

“The Different Gifts”
1 Corinthians 12:1-11, 27-31
Oct. 20, 2002
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Text Comment

The text we have before us this morning is too large to take in a single gulp. It raises several big questions that beg for answers and some of those are beside the main point that Paul is after. So, we'll consider this text over two Lord's Day mornings.

- v.1 Remember, “now about” indicates that Paul is taking up another subject that the Corinthians themselves had raised in their letter to him. But, as the text unfolds, it will become clearer that this particular discussion, in chapter 12, is part and parcel with the abuse of spiritual gifts that is marring their worship services and which he deals with head-on in chapter 14. He has already dealt with two other abuses in their worship and now he commences on the third. He is laying the groundwork in chapters 12 and 13.
- v.2 One thing these folk were not ignorant about was what it was like to be pagans and how completely they had been mastered by that falsehood. It seems most likely that Paul here is referring to their knowledge of the fact that many of the pagan cults in Corinth practiced so-called “inspired speech” in their worship, even of their mute idols. He is reminding them that it isn't only Christians that claim some form of inspired speech and, therefore, some form of ecstatic utterance, in and of itself, is no proof of true spirituality or godliness.
- v.3 The main point here seems to be that, against those who wanted to measure and to prove their deeper, higher spirituality by their exercise of the gift of tongues, Paul argues that far more basic and more important is the content of the Christian faith itself and one's full, sincere embrace of that faith.

The details are very difficult, however. Who, after all, would have said “Jesus is cursed?” Perhaps Paul is only being hypothetical. Or perhaps in the pagan worship of Corinth such things were actually said and Paul is continuing a contrast between their former worship and their Christian worship. Of course, when he says that no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Spirit, he doesn't mean simply the uttering of the words, but that heart confession which leads to the full submission of one's life to Christ's rule.

- v.4 Now the specific question of the use and abuse of inspired speech is placed in a larger context. He is going to describe the nature of the body of Christ, the church, as a unity characterized by diversity. This diversity is necessary for the church's health and it comes directly from God the Holy Spirit and it is expressed, among other ways, by a diversity of gifts.
- v.6 Note the reference in vv. 4-6 to each of the three persons of the Trinity. This diversity is the will and work of all of them. And, more profoundly, the diversity in unity found in

the church is found first and ultimately in God himself. This is, by the way, an important demonstration of the Trinitarian doctrine of the NT. One reason it is is because it is so artless and unconscious. [Barrett, 284]. That is, it is not so much an intentional confession of the triune nature of God as it is unintentional proof that Paul and the early Christians thought about things in reference to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in a single Godhead.

- v.7 Here is the point that Paul is going to hammer away at. These gifts that the Spirit has given, one to some and another to others, *are for the common good*. They are meant to be the instruments of humble love not overweening pride as had, alas, become the case in Corinth.
- v.8 Now the precise definition of these various gifts or manifestations of the Spirit is very difficult and perhaps, from this distance, impossible. How wisdom and knowledge are to be distinguished from one another in this verse, no one really knows.
- v.9 Insofar as faith is something all Christians share, what is presumably meant is some extraordinary measure of faith by which supernatural works are performed.
- v.10 The fact that the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues are listed last here, and first in 13:1 suggests that the abuse of *these* gifts was the primary problem. By the way, the choice of “tongues” as a translation for Paul’s Greek here represents a failure of nerve on the part of the translators. In any similar context the word would be rendered “languages.” Only once in the NT are we actually given to see the gift of tongues in operation and it is the Spirit-given ability to speak in a language one has not learned. And so with “interpretation of tongues” which, most naturally would be taken to mean “the translation of languages.”
- v.28 In the list that follows, Paul now mixes together offices and gifts and in quite a different way than in the list he gave in vv. 8-10.

The gift of helping others and the gifts of administration (or, better, counsel or rule) are mixed together in a list of largely supernatural gifts. As you may know, there is a long history of interpretation in the Reformed world that links these two gifts to the offices of deacon and elder.

