

Gifts of the Spirit and Unity (1 Corinthians 12:1-26)

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

I. Introduction and Review

- a. In Paul's **First Letter to the Corinthians**, he addresses a number of problems in the church.
- b. The focus of the two prior lessons, which covered **1 Corinthians 11**, was on two problems: one related to Christians not following the apostolic teaching on headcovering, and the other related to problems in the church during their observance of the Lord's Supper.
- c. Paul now addresses issues related to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, and how they were contributing to division in the church.
 - i. In listening to how he addresses those problems, we can learn more about the gifts of the Spirit, as well as about how the church is *supposed to* function, with all the varied parts working together.

II. How Paul Instructs the Predominantly Gentile Church in Corinth

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 12:1-2**.
 - i. "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant: You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led." (**1 Corinthians 12:1-2**, NKJV)
- b. Recall that in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13** Paul included the sin of idolatry (referring to the golden calf incident at Mount Sinai) as one of the five sins that kept the Israelites from making it all the way to the Promised Land.
 - i. "Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.'" (**1 Corinthians 10:6-7**, NKJV; where Paul is quoting from **Exodus 32:6**)
 - ii. Paul picks up on the sin of idolatry right after that, as an immediate take-away application from the exodus journey foreshadowing the Christian life.
 1. "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry." (**1 Corinthians 10:14**, NKJV)

- iii. Here in **1 Corinthians 12:2**, Paul is again reminding them of the dangers of idolatry.
- c. The Jews had struggled with idolatry for centuries; only after their captivity in Babylon did it essentially disappear from their midst.
- d. However, worshiping other ‘gods’ and idols was a plague among the other nations, including those in Greece and the Roman Empire.
 - i. That was the situation in Corinth, as we have discussed in prior lessons in this series. We know that from history and the inscriptions left behind. (See the first lesson of this series: *Introduction and Division in the Church (1 Corinthians 1:1-13)*).
 - ii. “You were Gentiles...” (**1 Corinthians 12:2**)
 - 1. “You know that when you were *pagans* you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.” (**1 Corinthians 12:2**, ESV)
 - 2. Most of the Corinthian Christians were from pagan or Gentile backgrounds.
 - a. Notice that the sins addressed (idolatry, incest) are more typical of those from pagan backgrounds than what Jewish Christians might be struggling with (issues regarding circumcision and the Law of Moses).
 - b. As noted throughout this series, Paul bases many of his arguments on assuming they know the Old Testament Scriptures very well. In fact, the Gentiles who made up most of the Corinthian church, understood those Scriptures *even down to details that most Christians in the U.S. today would not know!* For example:
 - i. In addressing gross immorality in the church, Paul goes back to the story of the Unleavened Bread following the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, from **Exodus 12-13**.
 - 1. “Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened

bread of sincerity and truth.” (1
Corinthians 5:6–8, NKJV)

- ii. To support the idea that those serving the church full-time should be supported by the congregation, he quoted “do not muzzle the ox...” from **Deuteronomy 25:4**. Then he cites the example of the priests who served at the altar eating from the offerings, from **Leviticus 2-8**.
 - 1. “Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.’ Is it oxen God is concerned about?” (**1 Corinthians 9:8–9**, NKJV)
 - 2. “Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar?” (**1 Corinthians 9:13**, NKJV)
- iii. We know from **Acts 18** that Paul had a vital role in laying the spiritual foundation for the church in Corinth, having spent over 18 months there. From **1 Corinthians 15:1-4**, we learn that the foundation he laid for this predominantly Gentile church was faith in Jesus *based on the evidence of fulfilled prophecies in the Old Testament Scriptures*.
 - 1. “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you— unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day *according to the Scriptures*,” (**1 Corinthians 15:1–4**, NKJV)
 - a. When Paul says “according to the Scriptures”, he is not talking about

the New Testament. He is referring to *the Old Testament prophecies* that were fulfilled in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

c. **Take-Away for Us:** The Old Testament is not just for the Jews! It was used as the Bible of the church in the beginning, including with Gentile believers. Paul considered knowledge of the Old Testament to be indispensable for Gentile Christians, as well.

i. Recall how Paul pointed to the value of the Old Testament to Christians, in his letter to the Christians in Rome. After quoting from **Psalm 68/69:9-10**, he wrote:

1. “For *whatever things were written before were written for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)

iii. “Dumb” idols?

