

| 1 Corinthians |

Week 19 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Biblical Context

Many of the Corinthians considered themselves *spiritual* (πνευματικός, *pneumatikos*). Because of their over-realized eschatology, they believed that they had already arrived at spiritual maturity and that the kingdom had already come (cf. 1 Cor 13:10).¹ Paul comments that the *spiritual* among the Corinthians should understand supernatural wisdom (2:13) and judge all things (2:15). However, Paul later comments, “I could not address you as *spiritual*, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (3:1). In 12:1, Paul again opens a section with “now concerning...” (περί δὲ, *peri de*), returning to the issues the Corinthians raised in their letter to him (cf. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 16:1, 12). He uses *tōn pneumatikōn* which can be translated as “spiritual people” or “spiritual things.”² The context is a spiritual people operating in spiritual gifts (χάρισμα, *charisma*; 4:1).³ The problem Paul is addressing “is almost certainly an *abuse* of the *charisma* of tongues” in the church, which Paul will address in greater depth in 1 Cor 14:1-36.⁴ “The long concluding argument on intelligibility and good order in worship (ch. 14) indicates that, as throughout the letter, Paul’s answer is intended primarily to be *corrective*, not instructional or informational.”⁵ It is important to note that the overall argument deals with “manifestations of gifts in the church, not with individual spirituality” (cf. 14:19, 23, 26).⁶

Paul expresses that he does not want the Corinthians to be ignorant (οὐ θέλω ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, *ou thelō humas agnoein*; Rom 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor 10:1) concerning the things of the Spirit (*pneumatikos*; 12:1). He begins to correct their ignorance by reminding them that, in their pagan past, they were “led off to mute idols” (12:2).⁷ In contrast to the Spirit of God, idols can neither hear, speak, nor answer prayer. The former pagans worshipped idols by sacrificing to them. Though these idols are “mute,” Paul indicates that they represent demons (10:20-21). It was believed that some pagan worshippers would give voice to the demonic (cf. Mark 5:7, 9; Acts 16:16-17). “Most likely, therefore, he is reminding them of what they well know, that in some of the cults ‘inspired utterances’ were part of the worship, despite the ‘mute idols.’”⁸ It is against this cultural and spiritual background that the former pagans express concern, to which Paul assures them, “no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (12:3). While the “ecstatic utterance” of the pagan would call Jesus accursed, the “inspired utterance” of the Spirit-filled believer would be to the proclamation of Jesus’ deity.⁹ Thus, an ecstatic utterance was not sure evidence of being “led by the spirit.”¹⁰

¹ The Corinthians’ “over-realized” eschatology is a pervasive theme in the letter. In the letter’s introduction, Paul desires that they “are not lacking in any gift (*charismati*), as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:7). Paul will later refer to this as “when the perfect comes” (13:10).

² The word “gifts” is not found in the Greek of 1 Cor 12:1 and has been supplied from the context by the translators. Paul uses the genitive case in 12:1 (*tōn pneumatikōn*) which can be either masculine or neuter. It is vague whether it refers to people (masculine) or things (neuter; i.e. *gifts*). In 1 Cor 14:1, Paul uses the word in the accusative case (*ta pneumatika*) which is most definitely neuter (i.e. gifts), making the context more clear in 14:1, syntactically.

³ *Charisma* means “that which is freely and graciously given, favor bestowed, gift,” and is related to the word *charis* which is commonly translated as “grace,” or unmerited favor. The word is used 17 times in the New Testament and with the exception of one use by Peter, all are found in Paul’s letters. Where the focus is more in the Spirit, Paul uses *pneumatika* and where the focus is more on the manifestation, Paul uses *charismata*. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 638.

⁴ Tongues (γλῶσσα, *glossa*), like Hebrew *lashon*, refers to the physical tongue but can also mean language. It is used in Acts 2 where the disciples “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (*glossa*) as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). God used these utterances to get the attention of people from many nations/languages and spread the message of the gospel. As it is used in 1 Corinthians, it also refers to a “supernatural language” (i.e. a language not known to the speaker), but in a slightly different context. Also referred to as “speaking in the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 12:3), “tongues of angels” (13:1), “uttering mysteries in the Spirit” (14:2), “praying in the Spirit” (Eph 6:18; Jude 20), Paul explains in 1 Cor 14:2 that “one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God,” and “builds up himself” (14:4; cf. Jude 20). The “gift of tongues” coupled with its interpretation in the context of corporate gathering is equal to prophecy (1 Cor 14:5, 13) and should build up the church (14:5, 12, 19, 26). Thus, tongues without interpretation speaks mysteries to God and builds up the individual believer, but in the context of corporate worship should only be given publicly with an interpretation.

⁵ Fee, 632.

⁶ Fee, 638.

⁷ “Terence Paige has made a strong case for understanding Paul’s reference here to the constant processions that were a part of normal life in the Roman world (including Corinth). Such processions took place as part of religious festivals “in which the participants normally proceeded along a sacred route” which brought them to an image in a sanctuary... He suggests that Paul may have been playing ‘on this “leading” of both people and animals by implying that in their former practices the Corinthians were like the animals themselves, led away captive to slaughter.... The pompe then symbolizes the ignorance and slavery of the Corinthians’ pre-conversion life, in which they simply followed where they were led.” Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 564. The former pagans worshipped idols by sacrificing to them. Though these idols are “mute” they represent demons (1 Cor 10:20-21).

