

The Gifts of the Spirit

There are several things in this chapter (1 Corinthians 12) interesting and important to be understood, but not apparent on the surface. To discern them, it is necessary to have distinctly in view the people to whom the epistle was written, and the time and circumstances under which it was addressed to them. If we were to read it from a modern point of view— that is, as if Paul were discussing principles applicable to modern circumstances, we should make many mistakes. Paul is discoursing on a situation of things existing in his own day, and having no parallel in our experience. The situation is very simply described. A number of people in Corinth, brought up in a mixed state of philosophy and idolatry, had believed the testimony of Paul on the occasion of his visit to the city, concerning the resurrection of Christ, and the benefits offered to those who should believe and obey the risen Master.

Their belief was based upon the signs and wonders by which Paul's word was accompanied. God gave testimony to the word of His grace in signs and wonders and gifts of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 2:4), so that their faith "*stood not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God*" (1 Cor. 2:5). After they believed, the Holy Spirit was given to them also, by the laying on of the apostles' hands, so that they also were able to speak with tongues, work miracles, prophesy, speak the words of wisdom and knowledge, etc. Paul stayed with them a good while, even "*a year and six months*" (Acts 18:11), for Christ had told him that he had much people in the city (verse 10). After Paul left them, various questions began to arise among them as to duty in this and that, in the new position in which the truth had placed them. Some held one opinion and some another upon the various matters that arose. There were also sectaries among them—men who did not rise to the breadth and greatness of the unity that was in Christ, but conceived petty partialities for certain leaders and teachers. Some said, "*I am of Paul*," as against others who boasted to the disparagement of Paul, that they were of Peter; while others again made Apollos the watchword, and others, Christ. The existence of such a state of division in a community blessed with the gifts of the Spirit will appear inexplicable to those who have not realized that those gifts did not override the judgment and temperamental peculiarities of the possessors; but were restricted to the particular function appertaining to them.

A speaker of tongues was the same individual in the manifestation of character as if he had not received a supernatural knowledge of the languages. A worker of miracles was not made infallible by the impartation of the power to heal. Those having the gift of knowledge and wisdom would be reliable guides; but they do not appear to have been deferred to, to their full extent. And this would be accounted for by the probable argument that one man with a gift of the Spirit was as good as another with a different gift. Thus, the man having the power to interpret tongues, if he differed in judgment from the brother who had the word of wisdom, might feel justified in maintaining his own opinion on the ground that he also having the Spirit, had as much right to form a judgment of the matter as another having the same Spirit in another form. In this disordered state, they appear to have written to Paul to give his mind on the various questions raised. This fact comes out in the 1st verse of the 7th chapter: "*Now concerning the THINGS whereof ye wrote unto me.*" The last ten chapters, including the one that has been read, follow this sentence. It is, therefore, probable that they deal with questions that had been asked by the Corinthians in their letter. Indeed, the style is decidedly indicative of this fact. Take the first verse of the chapter read for instance: "*Now concerning spiritual gifts*"; this is not the way a man writes who is dealing spontaneously with the subject. It is just the style of a man who is answering questions that have been submitted to him; who having done with one, is proceeding to another. It is, therefore, probable that Paul's judgment had been asked on the matters discussed in the chapter. This supposition greatly aids the comprehension of it.

"*Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led*" (1 Cor. 12:2). This allusion to their antecedents prepares the way for the attitude he is about to take as their teacher, and also lays a basis for the argument he is about to advance. As much as to say, "Ye know that apart from what I brought to you, ye were idolaters, without hope, without inheritance in

Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise. The gifts that ye have, were acquired by you in connection with the Gospel. Therefore, the Gospel is the standard by which the questions in agitation must be decided. "*Wherefore, I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed*" (verse 3).

Now, how came Paul to have to make this apparently superfluous declaration? Obviously, because there were some among the Corinthians calling Jesus accursed, who professed to speak by the Spirit. How could such a thing be? This is only to be understood in view of the surroundings and extraction of the Corinthians. The Grecians have been termed the philosophers of the world. The Corinthians lived in one of the principal cities of the Greeks, and at one of the principal seats of philosophy. It was very natural, therefore, that philosophy should crop up in their midst as a perverter of the phenomena connected with the Spirit. Indeed, in the case of another Greek ecclesia—that at Colosse, he expressly says, "*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit.*" Now upon what principle of philosophy could any man take the attitude of a detractor of Jesus, and yet claim to be speaking by the Spirit? I could understand such a case to arise in this way. A worldly thinker, brought in by the preaching of Paul and the novelty of the gifts, remains submissive to apostolic principles for a while, but bringing his secular philosophy to bear, aided by intercourse with the philosophic alien, gradually comes to regard the Gospel movement as but a peculiar form of universal truth. Such a man would come to esteem highly the writers and thinkers and orators of Greece, and to contend that although there was doubtless good in the apostolic system, and a greater measure of good than in Paganism, that yet as a whole it was narrow and unphilosophical; that Jesus, dying by crucifixion, was accursed by the very system which he said he came to fulfil; that it was unreasonable to suppose that God intended an accursed man to hold the position of supremacy taught by the apostles, especially to the exclusion of "the wise and good" men of philosophic fame.

