

“Ministry Diversity and the Centrality of Christ in the Local Assembly” Issues of
Diversity
Understanding Spiritual Gifting

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Date: February 4, 2007
Title: “Spiritual Gifts and the ‘Fork in the Road’: Are Spiritual Gifts for Today?”
Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

The Big Idea: Today, more than ever, we must be called back to the biblical mandate for loving one another.

Introduction:

Our study in 1 Corinthians 13 ended on September 24, 2006. Now, 4 months later, we will pick up the study for approximately 2 months. Our title is two-fold and I will explain the title at the appropriate time.

What is the purpose of the grace gifts (12:7), and why would a select few vanish for/from church life? The gifts of the Holy Spirit to His people were never meant to divide the body of Christ but to unite it. What went wrong? Why would spiritual gifts cease? Is Paul making a theological statement or a literary statement? What is the “perfect” in verse ten? What is the “mirror dimly” in verse twelve? Is the perfect coming of verse eleven and the face-to-face of verse twelve speaking of the same thing? What will my “fully know” look like in the future when the perfect comes? Why is love the greatest when compared to all spiritual gifts, and is love a spiritual gift? It is impossible for us to examine all of these questions in our present study. In time, I believe we will get there, but for now let us content ourselves with the larger picture.

Our passage is intriguing. The question that often comes up as a fellowship is whether or not the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still active in a local church fellowship. The question is broad enough to warrant refinement. **First**, are we speaking of all spiritual gifts or a subset of spiritual gifts? The short answer is “a subset of the spiritual gifts” (i.e. sign-gifts = tongues, prophecy, healing). **Second**, in attempting to answer the question, the purpose of spiritual gifts must be addressed. Why do they exist? With these two initial questions asked, I would like us to consider the idea as to whether or not spiritual gifts are for today and if this is the real issue.

I would like to go from the larger context to the actual idea, so let us begin by noting the larger literary context for 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

- I. What is the larger context of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13?

- A. First Corinthians 12-14 deals with the Holy Spirit's gifting in and through the local church.
- B. It is addressing problems within the local church and the expression of this gifting.
 - 1. Chapter 12 deals with body unity within member diversity.
 - 2. Chapter 13 deals with love as the one element that is strong enough to provide body unity within member diversity (Do you see where this is headed?).
 - 3. Chapter 14 deals specifically with the gifts of biblical prophecy and biblical tongues in their expression within a local church family.

Now let us narrow our discussion only to chapter 13.

II. What is the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13?

Chapter 13 provides the glue that holds any family together where tremendous diversity exists and is expressed. Remember, remember, and remember, **chapter 13 is a response to a problem.** The issue Paul was addressing was not *whether or not spiritual gifts ceased*, but the function of love to hold a body in unity where gifting diversity existed. This is the issue. The issue of what gifts would stop was not the issue, and it would be wrong for us to major on this minor point. This forces us to consider the title of this study once more "Are Spiritual Gifts for Today?" or "Spiritual Gifts and the 'Fork in the Road'." The Fork in the Road is this: you will either make the idea of gifts continuing or stopping the issue, or you will make the issue biblical love. But only one idea is the big idea and thus Paul's point.

III. What is a working outline for 1 Corinthians 13?

Several months back we considered this chapter, and the following outline is what guided us through the study. I would like to share that same outline with you at this time.

A. The Necessity of Love (vv. 1-3)

Today's church has underestimated these qualities of biblical love. Love as we know it is a mere shadow of what it should be. Biblical love cannot help but put others first. Biblical love is compelling. Those who love, serve. Those who love, obey. Serving and obeying are not burdens to be born. Love is the parent of many offspring. If love does not birth the child, then serving and obeying become cruel masters.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of love is its ability to identify. Love is the consummate Christian virtue. This is clearly seen in John 13:34, 35 and in 1 John where without love for one's brother and sister in Christ the validity/genuineness of one's Christian faith/profession is challenged.

The end of God's activity in and through His people is an unconditional love. Love's power is seen in Ephesians 4:16, "From whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" and 1 Corinthians 7:1, "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies."

A. The Quality of Love (vv. 4-7)

First Corinthians 13:4-8a goes on to show us what love looks like relationally. Being non-loving is inexcusable. Love is not dismissed because of emotional stress, personal rejection, or physical fatigue. No matter how large, progressive, financially lucrative, or powerful we might become individually and corporately, in the absence of love it does not matter. What matters is how loving we were/are to those who come inside of our circle of influence. Expressing love is not controlled by how well things are going. In fact, love's strength is best seen when confronted by the crucible of affliction, misunderstanding, and personal insult.

B. The Priority of Love (vv. 8-13)

Love takes precedence over everything else. This is the point of verses 8-13. It is to show that love is the only way a body can be unified when there is a tremendous diversity of spiritual gifting. This is the real issue inside of this short paragraph. The issue is to show that love is the only possible way for body unity to exist within member diversity. With this in mind I wish to make six observations about the question "Have certain spiritual gifts ceased?"

1. First, I believe we would be overstepping the biblical revelation if we categorize gifts beyond their ultimate function.

Perhaps we can safely conclude that the gift of prophecy is of little immediate value when someone is dying where the gift of healing might be useful, but even here the gift of prophecy could communicate whether or not the individual would recover or die.

So beyond the most noticeable thought that gifts vary according to their immediate function, all gifts are a revelation of the Holy Spirit working. When

gifts are exercised, the Holy Spirit is working. This work is a manifestation of Jesus Christ in and through His body.