⁸ Fee, 640.

⁹ Most English translations read “Jesus is Lord,” but this is not what Paul wrote. The Greek reads Κύριος Ἰησοῦς (*Kyrios Iesous*), “Lord [is] Jesus.” This may seem insignificant to modern readers, but the earliest Christians would have read it more clearly. The word *Kyrios*, when lacking the definite

For Paul, the ultimate display of the power and presence of the Spirit was not the mere display of gifts, but the exaltation of Jesus as Lord. “Whatever takes away from that, even if they be legitimate expressions of the Spirit, begins to move away from Christ to a more pagan fascination with spiritual activity as an end in itself.”¹¹

It is suggested that the catalyst for this discussion was an overuse or overemphasis on the gift of tongues (or ecstatic/inspired utterances).¹² At issue is both the source of the gift and the individual gift, itself. Correcting their ignorance, Paul simultaneously presents the need and design for diversity as well as the unified divine source and purpose for the gifts. There are varieties/diversities of gifts (χάρισμα, *charisma*), service (διακονία, *diakonia*), and activities (ἐνέργημα, *energema*)—all manifestations of the Spirit—but it is the same Spirit, same Lord,¹³ and same God who empowers (ἐνεργέω, *energeō*) each believer for the good of the community (1 Cor 12:4-7).¹³ Paul then illustrates this by giving an *ad hoc* listing of a variety of manifestations of the Spirit.¹⁴ Paul’s list is neither instructive nor exhaustive, but “merely *representative* of the Spirit’s diverse ways of being present among them—which Paul calls ‘a manifestation’—so that the Corinthian believers will stop being singular in their own emphasis.”¹⁵ God’s unity does not suggest uniformity in gifts, but rather the one and only God is responsible for the variety and diversity of manifestation.¹⁶ Thus, Paul’s emphasis is not in listing the gifts, but highlighting their variety and divine origin; his thesis is found in 12:7—“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”¹⁷ Paul begins his list with concepts that have been previously used in his letter—the utterance (λόγος, *logos*; 1:5, 17; 2:1, 4, 13) of wisdom (σοφία, *sophia*; 1:17-2:16) and knowledge (γνώσις, *gnosis*; 1:5; 8:1, 10-11).¹⁸ Speech, wisdom, and knowledge were all held in high regard in Corinthian society. Paul uses their own terms, but reshapes them “in light of the work of the Spirit so as to give it a significantly different content from their own.”¹⁹ Time and space do not permit a thorough elaboration on individual gifts Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11. Sufficient for the moment is the fact that, from Paul’s perspective, the gifts exist at the initiation and discretion of the Spirit of God alone for the purpose of building up the church and proclaiming Jesus.

Connection and Application

Paul’s thesis statement for this passage is worth repeating—“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7), and emphasized by 12:11, “All these are empowered by the one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” Discussion of the “gifts of the Spirit” can be controversial in some circles—with Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christians on extreme opposite views and anywhere in between. Seemingly, the issue at the forefront in this context was an over-emphasis of one gift over others with an accompanying spiritual arrogance. While some may feel the gifts of the Spirit are not a discussion for today, Paul was addressing an issue in the church that is still an issue. This passage boils down to the following: God is the source of the diversity of gifts. The Holy Spirit apportions to each believer as he wills—true manifestations are at the initiation and discretion of the Spirit. Spiritual manifestations will glorify Jesus (Jesus-centered), are for the common good of the church (family), and proclaim the gospel (on mission).

article (anarthrous) was used almost exclusively in representing the tetragrammaton YHWH (יהוה), the Hebrew name of God. Thus, what was being proclaimed was that “YHWH is Jesus” (cf. Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11; Jer 23:5-6). “Such an affirmation meant absolute allegiance to Jesus as one’s deity and thus set believers apart both from Jews, for whom such a confession was blasphemy, and from pagans, especially those in the cults, whose deities were called ‘lords.’” Fee, 645.

¹⁰ Fee, 644.

¹¹ Fee, 645.

¹² Different sects of Christianity believe that a person is not a born again Christian or filled with the Spirit unless there is evidence of speaking in tongues. This is an over-emphasis on passages like Acts 2:4; 10:46; and 19:6 as normative for the Christian experience to the neglect of the surrounding context and myriad of other verses where individuals believed and did not necessarily experience this. In Paul’s own writing (with the use of rhetorical questions), he asserts that not all Christians speak in tongues (1 Cor 12:29-30), but rather share a variety of giftings with a singular source.

¹³ There is a latent Trinitarian element in Paul’s usage of Spirit, Lord, and God in this context (1 Cor 12:4-6), where all are used interchangeably. The verb *energeō* (“empowers,” “enables”) has “God” as the singular grammatical subject in 12:6, and “Spirit” as the singular grammatical subject in 12:11.

¹⁴ Paul repeats, with variation, the source of each of the manifestations, “through the Spirit...by the same Spirit” (1 Cor 12:8), “by the same Spirit...by the one Spirit” (12:9), “all these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (12:11).

¹⁵ Fee, 649.

¹⁶ Fee, 650.

¹⁷ Paul’s focus is not on the giftedness of each believer but on the Spirit and diversity.

¹⁸ Wisdom (1 Cor 1-2) and knowledge (1 Cor 1:15; 8:1, 7, 10-11) were . In contrast to the carnal source of worldly wisdom and knowledge, Paul identifies the Spirit as the source.

¹⁹ Fee, 656.