

Birthday Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

³ No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Happy birthday church! This is the Day of Pentecost, the day that church historians through the ages have recognized as the day the church officially began with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus as they waited in Jerusalem for the promised Comforter and Teacher. For the past ten years, as the pastor of Unity, I have always referred to the activities of Acts 2. This year I also found the account of God's pouring out of the Holy Spirit when God shared Moses' authority with other leaders of Israel in Numbers 11. It tells of Moses gathering "seventy elders of the people and placed them all around the Tent of Meetings. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied." It also tells of two men who remained in the camp, Eldad and Medad, who also received the Spirit and its manifestation. Moses famously said: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit in them!" With birthdays often come gifts, and the birthday of the church and our own spiritual birthdays, or the day of our baptism

into the community of faith also come with birthday gifts, or as theologian James A. Fowler calls them, “spiritual expressions.”

Sustained and nurtured by God and evangelized by Paul, the early Christian community has been richly blessed and graced with many birthday gifts. In our scripture Paul enumerates the many gifts that have been given to God's people. His focus is on the Christian community living in Corinth, which, for whatever reason, has become competitive with respect to the spiritual gifts it has received. Some Corinthian Christians seem to be claiming that certain gifts of the Spirit are better than others. Paul's response to this situation informs the Jewish Christians that the gifts of the Spirit are varied, and that this variety does not presuppose one gift to be better than another. Each gift is meant to contribute to the common good.

Paul first explains that those who proclaim "Jesus is Lord" have been given this understanding by the Holy Spirit (v. 3b). Only those graced by God's Spirit are able to make such a confession. "Jesus is Lord" is an acclamation and affirmation of faith, and through it we are empowered to function and minister within the Body of Christ, and witness to the world.

Our passage focuses on the theme of diversity and unity in relation to the blessings that the Christian community has received from God. Paul states that a variety of gifts, services, and activities exists, but the same Spirit (vv. 4-5) and the same God activate all of them in everyone (v. 6). Therefore, no one gift, service, or activity is better than another, all have the same divine origin, and no one should be in competition with another with respect to the blessings and graces God has bestowed upon the community as a whole.

Paul makes clear that each person in the community is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. None of the gifts of the Spirit has been given to glorify or improve any one person in particular; therefore, none of the gifts is meant to be self-serving. Paul's emphasis is on the common good. For Paul, every

person within the community is gifted; all participate in the expression of the Spirit, and although the gifts may vary and differ, no one person is to be found lacking in the expression of the Spirit.

Less we misunderstand, Paul lists some of the gifts that are to be found within the community of faith and emphasizes the fact that the same Spirit is at the heart of each of the variety of gifts. To one is given the utterance of wisdom through the Spirit (v. 8a). Wisdom is essentially a practical instruction on how to live properly and successfully (see, e.g., Prov. 1:1-6; Jas. 3:1-4:17). Wisdom includes knowledge and understanding gained from life experience, as well as knowledge and understanding about God and God's ways. The source of wisdom is God (Prov. 2:6). I am so very blessed to be the pastor of many persons with the gift of wisdom, age and experience. They give counsel from the grace that only God can give!

Another gift given to various members within the community of faith is the utterance of knowledge (v. 8b). Like wisdom, knowledge is given through the Spirit. Knowledge includes knowing God's instructions, laws and ordinances (Ps. 147:19, 20), God's ways (Ps. 25:4), and even God (Jer. 31:34). Knowledge also includes knowing that only one true God exists (1 Cor. 8:1). Some, without the benefit of formal education can quote and explain Scripture and God's ways and will.

A third gift, faith, is also given by the same Spirit (v. 9a). Faith centers on the belief in God's reliability and is also identified with accepting Jesus as coming from God. For Paul, faith is central to salvation, and faith is the means by which we are incorporated into the body of Christ. The object of faith is always God. Do you know people with the gift of faith? I do!

Healing as a gift given by the Spirit (v. 9b) can assume many expressions. Healing is the process of restoring meaning to life and can occur on physical,

emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels of a person's being. Healing was central to Jesus' mission and ministry (Matt. 4:23-25; 9:35) and was part of the apostolic tradition (Acts 4:14, 22; 5:16; 8:7; 28:8). As attested by Jesus in the Gospels, healing flows from the proclamation of the reign of God.

The ability to work miracles is another gift given by the same Spirit to various people (v. 10a). In the NT, the word "miracles" is understood as "mighty deeds," "signs," "deeds of power" and is associated with the activity of God (Deut. 3:24). In the Gospels and early Christianity, mighty deeds included healings, exorcisms, and instances involving control over the forces of nature, such as calming the winds and storms or increasing food or beverage supplies. Both Jesus and his disciples perform mighty deeds (e.g., Luke 8:22-25; 9:37-43; 10:17-20).

Prophecy, another gift given by the same Spirit (v. 10b), enjoys a rich tradition. Within the biblical tradition, beginning with Abraham, the prophetic spirit has been active. Throughout Israel's history, prophets have been proclaiming words of woe and hope while sharing a vision of a new world order and a new understanding of leadership. The prophet Joel foretold the outpouring of God's Spirit that would result in widespread prophecy. This message was repeated by Peter and came to fruition in Acts 2:14-18 on the Day of Pentecost. Prophecy became the gift of not only a few people whom God raised up but also the gift of the community of faith at large.

Three last gifts that Paul mentions are discernment of spirits (v. 10c), tongues (v. 10d), and interpretation of tongues (v. 10e). Discernment of spirits involved being able to distinguish what is of God and what is not. One of my girlfriends always introduced a new boyfriend to my husband Leroy. He is gifted with the ability to root out the ones that are up to no good! The gift of tongues is a spontaneous stream of articulate sounds and words. Some find great comfort in this gift in the time of worship. This gift is central to Paul's First Letter to the

Corinthians. Paul would like all of the Corinthians to speak in tongues (1 Cor. 14:5). For Paul, this gift functions to convince unbelievers of the Spirit's presence (1 Cor. 14:22). Paul emphasizes the need for the gift of interpretation of tongues so that the one praying can be guided by the Spirit.

Paul closes this scripture with a metaphor that emphasizes the unity of all people, drawn together by the Spirit, who is given to all and who has baptized all into one body (vv. 12-13). For Paul, a church that is both diverse and unified embodies the body of Christ and the vision of God. **Carol J. Dempsey**

We have been given wonderful birthday gifts. But remember that spiritual gifts are the gifts of the Spirit, given for the common good and for the building up and strengthening of the body of Christ. No one gift is superior to another; the diversity is important because all of these gifts are necessary for the body of Christ to be complete. So again, Happy Birthday!” **Greg Garrett**

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