

XXI. Spiritual Gifts 101

October 15/17, 2013

1 Corinthians 12:1-7, 11

Aim: To understand that God gives a variety of spiritual gifts to all Christians for the building up of the church and the glory of Jesus' name.

[DSB Note: Paul lists nine spiritual gifts in verses 8-10. He has a similar but different list of eight spiritual gifts in verses 28-31. In addition to these two passages, spiritual gifts are also discussed in Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:7-11; and 1 Peter 4:7-11. None of these lists are identical; all of them have some overlap and some originality. They are meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive. Some of the spiritual gifts listed have ceased; others continue. Rather than deal with the list in verses 8-10 in one lesson and the list in verses 28-30 in another lesson, I've chose to group both sections in one lesson (with references to the other passages on spiritual gifts). We will study the individual spiritual gifts in lesson 23, after first having an overview of the theology of spiritual gifts in this lesson (21) and the next one (22).]

This passage begins a long section in which Paul deals with the vast area of spiritual gifts. The Corinthians were having quite a bit of trouble in this area and they had asked Paul several questions. From what Paul says in chapters 12-14, we assume they had questions about spiritual gifts in general and about one gift in particular, the gift of tongues.

Perhaps no area of biblical doctrine has been more misunderstood and abused, even within evangelicalism, than that of spiritual gifts. Yet no area of doctrine is more important to the spiritual health and effectiveness of the church. Apart from the direct energizing of God's Spirit, nothing is more vital to believers than the ministry of their spiritual gifts, their God-given endowments for Christian service.

Every member of Christ's church has been given supernatural endowments, gifts of God's Holy Spirit, which through the Spirit are God's divine means of ministering His Word and power among His people and to the world. They are God's supernatural provision for the edification of the church and the evangelization of the world. They are the means through which believers are to grow, worship, witness, and serve. True spiritual gifts are given by God to strengthen and manifest oneness, harmony, and power. Satan's counterfeit gifts are meant to divide, disrupt, and weaken. God's gifts build up; Satan's counterfeits tear down.

The Corinthian church, like many of the church today, was seriously affected by counterfeiting as well as misunderstanding and misuse of spiritual gifts. Just as the Corinthians had perverted almost everything else, they also had perverted the nature, purpose, and use of spiritual gifts. This perversion, as the others, largely was due to ideas and practices they had dragged from their pagan society into the church. The old life continually contaminated the new.

A. Testing of Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-3)

It is the height of tragedy that spiritual gifts have become such a divisive issue amongst Christians in our generation. It is also a supreme irony, because the purpose of the gifts is to build up, unify, and edify Christ's body, not to pull it apart. It is in this context of a church being torn apart by factions and jealousies that Paul focuses the clearest teaching about the identity and use of spiritual gifts. Obviously this was a major ingredient in the problems that beset the church in Corinth.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

Why is it so often like that? Firstly, because of the existence of an enemy who counterfeits all of God's gracious works and gifts, the spurious will always be found alongside the genuine. In a city like Corinth, where every sort of religious experience under the sun was practiced and promoted, it was not always easy to determine what was of God and what was not. Satan is an arch deceiver who loves to throw dust in the eyes of God's people so as to confuse them about what God is saying in His Word. Secondly, the sinful nature of every Christian ('the flesh') is at war with the Spirit and obstructing the work of making us holy. The Holy Spirit, who is carrying out this work in our lives, is always being opposed and frustrated by the world, the flesh, and, behind them both, the devil.

The chief mistake of the Corinthians, which falsified their judgment and made them spiritually ignorant, seems to have been this: they imagined that it was a proof of the power of the Holy Spirit working in him if a man became beside himself, and the greater his ecstasy the more sublime the state to which the Spirit had raised him. From this point of view, the teacher ranked below the prophet, and the prophet below the man with the gift of tongues. Greek and even Jewish ideas agreed with this. They were being truly Greek; very Corinthian. The more you are taken over or possessed – the less you are in control – the more spiritual you must be. However, the truth of the matter as presented by Paul is very different: the measure of greatness of any spiritual gift is not in its degree of impressiveness, or its apparent miraculous nature, but its usefulness in building up the body of Christ, in love and in truth.

1. The Corinthians and Spiritual Gifts (12:1)

a) *The Corinthians' Pagan Background*

Several pagan practices were especially influential in the church at Corinth. Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most obvious, was that of ecstasy, considered to be the highest expression of religious experience. Because it seemed supernatural and because it was dramatic and often bizarre, the practice strongly appealed to the natural man. And because the Holy Spirit had performed many miraculous works in that apostolic age, some Corinthian Christians confused those true wonders with the false wonders counterfeited in the ecstasies of paganism.

