

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-31 ST JOHN'S, 27.1.19, 9.30 am

### INTRODUCTION

Last week, we heard the first part of 1 Corinthians 12 as one of our readings; now we've heard the second part of the chapter, I'm going to speak on the whole. The first part of the chapter is about gifts from the Holy Spirit; that might make you feel either uncomfortable, or excited! Some Christians feel that there's no place for the supernatural in our religion, that things like speaking in tongues, working miracles, and healing are weird and discomfoting. Others feel that this is where it's really 'at', and if we aren't experiencing the supernatural in our everyday lives, there must be something missing.

In the religious culture of Corinth, it was expected that some people would behave in strange ways, throw themselves around, or speak in a frenzied way. People who did those sorts of things were thought to be especially close to whichever god they worshipped. And so, whatever they did or said when they were worked up like this, people thought must come from that god.

When some of the people in Corinth became Christians, they went on thinking like this. In this chapter, Paul puts them right. The Holy Spirit is not the private experience of a few special people; he comes on all believers. People don't show that they're 'spiritual' by going into trances; they show they're spiritual by using their gifts to point to Jesus as Lord. Yes, the Holy Spirit does give some people 'spectacular' gifts - messages of knowledge or wisdom, miraculous or healing powers.

But he doesn't give such gifts as a reward for being super-spiritual; he gives them to build up the church and to point to Jesus as Lord.

If we make the same mistake as the Corinthians, then we could also find ourselves in deep water. One explanation of what's going on in verse 3 is that a believer in a trance had said 'Jesus be cursed', and because the Corinthians thought that going into a trance was a sign of being super-spiritual, they also thought that this phrase must have come from God himself. But Paul puts them straight: there's no way the Holy Spirit could possibly inspire anyone to say such a thing. They need to learn to take into account the content of what anyone says, before they decide whether or not it's from God.

On the other hand, we could well ask, 'how do we *know* that we're worshipping in the power of the Spirit?' The answer to that lies in verse 3 as well: *no one can say "Jesus is Lord," except in the Holy Spirit.*

### THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SPIRIT

As I said, verse 7 was news to the Christians in Corinth: *to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* It was easy for the Corinthians, and it's easy for us, to be impressed by 'spectacular' gifts. Someone who exercises a gift of healing or miracles can easily become proud and take the attitude, 'I must be more important than you, because I have this gift'; or 'You can't be a *real* Christian, because you don't have that gift'. It's tempting for those with spectacular gifts to show off in church, or in Christian meetings, by going up to the front to 'perform'. That's the kind of attitude the

Christians in Corinth seem to have been taking. Paul points out here that they've got it wrong.

The first reason that they're wrong is that the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God, gives all the gifts. People who are proud, people who want to show off, people who claim that their gift is the most important, create divisions in the church. And it's clearly wrong for God's people to become divided over the good gifts he's given them.

The second reason that they're wrong is that the Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person. In other words, although not everyone is given a 'spectacular' gift, everyone does receive at least one spiritual gift. Of course we don't all receive the same gift! That would be very boring, and it would leave the church overloaded with some things, but deprived of others. God the Holy Spirit isn't like a managing director, who at Christmas goes and buys several cases of the same wine, and gives all his employees a bottle. All that says to the workforce is, "I know I have to be seen to give you something, but I don't know you as individuals, and I can't be bothered to find out what gift you'd really like." No, God the Holy Spirit knows each one of us personally. He knows about our relationship with God. He knows how we feel about ourselves, whether or not we feel valued. He knows what gifts we're able to use at any given point in time. He knows when to encourage us, and when to remind us that we're not as important as we think we are. The gifts we receive are designed especially for us, as individual people loved by God. We all receive what's best for us, so we're wrong if we think we've been given something better than

everyone else, and we're wrong if we think everyone else has something better than us.