1. The word “dumb” has multiple meanings.
2. The old meaning was “unable to speak”, as in the expression “deaf and dumb”.
3. The meaning more popular today is to be “stupid”, as in the expression, “dumb and dumber”.
4. The Greek word used here means unable to speak.
 - a. In the ESV translation, it says “mute”.
 - b. The contrast is between the true God who speaks to us, versus the idols of stone, metal and wood that are lifeless and cannot speak. (Although demons, which are real, may be actively involved.)

e. A brother (Dan Tillinhast) pointed out to me that in **1 Corinthians 12:1**, the phrase “concerning spiritual *gifts*” in the NKJV and many other translations, the word “*gifts*” is in italics (meaning it is not in the Greek text, but was supplied by the translators).

- i. Therefore, the “spiritual things” he refers to in that passage may pertain to what was previously addressed (including idolatry) or may pertain to what follows (the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit).

III. Diverse Gifts from One Spirit

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 12:3-11**.
- b. **Questions:** What was the purpose of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit? Why were they given in the beginning? Why were they necessary?
 - i. Read **Mark 16:15-20**.
 - 1. “And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and *confirming the word through the accompanying signs*. Amen.” (**Mark 16:20**, NKJV)
 - 2. The purpose of the miraculous gifts, according to Jesus, was to confirm the validity of the word that would be preached, by the evidence of miraculous signs.
- c. Tertullian addresses the miraculous gifts (why they were given) in *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 8 (found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp. 445-446). The points he makes there include:
 - i. Spiritual gifts were provided by the Creator through Christ.
 - 1. Read **Isaiah 11:1-3**.
 - a. The entire Spirit rested upon Jesus (when the Spirit came down upon Him at His baptism).
 - i. This reminds me of what Jesus had said in **John 3:34**: “For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.” (**John 3:34**, ESV)
 - 1. Jesus was given the Spirit “without measure” (without limit).
 - b. Tertullian argues that after Jesus received the full measure of the Spirit, the Spirit was no longer given to the Jews (no more prophets), except through Him.
 - c. Therefore, the Spirit could now be given through Him (alone), in the form of gifts, in fulfillment of prophecy.
 - i. “He gave gifts to men.” Read **Ephesians 4:7-10**.

1. The prophecy is from **Psalm 67/68:18-19**.
 - a. Note that the Masoretic Text says “*received gifts from men*”, versus the LXX, which is closer to what Paul cites in **Ephesians 4**.
2. This statement about Jesus “descending” refers to Him descending to Hades after He died, as recounted in the Apostles Creed.
3. Tertullian says this prophecy quoted by Paul in **Ephesians 4** speaks of Jesus in making the following statements:
 - a. He ascended higher (to heaven).
 - b. He led captivity captive (referring to His conquering death / slavery to sin).
 - c. Also, He gave gifts (miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit) to men!
- ii. Another prophecy fulfilled by the gifts of the Holy Spirit being given to men is found in **Joel 2:28-3:5**.
 1. This is quoted by Peter in **Acts 2**, in his speech to the Jews on the day of Pentecost. He uses that to explain the Spirit having just descended in fire upon the apostles and their ability to miraculously speak in other languages.
 2. Read **Acts 2:14-21**.
 3. Note that the gift of prophecy would be given to women as well as to men, according to **Joel**. Tertullian makes the point that this is why it speaks of women needing to cover their heads “when they prophesy”, since there would be some women who would have that gift.

IV. Unity in the Midst of Diversity

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 12:12-26**.
- b. First, let us make a few observations pertaining to what Paul says here regarding baptism.
 - i. “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit *we were all baptized into one body*—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” (**1 Corinthians 12:12-13**, NKJV)
 - ii. Baptism is one of the things that should *unite all Christians*.
 1. This reminds me of something similar Paul said to the Ephesians, regarding baptism being something that should bring unity to all Christians.
 2. “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, *endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling: *one Lord, one faith, one baptism*; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (**Ephesians 4:1-6**, NKJV)
 - iii. This refers to water baptism (just as Paul previously alluded to that in his allegorical explanation of the Israelites wandering in the Wilderness, in **1 Corinthians 10:1-4**).
 - iv. *Many things* happen in baptism.
 1. In **Acts 3:38**, Peter said that in it we obtain the remission of sins, and receive the Holy Spirit.
 2. In **Acts 22:16**, Ananias told Paul that his sins would be washed away in baptism.
 3. In **Romans 6:1-5**, Paul said that we die and are buried with Christ in baptism.
 4. In **Galatians 3:26-28**, Paul said that we have “put on Christ” or have been “clothed with Christ” in baptism.
 5. In **1 Peter 3:19-21**, Peter said that we are “saved” through baptism.

