

Benny Hinn is a televangelist in the prosperity gospel tradition. A couple of years ago his nephew, Costi Hinn, wrote an article for *Christianity Today* titled “Benny Hinn is my Uncle, but Prosperity Preaching Isn’t For Me.” In the article Costi Hinn described growing up in the family as “like belonging to some hybrid of the royal family and the mafia. Our lifestyle was lavish, our loyalty was enforced, and our version of the gospel was big business.”¹ They were also suspected of being frauds; in fact, in 2007 Chuck Grassley conducted an investigation of Benny Hinn’s finances, but concluded that he was all right.

The family said that their critics were jealous of their blessings, and that they were being persecuted like Paul and Barnabas. In fact, they had an answer for everything: when young Costi asked if they could go to a classmate’s home to heal her, since she had cancer and her hair had fallen out. His father said they could pray for her at home (which wasn’t thought to be as effective), and the boy began to have doubts. “*Shouldn’t we be doing what the apostles did if we have the same gift?* At that point, I didn’t question our ability to heal, but doubts began to stir about our motives. We only did healings in the crusades, where music created the atmosphere, money changed hands, and people approached us with the “right” amount of faith.”

The cracks widened when in college he met his eventual wife, Christyne, who could not speak in tongues. He thought he would not be able to marry her, since she so obviously lacked the faith of which speaking in tongues was evidence. “Then one day she pointed to a verse I had never seen: 1 Corinthians 12:30 (“Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/october/benny-hinn-costi-uncle-prosperity-preaching-testimony.html>

all interpret?”). I was shaken to the core. There it was plain as day—not everybody has to speak in tongues. Soon, the domino effect began. Other longstanding beliefs were failing the biblical test. No longer did I believe that God’s purpose was to make me happy, healthy, and wealthy. Instead, I saw that he wanted me to live for him regardless of what I could *get* from him.”

I love this story because it gets at one of the problems that Paul is addressing in his first letter to the Corinthians, which is motivation. Where is the energy coming from? This seems to be a very diverse community—wealthy and poor, Jews and Gentiles, families and unmarried women and men, slaves and free people. And startlingly enough, they did not all get along. Paul writes Chapter 13, today’s reading, not to praise the Corinthians for their great community, but as a prescription, to tell them what they need to do.

They were also terrifically gifted. Teachers, preachers, speakers in tongues—you name it, they had it. And, having recognized that there were so many gifts among them, the Corinthians naturally went straight to *ranking* the importance of each gift so as to be able to value each member appropriately—more if you had good gifts, less if your gifts were “less valuable.” This is why, a little earlier in the letter, Paul points out to them that every body part is important, and we don’t ask ears to act like eyes, or feet to act like heads. In other words, there are no insignificant gifts, nor are there insignificant church members.

So in today’s reading, Paul doubles down on motive. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels [e.g., glossolalia], but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” You can have all kinds of wonderful gifts, and you can even use them in the service of the church, but if your motivation is self-aggrandizement or one-upmanship, your gifts are just annoying and distracting. The Corinthians care deeply about spiritual development, but in ways

that point back to themselves. Meanwhile they're taking each other to court and competing with each other and the rich people are eating the whole agape meal before the poor people get there, and some guy is sleeping with his stepmother, and they're just a mess. Paul has used this metaphor of the body, and now he tells them, You *are* the Body of Christ, constituted as you are. You don't have a choice; you don't get to sculpt this body to be just the way the dominant people want it. You have the body parts you have, and now you have to learn *how* to be the Body of Christ. And the way is love. So whatever you do, if you're not doing it out of love, don't do it.

It is interesting that the Corinthians don't necessarily like each other. They're not friends first and then the church. They became a church and now they have to grow into being the Body of Christ. And Paul doesn't seem to think there's anything wrong with this; he doesn't assume you all have to like each other, but he does think it's possible, through inner work, to come to love each other.

Love, Paul says, is patient. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for this is related to bearing weight for others. It's related to the word for the burdens that Hebrew slaves in Egypt bore, and their slavery ended because they called out to God for help. So patience does *not* mean bearing with injustice. You can love the rich church members and still call them out for eating the whole agape meal before you got there. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. That is, when something goes wrong and it's to my benefit, or vindicates my position, like if somebody refuses to wear a mask and then gets coronavirus, I'm not supposed to gloat about it. "Love believes all things," which seems like a really bad idea, but it probably means that regardless of what may happen, loving people are oriented by faith, and respond to what happens with the

conviction that God is still in charge.

I'll give a couple examples from my own life, because that's all I have to work with right now. But on the assumption that God is in charge even during a pandemic, I asked Bea if there was any way I could help out with her students from a distance. She said that some families are asking for extra activities and especially ones that can be done screen-free. Like, using playing cards to practice multiplication facts, or ideas for sidewalk chalk art, or at-home science experiments with materials that are easily accessible. Well, *then* Caroline's offer on her condo was accepted, and I realized that I could create a floor plan activity for Bea's students, in which they draw Caroline's new floor plan on graph paper and then draw in the furnishings to scale. Math! Art! Bugging my daughters! It was the hand of God.

Perhaps more substantive, because *my* life has gotten quieter during the pandemic, I've taken the time to do more spiritual reading and listening. That's not the way the pandemic has affected other people's lives, but it has mine. So I've begun listening to a podcast about the Enneagram, the spiritual direction tool that posits nine basic motivations that can entrap us or liberate us. The other day I heard an interview with Helen Palmer, who's one of the early teachers of the Enneagram, and she talked about how her work with Vietnam war resisters led her into her first experience of contemplation as a young woman. She talked about how she unintentionally learned how to get past the ego structure that informs our contemplative experiences, and move into a deeper awareness. It was just a few sentences, but she hit on just something I'd been thinking about for months, so now I'm going to pursue more of Helen Palmer's work. That's all a long way of saying that on the assumption that God is in charge, I've been given time and space to go deeper with my contemplative prayer practice. Love believes

all things. I'm sure others among us could share the ways you're seeing the hand of God in our situation.

First Corinthians 13 really invites us to look at our motivations for what we do as church, and to orient ourselves toward love. Within the frame that love "believes all things," this forced helplessness must contain a gift, and at least one gift must be a gift for us together as a church, not each of us individually, like in my personal examples. Maybe there's something we want to study together, and we could use Zoom. Or maybe we just take time every week to share with each other something that felt significant during the week, so we're better connected. The one thing I am quite sure of is that we are the Body of Christ, and have all the parts we have because they're all important, and I would just hate to waste the opportunity to uncover yet another gift in this already-rich community.

Instead of a prayer, I want to close with this poem, "Epitaph," by Merit Malloy.

When I die
Give what's left of me away
To children
And old men that wait to die.
And if you need to cry,
Cry for your brother
Walking the street beside you.
And when you need me,
Put your arms
Around anyone
And give them
What you need to give to me.
I want to leave you something,
Something better
Than words
Or sounds.
Look for me

In the people I've known
Or loved,
And if you cannot give me away,
At least let me live on in your eyes
And not your mind.
You can love me most
By letting
Hands touch hands,
By letting bodies touch bodies,
And by letting go
Of children
That need to be free.
Love doesn't die,
People do.
So, when all that's left of me
Is love,
Give me away.