

## Varieties of Gifts

Mark Heath, 23<sup>rd</sup> Jan 2005

1 Cor 12:1-11

*<sup>1</sup>Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup>You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. <sup>3</sup>Therefore 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.*

*<sup>4</sup>Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. <sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup>To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup>to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup>All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.*

If someone says to you "there's something you need to know", you would pay close attention to what was coming next. People usually say it to introduce some information that is necessary to avoid you making some kind of mistake. Here Paul tells the Corinthians that there is something they need to know about spiritual gifts. Without this information, they were in danger of making some big mistakes in the way they worshipped God.

The Corinthians had sent a letter to Paul, and it included some questions or matters they wanted him to address. It would seem that the gist of what they wanted to know was what he thought was the sign of a "spiritual" person. In particular, we know from chapter 14 that the Corinthians were attaching too much importance to the gift of tongues, as though using this gift was the one and only sign of a person who has the Spirit. So Paul begins now to spend three whole chapters addressing this issue, and the section we have here is designed to emphasise the variety that there is in the Spirit's ministry.

### **The Test of the Spirit v2-3**

Paul starts off by reminding them of where they have come from. They used to be pagans, and served idols that could not speak. Now they serve the living God who certainly can and does speak. It may have been that they had experienced some kind of "inspired utterances" whilst being involved in pagan worship, but they were not Spirit filled people then. Paul's background was very different, yet he too would have thought himself "spiritual" despite not having the Holy Spirit before his conversion. So their past would remind them that not everyone who thinks they are spiritual necessarily has the Holy Spirit.

In verse 3, Paul is not trying to give the Corinthians a test to help them decide whether someone's prophecy is from God or not. It's obvious that the Holy Spirit doesn't inspire people to curse Jesus. Neither is Paul trying to suggest that a non-Christian somehow can't say the words "Jesus is Lord" or that a Spirit-filled believer can't utter the phrase "Jesus is accursed". After all, anyone who reads this letter aloud will have spoken them both.

What Paul is explaining is that the sign of someone who has the Spirit is their sincere desire to exalt Jesus as Lord. It is not the manifestation of gifts but the honouring of Jesus that marks a person of the Spirit. Those who have the Spirit could never bring themselves to curse Christ, as Paul well knew from his previous attempts to persuade believers to blaspheme (Acts 26:11).

So there are two equal and opposite dangers. We can endorse some people as being 'spiritual' (or maybe today we might say "Spirit filled" or "on fire") for the wrong reasons. Our first question should be whether they are passionate about bringing glory to Jesus, not whether they line up with our practises on some other issue. The other danger is to write off some people who are actually

our brothers and sisters who love the Lord, simply because they do not match up to some criteria we have set.

### **The Variety of the Spirit v4-10**

In verses 4-10, Paul is not trying to give some teaching on what the full list of available gifts is. He misses out a few that appear in lists he makes elsewhere. Neither does he feel the need to explain what each gift is and how it is to be used. He assumes they already know that. The point is that there is a diversity of gifts and yet they all flow from the one God. Although the members of the Triune Godhead – Father, Son and Spirit (each mentioned in v4-6) are one, yet within their unity is a love for diversity. Their gift to one person may differ from their gift to another.

While affirming God's love for diversity, we must note that this is a love for a diversity of good things. We cannot use it to affirm beliefs that are false or actions that are sinful, simply because they add to the “diversity” of the believing community. What is given by God as a gift though, should be warmly appreciated and received, even when it differs from what he has given to someone else.

So again we see that we should not try to insist on one particular type of gifting or behaviour as being the sign of a spiritual person, but rather focus on glorifying Jesus in all we do. In a lot of churches, the young people and new converts who are zealous for God will try to emulate those more mature in the faith – their vocabulary of prayer, their style of ministry, their habits in worship and even their dress sense. If we are not careful we find that people are trying to be something that they are not, because we have not taught them properly about the variety of the Spirit's gifts. We don't have to all be the same, act the same and have the same ministries as each other. We are one because of what Christ has done, and we are one because we are committed to serving him.

Verse 7 makes two important points. First, Paul talks of “each one” using their gift. He doesn't imagine just one or two especially gifted people but rather that everyone should have a gift. As we see in the body metaphor he uses later, the church needs every member to play their part. And that includes those who might be tempted to think that their gifting is not significant or important. God has given it to us because he intends us to use it. And this is the second point – the gift is for the “common good”, that everyone might benefit. The point of the worship service is not for everyone to enjoy their own private experience of God, but that together we encourage one another to glorify God. And in the wider context of church ministries, our gifts are not intended to boost our own egos or give us a sense of personal fulfilment, but to bless others.

