

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

A Gifted Church (1 Corinthians 12:1-31)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 10, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ In our series through the book of 1 Corinthians, we've seen how troubled the church of Corinth was in Paul's day. It was fractured and divided into several camps. There were various presenting issues that they disagreed over. We've already covered a number of them. **But underlying all of those issues was this persistent claim by some in the church to possess a higher spirituality than others.**
 - Either because they were disciples of this or that leader (3:4). Or because they could manage living a life of celibacy (7:1). Or because they could eat food offered to idols with a clean conscience (8:1). Or because they felt free to cast aside any culturally-accepted symbols signaling a wife's relationship to her husband (11:2).

- ❖ **Now, in chapter 12, we learn that some in the church saw themselves as more spiritual because they possessed more spectacular spiritual gifts.** Especially the gift of speaking in tongues. Now in response to that divisive attitude, Paul compares the church to the human body. **The point of the metaphor is that every local church is a visible manifestation of Christ's body.** And every Christian in a church is a part of the body with an essential role to play and a spiritual gift to employ – aimed at the overall health and growth of the church.

- ❖ At the end of chapter 9, Paul used another metaphor comparing the Christian life to a race. And in its context, that metaphor is helpful. **But the problem is when we mix metaphors and mistakenly assume Christians are in a race *against each other*.** Sadly, many churches are characterized by competition. There's a one-upmanship marking how we relate to one another. We're always sizing each other up. Feeling good because we don't struggle with that person's issue. Or feeling bad because we don't seem to measure up to that Christian.
 - Maybe you'd never describe your relationship with others in the church as competitive. **But would you describe it as close? As intricately linked and symbiotic? Because that's how you'd describe the various parts of a human body.** Every body part and organ is intricately linked and inseparable from each other.

- ❖ **And yet many Christians think in terms of a race – an individual race.** On certain days of the week, we might join with others in the same race and run together for a bit. It's like how you might join a jogging group. You run with others that day. But normally you jog on your own. That's how a lot of us view our Christian lives. **It's normally a personal race – a personal relationship with Jesus. And occasionally throughout the week, we'll run next to each other for a couple of hours.** But then we part ways and return to a solo race.

- ❖ That's the danger of mixing metaphors. The chapter 9 race metaphor was intended to communicate the kind of self-control Christians need. It was never meant to be a metaphor of our life together as the church. The body is a far better metaphor.
 - **If the church is a body, then the attention is naturally on the whole person and not individual body parts.** So I might be looking at you in the eyes, but I don't see you as merely a pair of eyes detached from the rest of your body. That's creepy. I still see you as a whole person – even if I'm looking, at that moment, in your eyes.

- ❖ **In the same way, from time to time, the focus might be given to one member of the church.** Like when a preacher is preaching. But a preacher in isolation is incomprehensible apart from the rest of the church. To focus exclusively on a preacher would be as grotesque as staring at a pair of detached eyes. We must never lose sight of the church as a whole.
 - That's why the body metaphor is helpful. Especially in combating any competitive tendencies among us. **So keep in mind the underlying problem of spiritual pride and divisiveness in the church, as we consider the presenting issue of spiritual gifts.** Let's consider: (1) The source of the varied gifts in a church. (2) The parity of the varied gifts in a church. (3) The constructiveness of certain gifts for a church.

The Source of the Varied Gifts in a Church

- ❖ Let's begin by considering **the source of the varied gifts that we find within a church.** Paul identifies that source immediately in the first three verses. Now at first glance vv1-3 seem out of place. We've got Paul referring to mute idols and to the fact that when the Spirit of God is empowering people to speak, they'll never curse Jesus. And on the flip side, only those empowered by the Spirit will confess Jesus as Lord. **What does that have to do with a discourse on spiritual gifts?**
- ❖ It helps to remember that Paul is responding to a letter they wrote him. "*Now concerning spiritual gifts,*" signals that they're raising the topic. Now an alternative translation could be "spiritual persons" (*pneumatikos*; 2:13, 15). I prefer that since the more common term for spiritual gifts (*charisma*) doesn't appear until v4. I think they were writing to Paul about spiritual persons. Some in Corinth saw the gift of tongues as the sign of your advanced spirituality. So having that spiritual gift meant you were a spiritual person.
 - **But Paul's point in vv1-3 is that anyone who confesses Christ as Lord should be considered a spiritual person.** Not just those who manifest a particular gift. He's deflating the ego of those elevating tongues and returning it them to the same level ground as anyone who confesses Christ and shares the same Spirit.
- ❖ Which leads Paul, in vv4-6, to identify the source of all these varied gifts as the Holy Spirit. "*⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.*" **Whether Paul speaks of gifts, service, or activities – he's using those terms synonymously. All referring to spiritual gifts.** He's saying that, in one church, you'll find a diversity of spiritual gifts and the same Spirit of God empowering them all.
- ❖ **The point in stressing the Spirit as the same source for all gifts is to stress the foolishness of boasting in the specific gifts you have.** The Greek word in v4 for gifts is *charisma*. It's where we get the English word "charisma" and where the term "charismatic movement" comes from. But in that word is the Greek word for "grace" (*charis*). So you could also call a spiritual gift a "grace-gift". So think about it: **If the ability to speak in tongues is a gift of grace from the Spirit of God himself – then how can you point to that gift and boast about being more spiritual than others?**

