



COMMENTARIES ON "I CORINTHIANS"

Chapter 12

In 1 Corinthians chapter twelve, St. Paul leaves off discussing problems in Corinth about which he has heard to address issues for which the Corinthians themselves apparently asked for guidance. The focus in this chapter is on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the effect that these gifts should have on the congregation as a whole.

He begins by contrasting the religious experiences that the Corinthians had when they were non-Christians with their experience as Christians. Whatever the Corinthians were led to do in their worship of false gods (called "dumb idols" in verse two), they were invariably led astray into error (12:2). Christians who are led by the Holy Spirit, however, are never led into error. Therefore, no one who is led by the Holy Spirit can say that Jesus is cursed by God, and likewise no one can proclaim that Jesus is Lord unless he or she is led to do so by the Holy Spirit (12:3).

The fact that God will never lead a person into error or confusion leads directly into St. Paul's next point: this same God will never cause confusion or division through the spiritual gifts that He gives. Therefore, while there are different types of spiritual gifts, there is only one Holy Spirit Who gives them (12:4); there are different ministries in which these gifts can be enacted, but there is only one Lord Jesus Christ (12:5); and there are many activities in which a Christian might engage, but there is only one God the Father Who "works all in all" (12:6). This unity is extended to God's people: God is united in giving spiritual gifts to individual Christians, and individual Christians must be united in using these gifts for the benefit of all Christians (12:7).

St. Paul then provides a brief list of the individual gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit:

- 1) The gift of the word of wisdom (12:8), which Clement of Alexandria defines as "the knowledge of things human and divine and their causes." This is more than simply the accumulation of information that comes from hard study and deep thought; it is, as Ambrosiaster says, "Knowledge (that comes) not by book learning but by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit."
- 2) The gift of the word of knowledge (12:8), which many scholars believe is related to wisdom in that knowledge involves the ability to put wisdom into practice. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains that the word of wisdom is a divinely given insight into God's saving mystery, while the word of knowledge is the ability to respond to this divine wisdom (or to assist others in responding).
- 3) The gift of faith (12:9), which is a powerful faith that transcends the ability of mere humans to believe. St. Cyril of Jerusalem says, "This faith which is given by the Spirit as a grace is not just doctrinal faith but a faith which empowers activities surpassing human nature."

4) Gifts of healings (12:9), which refers to the divine ability to heal diseases. The Apostolic Constitutions say regarding this gift, "He who has received the gift of healing is declared by revelation from God. The grace which is in him is manifest to all."

5) The gift of working miracles (12:10), or "works of power." Scholars point out that this refers to the power to exorcise demons - which it does - but the word is also applied in the New Testament to other miraculous works which, in addition to healing and exorcism, include changing water into wine, feeding multitudes with a few fish and loaves of bread, controlling the forces of nature, and raising the dead.

6) The gift of prophecy (12:10) which, in addition to the ability to foretell the future, also refers to the ability to correctly interpret and teach the Word of God. We will learn more about this in 1 Corinthians 14.

7) The gift of discerning spirits (12:10), which is the ability to distinguish between good and evil spirits, and between true and false prophecies. St. John the Theologian reminds us of the importance of this gift in 1 John 4:1, where he says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

8) The gift of different kinds of tongues (12:10). In the New Testament this refers to cases in which God empowered Christians to speak in languages other than their own in order to communicate the truth of Christ to others (see Acts 2:6; 14:9).

9) The gift of interpreting tongues (12:10). The gift of speaking in different tongues or languages never exists solely on its own, because this would cause confusion within the Church. Instead, the gift of speaking in tongues must be accompanied by the gift of interpreting tongues - or interpreting the language that was miraculously spoken - in order to prevent such confusion. St. Paul says more about this in 1 Corinthians 14.

St. Paul concludes this list by teaching the Corinthians that these gifts should not provoke jealousy or division among the Christians. The gifts are given to each person individually as the Holy Spirit chooses (12:11), and they are given for the benefit of the group of Christians rather than the personal profit of the individual.

The apostle emphasizes the spiritual unity of the entire group of Christians - both in a local congregation, and in the entire Church - by returning to a metaphor that he used earlier in 1 Corinthians (6:11-20 and 10:1-22): the Church is the body of Christ. In 12:12 St. Paul emphasizes, "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ." In 6:15 he stated that are bodies are members of Christ; in this passage he goes further and explains that those who are individually united to Christ form one body. As Nicholas Koulomzine notes, "The body is Christ Himself; it is impossible to be a member of the Church without being a member of Christ."

To illustrate this point, St. Paul writes an allegory involving a physical body: foot, hand, ear and eye. The allegory in verses 14-26 demonstrates the significance of full spiritual unity for the individual: the Holy Spirit Who sanctifies us in baptism (12:13), Who impels to proclaim that Christ is Lord, also provides us with gifts so that we can perform a special role in the body, just as physical organs and appendages perform vital bodily functions. The importance of each individual part of the body can be seen in the

attention (St. Paul uses the term “honor”) given to certain body parts. It may seem that some parts of the human body - particularly those which eliminate waste - are less honorable, but we give even more attention to how we care for and clothe those parts of the body than we do to seemingly more essential parts (like our hands); in fact, we use such body parts as our hands and eyes to tend to these “unpresentable” parts of the body (12:23-24). Therefore, all members of the body suffer or rejoice along with any individual member of the body (2:26).

St. Paul moves on from this allegory to a practical application: does as a physical body has different parts that are united in care for the entire body, so the Church has different offices that are united in caring for the body of Christ (12:27-28).

- 1) Apostles are listed first both because there have been the fewest of them in the Church - only twelve - and because it is through them that the Gospel was given to the nations.
- 2) Prophets are those who, in the words of Fr. Lawrence Farley, “speak (God’s) Word and inspire believers to follow it.”
- 3) Teachers are those who engage in catechesis and biblical teaching.
- 4) Individuals with the gift of miracles (see verse ten).
- 5) Individuals with the gift of healings (see verse nine).
- 6) Individuals with the gift of helps, which refers to those who are gifted to provide physical and financial aid to others. In the early church, deacons were specifically ordained for this purpose (see Acts 6:1-7; Romans 12:7).
- 7) Individuals with the gift of administrations refers to those who are specially equipped to guide a community, which can refer not only to priests but also to those who serve in such positions in a modern church as members of the parish council.
- 8) Individuals who are gifted with varieties of tongues (see verse ten).

What does St. Paul mean in verse thirty-one that Christians should earnestly desire the best gifts? He means that Christians should pray that God will equip and use them in the ways that will be of the most benefit to others. St. John Chrysostom says that the best gifts are “the more useful, those which would profit.” This leads into the “more excellent way” (12:31) that St. Paul will discuss in chapter thirteen: the way of loving others.