

Scripture Reading for January 20th 2019

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 (NIV)

12 Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. ⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Sermon: Concerning Spiritual Things

Have you ever been in the embarrassing situation where you hastily opened a letter only to discover that it belonged to your neighbour and it was delivered to you by mistake? Even worse, you’ve demolished the envelope and it turns out to be a big bill! And you now have to sheepishly go around and deliver it to them. Aspects of 1st Corinthians are just like that. Today it seems like we are reading the mail of the local Pentecostal church, rather than something addressed to Presbyterians. For many Christians, the Trinity consists of the Father, the Son and the Holy Bible, or alternatively, Father, Son, and Holy Church.¹ We are just not sure what to make of the Holy Spirit and we therefore dismiss the third person of the Trinity as irrelevant. That would be a huge mistake.² Part of the problem is that we like to be “in control”; Presbyterians like everything to be done “decently and in good order.”³ Mention of the Holy Spirit, especially in the context of worship, seems to be inviting chaos and this, understandably, makes us uncomfortable. The problems of the church in Corinth just proves the point! However, Paul’s letter was to correct excess “enthusiasm,” not to eradicate it! And since this letter is part of the *canon* of Scripture, it is also addressed to us; its *our* mail too, and we need to take it seriously.

¹ Catholic Theologian Karl Rahner said that many Christians are functionally “binitarians” and have ignored the Holy Spirit.

² See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/We-Have-the-Mind-of-Christ.pdf>. As American theologian Stanley Hauerwas and churchman Bishop William Willimon put it, “Christians are *nothing* without the Holy Spirit.” Hauerwas and Willimon, *The Holy Spirit* (Abingdon Press, 2015) p ix.

³ 1 Cor 14:40.

In today's reading, Paul begins a new section, which is clearly important as it continues for three chapters. He writes, "Now, about spiritual things,⁴ brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed."⁵ This is a literary example of *irony* because the Corinthian church was certainly *not* ignorant about such things; indeed, they saw themselves as authorities on spiritual matters!⁶ And that was part of the problem. Some in the Corinthian church placed an excessive emphasis on showy displays of spirituality, especially "speaking in tongues."⁷ It seems that some of them were disrupting or dominating church meetings by these disorderly Spirit-inspired utterances that were unintelligible to other members of the community. It is important to state that Paul never disputes the authenticity of their experience of the spiritual gifts that they had received from God. What troubled Paul was the tendency of those who spoke in tongues to see this as indicative of their personal spiritual superiority and so assert their own power and status within the community. In other words, because they could speak in tongues, they saw that as the surest sign they were truly "spiritual" and, hence, those who could not were spiritually inferior. No wonder Paul was concerned, because this would create jealousy and conflict⁸ within the church.

Before moving on, it is worth saying that many people today might be surprised that those in Corinth who prized philosophically-informed wisdom and knowledge would also share an enthusiasm for speaking in tongues. The former seems soberly intellectual, while the latter seems irrationally emotional. This is, however, to impose modern stereotypes onto the ancient world. Indeed, many in those days might well regard speaking in tongues as entirely appropriate for a person deemed gifted in spiritual illumination or wisdom. Remember too, this phenomenon is not unique to Christianity, as Paul reminds them in the next couple of verses and which sets-up his lengthy response.

Paul tells them, somewhat bluntly, that intense spiritual experiences can lead to self-delusion! He says, "Before, when you were gentile non-believers,⁹ you would do all sorts of spiritual things, including speaking in tongues, when you were carried away into realms of ecstasy in your worship of speechless idols."¹⁰ Such experiences alone, says Paul, is no criteria for being guided by the Holy Spirit! We face the same problem today, as there can be confusion in people's minds between something that's *spiritual* and something that's *Christian*. "Discernment – or wisdom - is therefore required," says Paul, "Only when "Jesus is Lord" is *authentically confessed and lived out* will our spiritual experiences be

⁴ See also 1 Cor 7:1,25; 8:1. There is a familiar pattern here suggesting Paul is responding to their earlier letter. Moreover, the word "things" is a better translation here than "gifts" here to differentiate it from the *different* Greek word in 12:4 (*charismata*). The word in 12:1 could relate to either spiritual "persons" (and hence tie in with 1 Cor 2:6-16) or spiritual "gifts" (or, today perhaps, 'spirituality,') and most translators focus on the latter, based on the subsequent verses.

