

1 Corinthians 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 12 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.

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. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord.

And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 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.

All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. For just as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member, but of many.

[1 : 32] If the foot should say, Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable, we bestow the greater honour, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more representable parts do not require.

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together.

[2 : 47] If one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it, and God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret, but earnestly desire the higher gifts?

And I will show you a still more excellent way. 1 Corinthians chapter 12 leads into the final section of Paul's treatment of worship in Corinth, a section that runs until the end of chapter 14.

We must remember again that the themes of the letter to this point are still in play here. Paul is again dealing with a situation where some members of the church are overriding or despising others.

In this and the following chapter, he is laying the theological foundations that he will build upon in chapter 14 when he moves to tackle specific issues more directly. He will be developing themes of the relationship between the strong and the weak throughout also.

[4 : 00] The Corinthians had likely raised the issue of spiritual gifts in their letter to Paul. The word that's used in verse 1, however, means spiritual things or spiritual persons.

It is not inappropriately related to the teaching on spiritual gifts that follows. However, the change in term may be significant. Paul may be shifting from the Corinthians' emphasis to one that foregrounds the gracious gift character of spiritual things and manifestations.

He starts off by talking about their former state in paganism, when they were pagans or literally when they were Gentiles. They are no longer Gentiles, they're sons of Abraham in Christ. And during that time, they were carried away by mute idols.

Theirs was a religion built not around a speaking god, but around speechless idols. Pagan spirituality is based around ecstatic events, trances, other forms of altered consciousness, mass psychology and emotional manipulation.

However, a religion based around a speaking god is not characterised by the same irrationality. Christian faith is built around the word of the cross.

[5 : 07] And we should bear in mind the Corinthians' distorted sense of what counts as spiritual. They might see the spiritual manifestations as marks of their own superiority and achievement, rather than seeing them as what they actually are.

And Paul deflates some of their understanding of what counts as spiritual here. Everyone who unfeignedly declares Christ to be Lord has received the Spirit, whether or not they have the more dramatic outward manifestations of him.

On the other hand, no one speaking in the Spirit of God will speak against Christ. The most fundamental test of spiritual speech and behaviour is how it conforms to the Lordship of Christ.

The true test of true spirituality is not elevated experiences, but faithful confession of Christ and his Lordship. In verses 4-6, Paul presents a Trinitarian pattern.

The triunity of the one God unites the Church in its diversity. The triune persons are related to the life of the Church in their united action, but in different ways. The Spirit is particularly connected with the gifts, the spiritual gifts.

[6 : 15] The Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, is connected with the varied forms of service. And God the Father is the one by whom all activities are rendered effective. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit in ways that distinguish between them in the prepositions that are used of their work.

From the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Paul doesn't express an explicit doctrine of the Trinity in his epistles, but the presence of a doctrine just beneath the surface can be seen in places like this.

In these verses, Paul presents spiritual things as expressions of the one God in his activity of forming his Church. The terms he uses may have challenged some of the Corinthians' preconceptions.

The Spirit gives gifts. It's not about forms of spiritual attainment, forms of personal attainment by which one individual may be elevated over others. Participation in the Lord's ministry is seen in service, not in mastery and superiority and dominance over others.

And all the activities in the Church, in their varied and diverse character, are all empowered by the one God, not by our own power. The Spirit is given to each for the sake of all.

[7 : 29] This is not a religion of individual superiority, but of mutual service. There is a great variety of gifts, but unity in the one Spirit. The list of the gifts of the Spirit that we have in verses 8-10 is not the only list that we have in Scripture.

We find a similar list in places like Romans chapter 12 verses 4-8. For as in one body we have many members and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them, if prophecy in proportion to our faith, if service in our serving, the one who teaches in his teaching, the one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity, the one who leads with zeal, the one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness.

The gifts in Corinthians are the more demonstrative and so-called miraculous or supernatural gifts, perhaps because these were the gifts that were most attractive to people with the sort of hangovers from pagan spirituality from which the Corinthians suffered.

They are looking for spiritual pyrotechnics, whereas Christian faith foregrounds the word. However, whether the gifts in question are flashy and extraordinary or seemingly more ordinary and unassuming, all true gifts are empowered by the one Spirit.

[8 : 52] Paul moves from the unity of the Spirit to the unity of Christ's body, formed by the Spirit. He speaks of the Church as Christ. Christ is undivided, head and body are one.

Christ is the head, the preeminent one, the bridegroom of the bride. But he is united with his body. Christ describes what some have called the totus Christus, the whole of Christ, head and body. Christ is undivided. The Church was baptised into one body by the Spirit given at Pentecost, overcoming differences of social status between slave and free and differences between Jew and Gentile.

