

“Jesus is Lord”

The Twenty-First in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:1-3; Habakkuk 2:2-20

First century Corinth was dominated by paganism. The church to which Paul is writing his first Corinthian letter had been founded by Paul just a few years earlier, and most of the members of this church were new Christians, struggling to live the Christian life in the midst of a pagan culture. From the things we have seen throughout our study of this letter, apparently the Corinthians understood the gospel—they were justified before God through the merits of Jesus Christ received through faith alone. But the Corinthians were struggling with leaving behind those pagan ways of thinking and doing which saturated their culture and which characterized their lives before becoming Christians. Their struggle and their culture were surprisingly very much like our own. The Corinth of 55 A.D. was very much like contemporary Southern California.

We now turn to 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul addresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church and its members. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:11, certain members of Chloe’s family (who were members of the Corinthian church) had arrived in Ephesus, where Paul was staying when he wrote this letter. Chloe’s family reported to Paul that a number of troubling things were going on back in Corinth. Sadly, there were factions and divisions forming within the church. Some were claiming, “I follow Paul.” Others, “I follow Peter.” Others still, “I follow Apollos.” There was even a group boasting, “I follow Jesus.”

Paul condemns this behavior in no uncertain terms. Paul reminds the Corinthians that he had proclaimed the gospel to them—in which the wisdom and power of God were clearly revealed. The gospel exposed the so-called “wisdom” of Greco-Roman paganism for the foolishness that it was. Paul explained that it was the Holy Spirit who brought the Corinthians to faith in Jesus Christ, and then formed these individual believers into the living temple of God in which the Holy Spirit dwells. Because the church is the living temple of the Holy Spirit, no one should seek to divide it. This means that the factions which had formed in Corinth were not the work of the Holy Spirit, but a manifestation of that sinful behavior the pagans considered to be “wisdom.”

Paul also learned of sexual immorality in the church—one man was even sleeping with his father’s wife. Paul instructs the church to excommunicate the man immediately. Paul has also learned that professing Christians were suing each other in the city’s public courts, instead of seeking to resolve their disputes in private, as instructed by Jesus in Matthew 18. Paul has also heard that members of this church were still engaging in sexuality immorality in the city’s many temples—which were nothing more than brothels under the guise of pagan religion. Again, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are indwelt by God’s Spirit and are the Spirit’s temple, therefore they are to glorify God in their bodies. All such sexual immorality must cease because to engage in sexual sin is to sin against one’s own body in which the Holy Spirit dwells—explaining why the guilt and shame of sexual sin can be so great.

Beginning in chapter 7, Paul addresses a group of questions put to him by the Corinthians in the form of a letter—to which this letter (which we know as First Corinthians) is Paul’s response. Paul responds to these written questions by dealing first with the question put to him about the importance and the role of marriage. He reminds the Corinthians that during times of trial and uncertainty—such as they were currently facing—it was good for them to remain as they were when they were called to faith. If currently

single, stay that way. If an unbelieving spouse leaves, let them go. Then, from 1 Corinthians 8:1-10:22, Paul has been dealing with matters regarding the proper worship of God. Paul has forbidden the Corinthians from participating in any form of idolatry, like that which went on in any of the large number of pagan temples which filled the city. Next, the apostle dealt with several issues related to the worship then going on in the Corinthian congregation. One issue is the proper understanding of preaching (prophecy), and a second is the proper celebration of the Lord's Supper—requiring a stern rebuke from Paul about the way in which the Corinthians were abusing the Lord's Supper, to the point of risking the judgment of God.

The next section beginning in verse one of chapter twelve of First Corinthians—the passage we take up this morning—constitutes Paul's response to a third issue which been raised by the Corinthians in their letter. This matter is very important, since it has to do with what it means to be spiritual—which is a subject especially important to a church such as the one in Corinth which was surrounded by pagan “spirituality.”¹ Although Paul does not tell us what the Corinthians said to him in their letter, from the subject matter in chapter 14, the primary issue seems to be the abuse of speaking in tongues. By working our way back from Paul's discussion there, we can see how Paul's comments in chapters 12-13, set the stage for what comes in chapter 14.²