- ❖ Notice how, starting in v8, Paul gives us a list of varied grace-gifts. There's another list in v28. **Let's clarify that these lists are not exhaustive – they're representative.** (c.f. 13:1-3; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 4:11) Now Paul identifies nine gifts in vv8-10. And, in v28, he mentions eight but with many overlapping with vv8-10.
 - Now in v8, it mentions **the utterance of wisdom** and **the utterance of knowledge**. Some think these two gifts are miraculous in nature. But that seems redundant with prophecy. Which leads others to think it's referring to the ability to give wise or knowledgeable counsel. Or it's another way of referencing the gift of teaching, which Paul particularly mentions in v28 and in all his other lists (Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11).

- ❖ Now if we're correct in understanding these two gifts as non-miraculous in nature, then we can group them with two other non-miraculous gifts in v28 – **the gifts of helping** and **administrating**. The gift of helping or serving is a gift you'd expect a church deacon to have and to employ on a regular basis. It's not limited just to deacons, but it does fit that office.
 - The gift of administrating can also be translated as the gift of guidance (NIV) or the gift of leading (CSB). The Greek word refers to the piloting or steering of a ship. It's a gift you'd expect a church elder to have and to employ as he serves to oversee the church. It's not a gift limited to elders, but it does fit that office.
 - **Now when we say the gifts of teaching, helping, and administrating are non-miraculous, we're not suggesting that these are merely natural abilities applied in a spiritual direction.** Paul is not talking about natural talents. He's talking about a Spirit-empowered ability exercised in the life of the church. These gifts may not be miraculous or impressive. But they're certainly supernatural. They are gifts *of the Holy Spirit*.

- ❖ **Now the gifts in vv9-10 are overtly miraculous in nature.** And, let's be honest, they are more impressive. The Corinthians weren't enamored with the gift of helps. It was the gift of tongues that captured their attention. So what are these miraculous gifts? In v9 Paul mentions **the gift of faith**. That's not referring to saving faith. We're talking about an extraordinary faith that enables a believer to trust God in situations where others would tend towards doubt.
 - After faith, Paul mentions **gifts of healing**. Now some say those gifts aren't miraculous in nature but refer to a compassion or aptitude for helping the sick. A gift you'd expect in those called to a career in medicine or caregiving. But Paul more likely had in mind a miraculous gift that results in the kind of miraculous healings you see in the Gospels or the book of Acts.

- ❖ But note that Paul never speaks of healers being given to the church like he speaks of prophets or teachers in v28. **Meaning there's no biblical evidence for the role of a healer in the NT church – someone with the power to heal people at will.** Now prophets and teachers (along with apostles) had recognized roles in the early church. And serving in that role would've required that gift. But in the NT, we don't see those with gifts of healing serving as regular healers in the church alongside regular prophets or teachers.

- The same could be said of those given **the gift of the working of miracles** (v10). There was no role of miracle-worker in the early church. Even as some were able to perform miraculous works, as the Spirit led. In the Gospels and Acts, that included exorcisms and other miracles of nature.

- ❖ Now **prophecy** and **the ability to distinguish between spirits** are likely related gifts (v10). Prophecy refers to the ability to offer encouraging insight to others as God spontaneously reveals it to you (14:3, 30). And others in the church have the ability to discern whether that prophetic word is from the Lord or from false spirits. We'll look further at prophecy when we get to chapter 14. **But I want to clarify here that, because of its spontaneous nature, prophecy is not the same as preaching or teaching.** Preaching and teaching are the direct result of preparation and study in a biblical text. But in prophecy, God communicates a word directly to the mind of the prophet – not through a written text.
 - And lastly in v10 are **the gifts of various kinds of tongues** and **the interpretation of tongues**. Tongues refers to the ability to praise God in a language unknown to the speaker. The first manifestation was in Acts 2. Visitors to the temple, from around the world, heard the apostles praising the works of God in various tongues. Now in 1 Corinthians, we learn that sometimes not even the hearers understand what's spoken. Which is why God gifts others with the ability to interpret tongues. So that what is spoken can benefit others. That's a huge concern of Paul's that we'll consider soon.

