

Lessons from Corinth

“What About the ‘Things of the Spirit’?”

Part 8a:1 Corinthians 12:1-13:13

1 Cor. 12:1-14:40 forms a single unit. In this section Paul addresses what it means for the Corinthians to function “in the Spirit” during the times when they gather together. Remember, when N.T. believers gathered, they met in small groups in homes; there were no church buildings. These gatherings are the context for what Paul addresses in 1 Cor. 12-14.

It appears from this passage that their gatherings were very informal by American evangelical norms; no liturgy, no bulletin, no worship team, no preaching (in the sense we think of it), no pre-defined format. They gathered to meet with Jesus and with one another; they gave and received ministry and most importantly, they expected and experienced the presence of God’s Spirit among them.¹

Their gatherings were “supernaturally natural,” “Spirit stuff” was expected as each person was open to the Spirit’s leadership and activities (12:4-11). After all, He was present with them! It cannot be overemphasized that these were “charismatic” gatherings.² In fact, the expectation was that *each* person would come ready to contribute their part to whatever the very real and present God was doing in the moment (1 Cor. 14:26). All was for mutual encouragement and edification.

Because there are a variety of matters to look into, we will break chapters 12-14 into “Part 8a” (1 Cor. 12:1-13:13) and “Part 8b” (1 Cor. 14).

While most translations talk about “spiritual gifts” in 12:1 and 14:1, the word commonly used for “spiritual gift” (*charisma*) is *lacking* in both of these verses. Rather, Paul uses a different word, *pneumatikos*, which means “of or pertaining to the Spirit.” Therefore a better rendering for 12:1 and 14:1 respectively might be: “Now concerning the things of the Spirit...” and “desire earnestly the things of the Spirit...”³ These chapters then are Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians about the “things of the Spirit,” i.e., how the Corinthian believers should respond to and cooperate with the Spirit when they gather – what is appropriate, and more particularly, what builds up the Body.⁴

Tongues as supernatural utterance will appear throughout the context. Paul is out to address the *overuse* of this one Spirit activity (tongues) in their gatherings and to call for *diversity* of Spirit expressions.⁵ It is important to understand that his attitude toward tongues was very positive. He himself speaks in tongues “more than they do” and is grateful that he does (14:18). In fact, he desires that they *all* speak in tongues (14:5) because of its power to edify/build up the one who does so (14:4). Finally, he is adamant that they do not misunderstand his correction of their *public* overuse of tongues as a denial of tongues altogether; so he charges them *not to forbid* speaking in tongues (14:39).⁶

So what exactly is the issue? It seems this. When they gathered they were all speaking in tongues to the *exclusion* of other Spirit activities (12:4-11). If Paul saw tongues as positive, then why did he consider this overuse to be an abuse of this gift? Because the *purpose of their gathering was to be mutual edification and that required speaking things that were intelligible and understandable to everyone present.*⁷ With this in mind, let’s take a quick walk through 1 Cor. 12-13.

In 12:1-19 Paul emphasizes the need for variety and diversity of function within the Body. There are a variety of “gifts, ministries and effects” (12:4-6), the Holy Spirit “distributing” to each

person as He chooses (12:7, 11), all for the purpose of seeing the Body built up (12:7). Listed are nine of these particular “manifestations” or expressions (12:7-9). While some speak of “the nine gifts of the Spirit” as though this is a comprehensive listing, it is more likely that the nine here are an ad hoc list, “off the top of Paul’s head” as it were. Therefore, these are not meant to be a complete listing, only illustrative of the Spirit’s variety of operations among God’s people.⁸ He chooses to “distribute” what is needed when it’s needed. Because the Spirit Himself decides how these things will be “distributed,” the implication is that these kinds of activities are potentially available to *everyone* when the church gathers, not just a select few. That means that all of us, each of us, must be *available* to the Holy Spirit!

In 12:12-19 Paul elaborates. The many-membered body should be displaying its many members! It is to the advantage of the body that all members are not the same thing (e.g., an ear, an eye, etc.); each is important because each has its own part to play in a healthy body. Notice how Paul highlights the Spirit’s place in making us one body; it is our *common experience* of the Holy Spirit that makes us functionally one. Unless we are welcoming Him and engaging with Him we cannot be the one body He intends. Any passivity, any lack of engagement, has disastrous consequences for Him, for us and for a broken world that needs to see Him *alive* in and through us.

Perhaps this lack of Spirit experience is why we struggle to experience what it means to be one body. If we are unaware of what the Spirit is seeking to do, or worse, resistant, then we will not experience the kind of life the Spirit wants for us together. The church is not another human organization, it is to be supernatural. If we strip away the real, dynamic of the Spirit then we are left to our own designs – what we can crank up on our own. No wonder so much of the American church is so anemic. Moses understood, Ex. 33:12-16.

In 1 Cor. 12:20-26 Paul reminds us of the value of each member and of our need to value and care for one another; this is a “Spirit work” as well and is essential to a healthy body’s being fully *functional*. How can a body which does not care for itself, be anything but *dysfunctional*?

