

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”
TOGETHER IN THE SPIRIT
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Last week, you may recall, we looked at how Paul included this section on orderly worship in his letter to the new Christian Church in Corinth. He was anxious that the times of worship in this fledgling Christian community were getting out of hand and all kinds of unhelpful things were going on which detracted not only from the worship of God, but also from the witness of the Christians within the cosmopolitan seaport of Corinth. It was important for people to ensure that they dressed appropriately so that they didn't give off the wrong signals to outsiders, and vital that the worship itself didn't descend into a free-for-all with people shouting across the church and making a nuisance of themselves.

Within that section (which is effectively chapters 11 to 14), Paul now turns to another of the questions that the Corinthians have actually asked him – a query to do with “*spiritual things*”. In the NIV, from which we have just read, it says “*spiritual gifts*”, but that's not the word used here in Greek. (Presumably the translators used that as the section is pretty well all about gifts.) Once again, we need to sketch in a bit of background here so that we can see why it was such an issue for these people and for Paul.

In Greek and Roman religion – indeed, in most religions still today – spiritual experience was highly prized. People would work themselves up into all kinds of states using a variety of means from drugs and music to sex (especially in Corinth, as we've seen). Indeed, Ian Dury & the Blockheads' hit, “Sex and Drugs and Rock'n'Roll” could have been an anthem for them! They would also open their minds up to spiritual forces or use techniques of mass persuasion to get into these states. Some well-known people could do it pretty well to order. If you've read any ancient history or classical literature you may have come across The Oracle at Delphi or The Sybil of Cumae (who crops up in Virgil's *Aeneid*). And there's mention of one in *Acts 16:16ff*. Those who displayed these ecstatic trances and spoke in strange languages and produced enigmatic oracles were seen as somehow superior and, of course, everyone wanted to be like that.

It's certain that many of the people who became Christians from the city of Corinth would have witnessed or even experienced such things themselves. Clearly they were supernatural in some way and now they want to know from Paul how this all fits in with the new religion of Jesus Christ. In v2 Paul writes that, in their pagan days when they worshipped idols and false gods, they were “*influenced and led astray*” by such things. Again, looking at the Greek words can help us here, because the phrase “*led astray*” could equally well be translated “*carried away*”: in other words, they had been carried away into these ecstatic trances as they worshipped these “*mute idols*”. The “*mute idols*”, although they might not be able to talk, or walk or move, represented powerful demonic forces, as Paul argues in *10:20*. So the spiritual experiences these people had – although they may have looked initially very much the same as the things the Christians were now demonstrating – were very different indeed in their origin. I remember an elderly Jamaican couple at the church where I was in London walking out of a service when someone spoke in tongues, because the only previous experience they'd had of it was in a voodoo ceremony. And the extraordinary behaviour of a demonically possessed man I once encountered, was a dark imitation of speaking in tongues and prophecy.

So Paul goes on to respond to what I think may well have been the Corinthians' specific question. Someone had obviously been undergoing a spiritual experience, but had cursed Jesus in what he said (v3). Paul says, quite logically, that if you're filled with the Holy Spirit, you wouldn't be cursing Jesus, therefore this person must have been under the influence of a demonic spirit. On the other hand, if someone is glorifying Jesus, calling him Lord and offering Christian worship, then it must be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. That's an important thing to remember when unusual things happen in Christian worship. It's easy to write people off as being under the influence of evil spirits, when they are, in fact, praising God. It's not the trappings of spirituality that count: it's the content. F F Bruce, the great New Testament scholar, writes, “*Ecstasy or enthusiasm is no criterion of spirituality: attention must be*

