

# “The Common Good”

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

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Joel 2:18-32*

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The church in Corinth was struggling with a number of issues. When they asked Paul a question about spiritual gifts and speaking in tongues, Paul answers their question by taking up a discussion of spiritual things (*pneumatikon*). Paul informs them that in order to understand spiritual things, a Christian must first confess that Jesus is Lord through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. A Christian must believe that Jesus is the Lord of all things and the very Son of God, whose death saves us from the guilt and power of sin, and whose righteousness is imputed to us through the means of faith. For Paul, knowing and confessing that Jesus is Lord, is the starting point when it comes to understanding spiritual things (the *pneumatikon*). We must understand spiritual things so that we understand spiritual gifts (the so-called *charismata*), including the role of speaking in tongues.

As we continue our series on 1 Corinthians, we have reached chapter 12 where Paul seeks to answer a question the Corinthians had put to him in a letter which reached the Apostle while he was in Ephesus. Although Paul doesn’t tell us what their question was, it must of had something to do with speaking in tongues, since this is the subject of a lengthy discussion in chapter 14. In chapters 12-13, Paul is laying the ground work for dealing with that subject by addressing how we as Christians are to understand “spiritual things.” Understanding spiritual things enables us to speak properly about spiritual gifts and to realize that the greatest of the Spirit’s gifts is not the ability to speak in tongues, but the ability to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, the subject of chapter 13.

Having affirmed the Lordship of Christ as the foundation for the discussion of spiritual things in verses 1-3 of chapter 12 (our subject last time), Paul continues to deal with the specific question asked by the Corinthians. At this point, Paul takes up a discussion of spiritual gifts. While there is one Lord (Jesus) and one Holy Spirit, there are many spiritual gifts given to those within the church. Each of these individual Christians who is given a particular spiritual gift plays a vital role in the building up of the body of Christ because these gifts are given for the common good, as Paul puts it.

In verses 4-11 of chapter 12, Paul describes how genuine Christian unity is based upon the fact that there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, and one common divine purpose for spiritual gifts. Therefore, the only way to make sense of spiritual gifts, is to understand the unity of Christ’s body, and how these gifts serve the purpose of building up that one body. This flies in the face of the pagan understanding of spiritual things which saw such so-called “spirituality” as centering in someone’s religious experiences, or in the ability to predict the future, speak to the dead, or pronounce or remove blessings and curses. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that spiritual gifts are not about Christians as individuals, but about the well-being of Christ’s church as a whole.

Yet there is diversity here as well, seen in the fact that the same Holy Spirit distributes a variety of spiritual gifts to the various individuals within the church. Not everyone receives the same gifts since a multitude of different gifts make Christ’s body as a whole that much stronger. Therefore, there is both unity (one body, one Christ, one Spirit, one purpose for spiritual gifts) and diversity in the church (each member of the body being given different gifts). In verses 12-26 (our subject next time) Paul will address the subject of the body of Christ and focus upon the diversity among its members, before he addresses the subject of certain offices in the church and how these offices relate to spiritual gifts in

verses 27-31.<sup>1</sup> Unless we understand the gifts of the Spirit in relationship to the body of Christ, we cannot understand either their purpose or the manner in which God's gifts are to be exercised.

It is a shame that we don't allow for two-hour sermons in our churches today, because chapters 12-14 is one long running argument and these chapters should be tackled as a whole. Unfortunately we must address it in small segments. So, even though we will several sermons to chapter 12, we need to be careful not to miss the forest through the trees. You cannot talk about gifts of the Spirit (the *charismata*), without talking about the unity of Christ's body. And you cannot talk about spiritual gifts without understanding spiritual things (the *pneumatikon*). And you cannot understand spiritual things unless you understand that Jesus is Lord, and that the church is his body. These things are all inter-connected.

So, as we struggle to keep the big picture before us, in verses 4-11 Paul takes up the subject of the unity of Christ's body and diversity of the distribution of the gifts of the Spirit. In verse 4, Paul writes, "*now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.*" The word the ESV translates as "varieties," comes from a root word which means to divide. The gifts of the Spirit are divided (we might say "divvied up") among the members of the church. These Gifts of the Spirit are known as the *charismata*—the root of the word *charismata* is *charis* or grace. The term refers to those extraordinary endowments which the Holy Spirit confers upon individuals within the church, specifically for the purpose of building up of the body of Christ. While these gifts may be related to the natural abilities people already have (in the sense of the supernatural enhancement of natural gifts), Paul's comments throughout this section emphasize the fact that the *charismata* are divine (or supernatural) endowments given specifically for the building-up of the church and the edification of its members.<sup>2</sup>

Given the pagan mind-set of many of the Corinthian Christians who are now struggling to think like Christians, many Corinthians selfishly boasted about possessing God's gifts, or else used them in an inappropriate manner—which we'll cover when we get to chapter 14. An inappropriate manner would be to call attention to oneself, to use these gifts as a pretense to divide the body (creating factions), or as a means of religious self-gratification. The gifts of the Holy Spirit which were intended to bring unity to the Corinthian church and to build up Christ's body were instead becoming a source of sinful pride and division. Paul's point is that since the same Holy Spirit who gives these gifts also called the Corinthians to faith in Jesus Christ and included them in the church, the proper understanding and utilization of these gifts is to bring greater unity to the church, not more division.