The third reason that the Corinthians are wrong in their attitude is that *the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*. Yes, our gifts are designed specifically for each one of us. But the Holy Spirit isn't only building us up as individual believers. He's also building up the church as a whole. Every gift received by every member of a congregation is just as important as every other gift received by every other member. For example, the gift of making people feel welcome as they come into church is just as important as the gift of preaching and leading worship. The best preacher in the world will speak to an empty church if people don't feel welcome when they come in. And the gift of administration is just as important as the gift of healing. There would be no opportunity for anyone to be healed, if church life wasn't organised so that people who need healing get prayed for.

God the Holy Spirit gives us a variety of gifts so that between us, we can serve one another and those outside the church, in the same way that Jesus served the people he met. We're all servants, and the word in verse 5 stresses the lowly kind of service we give, both to God and to each other. Even the most spectacular gifts are given to us simply so that we can serve each other and God. It's God who does the real work - often in spite of us. We have no reason to set ourselves, or others, on a pedestal.

At the same time, Paul tells the Corinthians to *earnestly desire the higher gifts* (v 31). This doesn't necessarily mean that we should desire to be given them ourselves - remember that with privilege comes responsibility. But we should certainly set our hearts on the church as a whole receiving the more important gifts – Paul even gives us a hierarchy in verse 28: apostleship, prophecy, teaching, miracle-working, healing, helping, administration and tongues. But first, we must use the gifts we already have. In Luke 16:10, Jesus says, "*One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.*" If we value the gifts God's given us, and use them faithfully, then he'll probably give us more gifts, and the more important ones. If we despise the gifts he's given us, no matter how much we desire the more important gifts, we're unlikely to receive them.

### **THE BODY OF CHRIST**

In the second half of this chapter, Paul uses the picture of a body to make some very similar points. We're so familiar with this picture that we know what Paul's talking about all the way through. But in fact, it's not until verse 27, after he's described how a body needs each and every part to function properly, that he gets to his point: *you are the body of Christ*.

Actually, this might not have been a new idea to the Corinthians. It was one used by lots of ancient thinkers. One fable makes the point very clear: the stomach appeared to the other members of the body to be doing nothing but enjoy the food they put into it; so they agreed to

starve it. Of course, it was only then that they found that they also starved themselves.

Just as God has arranged the parts of the human body into a whole, in such a way that every part must do its job if the body is to work properly, so he's also arranged the parts of the body of Christ into a whole. None of us can do without all the others. In a physical body, every part needs all the others to work, so that it can also work properly. It's the same in the body of Christ. No-one is an 'added extra'. We're all here for a reason. God's given each one of us a job to do, that no-one else can do. If we refuse to do it - either because we think we're too important, or because we think we're not important enough - then what we're doing is paralysing Christ, preventing Christ from doing his work in the world.

When God creates a human body, he arranges the parts within it. It's no good the foot saying, "I wish I was a hand", or the ear saying, "I wish I was an eye!" In the same way, God has appointed each of us to our place in Christ's body. We don't choose where we fit in. The only job each of us can do is the job God's given us, whether it's a 'spectacular', up-front job, or something behind the scenes.

### **CONCLUSION**

This is where the analogy breaks down, of course. In your body, your hand will always be your hand, whereas in Christ's body, our place might well change over the years. When I was a new Christian, it was obviously not my job to lead worship and preach. I'm sure there will come a time when it's no longer my job to lead worship and preach.

This is where we come back to the discussion on gifts. The Holy Spirit may choose to give you a gift for one particular occasion only, and never give you that gift again. Or he may choose to give you a particular ministry, allowing you to exercise one gift many times. The exciting thing is working out what gifts you have, and having the courage to use them, and the courage to lay them down when the Lord moves you on to something new!

I hope no-one here today thinks they have no gifts. The Lord is abundantly generous, and pours out his gifts on his church. But he expects us to use them. So if you think you have no gifts, you're wrong. Think and pray about what gifts you have - they're not necessarily listed in this chapter - and then make sure you use them to serve other people and God, and to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Christians who refuse to use their gifts are paralysing the body of Christ.

It's wonderful to see Christians discovering their gifts. One of the privileges of Christian ministry is watching people discover new gifts, and begin to use them. That's exciting. That's the body of Christ growing. That's the Lord showing his generosity to us. So let's thank him for all the gifts he's given us as a church, and ask him to help us to be faithful in using our gifts.