Ecstasy (*ekstasia*, a term not used in Scripture) was held to be a supernatural, sensuous communion with a deity. Through frenzied hypnotic chants and ceremonies worshipers experienced semiconscious euphoric feelings of oneness with the god or goddess. Often the ceremony would be preceded by vigils and fastings, and would even include drunkenness (see Eph. 5:18). Contemplation of sacred objects, whirling dances, fragrant incense, chants, and other such physical and psychological stimuli customarily were used to induce the ecstasy, which would be in the form of an out-of-body trance or an unrestrained sexual orgy. Sexual ecstasies were common in many ancient religions and were so much associated with Corinth that the term *Corinthianize* meant to indulge in extreme sexual immorality.

A similar form of mystical experience was called enthusiasm (*enthusiasmos*), which often accompanied but was distinct from ecstasy. Enthusiasm involved mantic formulas, divination, and revelatory dreams and visions, all of which are found in many pagan religions and philosophies today.

New Testament Corinth was filled with priests, priestesses, religious prostitutes, soothsayers, and diviners of the mystery religions who claimed to represent a god or gods and to have

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

supernatural powers that proved their claims. Unbelievably, some of their dramatic and bizarre practices were mimicked in the church.

b) The Corinthians' Spiritual Problem

The difficulty in understanding spiritual gifts comes in trying to hold in tandem two clear biblical principles. On one hand, the Bible tells us, 'Do not quench the Spirit' (1 Th. 5:19). On the other hand, it tells us to 'test all things' (1 Th. 5:21). What does it mean to quench the Spirit? It means to deny or suppress something that is truly of God. It is obvious that many of us have driven off into this ditch. We have had a tendency to close our eyes to anything and everything that would disturb our lives and challenge our complacency. When any movement or teaching comes along that has some depth of commitment and spiritual vitality to it, those with a burden for revival are extremely reluctant to question it, even if it is wrong.

For this reason many have forgotten all about the second principle Paul mentioned to the Thessalonians: 'Test all things' (1 Th. 5:21). In other words, in avoiding the ditch on the one side, they have driven headlong into the one on the other side. What does it mean to 'test all things'? It simply means we are not to accept every teaching at face value. We are to be alert and discerning, because there are many false prophets and teachers (cp. 1 Jn. 4:1).

Some people are so innocent and naïve as to think any feeling or impression they have, or any message delivered in the name of God, must be true and right. They fail to realize two basic truths. First, there are many spirits at work in this world (cp. Eph. 6:12). The second truth undiscerning Christians fail to see is that Satan is a great counterfeiter. He delights in taking something that is genuinely of God and copying it. In this way he not only deceives people, but also discredits the work of God (cp. 2 Cor. 11:14).

It appears the Corinthians had fallen into the second of these traps and were naïvely accepting at face value everything that was said or done in the name of God. They seem to have been overly enamored of the more glamorous, emotional gifts and especially the gift of speaking in tongues. They had failed to see that speaking in tongues was not a uniquely Christian phenomenon and that Satan was just as capable of counterfeiting it as he was other aspects of the Christian experience. Their great need, therefore, was to test the spirits.

Only three options are available to those who are trying to discern what messengers and messages truly come from God. First, we can say all are from God, but if we select this option, we have to find some way to explain why the messengers and messages contradict each other. Our second option is to say none of the messengers and messages are from God. The third option is to say some are truly speaking for God and some are not. This is what the Bible tells us (1 Jn. 4:1). If this is the case, we are left with the question of how we determine which is which.

One of the chief evidences of the spiritual immaturity of the Corinthian Christians was lack of discernment. If an occult practice seemed to have supernatural effect, they assumed it was of God. If a priest or soothsayer performed a miracle, they assumed it was by God's power. Like many Christians today, they believed that if something 'works' it must be right and good. Some of the believers, however, realized that the confusion, division, and immoral practices that characterized many of the church members could not be of God. They asked Paul to tell them how to determine what was of the Holy Spirit and what was of some other spirit (cp. 1 Jn. 4:1).

