



This study is a supplement to the study: Spiritual life in the church.<sup>1</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 12:28 the apostle Paul gives a rough sketch for the structure of the local church.

This study is intended to draw attention to the fact that, in that chapter, Paul sketches the principle framework for the structure of the local church and attempts, in doing so, to describe a number of elements.

Each church will have to develop these further for their own situation, possibly together with people who have experience with structures and leadership.

## **Why the local church?**

De Corinthians had asked Paul a number of questions, which he answered, as appears from the remark:

- *Now for the matters you wrote about: ... (1 Corinthians 7:1)*

The two letters Paul writes to this church are addressed specifically to them and are not general letters of instruction, like the letter to the Hebrews, for example.

The teaching Paul gives to the Corinthians is nevertheless useful for every church.

## **The text:**

The Bible text is reproduced here with a more literal translation.

- **And God has laid in the church**
  - *first of all apostles,*
  - *second prophets,*
  - *third teachers,*
  - **then** *miracles,*
  - **then** *gifts of healing/presents out of kindness of healing*
  - *helping,*
  - *management,*
  - *different kinds of tongues.* (1 Corinthians 12:28)

## **Furthermore, God has indeed appointed a place in the church to:**

After Paul has pointed out 3 ways in which the Holy Spirit is at work in de church - in verses 4-6 of chapter 12 - (see the study: Spiritual life in the church), he explains in verses 7-11 how the Holy Spirit is at work in each disciple<sup>2</sup>.

After that he delves deeper into life in the church, whereby he emphasises the unity of the body of Jesus Christ:

- **Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.** (1 Corinthians 12:12)

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<sup>1</sup> Study: Spiritual life in the church.

<sup>2</sup> Study: 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 - Spiritual Gifts through the Holy Spirit.



This is also the work of the Holy Spirit:

- *For we were all baptised (immersed) **by (eis: into)** one Spirit so as to form one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*  
(1 Corinthians 12:13)

Through the Holy Spirit the members of the body of Jesus are forged together into one body. It is expected that every member of this body, every disciple who has given Jesus Christ authority in his/her life, will be active at the place to which God has appointed him/her, as Paul writes:

- *But in fact **God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*** (1 Corinthians 12:18)

**Remark that it is God, who joins Himself to the local church and ensures that His Son, Jesus Christ, is given his full rightful place there.**

In view of Jesus' admonition, both to the individual members and to the church as a whole:

- *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*  
(Matthew 5:13)

... teaching and structure are needed, in order to avoid chaos arising in the church, which is society in miniature, and so that everyone will turn their life towards Jesus Christ.

Each person is unique and the different members of the body need each other, so that the body is able to function as a whole.

Everyone will have to take his place in the church, therefore.

**Moreover, God appoints a number of people to a specific task.**

A detailed explanation of the text of this verse is given in the study: 1 Corinthians 12:28 - God has placed in the church.<sup>3</sup>

The people to whom God designates a place will be working in the church in a servant function, as Jesus said:

- *"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and **you are all brothers.** And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.  
**The greatest among you will be your servant.**" (Matthew 23:8-11)<sup>4</sup>*

Or as Paul writes, that God has assembled the body of His Son Jesus Christ in such a manner:

- *... so that there should be **no division** in the body, **but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*** (1 Corinthians 12:25)

The greatest in the body of Jesus Christ is the servant, as Jesus said.

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<sup>3</sup> Study: 1 Corinthians 12:28 - God has placed in the church.

<sup>4</sup> Study: Matthew 23:9 - Do not call anyone 'father'.



- ... **whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant**, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - **just as the Son of Man** did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life (his soul) as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:26-28)

## The commission is:

To care for one another, so that no division arises in the body.

When someone has **authority** in the church, that authority **is granted** him/her by the church members, on the basis of a life lived in the Light, in submission to Jesus Christ and His Word.

## Basic structure of the church:

Paul appears to divide the structure of the local church into three parts:

- **apostles, prophets and teachers** - the spiritual edification of the church
- **then:** miracles
- **and then:** ministries for practical and management tasks.

## Apostles, prophets and teachers.

It is **God** who **appoints** people in the church **to a position** of apostle, prophet or teacher.

God designates and it is up to the church members and the leadership of the church to recognise whom God appoints and to which function.

God does not necessarily designate people because of their natural qualities, their talents that they received when they were conceived.

God designates people on account of their life and walking with Him, with Jesus and with the Holy Spirit, people who live **in a relationship with Him**.

Just as was the case as far as Paul was concerned, it is possible for God has given someone all the necessary qualities from the moment he was conceived, as he writes:

- *But when God, who set me apart **from my mother's womb** and called me by his grace, ...* (Galatians 1:15)

Nevertheless, Paul still has a lot to learn, from Gamaliel - a leading teacher - among others.

In spite of his calling and his study, Paul later persecuted the church of Jesus Christ.

He only became useful for the Kingdom of God when he had met Jesus.

Only from then on was Paul able to see all he had learned in the correct perspective and to teach that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

## Apostles:

According to the Greek/Dutch dictionary the Greek '**apostolos**' is to be translated as:

- Messenger, envoy.

According to the OLB, '**apostolos**' is derived from the verb '**apostello**'.

