

One God, One Body

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Date: 17 February 2013

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[0 : 0 0] but handouts, so take that out and we'll follow that tonight as we look at this passage. As well, please have your Bibles open to that chapter, chapter 12 of the first letter of Corinthians. Well, unity, it's something every organization dreams of having, but often incapable of achieving. So just take Australian politics as an example. Every day in the papers, we seem to be hearing disunity in the government. Rudd supporters, we hear, are actively undermining the Prime Minister, and the PM himself recently warned against leaking to the media. Now, of course, the former PM was himself the victim of disunity. Faceless men, knives in the back, the loyal treasurer who was loyal until it was time to be disloyal.

But the Liberal voters among us shouldn't be too smug, because the coalition, I think, is only united because they can sniff victory at the next election. But just look what happens if and when the polls turn against them. But that's just it, isn't it? Individuals are loyal only and as long as it serves their interest. But as soon as that doesn't apply, disunity reigns. And I have to say, from experience, churches don't fare much better as well. I used to belong to a church that was sadly deeply divided. The two pastors were at loggerheads and then dragged the entire church into taking sides. And after one of them left, the other one got into a conflict with the elders of the church. Now, thankfully, things seem to be much better here at HDD. But I guess we've all experienced or heard of those horror stories, haven't we? And as we look at this letter, we see, too, the Corinthian church having their own episode of conflict and disunity. And in this chapter in particular, what they were fighting over were spiritual gifts. Those with the supernatural gifts, like speaking in tongues or gifts of miracles, thought that they were more spiritual than others without. They think that if you can see the spirit working so clearly, then no one can argue about their spirituality. Well, maintaining unity is a huge challenge. Perhaps it's just an ideal or dream for many of us. So let's see what we can learn tonight from this passage about it. Before we launch into this passage, I just want to say something about spiritual gifts, that term spiritual gifts. I guess there are many books today and many pastors who use this term in a very sort of semi-technical way. Spiritual gifts is a defined term. And then they would, I guess, search the Bible to come up with a definitive list of what these gifts are. And then, you know, sort of work out which ones we have. But I think as we look at the passage tonight, Paul is actually a little more laissez-faire, a bit more loose in how he uses those words. So the word charismata, often associated with the word spiritual gifts, actually only appears twice in this passage.

In verse 4, it says different kinds of gifts. That's that word. And then in verse 9, gifts of healing by the one spirit. That's the only two times. And in the rest of chapter 12, the only other times when that word charismata is used in relation to gifts is when it describes the gifts of healing in plural.

Of course, at the end of chapter 12 in verse 31, when he says, it eagerly desired the greater spiritual gifts, that word as well as charismata. On all the other occasions where we see the word gifts in English, the literal translation is actually spiritual things. So here in verse 1, the literal translation is now about the things of the spirit, although in the NIV, it's the gifts of the spirit. I want to clarify all this at the start because my personal view is that I think sometimes we can get a bit too caught up in trying to define or distinguish gifts. You know, what gifts do we have and how is that different to talents?

Are gifts only things that we get after we become Christians and not before? But I think if you look at how Paul uses and explains gifts, everything good that God is doing through us, he considers a gift.

[4 : 42] And all that we have is from God and all that we are doing is for God. And I think that's part of what's happening in verses 4 to 6, which we'll get onto in a short while. So I think as we look at this passage, we don't really sort of need to agonize over what spiritual gifts and what's not. Yes, there's a particular sense in which some things we have, some gifts we have are spiritual gifts because it's perhaps miraculous and it's only because we are Christians that we have them and unbelievers don't.

But in the main, I think sometimes we can get a bit too hung up with that word and the definition of that word. So when I use the word gifts tonight, it's really my shorthand way of referring to the good work, all of God's grace that is in our lives. In fact, the word *charismata* comes from the word *grace* or comes from the same root word as *grace*. And anything you do that is good is a gift from God.

So let's turn to the first point, which is on your handout. And that is for Christians, our unity comes through worshiping the same Lord. Our unity is a result of Jesus' Lordship.