We're all bound together as one rather than being individuals competing with each other for status. If a body functioned in a way that pitted each member against each other, it would fail to function, it would break down.

And here, Paul describes the way that the Church is formed in a way of mutual dependence and interaction. The unity of the Church rests upon the event of Pentecost, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 54] But it's also sealed in every individual baptism. Each person who is baptised participates in the one gift of the Spirit that was given to the Church at Pentecost. We are all made partakers in the one undivided Spirit.

And the body is formed of diverse yet interdependent members. No part can do without the others, even though there may be real differences in the prominence, the strength, and the seeming honour of different parts.

A part of a body isn't what it is apart from the rest of the body. It is only as it renders its service to the rest of the body and is connected with the rest of the body that it enters into its own true character.

If you were to cut off your hand, it would cease to function as a hand. It could not be a hand apart from the rest of the body to which it is connected. Same with the eye, the nose, the mouth, the foot, or any other part of the body.

Just as the members of a physical body are mutually dependent, so it is with the members of the body of Christ. And Paul deals with the principle of gift here. God gives these gifts to people, not as private possessions.

[11 : 02] We are permitted to participate in God's giving process. God gave the Spirit to the Church at Pentecost, a single gift of the Spirit. And in the spiritual gifts, that one gift of the Spirit is represented through the manifold gifts of the different parts of the body.

And in this, God enables us to become participants in the building up of the Church in that one gift of the Spirit. God has given gifts to me, so that through me he may give those gifts to others. God has given gifts to you, so that through you he might build up others as well. These gifts, then, are not a matter of private superiority, of setting one person over against another and above another.

Rather, they are gifts for the sake of all, so that all might be built up as God has given through individuals to the whole. They are also gracious ways in which God has made us participants in his giving process.

So just as God has given to his Church, God has given to each one of us ways that we can minister the life of the Spirit to those around us. No member can look down on other members of the body because we are all dependent upon one another.

[12 : 12] No member can absolutize its own function and leave the rest of the body behind. We shouldn't try to become each other or envy others for their gifts. Rather, we should try and exercise our own gifts in our own station for the sake of the common good.

Just as in chapter 7, Paul challenged the mindset of people who thought or seemed to think that they needed to escape their current status in life, their current vocation, their current situational position in order to become true spiritual people and to participate in the grace of God and the ministry of his Spirit.

So here, he wants people to recognize their participation in the work of the Spirit in the situation in which they find themselves. In the Corinthian Church, where the so-called strong were exalting themselves over the weak, Paul teaches that the supposed weaker members of the body are in fact indispensable.

Even those members of the Church that seem less strong, less honorable, and less exalted, perhaps those members that you would never see at the front, they are to be treated with the greater honor.

The presentable members of the Church, perhaps the people we naturally push to the front, thinking perhaps that they are more eloquent, more gifted, more powerful, more influential, they are not necessarily the best parts of the Church.

[13 : 27] They're not to be presumed to be the greatest parts of the body. We cover up the sexual organs, perhaps thinking them less honorable. However, in our covering up of them, we bestow greater honor upon them than the parts of the body that are prominently on display.

This should perhaps further inform our understanding of things such as the covering of the women in the preceding chapter. From a human perspective, some might think that the covering up of the women with a head covering is because they are less honorable or less glorious.

However, for Paul, the logic seems to be that because they are more glorious, a greater degree of modesty is required. From a human perspective, we might focus upon those people who are most prominent and think that they are the most important.

And by challenging that entire mindset, Paul calls us to reconsider the way that we relate to different people and ministries within the life of the Church. Those who might be more prominent and visible must never delude themselves into thinking that their greater prominence makes them more important.

understood properly, the body should be characterized by mutual care with each sharing in what has been given to all and all sharing in what has been given to each.

[14 : 37] More generally, this is a vision of a good society in which great diversity is bound together in mutual dependence and honor. No member is ignored, left behind or dishonored.

Paul concludes this section by making the object of his illustration explicit. We are the body of Christ collectively and we are members of it individually. We should note the general movement from the focus on the spirit and the gifts to a focus on Christ and the order of the body and its ministries to a focus on God the Father and the activities that he has appointed.

This follows the pattern of verses 4-6. Paul has already described the different roles that people can play in building up the church as a building or working on the field of the Lord in chapter 3.

God has appointed ministries in the church in an ordered way. There are gifts to which we should particularly aspire. However, all of this is governed by the principle that he will elaborate in the next chapter, the principle of love.

A question to consider. How can Paul's description of how the church should be here inform our thinking about society more generally?