Some background here is important. In Greco-Roman culture it was commonly thought that certain enlightened individuals were in touch with the gods and endowed with unusual spiritual powers, like predicting the future, talking to the dead, pronouncing curses, etc. Given the close proximity of the Oracle of Delphi to the city of Corinth—a temple dedicated to Apollo where the faithful would receive direction from the gods—and given the large number of pagan temples in the city, this notion that certain individuals possessed great spiritual insight, was no doubt widely held among the people throughout the area. Many of those thought to possess these divine powers and abilities would offer up ecstatic utterances (like tongues), engage in religious frenzies, they would fall into trances, and so on, all during temple festivities. Among those religious groups we consider proto-gnostic (those looking for “secret knowledge” and the hidden keys to the meaning of life), such individuals were often designated “enthusiasts” and were characterized by their various public outbursts and extreme practices.³

Although Old Testament prophets were given divine revelation through dreams, visions and other divine manifestations, Pentecost marked a new age in redemptive-history in which the Spirit of God was poured out upon all believers—not just a few enlightened individuals. In fact, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is that which characterizes those who are in Christ, since those in whom the Spirit dwells have been transferred from sin, death and bondage to the law, to that freedom in Christ in which we are now seen as adopted sons or daughters of Christ and heirs to all the riches and treasures of heaven. While some Christians—especially the apostles—manifested sensational gifts after Pentecost (such as speaking in tongues, along with gifts of healing and miracles which confirm the preaching of the gospel), the primary manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit was the production of the so-called “fruit of the Spirit” as mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. The fruit of the Spirit stood in sharp contrast to the “fruit of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19-21) which characterized individuals prior to their conversion.

¹ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 570.

² Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 571-4.

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 162.

It is not dramatic and sensational demonstrations of spirituality or “enthusiasm” which characterize the gifts of the Spirit, but more seemingly ordinary and mundane things that have more to do with the transformed behavior of individual Christians. Paul will explain how Christians are to view the “spiritual” through the lens of the age to come, and not through the lens of this present evil age which was tied to the so-called wisdom of the pagans. This would have been another area where Paul would need to correct the misconceptions of those who grew up with a pagan spirituality, and who were apt to simply transfer pagan behavior and spirituality into the church. This, perhaps, is why speaking in tongues has come to cause division in the church and did not bring about the edification intended for the whole body of believers.

Remarkably, Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts begins with an affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This may come as a surprise at first—as one writer puts it, “this opening paragraph seems quite unrelated to the topic at hand”⁴—but nevertheless, the more we think about it, the more we should expect this of Paul. The apostle’s focus is upon the Corinthian’s former condition as spiritual idolaters in contrast to that freedom they now experience in Christ. Someone who does not submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, does not manifest the gifts of the Spirit. Indeed, they cannot manifest the gifts of the Spirit. The Lordship of Christ, therefore, is Paul’s starting point for all subsequent discussion of spiritual gifts. Understanding who Jesus is and what he has done for us is the key by which we determine whether or not these manifestations “of enthusiasm” are truly gifts of the Spirit.

While there are many gifts of the Spirit, Paul emphasizes that each one of these gifts contributes to the well-being of the mystical body of Jesus Christ (the church). But the most excellent of these gifts is love—Paul’s subject in chapter 13. This means that as spiritual gifts are exercised within the church, these gifts are to be exercised so as to edify the body and build-up the individual members of the church so that the church as a whole is the beneficiary. The tip-off that pagan wisdom is involved in this is when the supposed supernatural manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit benefits a particular individual (enabling them to show off their spirituality or their power), not the church as a whole.

No doubt, that for Paul, the manifestation of sensational gifts have an important place in the church—but the preeminent role belongs to love, the greatest of gifts.⁵ This, of course, would certainly differentiate Christianity from those pagan religions which stressed dramatic personal religious experience, while ignoring the corporate dimension of spiritual gifts which build up the church, enable us to love one another as Jesus has loved us and which do not tear down what Christ has been building-up in our midst.

So, with that bit of background in mind, let us consider the starting point for Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts—the identity of Jesus Christ who is Lord of his church. The purpose of spiritual gifts—which are distributed among the members of Christ’s body—is to bring glory to Jesus Christ through the building up of the church and the edification of God’s people. Given paganism’s stress upon religious “enthusiasm” which emphasizes individual religious experience, such is absolutely detrimental to the health of the church because it disrupts the divinely prescribed order in the church. Those so-called “gifts of the spirit” which do not exalt Jesus Christ by building up his church, cannot be said to be true gifts of the Spirit.

⁴ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 574.