We are united because each of us have Jesus as our Lord. So Paul says in verses 1 to 3, now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

You know that when you were pagan, somehow or other, you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore, I want you to know that no one who's speaking by the Spirit of God says, Jesus be cursed, and no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

[6 : 21] So we need to, I think, say first of all that not all division is wrong. Not all conflict is a sign of disunity. And so the Corinthians weren't wrong necessarily to draw lines to divide people.

The problem was they were drawing lines in the wrong places. Paul draws the line instead between those who confess Jesus as Lord and those who didn't.

They are the ones who are spiritual and they are the ones who aren't. Why? Because it is only through the Holy Spirit that anyone can confess Jesus as Lord.

The Corinthians, on the other hand, were trying to divide the church up into those who had a particular gift and those who didn't. Paul, on the other hand, compares them, their present state, with their state in the past.

They used to be pagans. They used to be led astray by mute idols. But now they have the Spirit to confess Jesus as Lord. And so Paul was trying to make that distinction rather than the distinction of whether they had supernatural or spiritual gifts, superior types of spiritual gifts and those that didn't.

[7 : 38] Now, I do want to say, of course, that sometimes it is important to delve a little deeper to understand what people mean when they say Jesus is Lord. Because some people can claim Jesus as Lord, but so distort who Jesus is and what he has done that we have to conclude at the end that actually he is not the Jesus that we worship.

He is not the Jesus that is revealed in God's Word. But if you put that aside, I think Paul's point is that it is the Lordship of Jesus that unites us. It is that and that alone.

And it is not a community that we create necessarily, but is actually given to us because by God, through his Spirit, God is working in us.

So the second point then is, having given us this unity, we find that it is expressed through diversity. So there is only one God, one Lord, and one Spirit, but his presence in our lives is expressed in many and various ways.

There is unity, but not uniformity. So look then with me as we move on to verses 4 to 6, where Paul says, There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.

[8 : 53] There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everything, it is the same God at work. Our diversity does not mean that we have different gods.

It is the one and same God. We are not like, as it were, a Coca-Cola factory, producing can after can of Coke, all with the same secret formula in the same red bottle or can.

Neither are we like the big accounting or law firms who train their graduates down to the very exact way they are meant to do filing and the way they are meant to tick the boxes or mark their checking of the facts and figures.

And some of you I know who have worked for those companies would know exactly what I am talking about. When God works in us and energizes us for his service, it will look very different in each of us.

We don't all have to have the same religious experience, and we don't all have to be good at serving God in everything. And so we mustn't try and straightjacket everyone into the same mold.

[10 : 01] And I say this particularly to those of us who are leaders, when we look at people and discern what they are to do in our midst. Now, please don't hear me wrongly.

I'm not saying that we go from one extreme to the other. If unity does not mean uniformity, neither does it mean chaos. So there are things that we should do together and that we should do in an orderly way.

But God, in his wisdom, has created each and every one of us so that we don't all look like cans of spiritual coke. And we come in all shapes and sizes, and the spirit in us bubbles out in all sorts of ways.

But even though there are a variety of ways, it is still the same spirit at work in us. Now, if you look with me at verses 4 to 6 again, I think Paul actually hints at why this is so.

Our diversity is actually a reflection of God's own nature. There is one God, but three persons in the Godhead. And so we see in the verses a reference to the spirit, the Lord, that is Jesus, and to God the Father.

[11 : 11] Paul is not saying that, you know, I don't think we meant to read that only the spirit distributes, gives, and the Lord gives kinds of serving, and God the Father workings. All the three persons in the Godhead is working together.

But the gifts are given for the service which God works in us. And Paul is describing this in a stylistic way, I think, to tell us that we are a reflection.

How we are to work in the body is a reflection of how the Trinity works for our good in relationship with each other. Each person in the Godhead complements each other.

They undertake different roles in relation to each other, but all the time remaining united. And so when we express our unity through diversity, we are in a small way reflecting God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We are, in other words, reflecting God because I think we're made in God's image. Which leads us now to the third point, that even though there is a diversity of ways in which God works through us, like God, we have a common purpose.