Now, the general sense of the text, together with the large section that we did not read this morning, is clear enough. The Corinthians were taking God’s gifts and glorifying themselves with them when the gifts were intended to be used not to stoke pride but to serve others. They had been given for the common good but were being used for personal aggrandizement. They interpreted the spiritual gifts that had been granted to them, especially the flashier ones, the ones that involved ecstatic speech, as a mark of the Spirit’s special commendation. The lack of a servant spirit among the Corinthians has, of course, already been addressed on several occasions in the letter to this point. This is another instance of the same fundamental problem. We will take up that problem and the burden of Paul’s argument here next time.

This morning I want to deal with the place of this text in our understanding of Christian spirituality and of Christian experience. In particular, I want to draw your attention to what Paul says here about what comes first in Christianity and what is fundamental to it and, so, what must be first and most fundamental for us.

Now, times change. The last time I spoke on this text in a series of sermons was in January of 1986, almost 17 years ago. In those days the tongues movement, or as we came to call it, the charismatic movement, after the Greek word *charisma* – which Paul uses here in v. 4 to mean “spiritual gifts” – was more vigorous in American evangelicalism than it is now. Christians were often being confronted with the claim that the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy and the like were abroad in the church and should be sought and experienced. The charismatic movement that reshaped American evangelicalism in profound ways in the 1960s and 1970s was only beginning to wane in the early 1980s. I don’t mean to suggest that it has disappeared. Far from it. But it has changed. And, very clearly, it does not exercise the influence it once did in American evangelical life. But a shift in evangelical thinking about the faith that the charismatic movement helped to foster is still very much with us and that is what I want to consider this morning.

Since then what has come to be called Pentecostalism’s “third wave” has washed over the evangelical world and appears already itself to be receding, in some part having spent itself on the excesses of the Toronto Blessing. In the third wave, especially associated with the late John Wimber and his Vineyard churches, tongues speaking, which had been the distinguishing mark of the charismatic movement from the early 60s onward, figured much less prominently. Prophecy, words of knowledge, and healing were John Wimber’s emphasis and he specifically repudiated the old Pentecostal/charismatic teaching that speaking in tongues was the mark of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a second, distinct work of grace in a believer’s life that lifted him or her up to a higher plane of spiritual experience and fruitfulness. That, of course, is what made tongues both so important and so controversial in the charismatic movement. It was this claim that those who spoke in tongues lived on a higher plane of spiritual experience and life than those who did not. Oddly, it was very much the same claim these Corinthian believers were making and which for making Paul took them to the woodshed in chapters 12-14.

At any rate, the situation we face in 2002 is, in this respect, not the same that we were facing in 1986. We were never persuaded, as you know, that the claims for a reappearance of the gifts of tongues and the interpretation of tongues (and, for that matter, miraculous healings and so on) were legitimate or that the tongues phenomena were authentic, popular as they had become in many evangelical circles and some Reformed ones. There were many arguments given that I won’t repeat today, but perhaps chief among them was the fact that the problem of authentication itself rendered the claims suspicious at the outset.

Whatever you say about NT tongues, clearly they were a supernatural phenomenon. They were a demonstration of divine power. Here, in our text, Paul links them with other miracles. But that is just the great problem. In the Bible miracles came with self-authenticating demonstration. No one was ever heard discussing whether or not a miracle had actually occurred. We are never told in the Bible how to discern between real miracles and false miracles. And the reason for that is that when God’s almighty power *was* unleashed in the world – as it was during only a few brief

periods in biblical history by the way – *everyone knew it; nobody denied it*. Even those people who had most at stake in believing that miracles *had not occurred* did not deny that they had. The religious authorities who were so envious of the Lord’s power and popularity did not deny the wonders he had performed. They ascribed his power to the Devil and not to God, but that they had performed works of supernatural power, they did not, they could not deny. And so it always was with biblical miracles.

But it has not been so in modern church history. Christians who claim to have performed supernatural healings cannot persuade most of the *church* that they have done so, much less the unbelieving world. And Christians who claim to be speaking a supernatural language cannot convince even most of the *church* that they are, much less the unbelieving world. Other religions feature some form of ecstatic utterance as part of their worship. Paul seems to be reminding the Corinthians of precisely that fact in v. 2. Christians who claim to be speaking in supernatural languages have not been able to convince even the majority of well-wishers in the Christian church that what they are doing is not simply man-made as it is in other religions. I have told you before that you have nothing to fear. You needn’t worry that you are missing some marvelously supernatural spiritual experience because you do not claim to speak in tongues or heal the sick or predict the future. When divine power is unleashed in the world in that way you will know it. Everyone will know it. You will read about it on the front page of the New York Times. The editors may well ascribe that power to the wrong source but they will be no more able to deny what has occurred than were the Egyptians in Moses’ day or the Pharisees in Jesus’ day.