⁵ 1 Cor 12:1.

⁶ Moreover, Paul knows their 'prowess' on such matters; 1 Cor 5-7.

⁷ The phenomenon of "glossolalia," or spiritual ecstatic utterances, is a well-established experience in many religions.

⁸ See also 1 Cor 3:3 (in the context of 2:6-16). The disunity is also evident in 1 Cor 1: 10-11; 11:17-18.

⁹ In 1 Cor 12:2, the word "pagan" is a very poor translation (we today see it as "uncivilised") and the Greek word means "Gentile." Paul's (typically Jewish) polemic is against Gentile idolatry; the contrast is with being *former* Gentiles as, in Paul's mind, Gentile Christians have now been grafted into "Israel" – see Rom 11:17-24.

¹⁰ Anthony Thiselton points out Paul's logic: Idols *cannot* be the source of spirituality because they are incapable of speech and so cannot inspire, so any spirituality that is associated with them is *self-induced*.

genuinely from the Spirit of Christ. And a sign of that reality is our unity within our inevitable diversity, and where no one is despised for what some regard as having lesser-significant spiritual experiences.”

This phrase “Jesus is Lord” is powerful statement - and likely an early creed. But it is not merely a matter of saying the words, it is living out day-to-day what they mean, namely, a radical commitment of exclusive allegiance to Christ.¹¹ To a Jew, the word “Lord” (*kyrios*) in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) was the word for YHWH. Consequently, “Jesus is Lord” means Jesus is *worshiped* as supreme, something that only arises because God has revealed this truth to them by his Spirit.¹² And since Caesar also claimed the title “Lord,” then, for both Jewish and Gentile Christians, to claim the risen “Jesus as Lord,” was a dramatic rejection of their primary allegiance to Rome.¹³ The earliest Christians therefore understood that confessing “Jesus is Lord” meant that *all* of life was dedicated to honouring Christ; indeed, this is a key premise to Paul’s whole letter. Today, we tend to divide life into the two categories of “sacred” and “secular,” and often sacred things are restricted to Sundays, [and maybe only a part of that!] and so we may think Christ being “master”¹⁴ is only relevant at those times. However, from the earliest days of the church, claiming “Jesus is Lord” also implied refusing to have life divided into secular and sacred value systems; Jesus was master in *all* areas of life. This is another reason why Paul, and Jesus for that matter, is so challenging!¹⁵

Paul goes on: “Now there are varieties of *gifts*, but the same *Spirit*; and there are varieties of *services*, but the same *Lord*; and there are varieties of *activities*, but it is the same *God* who activates all of them in everyone.”¹⁶ First, the Greek for “gift” here is *charismata* and its root, *charis*, means “grace.” This makes it very clear the source of any genuine spiritual phenomena is not oneself, but an *undeserved*

¹¹ Moreover, if Jesus is your “Lord” (or “master”), then you are his *slave* and therefore offer him prime allegiance. Note the passing reference in 1 Cor 6:19-20 to “being bought with the price” (redemption metaphor) and therefore *belong* to Jesus.

¹² Note, for a Jew to worship anything other than YHWH would be seen as blasphemous; to therefore consider Jesus as a *worthy of worship* is a remarkable U-turn in thinking and, hence, a dramatic work of divine revelation.

¹³ See also 1 Cor 8:6 where Paul adapts the Jewish *Shema* (Deut 6:4) in subtle and profound ways. [Jesus recites the *Shema* in Mark 12:29.]

¹⁴ The Greek word *kyrios* can also be translated “master” (or a polite “sir” to someone of a higher social status.) What is the meaning here? This is where an extensive study of author’s writing is necessary, as well as the immediate context. Paul’s (deduced) theology generally favours this “high” view of *kyrios* in his Jewish/Gentile context. The gospel writers, in contrast, are generally more focused of Jesus *as Messiah*, (not YHWH), and therefore it is more likely *kyrios* is translated as “master.”