The Corinthians were having much the same problem many of us are having. In particular, they seem to have been susceptible to accepting anything that moved or stirred their emotions. The

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

apostle Paul gave them a couple of things to keep in mind when they were confronted with the question of whether a particular teaching was from God.

a) *The Apostle's Subject Change*

¹*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.*

As the chapter begins, Paul uses his characteristic formula to indicate a change of subject matter and a major new section. Paul's opening word, 'Concerning' (*peri*) signals that he is again responding to questions in a letter sent by the Corinthians. In this case they are inquiring about Spirit-based ministries as they affect the gathered congregation.

Paul does not use the word 'spiritual gifts' (*charismata*) here, though he does later in the chapter (vv. 4, 9, 28, 30, 31). Rather, he uses another word of which the root is *pneuma*, 'spirit.' The form of the word in verse 1 (*pneumatikōn*) could mean either 'the spiritual people' (masculine) or 'the spiritual things' (neuter). 'The spiritual things' is a neutral term that only occurs again at 14:1 where the explanation in verse 2 determines that 'the spiritual things' means 'speaking in tongues.' Which of these does Paul mean in 12:1, which is the opening verse of this 3-chapter section? In short, are chapters 12-14 about 'spiritual people' or 'spiritual things,' that is, 'tongue-speaking'?

Paul is most likely addressing the Corinthians' question of tongues speaking. First, as it turns out, Paul does not go on to address 'the spiritual people' in these chapters. Apart from the reference in 14:37 the word *pneumatikoi* does not otherwise occur. Second, 'tongues speaking' is what he is really concerned about throughout chapters 12-14. In short, these chapters are devoted to establishing the limited worth of 'the spiritual things,' that is, of 'tongues speaking' in the assembly of believers. Paul wants to make sure that the Corinthians have a clear and complete understanding of their spiritual gifts.

His words, 'I do not want you to be uninformed' are a kind of formula to introduce teaching or information not given previously by Paul whether in person or by letter. This suggests that the practice of or the greater emphasis on 'tongues speaking' was a recent development in Corinth since his departure from the city three years previously.

The Greek *agnoeō* literally means 'not to know' or 'to be ignorant of.' It is the term from which we get 'agnostic.' Paul wanted the Corinthians to have no ignorance and no doubts, no uncertainty or agnosticism, about the identification and use of their spiritual gifts. The church cannot function, and it certainly cannot mature, without properly and faithfully using the gifts God gives His people for ministry. Satan will try to counterfeit the Spirit's gifts, and he will try to induce believers to ignore, neglect, misunderstand, abuse, and pervert them. Consequently, Paul's teaching here is critical.

The apostle assured the Corinthians that it was possible for them to know the truth about spiritual gifts and that he was determined to teach them. He therefore proceeds to tell them how to determine which gifts were true and godly and which were counterfeit and satanic. Because they misused the true gifts, he also tells them how to use those gifts properly.

2. The Corinthians and Pagan Idols (12:2)

²*You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.*

Having introduced this extended teaching on a subject about which they are 'ignorant,' in verses 2-3 Paul immediately launches into something they do 'know,' namely the work of the Holy

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

Spirit that made possible their conversion. As a result of the proclamation of the gospel the Holy Spirit has come, bringing a total change of attitude to Jesus. The power of the Holy Spirit has broken the chains of idolatry enabling the new believer to declare the Lordship of Jesus.

‘Pagan’ translates *ethnē*, which was commonly used to represent all non-Jews, that is, Gentiles in general. One of the chief characteristics of most pagan religions was idolatry. ‘Led astray’ (*apagō*) was often used of prisoners being taken under armed guard to prison or execution (Mk. 14:44; 15:16; Acts 12:19; cp. 2 Tim. 3:6). ‘Dumb’ (*aphōnos*) does not mean unintelligent but speechless, literally ‘without voice.’ No idol can respond to man’s needs. By definition an idol is man-made and impersonal. No idol, primitive or sophisticated, can answer a person’s questions, give him revelation, assure him of truth, forgive him of sin, or endow him with dignity, meaning, and peace.

First, he warns them to not make the stirring of their emotions the determining factor in this business of testing the spirits. This is, of course, what many naturally tend to do. I dare say the vast majority of Christians have adopted the creed, ‘I know because I feel.’ For them, emotion is the final court of appeal. If a particular message has touched them or moved them, they are convinced God has spoken and they will not lend countenance to the slightest hint they might be deceived.