Times without number these phenomena have been investigated to see if the claims being made for them can be validated. They have been investigated by friends and foes alike. And the results are always the same. There is precious little evidence to prove that anyone actually was healed supernaturally and precious little evidence to prove that the sounds being made by the voice are any kind of a language at all or that the interpretations that are given have anything in particular to do with what sounds were made by the tongues-speaker.

I say this with the best will in the world toward our charismatic friends who believe very firmly that the supernatural spiritual gifts are alive and well in the world and struggle to understand how our viewpoint can possibly square with what Paul says here and how it does not inevitably diminish our expectation of the Holy Spirit’s work among us. Perhaps most of us know Christians of that opinion whom we love and respect. I do. We simply ask them to respect in turn our conviction that they have not made their case *from the Bible*. No one doubts that things happened at times in biblical history that do not happen today. No one doubts that the church was laid down on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets and their unrepeatable ministry. No one doubts that the miracles and miraculous powers that Paul is talking about were genuinely and obviously supernatural phenomena. Taking the Bible as a whole, it does not trouble us at all, it is entirely to be expected that through 2000 years of Christian history since, virtually no representative Christian, no great Christian minister or missionary, no great theologian, no famous saint, has claimed to speak in tongues or to heal the sick or to work other miracles.

Augustine, writing in the second decade of the fifth century, asked why no one in his day spoke in tongues and gave two answers. First, he said, “the testimony of temporal sensible miracles”

was given in former days “to be the credential of the first beginnings of the church.” Second, the church first spoke in tongues or different languages as a sign that it would spread to all the nations and therefore speak in the various languages of the world. [*On Baptism*, III, xviii, 16-21; *Homilies on 1 John*, 6, section 10; cited in Clowney, *The Church*, 250]

But, every Christian knows the struggle of living by faith and not by sight. We all want to see, don’t we. We all want to have our faith demonstrated to us and others in invincible ways. It is hard to live by faith. It is hard to believe what cannot be seen and to hold fast to promises that are yet to be fulfilled. It is, I believe, this perfectly natural and universal longing in every Christian’s heart and mind that lies behind the claims for supernatural phenomena. The wish is the father of the thought. *But, there is a danger here as well.*

In the early 1970s, Francis Schaeffer published a little book entitled *The New Super-Spirituality*. He was responding to developments in the evangelical church at that time, one development, of course, being the rise of the charismatic movement, which in the early 70s was just getting up a full head of steam. And what he observed about these folk was their almost total emphasis on *experience*. The old Pentecostals had a belief in speaking in tongues and miraculous healing, but in other respects they were old fashioned Christians. They cared about doctrine, they insisted on orthodoxy, they required obedience to God’s laws, they taught the Bible systematically to their people. But in the 70s the new charismatics were very widely making the experience of what they thought were supernatural phenomena the test of Christian fellowship. Not Christian doctrine held in common, not a mutual conviction about the message of the Bible, not agreement about how to live before God, but, rather, a common experience of tongues or healing or prophecies. Questions that were considered of the utmost importance through all the centuries of Christian history and especially through the centuries since the Reformation were swept under the rug; were considered of little importance. If you had the experience of tongues, if you shared the emotional tie of those who had such experiences, these other questions, these other divisions did not matter.

In other words, the basis of the faith, of membership in the Christian church, the principle according to which one was in or out was being subtly shifted. It was no longer what one believed and how one lived, but what experiences one had.