Read verses 12:27-31 carefully; they are a key to understanding chapters 12-14.

12:27-28.

As individual members of the body, we will find ourselves enabled by God to do those things necessary to fulfill His designs for the church. Here is another listing of things, but notice it is not exactly the same as 12:8-10. Again, Paul’s point seems to be that of *diversity*.

12:29-30.

Typically, this is interpreted as Paul’s intent to show that each person has a particular gift and other persons have other gifts. Thus, not everyone is an apostle, not everyone a prophet, not everyone speaks in tongues, etc. However, there are several problems with this view. In chapter 14, Paul desires for *all* to speak in tongues and indicates that *all* can prophesy. Already we have seen that the listing of Spirit activities in 12:8-10 seem to be available to *all*. So restricting diversity by saying what one *cannot* do seems counter to Paul’s point here.

So how might we understand this passage? Paul’s concern is with the overemphasis by the Corinthians on one gift (tongues) and therefore the need for diversity of gifts. Therefore we might read the passage like this, “All are not the *same* thing are they? Everyone doesn’t just do the *same* thing - prophesy or teach or administrate or heal or speak in tongues, do they?”¹⁰ In this way, Paul would emphasize *diversity* as a proper response to the Spirit in contrast to the Corinthian *conformity* to just one gift, in this case tongues.¹¹

12:31.

What exactly are the *greater gifts*? Is it love, the focus of chapter 13? Probably not: love is never considered a *gift* in Paul's writings; also love is a singular, not a plural (notice *greater gifts*, not *gift*).

It seems Paul looks ahead to chapter 14 where he calls for the Corinthians to use those gifts that *edify* the church, those that can be *understood* by all when they are gathered together. In chapter 14 he will contrast the use of tongues (which cannot be understood, unless interpreted) with prophecy (which is understandable). Thus, the greater gifts would be those that are intelligible, understandable to the gathered body *because these edify*.

In chapter 13, Paul launches into a discussion on love. It might seem to be an aside, a parenthesis, sandwiched between his instruction on Spirit stuff in chapters 12 and 14. However, it is not disconnected from his overall instruction, but essential.¹² It is love that must govern our life together as God's people. I might operate in many supernatural ways and yet accomplish nothing if I lack love. Why would Paul include this in the middle of a discussion about Spirit "gifts?" Clearly, the way the Corinthians are presently operating in the gifts expresses a lack of love. How so? Their over-emphasis on one gift to the exclusion of the others (tongues in this case) shows their lack of concern for the building up of the church, thus their lack of love.¹³

Paul's conclusion is this: we must let love govern all that we do, especially the way we cooperate with the Spirit in His supernatural activities. We *need* His giftings in all of their diversity in this present moment and time while we await the completion of God's kingdom purpose at His second coming.¹⁴

Implication and Application

While this passage has something to say to all Christians; its relevance may well depend on your starting point. We will begin by addressing the extremes.

If you begin with a denial of tongues or of the more expressive Spirit activities, then you must ask yourself if you are completely Biblical. What in fact has determined your stance? Perhaps past teaching in opposition to gifts, religious training, prejudice or just plain fear has limited your walking in obedience to all God has for you. For many, if honest, it is the fear of the loss of control that holds them back – their "what if...this and that" has left them afraid of God! Again, our experience must be determined by the Bible and what the Bible considers to be the normal and expected experience, not what we are presently comfortable with or have been previously taught.

If you are on the other extreme, perhaps you have been neglectful of the need for order and edification in the use of the gifts; then you too need to return to the Bible to ask what would constitute a healthy and holistic body life - what would be the proper expression of gifts to build up the body? All that God gives can be misused as well as ignored. *It is equally possible, equally unhealthy and equally wrong to be either flaky or frigid with reference to Spirit activities.* We must seek for Biblical norms, balance and context.

Perhaps you are somewhere in between these extremes. You are not opposed, but neither are you engaged. Perhaps you are open, but *not* seeking more in this arena. If frigid and flaky are not options, neither is *indifference* or *hesitancy*. Our life with God is not a smorgasbord where we can pick and choose what kind of experiences we will have. "Some fruit for me, but no gifts, they upset my stomach." or "Bring on the spicy stuff, but I don't really like fruits and vegetables, so no serious thinking, accountability or discipline." Too many Evangelicals have decided in advance what is a "legitimate" experience, and have let their own preferences and comfort levels

determine (in fact limit) what God can do in and through their lives. On the other side, too many Charismatics and Pentecostals have been negligent with the need for real practical Biblical study, accountability with others and careful thoughtfulness (reason) – all of which are essential to a balanced diet that leads to a healthy body. ☺

The people of God have need of and must be walking in *all* that the Spirit has for us if we are to be faithful to Him and useful to our generation. Without the Spirit, we can do absolutely nothing that will matter for God's kingdom purpose.

God, in His wisdom and love, has determined that the Spirit alone can make us the people, the body, we need to be. And the Spirit *alone* decides *how that will be* – and it appears that this is plainly supernatural, experiential and concrete. So we must fully engage or resist, there is no middle ground. Is God real and alive in our lives, relationships, gatherings and churches or not?