In verses 8-10 Paul is trying to wake the Corinthians up to the fact that there is more to the Spirit's ministry than just a couple of gifts. In other places he adds to the list of gifts (see 1 Cor 12:8-11, 1 Cor 12:28, Rom 12:6-8, Eph 4:11) and is quite happy to include the “natural” alongside the “supernatural” (gifts involving supernatural knowledge or power). But he does include tongues in the list as he is not trying to put them off using it – far from it (1 Cor 14:5)! By leaving them near the end of the list, he reminds them that there are plenty of other good gifts that should also be used.

Right through this section the language Paul uses emphasises two principles – *diversity* and *unity*. There is great variety to the gifts but they all flow from the one God. We should not assume that unity in church life requires us to gather into groups where we are all alike. Gordon Fee says “Unity and uniformity are not the same thing, not even close”. As Paul goes on to say later, that would be as good as a body that was just one eye all on its own (1 Cor 12:17). Churches need to make room for *all* the gifts to be manifest, not just those that are the personal favourites of a prominent few.

### **The Sovereignty of the Spirit v11**

Just in case the Corinthians miss the point, and simply pick another gift or behaviour to single out as all-important, Paul reminds them of the sovereignty of Holy Spirit. It is ultimately his choice to

give or withhold certain gifts as he sees fit. This teaches us not to be proud at our own gifting, and also to not to elevate one gift above the others. They are called “charismata” - literally “grace gifts”. The word can include anything that we get because of grace – even our salvation.

Whatever we have, whether it be gifting or status or possessions or reputation, we have no right to boast, because we received it only because of God's grace. Paul has already reminded the Corinthians of this earlier in the letter (1 Cor 4:7). So believing in the sovereignty of God should keep us *humble*, but it should not stop us being *expectant*. It does not mean that we can't or shouldn't ask God for gifts. Some people seem to draw this conclusion and I have no idea why. Scripture encourages us to ask God for all kinds of good things, including healing (James 5:13), help in times of danger (Psalm 18:3), wisdom (James 1:5) and even the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13).

But if we should be expectant, we should not insist that God must always work in a particular way that we define. As Jesus said when speaking about the Holy Spirit (John 3:8), “the wind blows where it wishes”. Our attempts to make him fit into our own neat little boxes are futile. Don Carson warns us not to 'institutionalise' the gifts - there are different measures given at different times to different people. The Spirit will always work in accordance with what he has said in his Word but that does not mean that he is predictable.

## **Conclusion**

It is common to hear a negative evaluation of a church that goes along the lines “well this church is very good at X, but it's sadly lacking in Y”. Perhaps they have good children's ministry but poor teaching. Or perhaps they have many prophecies but small commitment to prayer. Or they are generous to the poor but do nothing to restore the backslider. Whatever the weaknesses detected are, the person making the criticism should ask whether *they* are the one that God intends to use to supply what is lacking. A body without all its parts can't function properly. Ignoring the importance of diversity causes churches to fill with people with similar gifts rather than being well rounded. So rather than getting frustrated if you think your church is poor in one particular area, make sure *you* are willing to use all your gifts to serve, and encourage others to do the same.

The message of the diversity of the Spirit's work is as relevant today as it was when this letter was written. In Corinth there was just one church. Sure, there were factions and differences of opinion (1 Cor 3:4) but there was no option to try one of the fifty or so other churches in the city. Here in the twenty-first century it is all too easy for Christians who are the same to congregate together and have nothing to do with those whose emphasis or primary gifting differs from ours. Sure there would be some painful challenges if we were to attempt to get back together, but perhaps the benefit of a greater display of the Spirit's variety would be worth the effort.

So let us learn to value and appreciate both *unity* and *diversity*. They are not in opposition to one another, but are essential companions. A church that has unity without diversity will tend to be proud and self-sufficient, critical of everyone else, and severely lacking in many ministries and graces. A church that has diversity without unity will go nowhere, torn apart by infighting and confusion over truth. But a church that has real unity on the essential matter – the desire to glorify Jesus, while at the same time displaying a diversity of ministries and gifts will be a most powerful testimony to the grace of God and an effective tool in his hands to bring his kingdom on earth.