This is an interesting thought because people often are desirous of “seeing Jesus.” But Jesus is seen every time a member of His body serves. The problem is that we often want Jesus to look like our deluded expectations, but what He looks like is you or your neighbor serving one another. Jesus is in the “one another” passages of the New Testament.

2. Second, regardless as to whether a gift is categorized as a sign-gift, the gift expressed is not about the channel through which the gift is expressed, but about the Triune God.

The gift is not about the tool, but the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ in the midst of His people.

It is always this nagging propensity to make much of the tool that has created division within the body of Christ. It is always amazingly sad that our Christian culture “touts” those who have certain gifts. Certain individuals have made their gifting the centerpiece of ministry, as if they are the focal point. **The hammer never built a house. Carpenters build houses. Knives do not make successful surgeries. Surgeons make successful surgeries.** To our shame, we have made the gifting of some individuals the centerpiece of Christ’s church.

It matters little to me what the gift is, only that in the expression of the gift, the Holy Spirit is seen and Jesus Christ is magnified.

3. Third, because no listing of spiritual gifts perfectly match, we would be safe in concluding that the listings are suggestive, not exhaustive.

In fact, I would argue that the expressions of an infinite God in and through His people are as diversified as cultures and personalities. God delights in the limitless diversity in which He works in and through His people for the accomplishing of His purpose. Various people groups, diverse genders, and multiple geographical locations all share similar gifts, but how they look in and through these various elements is very diverse. This is what makes the body of Christ so mesmerizing. **It is the collective expression that shows us the inexhaustible beauty of our Triune God.** The issue is not the gift, but the God of the gift.

4. Fourth, the gifts of God are for the glorification of His name and the edification of His body.

This is profound in its simplicity. The issue is not in trying to classify or define the gift, but in serving the body, and in so doing serving Christ. What can you do to edify the body of Christ? Calling a shut-in, sending a card, making a phone call, greeting the crest-fallen, encouraging the down-trodden, all of these are the works of the Holy Spirit for the manifestation of Christ to the world. We are the hands and feet of Christ. Caring, kindness, and compassion need no formal training.

ILLUSTRATION:

For example, if someone was drowning, I would not hesitate to help even if I did not have all the necessary training. Perhaps a lifeguard would be more efficient because of his training, but the individual drowning would not care as to my training or degrees. The end result is the same: rescuing the drowning.

This is just as valid of spiritual gifting. A class on teaching or shepherding or “tongues” can instruct as to what it might look like, but the gift itself is complete when it was initially given by the Holy Spirit. The class can only provide some needed structure and encouragement.

5. Fifth, since all spiritual gifts are sourced in the Holy Spirit and given by the Holy Spirit, the local church can only confirm what the Holy Spirit is doing.

If I do not have the gift of teaching, then there is nothing I can do to get it. I might pray for it, but whether or not I have the gift is dependent on the Holy Spirit, not me.

6. Sixth, there is no gift that is shared by everyone within the body of Christ. All gifts are enjoyed by everyone, but not every member has the same gift.

Thus, it is foolish for anyone to think that everyone should speak in “tongues.” By way of clarification, just because I do not have a gift does not mean I might not be exhorted by the Scripture to pursue its expression (i.e. compassion or mercy). I might not have the gift of compassion or mercy, but this does not excuse insensitivity to the needs of others.

The issue is not what are my gifts? The issue is whether or not I am living Christ to my circle of influence. So stop trying to figure it out and simply start serving. I am not overly concerned as to whether this gift or that gift has ceased, or how each gift is to be utilized in the local fellowship. What I am concerned about is living Christ to one another. Herein lays our greatest need.

Our local fellowship has everything we need in Christ for one another and for our community, our nation, and our world. Now it is for us to be Christ in the community in which we live.

APPLICATION: (Where do we go from here? What's the NEXT STEP?)

First, begin by knowing that you have a gift(s) from the Holy Spirit. Just assume it.

Second, do not spend a lot of time trying to figure out what the gift is. Regardless as to what it is, its intent is to serve your brothers and sisters in Christ. Discovery is in the journey, not the destination.

Third, the issue as to whether or not this or that gift still exists is completely secondary to the great diversity of His gifting to the body of Christ for the purpose of making Him known.

Fourth, serving is living Christ to your community. When you serve, or are served, **Christ is showing Himself either through you or to you**. See Him in the service.

Finally, you should start right now by taking whatever steps are necessary to serve Christ by serving His body, and in so doing showing Christ to your community, your nation, and your world.

The Gospel presented

For the truth of Scripture to change your life through renewing your mind, you must be in a right relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ His Son. This relationship is impossible apart from the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This relationship is built around four key ideas. They can be summed up in four words: God, man, Christ, and response.

GOD

There is a real and personal God who is both Creator and Judge before whom you will stand and give an account as both creature and criminal.

MAN – RECOGNIZE

You have rebelled against God. We've all participated in this sinful rebellion. As a result, we have alienated ourselves from God and have exposed ourselves to His righteous wrath, which will banish us eternally to hell if we do not accept the work of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

CHRIST – REALIZE

But God sent Jesus *Christ*, fully God and fully man, to die the death that we deserved for our sins – the righteous for the unrighteous – so that God might both punish our sin in Christ and forgive it in us.

RESPONSE – RECEIVE

The only saving *response* to this Good News is to believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:12; Acts 16:30, 31).

Have you turned to Jesus Christ as your only hope of eternal life? Today this can happen to you.