



## Daily Verse and Comment

### 1 Corinthians 12:27-29

(27) Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. (28) And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. (29) Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?

*King James Version*

Paul does not just list various positions of responsibility (and thus authority); he puts them in a definite order. What Paul is describing here is a hierarchy of spiritual gifts. Sadly, the word "hierarchy" has come to be despised by some because of the baggage that comes with it rather than what the term truly means. What is often affixed with the label of "hierarchy" is actually *authoritarianism*, which is a grave error on the opposite extreme.

*An-archy* means "without a leader." *Hier-archy* has the same root—*archos*—meaning "leader," but the prefix *hier-* means "sacred" or "set apart." *Hierarchy*, then, literally means a "set-apart leader." It can mean a "holy leader" or "a leader of sacred rites." In its highest sense, our *hierarch* is our High Priest, [Jesus Christ](#).

A second, and more common, meaning of *hierarchy* is "any system of persons or things ranked one above another." When Paul says that [God](#) has appointed "*first* apostles, *second* prophets, *third* teachers," etc., he is *ranking* these positions. The ranking is not based on worth or potential but on gifting, authority, and responsibility. God has not given everybody in the Body the same gifts. The [Parable of the Talents](#) shows that even though everyone has the same potential, God gives us differing levels of spiritual gifts—and "to whom much is given, from him much will be required" ([Luke 12:48](#)).

This directly contrasts with Gnostic thought, which holds that everybody is completely equal since everybody ostensibly has a divine, [immortal soul](#). While it is true that believers are equal in some ways, this passage in I Corinthians 12 shows God has gifted some in the Body differently than others. He has given responsibility (and thus authority) to some that He has not given to others. *God* has made us different in this, though Paul also teaches that these differences should not be a cause for boasting because they are God-given rather than inherent ([I Corinthians 4:7](#)).

Just a few verses prior to his ranked list in [I Corinthians 12:28](#), Paul warns against one part of the Body saying it has no need of another part of the Body: "But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (verses 20-21).

If we are going to discern the Body properly ([I Corinthians 11:29](#)), we cannot discriminate against parts of it that we feel we do not need. Following this principle, we do not get to decide that we have no need for someone to whom God has given greater authority and/or responsibility.

Those who claim that "God hates hierarchy" often work from a personal rather than a literal definition. Adding in the instruction in I Corinthians 12, God is clearly very much in favor of hierarchy. For example, and along the same lines, Paul mentions another hierarchy of authority in the previous chapter, writing, "The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" ([I Corinthians 11:3](#)). What God *does* hate is [sin](#), wickedness, and oppression, and sometimes, men, acting carnally, have misused the God-given structure of authority, both in the church and in marriage.

What follows this chapter concerning the workings of the Body of Christ is I Corinthians 13—the "more excellent way" ([I Corinthians 12:31](#))—that *should be* everyone's governing principle, regardless of what spiritual gifting he or she may have received. However, many stop their reading with the listing in I Corinthians 12, never continuing on to the "[love](#) chapter" to complete the instruction.

There will always be those who desire to be "in charge," to rule by their own authority rather than God's. Those without true knowledge of God lord authority over others rather than using it to serve as Christ did ([Matthew 20:25-28](#); [Mark 10:42-45](#)). The problem is the carnality of those involved, not the order and authority that God has established. Therefore, modifying the order might ameliorate the symptoms of authoritarianism, but only complete conversion will actually heal the spiritual disease.

— David C. Grabbe

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