in fact puff you up. That was a real problem in the Corinthian church.

But **no one can do it all**. We all need the diversity of gifts that God graciously dispenses to people within the body.

Let’s pray...

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, January 25, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ <https://youtu.be/dPtgPfPpQYE?si=A9KmC7TBHNvoAEP7>

² “Paul intentionally puts tongues last since the Corinthians were prone to exalt that gift.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 271.

³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1023.

⁴ Schreiner, 345.