That this is the issue becomes clear in the next verse (v. 5). "*And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord.*" That there are different varieties of service points to the role and function of spiritual gifts, namely the service of others. The word for service is based on the same word from which we get our word deacon (one who serves). Paul's point is that while there are different ways to serve one another, we should never forget that there is but one Lord whom we all serve. Serving one another is the divinely-appointed result of the distribution of supernatural gifts among the members of the congregation. Therefore, we should not make the mistake that the Corinthians made and assume that the more spectacular the gift, the more important the person who possesses it. Since Jesus is Lord, the recipient of Christ's gifts cannot be greater than the Lord who gave him the gift.

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<sup>1</sup> See the summation in Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 582-586.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 165.

If the end (goal) of these gifts (the *charismata*) is the service of others, then we should not depreciate what may appear mundane and unglamorous in the eyes of the world.<sup>3</sup> This is exactly what the enthusiasts among them were doing—belittling the service of others by boasting about their own gifts and claiming that it was the Holy Spirit who instructed individuals to disrupt the normal order of worship. The Greco-Roman fascination with individuals who possessed spectacular spiritual “powers” is what made the Corinthians so vulnerable to the so-called “super apostles”—a subject Paul takes up in 2 Corinthians 11:1-15.

At this point, Leon Morris reminds us of something quite important, but which is easy for us to overlook. When Paul speaks of “the Lord,” he is speaking of Jesus and affirming that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, as well as using the Greek word (*Kurios*) which is the word used throughout the LXX to translate “Lord.” While Paul does not formally affirm the doctrine of the Trinity in these verses, there are certainly Trinitarian ramifications throughout this entire section. Jesus is spoken of as on a par with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This really is a remarkable point and we can easily overlook it.<sup>4</sup>

In verse 6, Paul continues this line of thought. “*And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.*” Again, the gifts of the Spirit are directly connected to God’s working (his “empowering”). The point is that God is the active party throughout, working in and through these gifts of the Spirit to build up the body of Christ. Building-up not only entails numerical growth (more people becoming Christians) it also means that the Corinthians are strengthened as individuals so that they are better able to resist pagan temptations, and they are also enabled to love one another so that they will serve one another. While these gifts are distributed among the members of the body, they all come from God, who works in and through those in his church. Therefore, the gifts of the Spirit should further God’s purpose, not anyone’s personal agenda.

The reason for God’s activity and gifts is spelled out in the following verse. “*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” The church as a whole benefits from its members who have these different gifts. The gifts of the Spirit are given to “each one,” which means that all of the members of the body of Christ are given at least one gift and it is not unreasonable to conclude that no one individual receives all of them. The fact that these gifts are “manifested” emphasizes divine action—God gives these gifts as he wills, but gives them in such a way that the exercise of these gifts are evident to others. As Paul has been making plain, they are given for the common good. This means that any exercise of the so-called “gifts” must have as its goal the well-being of Christ’s church. Someone who is promoting themselves (in boasting about the greatness of the gift they have, or through religious self-gratification—talking about the sensational religious experiences they have had) is not manifesting the gifts of the Spirit, just as someone speaking by the Spirit cannot say that “Jesus is accursed.”

Beginning in verses 8-10, Paul now enumerates what these gifts are and briefly touches on how these gifts are to be used in the churches. The difficulty here is that some of these gifts are not present (or normative) in the church today. As early as the time of church father Chrysostom (344-407), Christians were wondering about what these gifts entailed, since it was thought that they had long-ceased to operate

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 166.

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in the churches.<sup>5</sup> There are three interpretive options here.

One approach is that of modern Pentecostals who claim that these gifts are still normative today. My question to the Pentecostal who claims that this is the case is simple: “how does what you claim is a manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, match-up with what we actually see going on in the New Testament?” Despite all the claims being made, where are the dramatic miracles, the instantaneous healings, and so on? In the New Testament, these things were done publically in the presence of unbelievers. It seems to me that Pentecostals now focus upon a particular style of worship, not so much on the spectacular miracles they claim occur in their meetings, as was the case just a few years ago.

