

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

By Steve Zeisler

May is a month in which several members of my family have birthdays. Giving and receiving gifts therefore has been a fairly common theme in our house in the past few weeks. During the month I remembered receiving a Christmas gift of a weekend at a Young Life camp when I was a sophomore in high school. There at that camp I received Christ and returned home as a child of the King. I have many times since pondered the importance of that gift of a weekend at camp. Gifts can open vistas and provide opportunities we had never dreamed of before.

One of the issues which we will consider this morning in our studies in the apostle Paul's first Corinthian letter is what the Scriptures call charismata, i.e. gifts given by the Spirit of God that qualify Christians for ministry, gifts that open vistas of service in the Lord. It is my hope that as we come to understand the concept of spiritual gifts, and perhaps see them in a new light, that we will rejoice at the changing and energizing effect they will have in our lives for God's sake.

Chapters 11 through 14 of this letter address the subject of Christians meeting together for the purpose of worship. We have already referred to a number of things which Paul has had to correct in the Corinthians' behavior during worship. In chapter 11, for instance, he referred to their tendency to over-value freedom of expression. Specifically, some of the women in Corinth were acting in such a way that their new-found freedom became a disadvantage because of what it did to their husbands. Paul demonstrated that freedom should be practised in the context of loving concern for others. Then in the same chapter, the apostle addressed the problem of the Corinthians' tendency to undervalue certain things. In their love feasts and in their sharing the Lord's Table together, they undervalued both the presence of Christ in the lives of some of their fellow-believers and the sacrifice of Christ on their behalf.

FALSE AND TRUE SPIRITUALITY

The issue which the apostle raises in chapter 12 concerns an area about which he feared the Corinthians were ignorant. They were unclear on certain teaching which was essential to their worship experience and to the concept of oneness among them. This is demonstrated in the opening verse in the words,

Now concerning spiritual things, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.

The word "gifts" does not appear in the first sentence, as some translations have it. Here, Paul's concern is that the Corinthians not be ignorant of spiritual things in general. He recognized that they had come out of the pagan world which had more than a passing interest in spiritual matters. Everybody is concerned about spiritual things-even those people who spend their time fighting against the recognition that there is a God. It's hard work being an atheist! Therefore it is true to say that every Christian has some knowledge of spiritual things which he or she brought with them at conversion. The Corinthian idols had a different form, but they were essentially the same idols which we worshiped before we came to Christ-the gods of war, beauty, health, knowledge, sex, potency, etc. They brought some of these memories with them into their new Christian life. Paul's task here is to help them distinguish what is of the Holy Spirit from other sources of spirituality.

God gives his children spiritual gifts, such as prophesy, teaching, discerning of spirits, etc., which he utilizes to spread his truth. But there are other voices claiming spiritual power who are actually liars and deceivers. That is why the apostle does not want the Corinthians to be ignorant of spiritual things, and why he wants them to be able to identify the course of spiritual things. Yesterday I received in the mail an advertisement for Dianetics. This bulletin claimed, "with Dianetics techniques, and with the help of a trained auditor, you can actually locate with laser-like accuracy the exact areas of your life that are holding you back-and you can clear them away... The door to a new life is open to you." An astrologer in San Francisco has apparently helped run our government in recent years. New Age thinking is widespread in public schools.

How can we tell what is of the Holy Spirit from what is not? Our college pastor told me last week that a wonderful, godly woman in her 80's who had been his Sunday School teacher many years ago died recently. Near the end of her life this woman received from a friend a list of hundreds of verses of Scripture that dealt with physical healing. If she read every one of these verses out loud, and claimed them as her own, this friend said, she would be healed of her terminal disease. This was an offer of spiritual advice. The woman replied that the one chapter of the Bible which she had already claimed was Revelation 21. She knew that it was time for her to go home and be with the Lord, and that he would "wipe away every tear." That was the only kind of healing that appealed to her as she neared the end of her life.

THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS

How can a Christian distinguish between all the voices which claim to be spiritual? Paul's answer is in verse 3: "Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'; and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." When the Spirit of God is present, the center of that life is Jesus; the declaration of that life cannot possibly be that Jesus is accursed; it cannot possibly undermine him and take from his glory. And equally, no one can say from his heart of hearts that Jesus is Lord unless the Spirit of God is present with him. The issue is not the Judeo-Christian tradition, the marvelous ethics of the Bible, the beautiful language of religious history. The issue is Jesus. Can you say from your heart that he is Lord? If you can, then you can be sure that the Spirit is present in you because he is the only means by which you can make that statement.

Further, recognize that the issue is one of the lordship of Jesus. It is not Jesus my friend, Jesus the teacher, Jesus the marvelous example of humanity, but Jesus as Lord, Jesus my Master, the one who owns my life and has the right to direct it and control it. If the Spirit is present in your life, the statement of your life will be, "Jesus is Lord." Is the deepest and most important matter before us Jesus and making him Lord? That is the first question, and the acid test, according to Paul.