Now, it seems to me that, at bottom, that was the problem that Paul was addressing in Corinth. They were placing in the chief position, as the measure of true spirituality, godliness, fruitfulness as a Christian, things that did not belong in the first place, or even the second place. And Paul meets this head-on at the outset of his discussion by saying, “No, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the confession of him as Lord, and, then, living according to his will, *that is what makes a person a Christian and that is what matters first and above all.*”

I want to say straightaway that there is nothing in this temptation to absolutize experience or other things above doctrine and ethics that is unique to our charismatic brethren. This danger, this error is an equal opportunity temptation! We can easily draw attention to how we think the charismatics stumble here – how doctrinal and ethical fundamentals are slighted, even emptied of significance for the sake of common experience and common emotion – (it is natural to draw out this point because, after all, Paul *is* talking about tongues speaking) but, we, we in the non-

charismatic part of the evangelical church, and the Reformed and Presbyterian part, are as likely to make that mistake, and have made it in our own distinct ways. Indeed, we make it today in a variety of ways. We are always tempted, the Devil is always after us to reshape our understanding of the faith, to give it a twist, so that it is no longer what it ought to be, no longer what the Bible describes it to be, no longer the faith that holds promise of the fullest and richest blessing of the Holy Spirit. We often see this problem of misplaced priorities in life. I've been reading some civil war history of late. This was the problem with Gen. George McClellan, the northern General for the first half of the war. He was great at organizing an army and he gave great emphasis to that. He was terrific at supplying an army. And he emphasized that. But he couldn't and didn't fight the army. But that is a serious deficiency in a general, for which organization and supply and even morale are no substitute. We can absolutize a lifestyle over the confession of our holy faith and the practice of an obedient life, we can absolutize doctrinal formulations themselves over the true and heartfelt confession of faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ – that is we can talk theology instead of truly confessing it and living by it – or we can do what they did in Corinth and absolutize a particular form of experience of a particular emotional expression and place these things – whether we see ourselves to be doing so or not – above true faith and an obedient life. Or, as many evangelicals have, we can define real Christianity in terms of a particular experience of conversion.

The Christian life is full of the experience of God, of deep, rich, soul-stirring, heart-breaking, joy, peace and love producing experience. Let no one think that we favor an emotionless Christianity. The Bible is a book of the deepest emotion. Paul himself says that the kingdom of God is a matter of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. We are commanded to mourn and to rejoice. In the Bible we are treated to many accounts of the deep emotional life of God's people. Let no one take our crown in demanding that true Christian living reach deeply into the emotions and be characterized by profound experiences of joy and sorrow, contrition and peace, loathing and love, longing and satisfaction.

But, it is very interesting and important to observe how little the Bible rests anything on these emotional experiences. We are hardly ever told how someone *felt* about something, or what his *experience* was when he was converted or baptized. The Bible never teaches us to judge our faith by what sort of experiences we had. Emotions can be counterfeit, experiences can be parroted or misinterpreted. And we know that very devout Christians have had very different measures of certain experiences of the faith. Some have had much more joy and others more sorrow; some much more peace and others much more fear. Some dramatic and sudden conversions, and multitudes grew up in the faith from their infancy.

That is why these things do not come first. And they are not what all believers completely and absolutely share. At the bottom, where all believers are the same, is the confession of our faith and the obedience of our lives. That is Paul's point. You may have this measure of experience or that. You may be treated to more ecstasy or more peace or more heart-break for spiritual reasons than the next brother or sister. But at the point of the confession of Christ's Lordship and the obligation to live in obedience to his commandments you are exactly the same as everyone else. At the foundation, we are all one! Our experiences may differ, but our believing and obeying is to be the same. Doctrine and ethics are at the bottom and come first and define our Christianity. And it is always the Devil's work to put something else there instead, and the

more biblical the thing the more insidious the temptation. That is the large point that Paul is making here. Confess, really confess with heart, mind, and strength, that Jesus is Lord, and then live in obedience to him, in that obedience that requires you to love your brethren – really, practically, sacrificially – and your neighbor as yourself – do that and you are a practicing Christian and have God’s approval.

You see, even if tongues were really being spoken today by the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul’s point is that other things still would come first and be much more important. Why he is willing to face people with these gifts and ask them whether they are sure they are Christians at all! Whether you have gifts and powers says nothing about your faithfulness as a Christian. That is Paul’s precise point in these chapters. The essentials are your confession of Christ and the obedience of your life coming out of that confession of Jesus as Lord. If those things are wanting, no gift can make up for the lack. If those things are present, the gift will find its proper place in your life and its proper use in the blessing of others.

Always doctrine and ethics: always confession of faith and obedience of life. Let nothing ever come before that or replace that or diminish the importance of that foundation!