Another approach is to argue that miraculous gifts (the so-called “sign” gifts or “extra-ordinary gifts”) ceased after the age of the apostles. This approach solves the problem of why these things don’t go on in the church today, but raises questions about the continuity of redemptive history. Where does Paul say such miraculous gifts will cease? He doesn’t. He also doesn’t say they are normative either. The key is that Paul does not ordain new apostles, but pastors, elders and deacons, and these offices do become normative in the church. The third option is to define these gifts so that they are connected to things which go on in the church today, making them far more ordinary and mundane than Pentecostals claim. This approach means we must “de-supernaturalize” these gifts and make them less miraculous than they were during the New Testament era.

My take on this is that there is probably a bit of truth in both of the latter two options. Clearly signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the gospel in new areas, specifically to confirm the truth of the message of the cross. There is no evidence, even in post-apostolic times (after the apostles had died), that these miraculous continued on in the churches once they had been established. And since Paul makes the point rather emphatically that the purpose of these spiritual gifts is to serve others and build up the church, then there is good reason to understand these gifts in terms of the more mundane activities of the church associated with service and love for one another. But, no doubt, this is clearly a difficult and divisive topic and we need to be careful here in some of our assessments.

We can say for sure that these gifts are supernatural in origin—and although possibly enhancements of natural abilities, the emphasis falls upon the supernatural aspect of them. We can also say for sure that the purpose of these gifts is two-fold. One is for the common good for the church. The other is to enable us to love one another as we labor together to build up the body of Christ. Therefore, if we stress continuity between our age and the time of the apostles, then we must connect the miraculous sign gifts to the mission field so as to confirm the gospel, and not make them normative in established churches. If we stress discontinuity between our age and the time of the apostles then we must give some justification for certain gifts which were given for the common good not continuing in the post-apostolic age. I think the key here is to concentrate upon the purposes these gifts served in the apostolic church as the way to navigate these difficult shoals. What role did these gifts play in the New Testament?

In verses 8-10, Paul now enumerates some of these gifts. *“For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.”* Paul mentions various gifts of the Spirit here, but the

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Morris, 1 Corinthians, 167.

list here is not exhaustive because there are other such lists in Paul's letters, notably Romans 12:6-8 and Ephesians 4:11-12. There are profound echoes in this list of gifts from the second chapter of the prophecy of Joel (our Old Testament lesson), in which Joel predicts that the last days would be characterized by the work of God's Spirit poured out upon all believers, not just a few spiritual elites.

It is difficult to determine with precision what some of these gifts actually entailed, which makes the question of cessation of the gifts a difficult one. For one thing, it is just plain wrong-headed to do something with no biblical precedence—like Pat Robertson having “words of knowledge” about people watching the 700 club—and then claim that what you are doing is offering a “word of knowledge” like Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 12. The use of these gifts in Scripture must define how we practice them today, not the other way around. This matter is further complicated by the fact that the difference between some of these gifts is not great (gifts of wisdom and knowledge, and healing and miracles).<sup>6</sup>

The first gift mentioned by Paul is the “message of wisdom” (*logos sophias*) which probably refers to a spoken message of wisdom, in the sense of a Spirit-inspired insight into affairs of life. This is tied to God's perspective on things which worldly wisdom cannot understand. I take this to refer to the Holy Spirit bringing to mind something which we had read in Scripture and which the Holy Spirit now prompts us to mention to others. I can say with a fair bit of certainty that this is not the Holy Spirit giving Pat Robertson a vision of “Martha in Timbuktu with a gigantic goiter” which somehow translates into a reason as to why you too should join the 700 Club and send money to support the broadcast.

The second gift listed is the word of knowledge (*logos gnōseōs*) and probably refers to a Spirit-given insight into the mysteries of God associated with the revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> This, it seems to me, would be connected to teaching, preaching and spiritual counsel. It would be the exact opposite of paganism, which looked for hidden or secret knowledge. What God has done to save us from our sins and reveal to us his wisdom, he has done in public.

The next gift mentioned is faith—but this one is tricky because faith is something that all Christians are given by the Holy Spirit. The difficulty lies in distinguishing this supernatural endowment of faith in light of the justifying faith possessed by all Christians. Since Paul goes on to list healing and miracles almost in the same breath, it is commonly thought that Paul is speaking here of that faith which is connected with the miraculous (either created as a result of the miraculous, or that faith which believes that God will perform the miraculous, thereby bringing it to pass). We cannot be certain.