The inspired teachers in the ecclesia would, of course, oppose such a doctrine; and declining to argue it philosophically, might assert the authority of the Spirit in them as sufficient to close the mouth of the objector. In answer to which the objector might say, "I also have the Spirit: I received it equally with you; in fact all men have the Spirit—the poets and philosophers of Athens, as well as the apostles, and therefore we have as much right to maintain our convictions as you." If the man or men were clever and loquacious, their words would stagger the faith of some, and be difficult of confutation. Accordingly Paul was written to: "*Can a man have the Spirit who calls Jesus accursed?*" Paul's answer is "No!" and on the general question of all men being inspired, he says "*The things of God KNOWETH NO MAN, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God*" (1 Cor. 2:11, 12).

The next statement of Paul I understand also to apply to the cavils of the same objector: "*No man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Spirit.*" The necessity for making that statement might arise in this way. In dealing with the man calling Jesus accursed while claiming to speak by the Spirit, the spiritual men of the ecclesia might point out to him that but for the Spirit coming into their midst by Paul, they never would have known about Christ at all. In answer to which, the caviller might contend that the knowledge of Christ was as much a thing of natural cognition as any other matter of history. He would say that although they knew it first by Paul, that was a mere accident; Paul happened to be first on the ground: but that if he hadn't come, they would have heard of so stirring an historical incident in some other way. This would give rise to the point met by Paul's declaration, "Can a man know that Jesus is the Lord without the instrumentality of the Spirit?" The truthfulness of Paul's answer is apparent in many ways. To see or hear of the power of Christ was not to be made to know that he was the Messiah, the Lord. The Pharisees saw him, but did not believe. His appearance conveyed no intimation of the fact. As the prophet had predicted, "*He had no form nor comeliness; and when they saw him, there was nothing in him that they should desire him.*" His Messiahship requires to be testified by the Spirit and confirmed by the Spirit. It was not to be known apart from this. Hence when Peter confessed that he was the Christ, Jesus said, "*Flesh and blood hath not revealed this unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven.*" How? Not by the Spirit filling Peter and mechanically convincing him as it were (for the "Holy Spirit was not yet given" in that sense—John

7:39); but by the testimony the Father gave to Jesus on two notable occasions in the presence of Peter, and on one of them before a multitude. At his baptism and transfiguration, "*A voice came from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son; hear ye him.*" No man could know apart from the Spirit that Jesus was the Lord. When men heard the apostles afterwards, as the Corinthians heard Paul, they heard the Spirit, for the Spirit was in them, as Jesus had promised. The co-operating works of the Spirit in healing, raising the dead, speaking with tongues, were evidences of the testimony being the Spirit's testimony; but apart from that testimony, no man would say that Jesus is the Lord. As a matter of human knowledge, it was unattainable; and therefore the philosophic caviller was sporting himself with his own deceivings in contending as many do in our own day, with Renan at their head, that the Lord Jesus was a mere phenomenal manifestation of moral power, to be recognized and understood on natural principles.

But Paul's words in our day are greatly wrested from their meaning. They are made to teach that no man can say that Jesus is Lord unless he is personally and supernaturally illuminated by the Holy Spirit. This is a self-evident absurdity. We all here present confess that Jesus is the Lord; and we do it heartily, with joyful and grateful emphasis, yet we deny that we are subjectively illuminated in the way contended for in orthodox circles. We are only illuminated in this way, that the Spirit uttering its voice in the earth 1,800 years ago, and causing its words to be recorded, has furnished us with evidence that convinces our understandings that Jesus is the Lord: and apart from the means it instituted to this end, we never would have known the fact, and therefore could never have stated it. In this sense, still, no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Spirit, but this is a very different sense from the orthodox sense which requires that God shall inspire us before we can know His truth, although He has sent us inspired preachers for the very purpose of causing us to know that faith might come by hearing their word. Furthermore, the people who claim to be thus inspired, it is easy to show, do not confess the truth revealed by the Spirit concerning the Lordship of Jesus in many important elements. We must take care, while steering clear of the atheistical philosophy of ancient and modern times, not to run into mistakes in the opposite direction, which are only a little less ruinous.