- ❖ **But you might be wondering if these miraculous gifts are still given to the church today on a normative basis.** I'm not talking about whether specific *instances* of miraculous healings or prophecy or tongues could happen. **Few Christians today would insist on an absolute, blanket cessation of all miraculous works.** Most affirm that God still performs miraculous deeds in his mysterious ways. But are these miraculous gifts still to function normatively in the church today like you'd expect for the gifts of teaching or helping?
 - That's a debated question between Christians. Some of you are trying to figure out a position. Sorry but we're not diving into it today. Since it's not the main point of this text, it's not the main point of this sermon. We have a Systematic Theology course, and we'll get to it when we cover pneumatology next quarter. **But all we'll say today is that the debate hinges on how you define these abilities.**

- ❖ **Did gifts of healing refer to the kinds of healings that took place in the Gospels and the book of Acts?** Where the lame can walk; the blind can see; the deaf can hear; even the dead are raised. Those who say *yes* would suggest these gifts have ceased. Those who say *no* see gifts of healings as continuing – even as claims today are less spectacular in nature.
 - **Are the words of NT prophecy to be considered inspired and authoritative like the words of OT prophecy?** Those who say *yes* would suggest these gifts have ceased. Those who say *no* think the gift of prophecy continues in our day. But prophetic words need to be judged and weighed because of their fallible nature.

- **Is the spoken tongue a human language unknown to the speaker? Or does it include ecstatic utterances?** Those who insist on a human language would suggest these gifts have ceased. Those who include ecstatic utterances with no discernible language pattern would say the gift continues.
- ❖ But I hope you see that answering these questions is not essential to understanding this passage. **The point Paul is making is that all of these gifts are apportioned to us by the Holy Spirit.** Look at v11, *“All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”*
- **If that’s true, then why you possess a particular spiritual gift has less to do with you and the maturity of your faith or the degree of your spirituality – and far more to do with the Spirit and his sovereign will.** Remember how, back in chapter 1:7, the Corinthians were described as not lacking in any gift? And we’ve seen how immature and troubled the church can be. **Clearly you can have *all* the spiritual gifts and still lack spiritual maturity.** So why would you boast in your gifts? Spiritual gifts are not a sure indicator of one’s spirituality.

The Parity of the Varied Gifts in a Church

- ❖ That’s the message being sent. Which leads to our second point: **The parity of the varied gifts in a church.** That’s referring to the equal status of all these gifts. Which is particularly highlighted in the body metaphor that runs from vv12-26. Listen to vv12-13, *“¹²For 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. ¹³For 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.”*
- **What Paul is saying is that the church of Corinth is made up all sorts of people with all sorts of backgrounds. But they all share in common the same Spirit.** And more specifically, the same baptism of the Spirit. That’s what it means when it says, *“all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*
- ❖ **The baptism of the Holy Spirit is what happens at your conversion.** When you, as a non-Christian, receive the good news of what Jesus accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection – making possible the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life – when you receive that, by grace through faith, you are regenerated (born again) by the power of the Spirit. **And when you’re baptized into the Spirit, you’re baptized into the body of Christ.**
- So that when, after that, you’re baptized by water *into* the membership of a church – as we witnessed today – you’re publicly demonstrating the reality of your Spirit baptism *into* the body of Christ. Water baptism puts on display your Spirit baptism.
- ❖ Let’s keep reading in v14, *“¹⁴For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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.”* Paul goes on making a similar point. It’s straightforward. **Every body part is important and needs to function as designed for the optimal health of the body.** In the same way, every member of the church is equally important.

- And we all need to serve – we all need to use our gifts – in order for the body of Christ to grow and mature and achieve optimal health. **So we shouldn't think we're less a part of the body or less important of a member because we don't have an impressive gift or a prominent role in the church.** It would be like a foot complaining that it's not a hand or an ear being dejected because it's not an eye.

- ❖ **Paul reminds us that God chose to give you your particular grace-gift.** So don't fear that you've been overlooked. And don't despise what he has given. Listen to v18, *"¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, yet one body."* He's saying imagine if you were comprised of only one body part. You were all eye or all ear. Not only is that gross, you obviously can't function as a body. You won't thrive. You won't grow.
 - **That's why it's not healthy for a church to be filled with members all possessing the same set of gifts or all pursuing the same ones.** We value biblical teaching, but it wouldn't be healthy if we all had the gift of teaching or if that's all we emphasized. A healthy church will have a diversity of gifts spread out among its members and will encourage everyone to use their gifts *"for the common good"* as Paul puts it in v7.
 - **Some in Corinth were using their gifts to build up their egos, their reputations, their platform.** Paul on the other hand, insists that gifts are for building up the church. Contributing to the health and growth of the body.