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 162-163.

In verse 1, Paul writes, “*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.*” The opening words of this verse (*de Peri*—now concerning) indicate to us that Paul is beginning a new topic (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:1). We do not know what exactly the Corinthians asked of Paul in their letter but Paul’s rather lengthy response (which runs all the way from chapters 12:1-14:40) indicates that the issue they raised with Paul was a matter of pressing significance to the peace and well-being of the Corinthian congregation. This is why Paul responds to these issues in such great detail.

Paul speaks of the spiritual (*tōn pneumatikōn*) and the term “gifts” is added to most English translations because of the context (e.g. both the NIV, ESV)—“spiritual gifts.” But I take Paul to be speaking of “spiritual things” since the usual word for spiritual gifts is *charismatōn*, not *pneumatikōn*. This means that Paul’s topic in these three chapters is a proper understanding of spiritual things, of which the proper use of spiritual gifts plays a major role (especially that of the gift of tongues, which has caused such a problem in the Corinthian church). That Paul speaks of his readers here as “brothers” indicates that while Paul will have some words of rebuke and correction, nevertheless he is writing to people whom he knows well and loves deeply.

In any case, the primary reason for Paul’s subsequent discussion is that he does not want to Corinthians to be ignorant about “spiritual things” (a discussion not just limited to spiritual gifts). Throughout Paul’s writings, the phrase “*I do not want you to be uninformed*” indicates that what follows will be of some significance (cf. Romans 1:13; 11:25; 1 Corinthians 10:1; 12:1; 2 Corinthians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). Whenever we see this statement in one of Paul’s letters, we know to pay close attention to what follows.

In verse 2, Paul reminds the Corinthians from where they have come. “*You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.*” Paul speaks of *ethne* (pagans), a word which is usually translated as nations or Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews). But the context indicates that Paul is speaking to his readers of a time before their conversion, hence “pagans” is a very appropriate rendering.⁶ Before coming to faith in Jesus Christ these Gentiles were led astray by idols. Biblically understood, the essence of paganism is to be deceived by things that are not real. It is interesting that the verb and participle Paul uses here (*ēgesthe*) are used elsewhere in the New Testament to convey the idea of a prisoner or a condemned person being led away under the control and direction of another (cf. Mark 14:44; 15:16). In other words, paganism held the Corinthians captive before Christ set them free.

When Paul portrays paganism as holding people captive to lifeless idols, he may be thinking of Israel’s struggle with idolatry, since there are echoes in Paul’s words here from Habakkuk 2:18-19, part of our Old Testament lesson—“*What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.*” Despite their great intellectual ability, the Greek pagans did not come to idolatry because of intellectual reasons—i.e., they were convinced of the truth of paganism. Rather, Paul treats them as people who didn’t know any better.⁷

Notice yet again the great irony in this—those who profess themselves to be wise are shown to be utterly foolish in light of the true wisdom which God has revealed in Jesus Christ. The wise are shamed and

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 164.

⁷ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 164.

those whom the world regards as “foolish” (the followers of Jesus) are those set free from being held captive by things not real. “Can this statue without breath teach?” Paul mocks these idols because they are “mute” (or dumb). Graven images are unable to speak nor answer the prayers of those who worship them. They could reveal nothing to those who came to them seeking wisdom and insight. This means that the ultimate reality of the idol is the reflection back to us from the surface of the idol. Paul reminds his hearers that before they came to faith in Jesus Christ, they were being led to idols who couldn’t speak nor provide any of the things they were seeking. Why, then, would the Corinthians still be behaving as though the idols were real?

This leads Paul to his primary point in verse 3. “*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.*” Thinking they truly understood spiritual things, the Corinthians actually knew nothing and were being led to seek speechless idols which could do absolutely nothing for them. The key here is that what we affirm and confess about spiritual things reveals whether or not we are being lead astray or have been given true wisdom.

In this first instance, Paul refers to someone who utters the phrase, “Jesus is accursed” (*anathema*). The circumstances behind this utterance are a matter of some speculation. Jews were known to have cursed Christians (as recounted in Acts 26:11), and early church historians such as Eusebius recount that pagans often demanded that Christians curse Christ (i.e. renounce their faith), or else suffer persecution (being prevented from buying and selling). Some believe that Paul’s words are purely rhetorical—that no one really uttered these words, but that Paul is making a point (i.e. the only way a true profession of faith can be uttered is through the work of the Holy Spirit).