Paul's remarks on the unity in diversity of the gifts of the Spirit may also be understood as a reply to the same class of objectors, while furnishing information useful to those not in that position. When the official brethren of the ecclesia claimed, in the controversies that arose, to speak with authority in the name of the Spirit amongst them, the caviller of the class in question, of whom so many specimens are to be found in modern times, might well be supposed to say, "You talk of the Spirit; and you point to the various things that are done, but we cannot see in them an evidence of the Spirit. They are more like the feats of conjurers. If it were one Spirit, would it not show itself in the same way in every person having it?" "Like causes produce like effects," they might say, with the dogmatic sapience of a philosophy which has proved itself so many times in opposition to the truth.

"How can we answer this?" the Corinthian believers may well be imagined to ask Paul. The answer is: "*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.*" And there is more philosophy in Paul's answer than the ancient philosophers knew. The law is found to operate even in the natural body, which he afterwards makes use of as an illustration. Hearing is different from smelling; and tasting from seeing; and feeling different from both. Yet if you examine the nerve substance employed in the generation of these different sensations, you find it is exactly the same in all cases. Put it under a microscope, or test it with chemics, and you can discern no difference in the constitution of the nerve-fibre of the ear, eye, nose, tongue, or skin. And the vital energy developed from the blood by the discerning vessels, and supplied to these various functions, is exactly the same—"different manifestations, but the same spirit." Go wider still. Range the broad domain of Nature, examine all phenomena, and you get at last to what is now termed scientifically the "co-relation of forces"; that is, you come to see that the various powers denominated heat, light, strength, cohesion, gravitation, are but the manifestation of a common primal, simple, indefinable force: "*different manifestations, but the same spirit.*" Why is the same force one thing in one relation and another in another? There is no more philosophical answer than the one given by Paul: "*All these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.*" The will of the Spirit—the appointment of the Creator—is the ultimate explanation of all things. The Corinthian philosophers were, therefore, not so wise as they

imagined when they pointed to the diversity of the gifts as a disproof of the apostolic theory of the Spirit. In fact, it was a case of "*professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.*"

There is another feature of the chapter that had time permitted it would have been profitable to have dwelt upon: and that is where Paul speaks of the unity and comeliness of the body of Christ, I would only take time to say that it is a great mistake to look for the realization of what Paul says, in our present position. The perfect, complete, glorious body of Christ will not be seen till put together in all its parts at his coming, when he will present it to himself "*a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.*" It is now but being developed. The merest fragment exists in our day. To look on that fragment as the body of Christ would be a mistake calculated to inspire disgust and destroy heart in the whole matter. It is as when a manufacturer is getting up a splendid article to send to an international exhibition. It is got up in pieces; and an unskilled eye, seeing one of those pieces in the grimy workshop, unfinished and among dirt and litter, would form a very unfavourable idea of it. If he were ignorant of the plan and the pieces, he would be disgusted to be told that that unsightly piece of metal was to dazzle the eyes of courtiers at the world's fair. At present we are in the polishing shop; and we are but a very minute part of the mechanism—as it were a bolt or pin. The eye of intelligence looks at the situation and is not disappointed because things are at present so unartistic, so unlovely, so un-Christlike, in many ways.

The world looks not with the eye of intelligence, but looks at Christ's work in the workshop stage and jeers. Well, we can afford to bear this. We know that a glorious work is being done, and that all who profess the truth are not Christlike; that there is, nevertheless, being developed by the truth a people, here and there, who will form constituents of that great body Christ, in which there will be all symmetry and sympathy. We look forward, with the eye of faith, to the complete body—the principal members of which are now in the dust. Meanwhile, as regard the duties of our present position, we accept the professed friends of Christ, as the body of Christ in our day, towards which we are to be faithful and kind— "*good unto all men,*" but specially those who are of the household of faith. We know not who are Christ's. We must leave that to the judge of all the earth, who will do right. We must, in the dullness and bitterness of the time, do our duty, even unto kindness to the unthankful and the evil, in the full prospect of that day when, if we thus sow to the Spirit, we shall reap life and everlasting joy.

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, pages 132-137 by Bro. R. Roberts.)