¹⁵ The opposite is also true too. Hence the obscure reference to “Jesus is cursed,” making it clear that those who go down that route are not truly “spiritual” people (1 Cor 12:3). The peculiar phrase “Jesus is cursed” has been open to *many* interpretations. Hays says it is a *hypothetical* example, the very opposite of “Jesus is Lord.” *If* such practices *were* occurring, says Hays, Paul would have been even more vehemently against it, rather than just mentioning it in passing! Because the Greek wording is unusual, Thiselton suggests this could more probably translated as “Jesus grants a curse.” Apparently, in recent years, some 27 ancient curse tablets made of lead have been unearthed around Corinth. And these witness the practice of appealing to pagan deities to “curse” rival competitors in business, love, litigation, or sport. Again, such practices would be an anathema for Christians. Alternatively, some opposing Jews viewed the crucifixion as “cursed” – see Gal 3:13, Deut 21:23. Later on, in times of persecution, people were also compelled to curse Christ or die (see also Acts 26:11). Or it could possibly be that in an ecstatic state of worship, a person could be so worked-up that they don’t really know what they’re saying! Obviously, such a person could *not* be inspired by the true Spirit of the God.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 12:4-6.

gift of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Second, there are two triplets here, that of gifts, services, and activities given by the Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and God the Father, respectively. This looks like an early *trinitarian* expression of God's activity in the life of the church.¹⁸ Perhaps Paul is implying the *diversity and unity* in God's nature is also to be reflected in the church! It is, however, unwise to overanalyse the difference(s) between a "gift," a "service," and an "activity"; they are all *freely given by God*. Moreover, they are given to *each* person for the good of the *whole* church.¹⁹ Yes, some will have a more visible profile than others, some will be more mundane or secular than others, but since "Jesus is Lord" of *everything*, all are needed for the church to be healthy. God's gifts complement one another, and therefore Paul wants them to stop being competitive and self-serving about such "spiritual things." These gracious gifts of God are *not* given in order to have exciting private experience, or to enhance one's perceived status, but so that *everyone* will work together as a community, loyal to Jesus Christ, and unified in purpose and love by the Spirit.²⁰

Paul then provides a list some of these gifts: words of wisdom, words of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, works of power, prophecy, spiritual discernment, and lastly, speaking in tongues and interpreting them.²¹ The "words of wisdom and knowledge" from the Spirit are not clever speech of purely human construction,²² they are profound, timely, and genuine spiritual insights. The "gift of faith" is different from the faith that every Christian has as part of their very identity "in Christ"; perhaps it is to do with a profound confidence in God at times of uncertainty - and passing that on to others. It could also be the gift that turns vision into action! The "gifts are healing"²³ should *not* be seen as exclusively miracles, but *all* forms of healing, as God is the source of wholeness! Effective "deeds of power" will certainly include miracles and exorcisms, but it can also more generally imply *authentic effectiveness* in the life of the church.²⁴ Moreover, "prophecy" should not be understood as *foretelling* the future, but as *forthtelling*, declaring the revealed will of God into today's issues. And "discernment" is a wise determination as to whether what is attributed to the Holy Spirit is truly genuine, and this is more widely applicable than simply in terms of speaking in tongues.

It is important to add a few further explanations. First, in today's society, when someone is called "gifted," it usually refers to an ability that elevates an individual above the rank and file, implying greater promise and potential for success in an area of expertise or innate talent. Those gifts that we

¹⁷ In other words, true "spirituality" is not an innate human capacity waiting to be activated by individual effort! In the Corinthian context, *charismata*, by definition, cannot be a high-status term, because it is a gracious or undeserved gift.

¹⁸ Of course, one can't read too much into this as the formal doctrine of the Trinity arose much later; but it is *suggestive*!

¹⁹ 1 Cor 12:7,11.

²⁰ A spiritual gift is not granted to individuals for their own private spiritual use. Genuine spirituality is not the cultivation of private emotional highs, or mystical thrills, or exclusively individual serenity; this is narcissistic! Rather, the gifts are bestowed to build-up the church. They are intended to be publicly communicable, publicly shared, and publicly enjoyed.

²¹ 1 Cor 12: 8-10. It has been suggested tongues was placed last in this (sample) list so as to de-emphasise its status for the Corinthian church. Moreover, it is implied that no one person will have all these gifts!