[12 : 26] That is, the common good is the goal of our diversity. And that's what it says in verse 7. Now to each one, the manifestation of the spirit is given for the common good.

Never forget, my friends, that whatever gifts that God has given to you and to me is not meant for our own private benefit, but for the common good. God has given each of us different gifts, not so that we can compare and work out who's got the better gift and, you know, who's more important.

And I think that was the mistake that the Corinthians were making. But each of us is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good. Now this is so radically different to the way the world works.

First and foremost, God never gives gifts according to how good we are. But secondly, when he does give to us, what is given to us is meant primarily for the benefit of others, for the good of all.

And so if you look at the list in verses 8 to 11, I think they are primarily descriptions of gifts that are directed for the benefit of others.

[13 : 35] So messages of wisdom and knowledge, they are meant to build others up. The same with healing and prophecy. And then at the end, we see a number of gifts which are paired.

So the gift of tongues is only beneficial for the common good if it is accompanied by the interpretation of tongues. And I think the ability to distinguish or discern between spirits is actually paired with prophecy.

So one person speaks a word of prophecy and perhaps another or more than one discerns whether it is from the spirit or not. So everyone is asked, is to ask, I think, in relation to the gift that they have, not what it says about me, but how can I use it for the common good?

When we have a gift, we shouldn't be looking at what it is saying about us, but what God wants us to do with it for others. Because the reality is, it's got nothing to do with us.

Verse 11 says it quite clearly, the spirit dishes these, dishes, that's a bit rude, isn't it? Distributes these gifts out as he determines. It is the spirit's freedom and prerogative.

[14 : 50] But if you have a particular gift, then know this, it is because the spirit, it is because the spirit wants you to use it for the common good that God has given it to you.

He gives you a gift so that you can serve him by building up his body and so that then the body together can glorify God. So ask yourself this, what has God given you that you are using for the common good?

For everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord should be able to point to something which they believe God has given to them for the common good. Now it doesn't need to necessarily be something that's just unique to you or that you're, you know, better at it than anyone else.

But ask that question. The reality, of course, is that all our lives is actually meant to be used for the benefit for others.

But I guess a good place to start is just to think about that one thing. And if you're having trouble answering that question, then one good way might be to ask others because it's often true what others see in us that we actually discover what gifts we have.

[16 : 10] So friends, if there's one verse that I want you to remember tonight, then it is that verse 7. to each the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the benefit or for the common good.

To my mind, that is the key verse of the passage. And if I can summarize it in a catchy phrase, then it's that little line at the bottom. Embrace diversity, work for the common good.

Many people, I guess, are threatened by diversity. And us, even though we're Christians, often, don't we, we like to congregate with people that are like us.

We've got the same social status, the same interests, the same talents, people of the same age, the same race. But if we begin to understand what God is doing in our church, in His church, then we'll actually embrace the diversity that is in it.

I mean, we just have to look around tonight at our own congregation to see how diverse we are in terms of age, in terms of culture, in terms of gender. And the question is, do we see that as a hindrance to our unity?

[17 : 24] Or do we see it as God's wonderful means for working through us and in us? And can we rejoice that this is actually part of God's plan and design for us?

For if we can, then we will also recognize that it is actually, we are actually part of that plan. Each and every one of us, no matter how different we are, is being put here by God to work for the common good.

Your difference, your distinctive gift, is what is going to promote the common good among us. Now there's a whole lot more that I could say about this point.

Actually, the rest of chapter 12 is about that point, so I'm going to leave that for next week. But for tonight, or this evening, let's remember this. There is one God, one Lord, one diverse body, and one common good.

Let's pray. Father, Father, we thank you that you have given it to us, the spirit to confess that you are Lord, that Jesus is our Lord.

[18 : 35] And because of that, we ask that you help us with our various gifts to work for the common good. Help us not to be afraid of differences and diversity.

Help us not to feel that we are less worthy just because we might be different to others. And more importantly, help us, Lord, not to look at others, look down on others, just because they are different to us and may not have gifts and talents that we think are important in the body.

But Lord, help us to recognize that all of us are put here in order to work for the common good, to build up the body in Christ and to glorify God as a body.

We pray this, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen.