

Study 16: 1st Corinthians Chapter 12

Introduction

Throughout the latter chapters, Paul is specifically addressing the problems of order in the church. He now turns to spiritual gifts. In chapter 12, He tells us what the gifts are and how they are used. In chapter 13 he tells us that they will be replaced with something else. In chapter 14 he tells us how the gifts were to be administered in the church.

Body of the Study

The introduction to the issue

Where did the gifts come from?

What are the gifts?

The analogy of a body

The problem with the gifts in Corinth

God's order in the church

What is to follow?

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *How does Paul relate the common experience that all of the Corinthians shared (vs 12-13)?*
- *How did the miracles that Jesus did, differ from the miracles of the apostles? (What was different about their purposes?)*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapters 13 in preparation for next week.

Notes for study 16: Chapter 12

Introduction

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Body of the Study

The introduction to the issue

Spiritual gifts were apparently something that the Corinthians had written to Paul asking about in their letter to him, and he now addresses the issue after having answered some of their other questions. The length of time that Paul spends (three chapters, two of them reasonably long) would suggest that this was an issue of great significance in the Corinthian church. It may have been the major issue that has caused the divisions amongst them. He certainly mentions it in the introduction to the letter (1:1:7), although not in the close.

Spiritual gifts were extant in the early church. We might get the impression that miracles were everywhere throughout bible history, but whilst they are interspersed throughout the bible, we find major clusters of them at discreet periods. For example, at the time of Moses releasing the children of Israel from captivity in Egypt. Through these supernatural acts – which could only have come from God – we see Him establishing and declaring His power and authority over Egypt and the support and guidance of His people. Some time later, when the people had rejected God by turning to idolatry, another cluster of miracles occurs performed by Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and Daniel. We find the next grouping arising with the coming of Jesus as the Messiah in the New Testament, which proved Him to be who he said that He was (Jn 3:2). Lastly, another cluster of miracles comes in the church of the first century.

When the church was established (on the day of Pentecost in AD33 –Acts 2:1; 47) the New Testament had not been written. If we today, want to know what God wants, we need only go to the New Testament, and there we can read His revealed word. The New Testament churches, were unable to do that for a number of years. Paul's first letter (1st Thessalonians) was written around AD52 – some twenty years after the cross. The Revelation of John was the last book to be written. Its date is disputed date, some claiming an early date would put it around AD65, and those claiming a later date would put it around AD90. The synoptic gospels were written in the late 50's to early 60's, with John's gospel much later (probably in the 90's).

In its infancy, the early church received instruction directly from the apostles (Acts 2:42; 6:2). The problem arose with the diaspora (the dispersion), when the christians fled, probably back to their homelands (Acts 8:1,4; 11:19; 2:5,9-11). At once, they were no longer able to be under the direct teaching of the apostles. They certainly would have retained some of the things that they had learned and had been taught, but the problems arise when new things come up. What are they to do? How would they know what God would want?

At almost exactly the same time as the diaspora we find that miraculous spiritual gifts begin to be extended to the church. A close reading of the book of Acts will show (we did this in my Acts study, for those who have sat through my classes – if not, then read carefully the early chapters of Acts for yourself) that until chapter 6, ALL of the miracles performed were done by the apostles. (Acts 2:43; 3:1-8; 5:12). Then a problem of administration arose in the Jerusalem church in Acts chapter 6. Seven deacons were chosen to carry out the administration work, and the apostles layed their hands on them (Acts 6:5-6). The laying on of hands was a sign of approval, and the formal appointment to the work. But it also imparted the miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit, and enabled those who received the spiritual gift to perform miraculous signs and deeds.

Of the seven chosen deacons, we know nothing more about five of them. Of the two that we do know (Stephen and Philip) we find them both performing miracles after the laying on of the apostles hands (Acts 6:8; 8:6). The miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit was imparted through the laying on of the apostles hands (Acts 8:17-18), and although those who had the gifts could exercise it, they could not pass it on to others.

John was the last of the apostles to die (AD100), and if he passed on the gift to someone else shortly before he died, by the mid to late 2nd century the gifts had all died out – purely because the ability to pass on the gifts had died out. But, as we will see in our studies, the need for the gifts also died out just before that time.

This sets the background for our studies of the spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church.

Where did the gifts come from?

Many of the Corinthians had come from a polytheistic background (poly = many, theistic = god). A very natural conclusion regarding the different manifestations of the spiritual gifts would be that each different gift had come from a different god. Paul brings them to the unity and consistency of the spiritual gifts by pointing them to the unity of the Godhead “...no one speaking by the Spirit of God (*The Holy Spirit – GO*) calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit...” (1:12:3 NKJV). The word translated Lord – *kyrios* – is in the LXX (the Septuagint) translated from YHWY – Jehovah. Paul here does two things. He firstly brings the three parts of the Godhead into unity and harmony, and secondly expresses the spiritual gifts in both a negative and a positive sense.

Although the gifts are different, and have different manifestations, they have all come from the same God by the same Holy Spirit. Whilst there are differences in the manifestations, the important thing is that they work together for the common good of the church (1:12:4-7).

What are the gifts?

The word of wisdom	The ability to be wise and discerning in dealing with the situations that arise in the church
The word of knowledge	Revealing knowledge from God on teaching and doctrinal matters
Faith	“Faithfulness” – the ability to withstand under hardships including martyrdom
Healings	An expressly outward gift that allowed the possessor to heal other’s sicknesses
Working of miracles	Another expressly outward gift that demonstrated God’s power and authority
Prophecy	An inspired spokesperson for God – sometimes to predict future events
Discerning of spirits	The ability to know whether the apparent spiritual gift that another person has was genuinely from God, or was a demon or from satan
Different kinds of tongues	The ability to speak in languages that the person had not learned
Interpretation of tongues	The ability to understand and interpret languages that the person had not learned

We have very little knowledge about many of the gifts, however, we can see from their name or description how they might help and be used in the local congregation. Some of this of course is speculation as Paul has not told us the details.