Evidently, the Corinthians had fallen prey to this same kind of thinking. So before he ever tells them how to test the spirits, Paul tells them how *not* to do it. He does this by simply calling to their mind what their former religion of paganism was like. The emotional fervor of those religious practices was so great that Paul says they were ‘carried away.’ The picture Paul draws with this term is one who has fallen into a river and is swept along by the mighty, raging current. In other words, Paul says their old religion so stirred their emotions they were oblivious to everything else. Even though the idols themselves were ‘dumb,’ there was a sinister reality behind them, the reality of Satan himself.

Verse 2 is a description typifies all forms of pagan religion that tend to subvert the mind and concentrate on the passions and emotions. Although the Corinthian temples were strong on mystical experiences, ecstatic states, trances and visions, with plenty of noise and excitement, at the center of it all were lifeless ‘gods’ who could not therefore communicate at all. Doubtless there were prophecies, ecstatic language and miracle cures, but they did not, and could not, lead to a knowledge of, and relationship with, the Creator of the universe. His Spirit is not mute.

Tragically, many of the Corinthian Christians had fallen back into some of their old idolatrous beliefs and practices. They could no longer distinguish the work of God’s Spirit from that of demonic spirits, God’s true spiritual gifts from Satan’s counterfeits, or true worship of God from the perverted worship of idols. They forfeited God’s blessing and received none from their dumb gods.

The apostle may imply that Spirit-given tongues are altogether unlike the ecstatic speech not unknown in the Greek religion. If so, the double point is that genuine tongues are Christ-centered and rational.

So, the fact we are moved by a tidal wave of emotion doesn’t mean we are hearing from the true God. The truth we must always keep in mind is that Satan is able to give people great emotional experiences.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

3. The Corinthians and the Spiritual Test (12:3)

³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

It appears that some in Corinth claimed that the test of the Spirit was ‘tongues speaking.’ But Paul forcibly establishes at the very outset that the only real test of the presence of the Spirit of God is the conviction and the confession that ‘Jesus is Lord.’ The power of the Holy Spirit has broken the chains of idolatry enabling the new believer to declare the Lordship of Jesus. The primary activity of the Spirit of God is to liberate idolaters and to inspire in them the counter explanation that Jesus is the rule of God’s world.

a) *The Negative Test*

Some members of the church at Corinth apparently became so fleshly and confused, and their worship so paganized and frenzied, that they even allowed the Lord to be cursed within their own congregation. The clear implication is that those who were saying ‘Jesus is accursed’ claimed to be ‘speaking by the Spirit of God.’ They actually claimed to be ‘speaking in the Spirit,’ manifesting some gift of prophecy or teaching, while cursing the name of the Savior and Lord they were supposed to be worshiping! ‘Accursed’ (*anathema*) refers to severe condemnation. To say that Jesus is accursed is to condemn His nature, His character, and His work—not to mention His holiness and glory.

Some think Paul mentions the phrase, ‘Jesus is accursed’ because someone had actually blurted this out while being caught up in a state of ecstasy in one of the worship services. The more likely explanation is that some of the Corinthians had fallen into the trap of exalting ‘Lord’ over ‘Jesus.’ A popular notion among the Greek people of that era was that everything physical was evil. It is probably that some of the church members in Corinth had imbibed this notion and carried it over into their theology. The practical outworking of it was to disparage the physical body of Jesus. Therefore, these church members could exult in Christ’s deity and curse His humanity and not see they were contradicting the gospel message.

Paul adds a dark note. During those pagan temple sacrifices some people (including the priests?) would cry out, ‘*Anathema Iēsous,*’ that is, ‘A curse on Jesus.’ Perhaps some of his present readers in Corinth were among those who previously cursed the Lord, prompting Paul to say later, ‘If anyone does not love the Lord let him be accursed’ (16:22).

Paul tells the Corinthians that no such blasphemous utterance could possibly be ‘by the Spirit of God.’ Nothing should have been more logical and obvious, but the Corinthians had come to judge the nature and use of gifts on the basis of experience rather than content. The more impressive, showy, unusual, and bizarre, the more a practice was accepted and respected. They had fallen back so deeply into ecstasy and enthusiasm that their judgment was completely warped. As long as it took place in the church and was presented by someone who claimed to be a Christian, any teaching or practice was accepted without question. Content was ignored, even to the extent of disregarding that which was obviously immoral and blasphemous.