paid to the words spoken". And that is just as vital in today's culture, where there are all kinds of spiritual things going on, which people immediately assume are good if they're spiritual, whereas, in fact, they can be very harmful and destructive if they are driven by spirits in opposition to the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit gives not only the inspiration, but the strength to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Tom Wright makes the point that the phrase "*Jesus is Lord*" is actually incomplete for these early Christians. The second half of it has to be "*and Caesar isn't*". To acknowledge anyone else as Lord meant that you did not have the Emperor in first place, an Emperor who by this time was considered divine and who was worshipped as a god, with no other rivals tolerated. To say "*Jesus is Lord*" was a spiritual confession and also a highly subversive political statement. It could mean death! In Brian Walsh's recent book on *Colossians* he draws powerful parallels between the Roman Empire and twenty-first century global capitalism as anti-Christian hegemonies and insists that to say "*Jesus is Lord*" today is equally subversive and counter-cultural – and even dangerous. (But that's for another occasion!)

Paul goes on to explain that the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is real and alive and, importantly, at work in all Christians. Jesus has given us his Holy Spirit – it was the last promise he made to his followers as he left them to return to heaven (*Acts 1:8*). His activity is demonstrated in all kinds of ways – and Paul lists some of them here. It's not an exhaustive list, as he mentions others in different places, but we read here of nine, which I'll briefly explain.

The Message of Wisdom

Wisdom concerning God; the ability to make correct decisions and put things into practice the way God wants.

The Message of Knowledge

God-given insight into particular situations, an awareness of things that could come from no other source than God himself.

Faith

This is not the faith that we have to turn to Christ in the first place, but special faith that is granted to cope with specific situations.

Gifts of Healing

The Greek word here is plural and suggests that this would cover a wide range of different conditions and illnesses. There are those who are given special power by God to be his channel of healing to people.

Miraculous Powers

In the Bible a miracle is an action that cannot be explained by natural means. Usually it is an act of God that is evidence of his power and purpose. This is probably the gift that is least often demonstrated today.

Prophecy

This is a specific word from God about a particular situation. It isn't necessarily prediction, but is obviously God's word for that context. In *14:3* it is made clear that this is for the building up of the body of Christ, not tearing it down, and it must certainly be rigorously weighed against Scripture.

Distinguishing between spirits

Discernment: sifting out the authentic from the bogus. This is probably a much neglected gift.

Speaking in different kinds of tongues

This can refer both to the speaking of God's word in other languages (usually unknown to the speaker), as happened at Pentecost: or to the ecstatic utterances used in worship to praise God when our own vocabulary is just inadequate. When a message is given in another language, then the ninth gift of **Interpretation** is needed.

Now, these are very diverse gifts and there are others which are mentioned elsewhere. Paul also says here that there are, within the church, different ways of serving – that is, of serving one another within the church – and different ways of working, different ways of demonstrating God’s power. But – and he is very emphatic on this point – they all come from the same God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (vv4-6 have a very Trinitarian structure). Our unity is in the source of the gifts. And Paul makes two other important points about these various spiritual gifts.

Firstly, **they are given by God’s sovereign grace** (v11). These are not rewards for being a good Christian, nor are they indicators of spiritual maturity. There is no hint here of a theology that says that you need to have certain gifts to be a “proper” Christian. The Holy Spirit is at work in all men and women even before they commit themselves to Jesus Christ. Jesus makes that clear in *John 16*. You cannot work up these gifts for yourself, nor can you graduate to any of them. God gives them just as he sees fit, so we are all equal when it comes to this area of the Christian life, as we are in all others. That doesn’t mean, of course, that you cannot pray for them or ask God to grant them, but they are not to be used, as they were in the Greek religions and, to some extent in the church at Corinth, as a way of ranking people.

And secondly, **they are given for the common good** (v7). These gifts are to be used to build up the church of Jesus Christ, not to bring glory of fame to any one person. The evidence of a spiritual gift in your life is a clear call to serve God and his people using that gift, not a sign that you should be parading it or using it for your own ends. It is to be used for unity, encouragement and building up.