- ❖ That's the vision of a healthy, unified church that we want to see lived out at HCC. **It's a beautiful picture where every member recognizes the importance of every other member and the gifts they contribute to the health of the body.** It's about knowing how much we need each other. Listen to v21, *"²¹The 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.' . . . But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another."*
 - That's what we want to be. **A church that doesn't play favorites or elevate those with impressive gifts.** But instead shows the same care for one another. Regardless of who you are. Doesn't matter if your gifts land you on stage behind a mic. Or in the nursery holding a crying baby. Everyone is honored. Everyone is cared for.

- ❖ Look at v26. *"If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."* **That's the picture of a mutual, interdependent relationship between members.** When one of us suffers, we all suffer. You know how that works in the body. When your tooth hurts or if you stub your little toe, it's small, but its pain is felt through your entire body. It affects your entire mood. That's how a body works.
 - **Is that how our church works?** When a member is suffering – going through a difficult season – are we suffering with them? Are they being cared for with the *same* care you might show to a more prominent member like a pastor?

- ❖ On the flip side, Paul says, in a healthy church, when one of us is honored, we all rejoice. **The honor is shared by the whole body.** And it's well deserved because, behind the scenes, so many parts were involved to make that honorable moment happen.
 - Think about how it works in the body. **Let's say we praise someone for their great voice.** To which part of the body do we usually direct the honor? The lips? The mouth? That's what we see on the outside. **But for a good voice to be produced and heard requires so many other body parts working in harmony behind the scenes.** Praise should also go to the tongue. The voice box which hold the vocal chords. The throat. The windpipe. The lungs. The diaphragm. **Unless all these parts work together, you'll never hear that good voice roll off those lips.**
 - So if there's anything honorable happening on the stage, let's share that honor with everyone working behind the scenes in the AV booth. Behind the camera. Ushering at the door. Watching your babies or teaching your kids so you can worship. Nothing praiseworthy up here happens without them and their gifts.

- ❖ Now Paul wraps his argument up in vv27-30 by basically saying that all Christians receive some of these gifts and no Christian receives all of them. Therefore, every part of the body of Christ needs each other. **And every member has a contribution to make to the health and growth of the church by using a gift that God in his wisdom chose to give you.**
 - So no one should think less of themselves because they don't have a certain gift. Or think more of themselves because of a gift they do have. And don't treat others who do have a certain gift as more important in the church or more spiritual. And don't look down on those who lack that gift as less important or less spiritual.

The Constructiveness of Certain Gifts for a Church

- ❖ That's the point Paul has been driving home. Which has been based on the fundamental parity of all the varied gifts in a church. No one gift is better than another. But then he concludes the chapter with a statement that seems to upend his entire argument. This leads to our third point: **The constructiveness of certain gifts for a church.**
 - Listen to v31, "*But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*" **Now what does Paul mean by the higher? Isn't he contradicting himself?** Didn't he just explain that no gift is better than another?

- ❖ I think it's safe to say that Paul is not suddenly reversing himself. **When he encourages us to earnestly desire the higher gifts, he means higher – not in terms of higher importance for the one using the gift – but in terms of what is most edifying (constructive) for the church.** No gift is meant to prop you up or build your ego. But some gifts do more directly build up others whenever the church gathers.
 - So in writing to a church enamored with tongues, **Paul will argue in chapter 14 that, between the two, prophecy is the higher gift.** And that they should desire prophecy more than tongues. But again – not because those who can prophesy are better or more important than those who speak in tongues – but only because you can directly edify the church with prophecy without the need for interpretation (14:4-5).

- ❖ But lest anyone think, “Great, but what if I don’t have either gift? Or what if both have ceased in our day? I can’t access these higher gifts.” That’s why Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13. **There he’s going to tell us about the most excellent and edifying of spiritual gifts, which is love.** The love of God is a gift given to every believer. Which makes love the highest and greatest gift we have at our disposal for the edification and growth of the body.

- ❖ **Brothers and sisters, I hope you come away recognizing that you have been given a spiritual gift that you’re expected to employ for the common good.** Now maybe you’re not sure what that gift is. The best way to find out is to just start serving. You usually discover your gifts as you begin to use them.
 - **But what if it turns out that I don’t have that gift?** What am I going to do? You rely on the gift of love, which is at your disposal. That’s Paul’s answer. Serve with love and you’ll make a big contribution to the health and growth of the body.