This was a contradiction Paul simply couldn’t tolerate. No one who is a true child of God can ever curse Jesus. The Holy Spirit of God came into this world for the specific and express purpose of glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 16:14). Therefore, we may be sure the Holy Spirit is not at work in any context in which Jesus Christ is spoken of in a disparaging fashion.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

During the first century the philosophy of early-developing Gnosticism was a great threat to the church. It taught that everything physical and natural is evil and that everything supernatural and spiritual is good. When adapted to Christianity it taught that the supernatural Christ only *appeared* to be the natural Jesus. The human Jesus was an imperfect, evil, and poor representation of the spiritual Son of God, who, because of His divine nature, could not possibly have taken on a physical form. Christ's Spirit descended upon Jesus at His baptism but returned to heaven before the crucifixion. Therefore Jesus died an accursed death as no more than a mere man. So while glorifying the divine Christ the Corinthians may have felt perfectly justified in cursing the human Jesus.

There is no Lord apart from Jesus and there is no Christ apart from Jesus. The resurrected, historical Jesus is the divine, heavenly Christ. A person who will not claim the resurrected Jesus as Lord cannot claim the divine Christ as Lord. The incarnated Lord is the only Lord.

b) The Positive Test

The second part of the test is also doctrinal and is simply the reverse side of the negative. 'No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.' Paul is of course speaking of sincere confession. True confession is based on true faith, of which obedience to God's Word is the true mark. Confessing Jesus as Lord means nothing unless it involves affirming who He really is and obeying what He commands (cp. Lk. 6:46).

Verse 3 makes it inescapably clear that one's attitude to Jesus is the acid test of true spirituality. The Spirit will always bear witness to the true nature of the Son of God, and never anathematize Him. Therefore, real Christians will have this common foundation, which is strong enough and deep enough to bridge all their divisions and heal all their differences. It is not just our confession in words, important though that is, but the devotion of our lives to Christ's lordship in practical, everyday obedience that is proof of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

If we are to determine what is truly of God and what isn't, we need something more stable and settled than the shifting sands of emotion. Paul gives us the fixed principle we need in three little words: 'Jesus is Lord.'

In those three words, we have the very essence of the Christian message. The name 'Jesus' is our Lord's human name, given to him by Mary at His birth. The term 'Lord,' however, is an official title and it means He has sovereign authority. So when Paul says, 'Jesus is Lord,' he is affirming that the man known as Jesus of Nazareth was and is nothing less than God Himself in human flesh and is the sovereign ruler of all things (cp. 1 Jn. 4:2-3). Jesus and Lord – our whole theology must embody and revolve around these two poles.

The title 'Lord' (*kurios*) implies deity. The early church soon came to reserve *kurios* entirely for use in referring to God. Confessing 'Jesus is Lord,' therefore, was always understood as confessing Jesus as God. 'Lord' implies sovereign authority. There is overwhelming biblical evidence that the word means rulership. If the Lord is creator, sustainer, and controller, He obviously is sovereign. The lordship, deity, and sovereignty of Jesus Christ was and is central to the true faith, and such affirmation is the work of the Spirit.

4. The Modern Church and Discernment

So let's go back to our original question. How are we to discern whether a particular message is of God? Paul says we should use the 'Jesus is Lord' test. Does this message exalt Jesus Christ as Lord? How can we tell whether a message is exalting Christ? First, we need to ask ourselves

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

if it is constantly exalting and exhibiting self. Many messages claim to exalt Jesus, but all they do in reality is parade man and his religious experiences!

Secondly, we should be very frightened of any message that is built on new revelation. If Jesus Christ is Lord, He is the final and supreme revelation. God has said His last word in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-4), and anyone who claims to have received a new word should be disregarded and avoided.

Thirdly, we should reject out of hand any message that contradicts the teaching of Scripture. The Holy Spirit came, as we noted, to glorify Jesus. We have His witness to Christ in the pages of Holy Scripture. We may safely assume the Holy Spirit is always going to agree with Scripture. If someone comes along with a message that contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture, we may safely conclude this person is not of God.

The test of a spiritual gift is doctrinal. If a person holds a derogatory view of Jesus Christ, then what he says and does is not of God. We should always compare a teaching or practice with God's Word. That is the test of its being of the Holy Spirit. A Christian today cannot receive new revelation. The only way to be sure if something is spiritual is to be sure it is scriptural. If it agrees with Scripture, a new revelation from the Spirit is unnecessary; if it does not agree with Scripture, a new revelation cannot be from the Spirit and is false.