Leon Morris offers an interesting take on this verse which may provide the answer. He is of the opinion that since the gospel entails Christ becoming a curse for us (cf. Galatians 3:13), that someone speaking in an ecstatic utterance in the Corinthian church ended-up distorting the truth behind these words, and claimed to be doing so by the leading of the Holy Spirit.⁸ The assertion, Jesus was cursed by God while on the cross, became “Jesus is the accursed one” (without the necessary qualifications).

While the underlying circumstances behind this utterance probably will never be known to us, Paul’s point is simply that the words themselves (i.e., “on their face”) prove that this utterance did not come from God the Holy Spirit. While Jesus was accursed by God while suffering upon the cross, the resurrection proves that Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of his father. Jesus’ acceptance by God (the vindication of his saving work upon the cross and in fulfilling all righteousness) means that Jesus is Lord over all things. The Holy Spirit would never deny the Lordship of Christ. In fact, the exact opposite is true. It is the Holy Spirit who leads us to affirm the Lordship of Christ, something the Corinthians could never do when they were being led astray by dumb idols.

While even Satan knows that Jesus is Lord and can utter the words “Jesus is Lord” (so can the arch-heretic Kenneth Copeland), Paul’s point is that the expression “Jesus is Lord” becomes a true confession of faith, only through the power of the Holy Spirit, who regenerates, creates faith, and who grants wisdom and understanding into divine things which would otherwise be hidden. No Christian would ever say Christ is accursed in such a fashion as to deny his Lordship. Only someone who becomes a Christian through the power of the Holy Spirit can utter the words “Jesus is Lord” with the full sense of

⁸ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 165.

meaning, and as a confession of faith in Jesus' redemptive work through which his lordship is manifest. To confess that Jesus is Lord is to confess that he is the creator and redeemer, and the supreme revelation of the wisdom and the power of God.

The assertion of Christ's Lordship then, is the basis for properly understanding the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For Paul, to confess Jesus as Lord is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. To be "in Christ" and "filled the with Spirit" are one and the same. But what does it mean to confess that "Jesus is Lord"? As Christians, these words roll easily off our lips, but what do they mean?

In order to understand spiritual things (the *pneumatikon*)—the main point of Paul's discussion of this section of Corinthians—we must understand that Jesus is the very Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, his eternal glory now veiled in human flesh. If we want wisdom, we will find it in the person and work of the Son of God. We cannot find such wisdom anywhere else, not in our culture, not in secret principles of wisdom, the principles of a successful life, or in discovering some sort of untapped human potential buried within. Our culture chases after these things—just as the ancient Greek and Romans did. When we profess that Jesus is Lord, we are saying that in him, and in him alone, God has revealed everything we need to know how to be saved from the guilt and power of sin, as well as that wisdom which God has revealed to rescue us from dumb idols which can do nothing to help us.

Since it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to make this confession, in these verses Paul sets forth one of the clearest declarations in all the Bible that the only reason any of us are Christians is because God the Holy Spirit enabled us to confess that Jesus is Lord. While the fallen children of Adam (non-Christians) can speak the words (so can the devil), the only way this becomes a heart-felt confession of faith is through the indwelling Holy Spirit—not just that Jesus is Lord, but that Jesus is *my* Lord.

It is the Holy Spirit who makes us alive when we were dead in sin. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates us, indwells us, unites us to the same Jesus who now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven, and it is the same blessed Holy Spirit who seals us until the day of redemption. But it is Jesus who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit when we come to faith, and it is the Spirit of Jesus who gives gifts to God's people to build them up into one body—the temple of the Holy Spirit which is the church of Jesus Christ. The connection between the person and work of Jesus Christ and that of the Holy Spirit is profound.

To truly confess that Jesus is Lord is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The sure sign that someone is indwelt by the Spirit, is their confession—"Jesus is Lord." Therefore, to understand spiritual things, we start with the person and work of Christ, just as the apostle Paul did. When we confess "Jesus is Lord," we are confessing that Jesus is *my* Lord. We can do this only because the Holy Spirit enables us to do so. And it is this confession which enables us to understand spiritual things, including the gifts of the Spirit.

So, beloved let us confess that Jesus is Lord. He is our creator, redeemer, and the source of true wisdom. And the only reason we can say this is because of the enabling work of the Holy Spirit.