

Session 5 – 1Corinthians 12

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

It seems that a number of the Christians in Corinth had the gift of speaking in tongues, but this gift could be mis-used in a self-indulgent, even abusive, manner. Paul addresses this issue in **Chs.12-14**, where tongues are repeatedly mentioned – **12:8-10, 28, 29f, 13:1-3, 8, 14:6, 26**.

- In **Ch.12**, Paul writes about spiritual gifts in general.
- In **Ch.13**, he writes about the love with which gifts must be used.
- In **Ch.14**, he gives practical instructions about the way gifts – in particular, tongues and prophecy – should be used in Christian gatherings.

1. v.1-3 The Holy Spirit enables a person to say 'Jesus is Lord'

There was a danger that the Corinthians would judge whether a person was a truly spiritual person or not by whether they spoke in tongues. But Paul assures them that the test of a Christian is not whether they speak in tongues but whether they say 'Jesus is Lord' – if they do, it is a sure sign that the Holy Spirit is in them and at work in them (cf **1John 4:1-3**).

('Jesus is Lord' would not be an easy thing to say.

- For Jews, it was blasphemous – equivalent to saying, 'Jesus is God'.
- For Gentiles, it was dangerous if they failed to say, 'Caesar is Lord'.

"The burning issue there in Corinth was what parts of corporate worship were the most important and should be given priority. The Corinthians evidently favoured 'speaking in tongues'. ... Paul is being asked to endorse this preference – he doesn't."

2. v.4-11 The Holy Spirit gives a diversity of gifts

Paul writes about the gifts which are given to Christians as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit who lives in them.

- There is a great diversity of gifts (vv.4-6), and Paul gives a variety of examples in his list in v.7-10.

- These gifts are given by God (v.4,5,6) as he determines (v.11, see also v.18). Since the distribution of gifts is God's business, those gifts should never be a source of rivalry or jealousy between Christians.

- Gifts are given to all Christians. This is stressed through phrases such as "in everyone" (v.6), "to each" (v.7), "to each one" (v.11).

- These gifts are for the common good (v.7) – ie for the growth and wellbeing of the church, not for the self-indulgence of individuals.

Spiritual gifts and their exercise is public and open and to build up the whole body of believers. Gifts being used by individuals in a way which divides a church contradicts their purpose. The same Spirit provides all gifts and HE determines who gets what gift – there is no room for pride.

3. v.12-14 The Holy Spirit inspires unity in diversity

'Unity in diversity' is Paul's prevailing message as he introduces his metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ.

- **Unity in diversity**. Although there are many Christians with a great variety of gifts and personalities, they are all one.

- **Unity in the Spirit**. Whoever they are, the Christians all have the same Holy Spirit living in them and leading them to be united.

- **Unity in Christ**. In v.12, as Paul likens the church to a body, we expect the final phrase to be, "So it is with the church." Instead he says, "So it is with Christ" – as if to say that the bond between Christ and his people is so close and intimate that they are thought of as one. See **8:12, & Acts 9:4** – harm done to the church is treated as harm done to Christ.

4. v.15-26 Every member of the church is important and needed

Each part of the human body has a vital part to play, and the body functions well when each individual organ is functioning well. In the church, the Body of Christ, the same is true: each person and gift is vital, and the church lives up to what God calls it to be if each member uses their gifts well. No one should feel that they do not belong to the Body.

But if a Christian is arrogant about their gift and starts comparing themselves to others, then that can lead in two different directions.

➤ ***Don't say, "I don't belong" (v.15-20).*** No one should think so arrogantly of their gift that they consider that they do not need other people's gifts. (This was perhaps a danger of those Corinthians who had the gift of tongues, who thought their gift superior to everyone else's.) And neither should anyone underestimate the importance of their gift and feel that they and their gift are not really needed. Paul is stressing the ***great variety of gifts***: all the different gifts and all the different people are needed in the church and are essential to its ongoing life.

➤ ***Don't say, "You don't belong" (v.21-26).*** Some gifts may seem less significant. But they are just as important to the life of the church and must be welcomed and valued. If people feel that their gift is small and unremarkable, or that they themselves are of no significance, then they should be shown special care.

As a body, we depend upon each other and need each other – hence all suffer or all rejoice together (**v.26 and Romans 12:15**).

5. v.27-31a The Body of Christ

v.27 serves as a summary of the whole chapter: the Christian community, the church, is a single united entity and each Christian is an essential individual part of it. Individuals working together, using their gifts, builds unity. Each local church is part of the Body of Christ.

v.28-30 stresses again the diversity of gifts by giving another list of examples, beginning with three ministries of great importance in the leadership of the church. No one has every gift, so the church will only function well if everyone is included and plays their part.

v.31a speaks of desiring "the greater gifts," even though Paul has been stressing that there is no hierarchy of gifts and that all are equally needed. Most likely, he is starting the next stage in his argument which, in Ch.14, will urge his readers to desire the gift of prophecy rather than tongues because it is greater in the sense that it is immediately intelligible to others and will edify them.

Summary of Paul's argument in chapter 12

1. All gifts must point to Jesus as Lord. They are not for self-glory; that would be idolatry.
2. Although we are united (under one Lord), there is diversity in our unity. That diversity in unity is a reflection of God himself (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).
3. Our diversity should not lead us to feel that we are not in the body, neither should we feel self-sufficient. For as a body needs its parts, we all need each other.

For homegroups

1. In **12:1-3**, Paul implies that part of the trouble in Corinth resulted from church members not having broken completely with their pagan past. Can the church today be affected by its members' past lives?
2. What do the various gifts listed in **12:7-11** have in common? How should this affect our attitude and approach to spiritual gifts?
3. "Whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free" (v.13). If Paul were writing to Christians today, what divisions might he say were overcome through our membership of the one body?
4. What could be done in our church to help people use their gifts for the building up of others?
5. What things in church life are most likely to foster a sense of unity?
6. The word *concern* (v.25) appears also in **7:32-34**. In NIV, the same word is translated *worry* (**Mat 6:25-34 & 10:19**) and *be anxious* (**Phil 4:6**). When is care / concern/ worry a good thing and when is it not?
7. Why do we need one another in the body of Christ (**12:14-27**)? How is this need expressed in practice?
8. What gifts have you seen being used in our churches? Are there gifts which our churches seem to lack and which we should pray for?
9. What circumstances might cause church members to feel arrogant? To feel unimportant?
10. Does diversity in the body ever seem to be stifled? How can we guard against this?