B. Principles of Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11)

Paul was concerned to counter a defective spirituality that had developed in the church of Corinth. From what he says in chapters 12-14, we can conclude that this defective spirituality had certain distinct features. First, it placed the emotions above the mind and assumed that, the more emotionally overpowering something is, the more spiritual it is. Secondly, it encouraged people to progress from Christ to the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, it assumed all truly spiritual Christians would evidence their spirituality in the same way. Fourthly, it elevated certain gifts to a special status. Fifthly, it assumed Christians could take various steps to secure for themselves certain gifts. Sixthly, it placed the edification of the individual over the edification of the congregation. Finally, it placed the gifts of the Spirit above the graces of the Spirit and created a situation in which people were exercising their gifts in an unchristian way.

In the first three verses of this section, Paul counters the first two features of this defective spirituality by reminding the Corinthians of two indisputable facts. First, the moving of emotions was part of their former religion of paganism and could not, therefore, be used as a barometer of what is right and true. Secondly, the Holy Spirit Himself came to honor and magnify the Lord Jesus Christ, and, therefore, any attempt to place the Spirit about Christ is wrong and is grieving to the Spirit.

In the verses before us, Paul begins to dismantle some of the other leading features of their flawed spirituality. He does so by putting three correcting principles in place: the diversity of the Spirit's work (12:4-6); the priority of the church's good (12:7); and the sovereignty of the Spirit's will (12:11).

1. The Diversity of the Spirit's Work (12:4-6)

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

Throughout this chapter we find the twin themes of unity and diversity being explored, but the appropriate diversity is always within the framework of fundamental unity. In verses 4-6 Paul teaches that all godly activities within the congregation, though diverse, have one source, God. This is expressed in strongly Trinitarian terms.

a) *The Variety of Spiritual Things*

Paul shows that it is God alone who is the source of all ‘spiritual things’ (*tōn pneumatikōn*, v. 1), which is why they are said to be ‘gifts’ here. The three occurrences of ‘varieties,’ signifying ‘apportionments,’ ‘allotments’ or ‘distributions’ (*diaireseis*), are qualified in such a way as to expound something of the being of God. God distributes His gifts in many forms, in many varieties, to His children. He has a multiplicity of gifts, which are given to every believer.

In dealing with the first principle, Paul uses three different words to indicate the various ways in which the Holy Spirit manifests Himself in the life of the church: *charismata*, *diakonia*, and *energēmata*.

(1) Gifts

Charismata means ‘gift of grace’ or ‘free gift.’ These are freely and generously given by God with different provisions for different individuals. By the way, that word in and of itself counters the notion that Christians can do something to secure a certain gift. If one could earn it, it wouldn’t be a gift.

Spiritual gifts are not talents. Natural talents, skills, and abilities are granted by God just as everything good and worthwhile is a gift from Him. But those things are natural abilities shared by believer and unbeliever alike. Spiritual gifts come only as a result of salvation. Spiritual gifts are not natural, but rather are supernaturally given by the Holy Spirit only and always to believers in Jesus Christ. Spiritual gifts are special capacities bestowed on believers to equip them to minister supernaturally to others, especially to each other.

Essential to unity is diversity. Unity of spirit and purpose can be maintained only through diversity of ministry. But unity is not uniformity. A football team whose players all wanted to play quarterback would have uniformity but not unity. It could not function as a team if everyone played the same position. That is Paul’s point here. God gives His people ‘varieties of gifts’ just as players on a team have varieties of positions.

(2) Service

Diakonia means ‘varieties of service.’ It is the same word that is often translated ‘deacon.’ This refers to the way in which the God-given abilities are to be used. The emphasis is on serving others. This word takes a slap at those who were using their gifts as badges of spiritual authority. The Lord Jesus Christ came to be a servant, and those who follow Him should not be found to dodge servanthood.

God gives His gifts to be used in ‘varieties of ministries.’ Even Christians with the same basic gift may be led to manifest that gift in many different ways. One teacher may be especially gifted in teaching young children; another may have special ability with the original biblical languages and be highly qualified to teach seminarians. One evangelist may be able to powerfully address large crowds, while another’s strength is in one-on-one witnessing. One person’s service of teaching may emphasize exhortation and doctrine, while another’s may focus on comfort and mercy. The emphasis here is on variety.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

Spiritual gifts are not given as badges of privilege or prestige but as tools for ministry. The Lord gives them to His servants so they can serve, and He gives them for a limitless variety of services. All gifts are for service, but the types of service are immeasurable.