God, in the person of the Holy Spirit gives the gifts. What gift the recipient receives is entirely at the Spirit's discretion. The fact that the gifts are different does not mean that they have come from different gods (1:12:11).

The analogy of a body

Our physical bodies are made up of different “members” – body parts. We have arms, and legs, fingers, toes, ears, eyes, noses etc etc. All of the body parts have different functions. The functions are not *exclusive*, but are *complimentary* ie the foot has a different function than the hand, and without the foot to take us to the fridge, the hand isn't a lot of use in retrieving the Tim-Tams! In the same way, the foot isn't a lot of use without the hand. It is not *one or the other*, but rather both of them working together. All of our body works together for the good of the whole.

The body example that Paul uses is one that we all can relate to. We might think that the (seemingly) lesser parts of our bodies aren't much use at all. What good is a little finger, or little toe? But try hitting one of them with a hammer and see whether or not you think it is important. Right at that moment (and for quite a few moments to follow) it will be the most important member of your body. At least it will seem like it at the time!

In exactly the same way, the spiritual body – the church (Eph 1:22-23) works together as a whole when the different functions each effectively contribute their part. It was God who decided what members should have what gift, and His prerogative alone (1:12:18).

Paul is using the example to make the point about the spiritual gifts. They are as different from one another as an eye and an ear, or a hand and a foot. Yet, they all work together in harmony in the same way as a well functioning body. He uses exactly the same example in Romans 12:4-18 but there he is discussing (primarily) *natural* gifts rather than *miraculous* ones.

The problem with the gifts in Corinth

The first hint that Paul gives towards the problem is 1:12:18 – it was God who decided who would get what gifts. Apparently the Corinthians were boasting about the gifts that they had, which ones were better, and who had the best ones. This exactly aligns with the introduction to the letter from 1:1:12-13 that Paul says he has figuratively transferred to himself and Apollos. The Corinthians had become puffed up about these things (1:4:6).

Those who had gifts that appeared to be better than others, (apparently) were saying that the “lesser” gifts weren't needed “...*the eye saying to the hand ... (and) the head to the feet ...I have no need of you...*” (1:12:21). In direct contrast, Paul brings them right back to the point that those gifts that seem to be less important are necessary (1:12:22).

The principle has direct application of us. There are different roles that we all have in the church. Some (such as preaching, teaching or song leading) are more prominent than others. But there are other practical roles too – such as praying for the work, praying for others, and inviting people to study, or practicing hospitality by inviting visitors for a meal. These roles are every bit as important as the more prominent ones, and they all work together to enable the church to function effectively (compare Eph 4:16).

Coming back to the point in Corinth, Paul says:

“...*there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it...*” (1:12:25-26 NIV)

Reading between the lines, we can see that those who had the more prominent positions had neglected those who were less prominent. They had not bonded together in the same way that the different parts of our bodies are integrally entwined.

By application, we should be so much bonded and welded together that we feel the hurt, the sorrow, the grief, and the joy that the other members of the church are feeling. This is a big ask, and one that takes a lifetime to achieve. But it is exactly the achievement of such a bond that prepares us for our relationships with our brethren in the life to come.

God's order in the church

It was God who gave the gifts, and He put the order and authority on those whom he willed. The order is similar to Eph 4:11. The apostles had the first place of authority (c/f Jn 15:20), and the things that they said and spoke, they spoke with God's full authority (1:7:10; 1:14:37).

The prophets were second, and subject to the apostles. They were inspired spokespersons for God, and so the things that they spoke (and wrote) were just as much commandments of God as the things the apostles said and wrote. Remember that Jesus spent three years with the apostles as He taught them all of the things that they needed to know to be equipped for their world-changing mission. The prophets had not had this training, and (in my view) was the reason for their lesser role compared to the apostles. Whilst the apostles were fully equipped, the prophets were only as equipped as the specific revelation that God had given them. In the New Testament writings, we have the gospels of Mark and Luke, the book of Acts, The letter to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James (possibly), and the Epistle of Jude (possibly) that were not written by the apostles, but by the prophets.

Teachers are third. Paul places the role of a teacher (a natural gift – not one of the miraculous ones that he has discussed) above the roles of the miraculous gifts. The reason will become obvious in chapter 14, and it is because we need to *understand* what we hear and be *built up* (edified) by it. Thomas Edison once said, "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration". Those who had the miraculous gifts gained their knowledge by *inspiration*. The teachers gained their knowledge by *perspiration*. Apollos was such a man. He was "...eloquent and mighty in the scriptures..." (Acts 18:24) and had to have gained his knowledge by study of God's word (the Old Testament, as hardly anything of the New Testament had been written at that time).

After these roles, Paul places the miraculous gifts. Again he places some order to them – miracles *then* gifts of healing. Interestingly, he places the gift of tongues last on the list. From what he says in chapter 14, it is probable that the Corinthians were exalting the gift of tongues as one of the best gifts, but Paul places it last. More on this in chapter 14.

What is to follow?

The gifts were for a purpose. He outlines the gifts here, and then discusses their purpose in chapter 14. He notes that the gifts were something that the Corinthians should desire to have, and that they should earnestly want to have the best gifts.

But Paul says that something better – more excellent – was going to come. The gifts were temporal – they only existed for a while until something better could come along. In chapter 13 he discusses what that is.