- to order (one) to go to a place appointed
- to allow one to depart, that he may be in a state of liberty
- to order one to depart, send off



→ to drive away

From the Book of Acts it appears that, in the first instance, an apostle was sent out to support the local church(es).

Like the apostles who led the church at Jerusalem and Barnabas, who was sent to Antioch to support that church.

He later brought Paul along to do the work together.

## **Prophets:**

These are people who are sensitive in understanding the voice of God and who proclaim it. They are designated as prophets.

According to the Greek/Dutch dictionary **prophet**, the Greek '**prophetes**', is to be translated as:

→ soothsayer, priest, prophet, seer.

According to the OLB '**prophetes**' is made up of the words '**pro and phemi**':

→ **pro**: before, ahead

→ **phemi**: to make known one's thoughts, to declare, to say

A prophet is therefore someone who literally says something 'in advance', to be interpreted as: predicting the future.

Like prophets from the Old Testament and the prophet Agabus in Acts 11:28 and 21:10.

Prophets and prophesying can also be placed in a wider context.

The prophets in the Old Testament were commissioned by God to warn the people of the consequences of disobeying His laws and of the consequences of idolatry.

Like the prophet Nathan, who was sent by God to king David to bring him to repentance after his adultery with Bathsheba.

In 2 Samuël 2:3 the prophets of Bethel come to Elisha and in 2:5 the prophets of Jericho.

Fifty men of the prophets of Jericho followed Elijah and Elisha to the Jordan (2:7).

These appear to be 'schools of the prophets', where the budding prophets learn to proclaim the words from God.

It is rather unlikely that all these people were only occupied in predicting the future, through a Divine revelation through the Holy Spirit.

It appears rather that they were preparing themselves, after studying the Word of God, to proclaim His Word or to draw the people's attention to it, as explained in Romans 12, as prophecy, according to the correct proportion of their faith/trust.<sup>5</sup>

Or as Paul writes to the Corinthians:

- *For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be **instructed** and **encouraged** (also: admonition, consolation). (1 Corinthians 14:31)*

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<sup>5</sup> Study: Romans 12:6-9 - We have spiritual Gifts.



## Teachers:

These are not necessarily people who have a post as teacher, tutor or professor.

As far as God is concerned, what matters is the relationship someone has with Him through the knowledge of His Word.

When someone is able to explain the Bible in an understandable manner as well, God will appoint that person to a position as teacher in the local church.

## Then miracles.

**Miracles** is the translation of the Greek: '**dunamis**'.

According to the OLB, derived from the verb '**dunamai**', which means:

- to be able, have power whether by virtue of one's own ability and resources, or of a state of mind, or through favourable circumstances, or by permission of law or custom
- to be able to do something
- to be capable, strong and powerful

'**Dunamis**', which is derived from this, is translated by the Greek/Dutch dictionary - among other things as:

- to be able to, to have ability, to be mighty, to be capable
- to be possible
- to have influence
- to be able to obtain from oneself
- to have significance

Because '**dunamis**' is usually translated as **power** in relationship to **miracles**, it appears strange for **people** to be designated as **miracles**.

From the above-mentioned translations it can be noticed that Paul probably means: people who, as a result of their rich spiritual life, can have an influence without directly assuming a leadership role in the church.

**People** as '**miracles**', appear rather to have an advisory and counselling task within the local church.

## Then:

### Spiritual gifts/presents out of kindness of healings.

'Spiritual gifts of healings' are usually thought to refer to miracles of physical healing.

However, in the local church, God appoints **people to be gifts of healing**.

These can be thought of as pastoral workers who primarily help church members to bring restoration to their personal (spiritual) life, as a result of which physical ailments often also disappear.

This can take place together with seeking physical healing.



## Helping.

God also appoints people to the task of helping, assisting.

This is a commission for every disciple of Jesus Christ of course, but it refers here to people whom God appoints to a specific task of assistance within the church.

These people are generally called **deacons**<sup>6</sup>.

## Guidance.

There are people whom God appoints to manage the church.

Paul usually calls these people **elders** or **overseers**.

See a separate study about this.<sup>7</sup>

## Different kinds of tongues/languages.

**People**, as different kinds of tongues/languages.

It is not totally clear what Paul means by this.

If Paul has a ministry of speaking in tongues by the Holy Spirit in mind, he would probably also have mentioned interpretation.

By **people as different kinds of tongues/languages**, Paul possibly means people who have studied foreign languages and who look after speakers of other languages in the church.

## Conclusion.

In this study an attempt has been made to show how God views the structure of the local church, according to the teaching of the apostle Paul.

Several ministries are mentioned in this respect, for people who are given responsibility as 'God at work' (1 Corinthians 12:6).

'Work' is the translation of the Greek 'energema', which can best be described as 'working energetically', i.e. people who are expected to involve themselves energetically in carrying out duties in the local church.

These outlines will have to be developed further in each local church of Jesus Christ.

## Remarks:

God appoints people to a specific task on the bases of their spiritual life in accordance with His Word.

That is the reason why church members are **expected to bestow authority upon them**, as long as the life of these people appears to be in accordance with Gods' Word, in word en deed.

If not, these people should resign from their task in the church.

A separate study discusses the most well-known function within many churches, i.e. that of the minister, or pastor, which is not dealt with in this study.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Study: Deacons.

7 Study: Elders and overseers.

8 Study: Pastors.