It is critical to understand that spiritual gifts are not given for self-edification. A teacher who studies the Word and then writes lessons only he reads, or records messages that only he hears prostitutes his gift. A person with the gift of discernment who keeps his Spirit-given insights to himself is an unfaithful steward. Nor are God's gifts given for self-service. A gift exercised in private is a perverted gift. God gives His gifts *to* us but *for* others. We are personally blessed when we use our gifts in the Spirit's power to serve others in His name, but that blessing is the by-product not the purpose (cp. 1 Pe. 4:10). We are stewards of God's gifts. They are loaned to us; they belong to Him. They are for us to use, but by its power in His service and to His glory.

(3) Activities

Energemata means literally 'what is worked out or energized,' stressing that it is God's energy or power working through them all. The One who provides the spiritual gifts also provides the energy and power, as well as the faith (Rom. 12:3b) to make them effective. This word indicates that the children of God are to give evidence that God is at work in them. They are not to be a people of deadness and barrenness but a people of life and energy. We must, therefore, accept our differences as God-given and thank Him that in His mercy we are not all clones of one another.

We may exercise our talents, skills, intelligence, and other natural abilities in our own power, but only the Giver of spiritual gifts can empower them and make them effective. Just as God gives no commands for which He does not also give the ability to obey, He does not give spiritual gifts for which He does not also give the power to use.

Like the gifts themselves, the energizing of spiritual gifts is sovereignly varied (cp. Mt. 13:23). The same gift may be used by the Lord in countless ways, in many varieties. Even the same person exercising the same gift will not always see the same kind or extent of result.

The natural man, however, is always more concerned with uniformity than with unity. In their immaturity and carnality, the Corinthian believers tended to be superficial copiers. They were more interested in appearance than substance, and they tried to copy the gifts and practices of those who seemed to be the most successful, popular, and powerful. They were more interested in being 'successful' than in being submissive, and in being noticed and praised than in being obedient and faithful. That is why they so highly valued the more dramatic gifts, especially speaking in tongues. They were not concerned with using the Lord's gifts in His power to serve Him and His church but in using them in their own power and for their own selfish and proud purposes.

The emphasis here on 'varieties' seems to imply that the Corinthians thought that the more dramatic gifts were the only gifts, or at least the only gifts worth having. But Paul tells them that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to *all* Christians, that He gives a variety of gifts, and that every gift is as spiritual and important as any other. We should not envy those who seem to be greatly gifted. Our concern should be to discover, to faithfully use, and to be grateful for the gift the Lord has given us.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

b) The Unity of the Trinity

Did you notice how Paul connected each of these three words with a different member of the Trinity? He mentions the Spirit in connection with the gifts, the Lord in connection with the services or ministries, and God the Father in connection with the power or energies. Clearly these are not three different deities working in three different ways, but the Persons of the Godhead in perfect unity, providing for us a perfect model of unity in functional diversity. The inescapable implication is that if we are members of His body, we must reflect the unity of God in the way we relate to one another in our different functions, gifts, and ministries.

Each person of the Trinity – the Spirit, the Lord, and God – distributes the ‘diversities’ (*diaireseis*) of ‘gifts’ to the people. It not the Spirit alone from whom the gifts come. This was something the Corinthians, who were preoccupied with the Spirit, needed to know.

‘Gifts’ come from the Spirit, the gift giver; ‘ministries’ flow from the Lord Jesus who is *the* minister; ‘energizings’ come from God the source of all creative power. These are not bestowed according to one’s innate talent, but are ‘gifts’ from the Spirit of God; they are not bestowed for self-serving ends, but for ‘ministry’ to others; they are not self-generated, but are ‘energized’ by God. No one can take personal credit for gifts, ministries, or energizings. These are for the benefit of others.

One of the tenets of the Corinthians’ defective spirituality was that all Christians should evidence their spirituality in the same way. Paul’s words show them that they were looking for their unity in the wrong place. God’s people do not all possess the same gifts. Their unity lies not in their gifts but in their God! No matter what our gifts, we may be rest assured they are distributed by the Spirit for the service of the Lord as appointed and energized by the Father.

2. The Beneficiary of the Spirit’s Gifts (12:7)

⁷*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...*

The classic statement of verse 7 encapsulates the theme tune of the whole chapter. It instructs us that every believer has a ‘manifestation’ (*phanerōsis*) or unveiling, or appearing, of the Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit indwells every believer (John 7:39; Acts 2:38-39; Rom. 8:9), so He will reveal Himself to be present; He will appear in a variety of ways (e.g., see vv. 8-10). Wherever God’s people are serving out of love for God and for their neighbors, with the intention of expressing their conviction that ‘Jesus is Lord,’ there is to be found a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, whatever the form of that service might be.