Now, I would suggest that we need to embrace the *full experience* as defined by the New Testament. Though Paul's focus here is on some specific ways the Spirit works (and we how are to respond), there is more to consider. The Spirit-filled life must involve all the dimensions of the Spirit as defined by the NT - including gifts, fruit, holiness, power, relational intimacy, body-life, ministry and mission. It must be *multi-faceted* and *multi-dimensional*.¹⁵

That there is disagreement, division and distrust in the Body over these things is not new news. Those on the Evangelical side might say to their Pentecostal/Charismatic brothers and sisters “Don't be thinking that you're more ‘spiritual’ than the rest of us! Don't be pushy, don't try to force your way of thinking on us. And don't be so weird!” And those on the Pentecostal side might say to their Evangelical friends, “Don't condemn what you don't understand! You need to be more open to the Spirit. Don't turn people away from these things by your fear and prejudice!” And both would be right.

Where does love come in? Exactly where Paul put it: at the center of our responsiveness to the Spirit must be a fundamental responsiveness to one another. Gifts are for the building up, edification and growth of God's people. How we deal with one another in these things should reflect God's heart and character. And how we deal with the divide that is sometimes felt over these things must have love as its core attitude.

For all of us, we need to walk in the Spirit of Jesus without compromise but also without rancor. We all need to work at being people of both Word and Spirit, thus walking in the fullness of all God has.¹⁶

Next: “So, Paul, you want me to do *what!*?”

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¹ It was very “Pentecostal/ Charismatic” as we shall see. If this is disconcerting for some in Evangelical circles; sorry about that. ;)

² “Charismatic” comes from the Greek “charismata” – referring to the “grace-gifts” that God bestows on His people. “Charis” is the Greek for grace, thus “**charisma**” might be translated “concrete expressions of God's grace.” Therefore “spiritual gifts” are but one aspect of the larger category of God's gracious activity toward and with us.

³ 12:1 and 14:1 both use the same Greek word, “pneumatikos.” In both 12:1 and 14:1, the NAU puts *gifts* in italics, indicating that it is not present in the original language. See Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Hendrickson, 1994), 28-32 for a detailed explanation of this term, “pneumatikos,” and why he feels it means “of or pertaining to the Spirit.”

⁴ Edification, of course, is what the Spirit is seeking to do when they gather; this raises the important question of what *we* are seeking to do when *we* gather *and* if we are open to letting the Spirit produce our “building up” *in His own way*.

⁵ This is what the Spirit Himself is after! Thus, Paul is encouraging them to open up their lives and gatherings to more variety and diversity of Spirit stuff.

⁶ I often wonder how those who *do* forbid tongues deal with this rather clear command.

⁷ We will talk more about the nature of tongues when we look at 1 Cor. 14 in Part 8b.

⁸ This was a real challenge to my understanding of things having grown up under the “nine gifts” teaching in my early Christian years. However, it makes sense, both in the context of the passage and practically. Should we really assume that the only activities of the Spirit among us are restricted to just nine? I think not! Also, there is debate about what specifically each of the items on this list mean, e.g., what is a “word of knowledge,” etc. See Gordon Fee’s *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (Hendrickson, 1996), 163-178 for a “non-academic” explanation.

¹⁰ Thus following on his idea that each member is different and to be valued; not everyone is an eye, not everyone is an ear, etc.

¹¹ I am indebted to Gordon Fee for this particular way of seeing this passage and for his interpretation of these chapters as a whole. See his *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT.

¹² This chapter is often isolated from its context. While Paul had some quite wonderful things to say here about the nature of love, his purpose is to show the absolute need for love to govern how we operate in “Spirit stuff” if we are to see God’s edifying purpose for those gifts accomplished.

¹³ It might be interesting to try out another aspect of the Spirit’s work and see how that changes the way we see things. What if there is too much emphasis on teaching and not enough on healing or miracles in a typical Evangelical church? ;)

¹⁴ 13:8-13 is classic “already and not yet” thinking on Paul’s part. These gifts will one day be no more, but in the present, they are essential for us. Because now we see only in part and we know only in part, we need these Spirit giftings to help us live this life together. When the “perfect” comes, then these helps will no longer be needed. 13:10 is a proof text for those with cessationist leanings. They hold that the Bible is the “perfect” now come, therefore the gifts are no longer needed and have ceased. However, there is absolutely no indication anywhere in the Bible that Paul or any other N.T. author would have thought this way. Besides, if this is true, then how is it that knowledge (13:8) has not ceased? The “perfect” looks to the time of Jesus’ return when the “partial” of His kingdom (where we now live) will come into its fullness. The “not yet” will then be made complete and Jesus’ kingdom fully present!

¹⁵ I take the term “multi-dimensional” from Larry Hart’s chapter in *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism*.

¹⁶ There has been significant rapport between Evangelicals and Pentecostal/Charismatics in the last several decades. This is in part because P/C are taking the Bible, reason and Biblical scholarship more seriously and Evangelicals are recognizing that Spirit stuff is not irrational and that there is a need for deeper and more substantive experiences with God and one another.