The apostle goes on to say that there are ways in which we will be different from each other. Christianity does not spew our carbon-copy people who look and act exactly the same. There are important ways in which we will differ from one another, but there is only one Lord in our lives. In this we must be united. "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons." Your life's work will be different than that of other Christians. I saw a photograph of two NBA basketball players recently, one 5 feet 6 inches tall and the other 7 feet 4 inches. The smaller man only came up to the taller player's waist, yet both of them are first-rate players, and each has his own assignment on the court. One relies on quickness and ball-handling skills, the other on his rebounding and defensive skills. Both skills are essential to success in games, and both have the same goal in mind.

This, in a sense, is what Paul is pointing out here in this passage. Christians will be different from each other in essential and important ways, but there is only one Spirit who gifts us for Christian service. Different ministries will be given different people. Some will be called to minister in universities. Others will be called to minister in hospitals. Some will minister to children. Some will minister in the Bay Area in which we live; some in Africa or South America. But there is only one Lord who gives these assignments.

And there are differences in effect, as Paul says here, "And there are varieties of effects..." I have preached

essentially the same message in two different settings and seen some people awaken to the truth of God in one setting while in the other my listeners have fallen asleep. It was not apparent to me that anything I had said was different; it just turned out that the effect was different because God chose that it be different.

GENUINE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

Although there are differences in callings, experiences and assignments, there is yet a central witness which all must make, and that is that Jesus Christ is Lord. There is one God, and one Mediator between God and man. There is only one way to relate to Christ if we are Christian, and that is to relate to him as Lord. Having made that clear, then we will find the beautiful diversity of Christian experience which we need to understand from that chapter.

Verse 7:

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

This list of gifts given by the Spirit is polemical, to a degree. We must remember that Paul is writing to people who once were pagans, followers of dumb idols, temple worshipers of Aphrodite, Ares, Zeus, and other gods. In those religious traditions, many similar manifestations were produced demonically. Miracles, real or apparent healings, prophecies, peculiar languages uttered, at times under the influence of drugs, interpretations of languages, etc., was all part of pagan worship. Paul is saying that the Spirit of God will produce in the Corinthians gifts for the glorification of Christ so that they could minister. He is trying to help them distinguish between what is a bastard, phony form of these manifestations which they might have been acquainted with in a pagan temple and the gifts that come from God and are useful for service to Christ.

The apostle gives some tests that will help them know if their gifts were from the Spirit or not. The first test is that any such manifestation be "for the common good." It should benefit everybody, in other words. If you have a special ability that is from God, it is not given to make you richer, more prominent, or anything like that. It is not merely for your own good, in other words. If it is in fact from the Spirit of God, it will benefit all. Your using your gift will spread joy, truth and knowledge of Christ everywhere.

The second test which Paul gives is that these gifts are given by the Spirit. They cannot be acquired with money, as Simon the sorcerer learned in the book of Acts. They cannot be gained by effort, by apprenticeship to some guru, or by any means other than the granting of them as a gift by the Holy Spirit. He gives them as he chooses. It is not open to us to pick our options for service. Gifts are bestowed upon us by a sovereign God who fits spiritual gifts to our natural gifts and places us in ministry.

The last implication here is that where there is the touch of God, his working is obvious when his gifts are being used in his service. Jimmy Swaggart's return to his ministry was reviewed in the San Francisco Chronicle recently. Here is what the opening paragraphs said about this:

"Jimmy Swaggart, defrocked but defiant, returned to the pulpit yesterday and sought to save his troubled ministry by unleashing the talent that once had made him and his operation the envy of television evangelists. For more than two hours the golden-haired preacher in the sharp black suit wept, shouted Scripture, spoke in tongues, sang, danced, embraced cripples, groveled on his knees, played the piano, hugged his weeping wife, and told in whispers of dark, prophetic dreams and desperate late-night conversations with the Lord."

Many of these activities might have been done by a man or woman gifted by the Spirit of God to minister, and the effect would have been that God had accomplished something. But there is a way in the flesh to reproduce

all those things. The quoting of Scripture, preaching, speaking in tongues, attempts at healing—all of these things can be done in a fashion that is not of God. They can be attempted in a phony, reprehensible way.

Another problem we can have in this area is to deny that spiritual gifts differ from natural talents. We can become humanists, if you will, with a Christian tinge. We can stop believing that the Spirit of God might teach us truth in a remarkable way; that we might stand up and prophesy truth and have the Lord change lives by it, deny that miracles are possible, reject the notion that God ever could touch a body or spirit or soul and bring healing. We may grow so uncomfortable with the presence of God that we deny him the opportunity to work at all. We can either have a phony vitality which is what I take Jimmy Swaggart's act to be, or lifeless humanism. Neither is appropriate. What we should look for is the Spirit of God to give gifts to people and that those gifts, when used by the Spirit, will glorify Christ and bring about the work of God. The tests which Paul suggests we apply are: gifts are for the common good; they are given by the Holy Spirit; and, it is the Lord himself who is ultimately at work.