‘Manifestation’ (*phanerōsis*) has the basic idea of making known, clear, or evident. That is what spiritual gifts do: they make the Holy Spirit known, clear, and evident in the church and in the world. They manifest the Spirit.

We have all these manifestations of the Spirit at work in the life of the church. What is their purpose? Is it so Christians can call attention to themselves and receive adulation from others? Paul says the Spirit works in all these ways ‘for the profit of all.’ A diversity of spiritual gifts has been entrusted to numerous individuals for the benefit of the church. For this reason, there must be no rivalry.

But if each Christian has something to contribute, each Christian is also a beneficiary, since these gifts are given ‘for the common good.’ If this is the reason God has given them it must also be

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

the criterion for their exercise. But so often the fulfillment of the person using the gift is given priority over the benefit of the body as a whole.

They are also given ‘for the common good’ (*sumpheron*, from a verb meaning literally ‘to bring together’). The term can also mean ‘to help, confer a benefit, or be advantageous,’ and in the context of this verse means ‘mutually beneficially or advantageous.’ Spiritual gifts are to be edifying and helpful to the church, to God’s people whom He brings together in His name. Not only does the exercise of our spiritual gifts minister to others but it also helps them to better use their own gifts. As we each minister our own gifts we help others to better minister theirs. On the other hand, as we fail to minister our own gifts we hinder others in ministering theirs. A Christian who does not exercise his spiritual gifts cripples his own ministry and the ministry of others.

Ours is a day of great emphasis on the individual and his rights. However legitimate that may be for society, it has a devastating effect on the church. Paul calls upon the Corinthians to be done with ‘Lone Ranger’ Christianity, to repudiate their own desires and convenience, and to start putting the good of the church above every other consideration. Isn’t it time for all who know the Lord to stop asking what the church can do for us and start asking what we can do for the church? For the Corinthians, this meant shelving the notion that the spiritual gifts were for their personal gratification. What will working for the church’s good require of you and me?

3. The Sovereignty of the Spirit’s Will (12:11)

¹¹...All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

The third correcting principle Paul lays before the Corinthians has to do with the sovereignty of the Spirit. Paul says the Holy Spirit distributes to ‘each one individually as He wills.’ First, the Corinthian idea that all Christians should have the same gift or gifts and that certain steps can be taken to receive these gifts is foolishness. It is the Holy Spirit who determines who receives what gift. Asking God for a specific gift or claiming it by faith doesn’t mean we shall receive it. The Spirit of God controls these matters. Secondly, if the Holy Spirit is sovereign in giving the gifts, we have to say it is possible for Him to give certain gifts for a while and totally withdraw them!

Many Christians have made a couple of grand assumptions at this point. They assume all the gifts have to be in operation in every generation of Christians and that once a Christian has a particular gift, he will always have that gift. But the sovereignty of the Spirit would seem to mean that certain gifts will cease altogether, and that individuals may be given a gift for a particular moment in the church’s life. When that moment passes, the gift could very well pass as well.

All these gifts derive from the Holy Spirit. And God spreads gifts among believers according to His own disposition. It follows that the Corinthians should neither pride themselves on exercising spectacular abilities, nor be envious of those who possess gifts which they do not: God allocates with no reference to merit, and a tongues speaker, a prophet, or a healer is not necessarily more mature than anyone else.

There is no indication here that gifts should be sought. That would violate both the idea of a gift of grace and the intent of the text, which is to instruct the Corinthians to recognize that all believers have gifts that are different. The point is further emphasized in seeing that the Holy

1 Corinthians – Lesson 21

Spirit not only gives the gifts, but that it is the ‘Spirit who works all these things.’ ‘Works’ is the same term as in verse 6, and means ‘energizings.’ In the deepest sense a believer does not even use his gift, but allows God to work through it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we are unhappy about the gifts we have, or do not have, or that others have, or do not have, Paul wants us to know that our argument is with God. He chooses the gifts He will give and those to whom He will give them. Their true purpose is to unite, build up, and promote harmony and acceptance amongst Christians gathering together for the common good under the lordship of Jesus Christ. To splinter and fragment over the gifts of God’s grace is a tragedy and a scandal.

Before we ever ask what this or that particular gift means, we must make sure we are conscious of these three principles: the diversity of the Spirit’s work, the priority of the church’s good, and the sovereignty of the Spirit’s will. Only then will we avoid the snare of pseudo-spirituality and realize the enormous potential the gifts offer.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.