²² This was highly-valued in the Corinthian church, as I mentioned last week; see 1 Cor 2:6-16.

²³ Note the use of the *plural*.

²⁴ And given energy-sapping distractions, disunity, and dysfunction in a typical church, authentic effectiveness *is* miraculous!

affirm reveal what society values the most, such as intellectual prowess, leadership potential, artistic or linguistic skill. Paul's assertion counters this cultural definition because he says *everyone* is gifted, not just the elite few.²⁵ As I mentioned last week, Paul makes it clear that *all* Christians received the Holy Spirit in baptism, and so having gifts from God for the benefit of the church is only to be expected; therefore, *no one* should feel a second-class Christian! However, simply confessing "Jesus is Lord" is *not* all that the Holy Spirit has in store for us! So, let's discover our giftedness so that we can use them for the common good. Remember, gifts are not merit-badges for holiness, or signs of approval from God, but God's response to the needs of our community.

Second, this list is illustrative, not exhaustive, and written with the Corinthian context in mind. Consequently, sometimes the church interprets this idea of (spiritual) gifts from God far too narrowly. It is assumed that they consist *solely* of things like preaching, praying, evangelism, teaching, etc. Nevertheless, accountants, builders, electricians, painters have their own special "services" or "activities"²⁶ from God for the church.²⁷ Put another way, whether you are on the Board, the Session, or the Pastoral Care Team, or serve God in the choir, Sunday school, Richmond Terrace, the Boarding house, or washing dishes, or wherever, *all these things* are valued both by God and by this church, and are *essential* for us to function coherently and to thrive. Moreover, God has given us, as a congregation, people with the appropriate giftings to serve the Church in all these various activities.

What this passage invites us to do is to reflect what gifts are valued and undervalued in the culture of *this* church, so we can redress the balance. Moreover, we can help each other to discern and nurture the potential in one another - and of which a person might be unaware. What potential is lying fallow or waiting for recognition or a word of encouragement? Who has obvious skills that are not being put to good use? And who may have less noticeable gifting that needs an opportunity to flourish. Moreover, ministers also need to be willing to relinquish some of their tasks and responsibilities. Presbyterians are particularly poor at this because, typically, there is only one ordained minister in a church and there is often a subliminal expectation that they will do everything!²⁸ Let me give a few examples in order to make this topic more practical; Glen and Dennis will be leading the Richmond Terrace Service today with Matthew. Others might like to think over if this is an area where they too could serve in the future; perhaps some here have hidden musical gifts and could give Matthew a break by leading the music [at Richmond Terrace]. Olwyn will be leading a new Bible study shortly, so making good use of some of her gifting. St Andrew's urgently needs leaders and helpers in the Sunday School; Vicki has been doing a fantastic job - which can make it intimidating for others to follow on; however, if you think you this might be where you can serve, please talk to me. These are just examples, and I am sure you can think of others. It is my experience that God doesn't give us gifts that we hate! So don't be afraid on that

²⁵ There is always a danger that we will regard God gifts as natural capacities or talents, for which we might claim credit and take pride.

²⁶ 1 Cor 12:4-6.

²⁷ This does not mean that just because you are an accountant, teacher, etc., you must become the treasurer or Sunday School leader!

²⁸ They are to be a preacher, teacher, CEO, scholar, administrator, therapist, spiritual guide, etc., and this creates burnout.

count; God gives us *good* things for the benefit of others and that tie in with our life experiences and circumstances.²⁹ We do, however, have to nurture them by exercising them; we learn by doing.

In conclusion, the stereotypical typical image of a traditional church minister is that of a one-man-band! I hasten to add, I don't feel that way here! Paul's understanding of the church, however, is that of an *orchestra*. Think of all the musicians and their instruments, the strings, woodwinds, percussion and brass, all in tune and all playing together in harmony. Every instrument, however small, has a vital role. And the richness of the sound is much better than that of a one-man-band! The question then is, "Which instrument are you?" and "Are you playing it?" Amen. Let us pray.

²⁹ Moreover, such gifting is not likely to be forever(!), but for a season in life or until the need has gone.