The first two gifts which Paul mentions here, the "word of wisdom" and the "word of knowledge," are in widespread evidence today. Certain people have the ability to systematize truth. They might write theology, to mention a high-end use of this gift. There are many listening to me today who can hear and recall truth so that it retains its clarity. Others have the word of wisdom gift. They have the ability to apply the word of truth to a given situation, say, a family argument, a discussion with an unbeliever, or whatever.

Next, Paul mentions gifts that have to do with reading what is happening, if you will. I understand the gift of faith to be the ability to read the signs of the times so that you can sense where God is going. The vision for Peninsula Bible Church South was captured in about a 24-hour period. A couple of men in our body who have the gift of faith saw the possibilities and they were able to convince everyone else who needed to be in on the decision that this was of the Lord. In a remarkable sense that property and that congregation, and its influence in the community, were seized upon because someone who had the proper gift could read what God was doing. That is the gift of faith at work. "Distinguishing of spirits" is another reading-type gift which Paul lists here. This is the ability to sense whether what a person is saying is valuable or misleading.

Healings and miracles are gifts of dramatic change when God will use a person to bring about unexpected transformations. The plural "healings," by the way, can also refer to spiritual or psychological healing. Some are called by God to signify his presence with these gifts.

The power of speech is everywhere recognized in Scripture. God created the universe with his speech. The prophets altered history by declaring, "Thus saith the Lord." James comments on the tongue as a mighty force in human affairs. Three gifts of speech are listed here: tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecy. They are dealt with at length in chapter 14 and we will look into them when we come to that section. God will do these things, says Paul, he will promote their service and glorify himself by them.

DIVERSE AND UNIFIED

Verse 12.

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. For if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the

members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.

These pictures we have here of body parts conversing with each other illustrate two important points. First, they are declaring that a Christian cannot say that the body has no need for him. He cannot say, "I'm of no use because I cannot contribute as others do." And second, that Christians are all together in this. There can be no exclusivity. We cannot say to someone that we do not need them, that we can get along fine without them. Neither of those statements is allowable in the Christian body. All are needed. We are diverse and different. We are not supposed to be like anyone else. We cannot allow ourselves to believe that we are not needed, nor can we imagine ourselves so superior that we do not need others. Those two truths need to be kept in a hard embrace, as it were.

When you come into the body of Christ, the Spirit of God looks you over and decides what it is that he wants to do with you and then gives you special spiritual capacities that you did not have before. The intention of the Spirit is that you will discover what your gift is, you will allow it to grow and mature in your life, and eventually that recognition will fit you for ministry. You ought to look for similar opportunities everywhere you go. If the Lord moves you to St. Louis, you take with you the same gifts which you have been given and the same capacity for ministry to that new setting. If your gift is teaching, or evangelism, or healing, you ought to look for ways to use your gift. You have discovered yourself to be a hand, a foot, an eye or an ear and the expectation should be that the body of Christ is always going to need your contribution. Too often, however, churches limp along with only the hands or ears active. It's possible to do that but it is foolish. Those who are feet and legs ought to be called into ministry so that the hands and arms, ears and eyes can do what they do best.

It's very important for everyone to know that they have gifts, to discover what they are, and to come to understand what our gifts fit us for. Where can we serve? Where can we make our best contribution? Having found that out we should engage in making that contribution with a whole heart. We are not to isolate ourselves in our supposed inadequacy, nor are we to isolate ourselves in our imagined superiority. We are all in this together. If one of us suffers, everybody suffers. This is true of your physical body. If you have a stomach ache, the rest of you feels crummy. If one member rejoices, we all rejoice together.

The weaker members are necessary, says Paul. Your spinal cord is weak and easily damaged, but there are few things more necessary in your body than a working spinal cord. The same is true of Christians in the body. There may be some who are weak or needy, yet they are as important as any other. The weak are necessary; the unseemly are honored, says the apostle. This is probably a reference to how we wear clothing to hide what we call our private parts that are unseemly, yet we honor those parts in clothing ourselves and we respect the importance of them. We need to have the same care for one another.

Verse 27:

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

Here, Paul begins a long section (which will be the focus of subsequent messages) dealing with the fact that Christians may at times come into conflict because of the different gifts they possess. He will make two points.

First, certain gifts (apostleship, prophecy, and teaching are noted) should be promoted in any given congregation. These "greater gifts" can create a proper setting for others to flourish (much of chapter 14 concerns the issue of how should the gifts of prophecy and tongues interact). The apostle's second point declares that the most important thing of all is love: "I show you a still more excellent way." This is demonstrated by a radical understanding and commitment to love one another. This commitment will make any differences that surface because of the use of gifts, pale when set beside the commitment to love one another. The greatest thing of all, says Paul at the end of chapter 13, is love.

I hope you recognize that the Spirit of God is present in his people; that he is committed to glorifying Jesus Christ; that he has given us work to do and capacity to do it. Christians are to be united in their one Lord, despite their diversity. The Christian life is a call to adventure. The people sitting next to you are remarkable because the Spirit of God dwells in them. There is a vibrancy about the Spirit's call which we must not lose sight of. We need each other. We are members of each other. Each of us can contribute as the work of the Spirit is made manifest in us.

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