6. In **John 3:3-5**, Jesus told Nicodemus that we must be “born again of water and the Spirit”, which the early Christians understood to be referring to water baptism.
 7. Now, here in **1 Corinthians 12:12-13**, Paul explains one more significant thing that happens in baptism. Through baptism, the Spirit makes us members of *the one body of Christ*.
- v. Baptism is something that should unify all Christians. There is only one body of Christ. Recall that the night before Jesus was crucified, He prayed for the future unity of all believers (**John 17:20-23**).
1. Of all the teachings of Jesus that “radical Christians” want to follow, this one regarding unity strikes me as the most challenging. Very, very few are striving toward this goal in any serious way, since it *seems* unattainable. Recall that Jesus prayed for *all believers to be unified*, not just for unity within one local church or denomination.
 2. While I may not know what we need to do in order to attain the type of unity that Jesus prayed for, certainly it will not involve compromising any of His teachings! However, we must never lose sight of the idea that there is only one body (despite what it looks like in the Christian world around us).
 3. Baptism is one thing that should unify all Christians, since we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body.
- vi. Clement of Alexandria in *The Instructor* chapter 6 (found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, pp. 216-217) speaks of this statement by Paul in **1 Corinthians 12:12-13** in connection with the spiritual equality with one another that we gain in baptism.
1. There, Clement also addresses other important aspects of baptism, including that it brings illumination and the forgiveness of sins; and that it is accompanied by repentance and faith.
- c. There is no envy or jealousy among the parts of our bodies. If one part is injured (for example your foot), all the other parts will work together to assist it to recovery.
- i. It should be the same in the body of Christ, the church. There is no place for selfish ambition if we see ourselves as different parts of one unified body.
 - ii. Likewise, there is no sense of competition among the parts of the body. If one part is exalted, all the other parts rejoice with it.

- d. Paul uses this illustration of the human body, which has many different parts but all working together, to leave us with a compelling image of the kind of unity we need to have: not uniformity, but a unity based on all the different and diverse parts or members working together.
- e. Another picture of the kind of unity that the church should strive for is given by Peter, in **1 Peter 2**.
 - i. “Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, *you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” (**1 Peter 2:4–5**, NKJV)
 - ii. Here, Peter uses the illustration of a temple being built with different stones, with the stones fitted together representing individual Christians. The “spiritual house” or stone temple that results represents the church.
 1. Christ is the “living stone”, according to Peter, who mentions three prophecies in **1 Peter 2** in which a stone or rock foreshadows Christ.
 2. Likewise, we are to become “living stones”, patterning ourselves after Christ and being fitted together with the other stones.
- f. Unity and diversity
 - i. **Personal Illustration:** My story of teaching myself how to build a stone wall at my house, after the original block retaining wall collapsed.
 1. Building a stone wall is much harder to do than it appears, especially here in New England, where the native rocks are beautiful but shaped very irregularly. (They have curves, notches and protrusions where you don’t want them to be in order to fit them together to make a nice straight wall!)
 2. I found it very challenging to select stones and fit them together in a way that will be structurally strong and yet also look good (with the flat sides showing, and the exposed corners with the correct right angles)!
 3. My advice to anyone contemplating this type of construction (using irregular native New England stones): Don’t do it! It is much harder than you think.

- a. However, the experience reminded me of how hard it is to have a church where all the varied members are fitted together in a unified way.
- ii. Personal Experience: Our local church.
 1. We started off with nearly everyone from a similar spiritual and cultural background. We were an older group, with an average age of over 50.
 2. Since then, many young families and single people have joined us.
 3. We also now have people from many different spiritual backgrounds (Evangelical, Pentecostal, Churches of Christ / ICoC, conservative Anabaptist, etc.)
 4. Also, we have become much more diverse culturally (now including people of European, Hispanic, Asian and African descent).
 5. With more diversity, it can become much more challenging for us to remain unified. However, that is how the Lord intended for the church to be: diverse, composed of many different parts or members, yet *unified as one body*.
- iii. Takeaways for us, regarding the picture of how the Church is supposed to be:
 1. We all bring different strengths to the church.
 2. While “diversity” may be pushed by the world these days (including corporate America), that is not the type of diversity that Paul advocates.
 - a. Biblical unity is based on all of us seeking righteousness and holiness, yet using our different strengths and gifts to benefit the entire church.
 - b. This is based on a love for one another and a common purpose where, as in the human body, no part feels envy, jealousy, nor a sense of competition or selfish ambition toward any other part.
 3. Striving for unity in the body of Christ is one of the most challenging and important teachings of Jesus. Here, we see the church in Corinth struggling with this.

- a. May we learn from what Paul said to them in this convicting passage, one that holds up a beautiful picture of what the church is called to be.