When Paul speaks of “gifts of healing” (there is no article) he may mean different gifts of healing for different kinds of illnesses, but again it is difficult to tell. We do know that elsewhere in Scripture (Mark 2:1-12; James 5:14-16), healing is directly connected with the forgiveness of sins. We also know that complete and total healing of all diseases and infirmities is promised to all of us on the day of resurrection—but not before. God can and does heal. He can and does allow some of us to be sick and suffer. Why one and not the other? Some are sick because of obvious reasons—smokers get cancer, etc. In other cases, God simply does not tell us. But since Jesus Christ has died for all of our sins, the cruelest thing we can ever do is imply that some poor suffering saint must have done something which angered God and caused God to afflict them.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Perspectives on Pentecost (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980), 51-52.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 167.

Miraculous powers are connected to those miracles which establish the gospel. Here, the Book of Acts should be our guide and these gifts may very well be connected to the mission field and the advance of the gospel. What modern faith-healers call “miracles” have very little to do with what goes on in the New Testament. Jesus and the Apostles performed miracles in public in the presence of unbelievers to confirm the truth of the gospel—they did not perform so-called miracles in stadiums filled with thousands of excited followers hoping to see something . . .

Prophecy is very likely connected to preaching, and is probably a Spirit-given insight into the meaning of the Old Testament (where Christ is hidden in type and shadow) as well as a supernatural boldness in proclaiming that gospel in the face of hostile opposition. The discerning of spirits has to do with determining whether someone is truly a prophet or not. In 1 John 4:1, John warns Christians of the need to make such distinctions because there were false prophets everywhere. Indeed, Jesus himself warns us that the presence of false teachers will one of the characteristics of the inter-advental age (Matthew 24:11). The standard here is simple. Is what teachers teach and what preachers preach in line with the word of God? We know a false prophet to be a false prophet because he speaks lies. We know a false teacher based upon his false doctrine.

Finally, the ability to speak in tongues is often thought to be a divine-enabling to speak a language the speaker does not know, or else an ability to speak the gospel in a known language with great boldness. The gift of interpretation should be understood as a complementary gift (a supernatural ability to translate the language), or else refers to someone who is able to interpret what the speaker has said with a supernatural boldness (we will discuss this in more detail when we come to chapter 14).

Finally, in verse 11, Paul summarizes his prior point about the unity and diversity of these gifts. *“All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”* All of these diverse gifts are from the same Holy Spirit. He not only gives gifts to every Christian, he determines who gets what gifts and why. Since these diverse gifts come from the same source, they should have the same effect, to build up the body of Jesus Christ in which the Holy Spirit indwells.

What then, do we say by way of application?

There are two issues raised by this passage with which we must deal. The first issue is this: “if these gifts of the Spirit are still given to Christ’s people today, how do I know which of these gifts I might have?” You need to fill out a spiritual gifts inventory and sign the volunteer list—just kidding. The answer is simple—what do you like doing, and what are you good at doing? There’s no question that these gifts are supernatural—but there’s nothing indicated in the biblical text which tells us that someone who is afraid of public speaking suddenly will be called to preach. Or that someone who isn’t comfortable around children will suddenly desire to become the Sunday school superintendent. If you feel a desire to serve Christ’s church in a particular area (an internal call) then pursue it. See if you are enjoying doing it and find out if you do it well (an external call). That is how you know you have a particular gift of the Spirit.

The second issue is that the gifts of the Spirit are given to enable us to serve Christ’s church for the common good—which is the building up of Christ’s body. The gifts of the Spirit were not given to divide the church. When the charismatic movement swept through the churches years ago, the first thing that happened was it divided the church into two camps—those who thought the gifts were for today and that everyone should use them, and the opposition which insisted that these gifts ceased when the apostolic era ended. As a result of a supposed work of the Spirit, the churches were divided. The Holy Spirit does not create schism in the body of Christ.

The gifts of the Spirit as enumerated by Paul are given for the service of others—for the common good—and for the building up of the body of Christ. The evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work is obvious when we think about this in biblical categories. Do God’s people love one another? Is the coffee is made? Are extra chairs set up if needed? Do people sing joyfully and faithfully participate in the worship? Is food provided and served during the potluck? To the poor and needy? Do people care for one another in time of need? Do they bear one another’s burdens, like sending cards, making phone calls and praying for one another? Do people long to see sinners come to faith in Jesus Christ? Do sinners repent? Is the gospel preached and do people desire to hear the word of God proclaimed? Are the sacraments administered in accordance with the word of God? Do people do these things without seeking to call attention to themselves?

If these things are present in the church, then we can be sure that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are being used to build up the body of Christ, for the common good and for the glory of Christ. This starts with our confession that “Jesus is Lord,” because he alone has saved us from our sins, and included us in his body.