That was the big difference between Christianity and the Greek religions in Corinth. In the pagan religions, spiritual things were taken to be an aid to success and celebrity. In the church they are to be signs of God’s activity that will benefit all. As we said earlier, the Holy Spirit is at work in all Christians, so we all have gifts and opportunities for service which we are to get on and use. There is no gift of sitting back and letting everyone else get on with it! And there is also no suggestion in this letter – or anywhere else in the New Testament – that spiritual gifts are no longer part of the life of the church. The idea that some Christians have (which is known in theological terms as “cessationism”) that all these gifts died out with first apostles, has no warrant in the Bible, so you can’t wriggle out of it like that! Maybe this week you could spend a few moments thinking a praying about what your gifts are and how you might use them in your own situation as a part of this congregation – and next time we’ll look more closely at how we all need to do that together. (And at our weekend away next year, Andy Twilley will be helping us think about our gifts.)

(Discussion notes and questions on next page)

"TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER"
9. TOGETHER IN THE SPIRIT – 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Paul now turns to a query to do with "*spiritual things*". In Greek and Roman religion spiritual experience was highly prized. People would work themselves up into all kinds of states using a variety of means. Those who displayed this were seen as somehow superior. Many of the people who became Christians from the city of Corinth would have witnessed or even experienced such things themselves. In v2 Paul writes that, in their pagan days, they were "*influenced and led astray*" by such things ("*led astray*" could equally well be translated "*carried away*": in other words, they had been carried away into these ecstatic trances as they worshipped "*mute idols*" which represented powerful demonic forces, as Paul argues in 10:20.

Paul says, quite logically, that if you're filled with the Holy Spirit, you wouldn't be cursing Jesus; on the other hand, if someone is glorifying Jesus, calling him Lord and offering Christian worship, then it must be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. "*Ecstasy or enthusiasm is no criterion of spirituality: attention must be paid to the words spoken*" (F F Bruce).

Paul's list of the gifts is not an exhaustive list, as he mentions others in different places:-

Wisdom: Wisdom concerning God; the ability to make correct decisions and put things into practice the way God wants.

Knowledge: God-given insight into particular situations, an awareness of things that could come from no other source than God himself.

Faith: This is not the faith that we have to turn to Christ in the first place, but special faith that is granted to cope with specific situations.

Healings: The Greek word here is plural and suggests that this would cover a wide range of different conditions and illnesses. There are those who are given special power by God to be his channel of healing to people.

Miraculous Powers: In the Bible a miracle is an action that cannot be explained by natural means. Usually it is an act of God that is evidence of his power and purpose. This is probably the gift that is least often demonstrated today.

Prophecy: This is a specific word from God about a particular situation. It isn't necessarily prediction, but is obviously God's word for that context.

Distinguishing between spirits: Discernment: sifting out the authentic from the bogus. This is probably a much neglected gift.

Speaking in different kinds of tongues: This can refer both to the speaking of God's word in other languages (usually unknown to the speaker), as happened at Pentecost: or to the ecstatic utterances used in worship to praise God when our own vocabulary is just inadequate. When a message is given in another language, then the ninth gift of **Interpretation** is needed.

Paul also says here that there are, within the church, different ways of serving – that is, of serving one another within the church – and different ways of working, different ways of demonstrating God's power. They all come from the same God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (v4-6 have a very Trinitarian structure)

They are given by God's sovereign grace (v11). These are not rewards for being a good Christian, nor are they indicators of spiritual maturity.

They are given for the common good (v7). These gifts are to be used to build up the church of Jesus Christ. The evidence of a spiritual gift in your life is a clear call to serve God and his people.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways do people express their spirituality today? How should we respond to the current revival of interest in spiritual things?
2. Why is it important that there is diversity within the church? How do we see that in practice in our own church?
3. What are the implications for us of declaring that "Jesus is Lord" ?
4. What do you understand by each of the gifts Paul mentions here? How might they be used in a local church situation?
5. Do you believe in the existence of spiritual forces (good and evil) in the world today? Why/why not? How are they seen?