

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

We had jumped ahead in Corinthians to spend a few weeks on the subject of the resurrection, building off of our Easter celebration. Now we return to where we left off in the flow of Corinthians and pick up the next subject in Paul's letter.

As he has done repeatedly in Corinthians up to this point, Paul addresses a concern that came to him from the believers in Corinth. The opening verse of this chapter begins with "Now concerning . . ."—just as he did in 7:1, 25; and 8:1. Apparently there was some confusion and division in Corinth over "spiritual gifts" that Paul intends to clear up.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

What characterizes "church" in contrast to other social groups? That is the opening discussion question, and there are likely to be a variety of answers. Some, leaning on Jesus' words from the Upper Room, might focus on Christians having love for one another. Perhaps recalling Jesus' exchange with the woman at the well, some might suggest that worship is what marks out a group as "church" in contrast to other gatherings. All such thoughts are true, of course. But here in Corinth, as explained in Paul's letter, one of the things that makes the community of faith different than any other gathering is the manifest presence of the Spirit. And that topic is what comes into view in chapters 12 through 14.

In beginning this chapter (12:1), Paul tells his readers that he doesn't want them to be ignorant. Many translations, in rendering Paul's phrase, supply the word "gifts" in explaining what Paul doesn't want his readers to be uninformed about.

The word that Paul typically uses to refer to "gifts" is not found in 12:1. What Paul writes, literally, is that he does not want the Corinthians to be ignorant of "spirituals." But when Paul uses that word, he does not appear to have in mind either the human spirit or the idea of "spiritual" in terms of "being religious"—Paul typically uses the word found in 12:1 to refer to "things pertaining to the Spirit of God."

What we will see as Paul works his way through chapters 12-14 is that he wants to explain both what "spiritual people" (that is, people led by and controlled by and infused with the Spirit of God) as well as "spiritual gifts" (that is, those manifestations of the Spirit that the Spirit works into the lives of others for the good of the community). So we might say that what he is about to unpack for his readers is an understanding of "what the Spirit of God does in and through people who are yielded to Him."

What is the concern that has been raised by the Corinthians? That is open to debate; scholars have wrestled with that issue. One of the things hinted at in the opening verses is that there might have been concern on the behalf of some that if they were to genuinely yield themselves to the Spirit of God, they might not be able to control what they said and did and, in that state, they might blaspheme Jesus. But Paul sets their minds at ease, insisting that someone under the Spirit's

influence would never do that. And such affirmation would be of great comfort to those who had come out of ecstatic and frenzied religious experiences before coming to trust Jesus.

After his opening thought, Paul turns his attention, more specifically, to the gifts (or manifestations) of the Spirit. And he starts by affirming that the variety that is seen in the body of Christ is a variety that is anchored in the deliberate ministry of the Triune God. There is, in this sense, something "trinitarian" about ministering in spiritual giftedness.

Having underscored the idea that unity in the body—a "belongness" due to one's new life in Christ—does not hinder or hamper the ministry that comes through believers' lives, Paul turns to speak about particular spiritual gifts.

As you think through the list, it might be helpful to attempt to put some descriptions to the various "gifts" mentioned. Whatever your discussion ends up unpacking about the various gifts, there are a few things that are truly worth underscoring. Specifically:

The list of gifts in 1 Corinthians is not likely either exhaustive or hierarchical. That is, this list does not list all possible gifts and the order of the gifts listed here does not necessarily arrange the gifts in terms of their perceived value.

Although the Corinthians must have clearly known what each of the gifts listed actually was—what it looked like in the life of the church—we might not be able to describe each. Although that could well be the case, the value of having the list is not significantly diminished. After all, Paul apparently did not offer the list to ensure that the Corinthians could define each one but so that they thought better about what Spirit-empowered body life looked like. And if that is the case, we can still benefit from what Paul is writing about even if we can't specifically identify each of the gifts listed.

The "key player" in this passage is the Spirit. Notice how many times the Spirit is mentioned; pay attention to what Paul says the Spirit does in the life of the believer and the life of the church. What appears to be highlighted is that the Christian life is *supposed to be "spiritual"*—meaning influenced by, shaped by, and lived out in a manifestation of the Spirit's presence and power.

In the weeks to come, we will unpack more of Paul's thoughts—and more of the implications of those thoughts for our own lives and ministry. But for this week, a couple of truths are clearly in focus:

"Church life" really is life in the Spirit. The Spirit intends to make Himself known in and through the lives of each and every believer for the maximum corporate benefit.

Each individual believer has the potential and opportunity to be a conduit of the Spirit's presence and power into the lives of others for their good.

If we began to see ourselves and other Christian brothers and sisters that way, how different would "church life" look?

We will be looking at 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

INITIAL THOUGHTS

What do you think makes the church different than other social groups or gatherings? What marks it out as unique?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

As we move back to pick up Paul's response to the issue raised by the Corinthians, we turn back to 1 Corinthians 12. There, with his typical "now regarding" introduction, Paul touches on a question or issue raised by the believers in Corinth.

What concern among the Corinthians might Paul be addressing in the opening few verses?

When Paul turns his attention to "spiritual gifts," he begins by reflecting on their source. What seems to be his point(s)?

What is the purpose or intent behind spiritual gifts?

Do you think the list that Paul offers here is exhaustive, listing all possible gifts of the Spirit? Why or why not?

As you look back over the passage as a whole, what is the function of the Spirit in the kind of life depicted here?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

Do you think Paul would write to us, to you, suggesting that we "not be ignorant" of such things? Why or why not?

Although Paul does not fill in much of the picture for us about the specifics of each gift listed, he does tell his readers some critical truths about spiritual gifts. Of what he says here, what is:

The most helpful thought to you?

The most challenging thought to you?

The most needed-to-be-heard thought to you?

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