

Equipped by the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

Happy Birthday! Today is Pentecost Sunday – 50 days after Easter – 50 days after Resurrection Sunday. It is the celebration of when Jesus had been miraculously taken up into Heaven and the Disciples had returned to Jerusalem to wait for the promised Spirit. This is the celebration of when the Holy Spirit descended on the gathered disciples, giving the gifts or manifestations that gave the disciples the abilities to do their ministries of sharing and being the good news, and inviting others to do the same. On that day and every since, those who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior have been given gifts for ministry! How exciting! What will you do with your gift?

Spiritual gifts are the gifts of the Spirit, given for the common good and for the edification or building and strengthening the body of Christ, but to the church in Corinth—as perhaps to Christians today—they remain mysterious, and their diversity makes us curious. Within this rich set of possibilities, how can we be certain what behaviors are from the Spirit? How can we know who truly speaks for God? Our scripture focuses on the results of the coming of the Holy Spirit: the number and purpose of spiritual gifts, and their importance for life in community.

Paul's response to the Corinthian church is to an implied question—who speaks for God? While we do not know what his specific response might concern (were there some in the community who might, in an excess of enthusiasm, have been saying nonsensical things such as "Let Jesus be cursed"?), Paul's instruction is clear: those who confess Christ crucified are

the only ones who can be assumed to speak for God. Those who reject Jesus in their words and actions cannot be speaking by the Spirit of God, while those who proclaim the lordship of Jesus cannot help but speak through the empowerment of the Spirit.

The Corinthian church, at least as we encounter it in the letters of Paul, bears similarities to many modern American Christian communities. The church at Corinth seems to be full of individuals looking out for their own spiritual welfare and sharply divided in how they understood and lived out their call to be followers of Jesus. Paul's exasperation with these first-century Christians covered various issues, but one was their focus on individual spiritual gifts. It seems that he was upset at their inability to form a community. Stanley Hauerwas has observed that a community should be judged by the type of people it forms, and so far, despite some extraordinary individual gifts, the gathering of Corinthians was having a hard time producing people capable of living in true Christian community.

Paul tells us while there are varieties of gifts, they are all given by the same Spirit. Paul also suggests varieties of service to the same Lord and activities activated by the same God. The diversity is important because all of these gifts are necessary for the body of Christ to be complete.

Paul also suggests, like in the Roman thought of the body politic, each member of the body knew his or her place, and those who were clearly at the bottom of the hierarchy were nonetheless enjoined to continue carrying out their tasks, however menial they might be, for the greater glory of the empire. However, in contrast, Paul says within the body of Christ no one is more important, nor are anyone's gifts more important. All are equal in the eyes of God—Jews and Gentiles, slaves and citizens. In God's kingdom, all

are equal, all are loved, and wealth and power do not elevate one—or should not. **Greg Garrett**

Let's examine the gifts that Paul says the Holy Spirit has give to the church to equip us for ministry. Paul lists these gifts that are to be found within the community 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) to equip the church for ministry. 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).

Another gift given to various members within the community is the utterance of knowledge (v. 8b) to equip the church for ministry. Like wisdom, knowledge is given through the Spirit. Knowledge includes knowing God's 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).

A third gift, faith, is also given by the same Spirit (v. 9a) to equip the church for ministry. 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 God.

Healing as a gift given by the Spirit (v. 9b) to equip the church for ministry, 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) to equip the church for ministry. In the New Testament, 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 performed mighty deeds (e.g., Luke 8:22-25; 9:37-43; 10:17-20).

Prophecy, another gift given by the same Spirit (v. 10b) to equip the church for ministry, 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 putting forth 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 reiterated by Peter and came to fruition in Acts 2:14-18. Prophecy became the gift of not only a few people whom God raised up but also the gift of the community at large.

Three last gifts that Paul mentions are discernment of spirits (v. 10c), tongues (v. 10d), and interpretation of tongues (v. 10e) to equip the church for ministry. Discernment of spirits involved being able to distinguish what is of God and what is not. The gift of tongues is a spontaneous stream of articulate phonemes. This gift is central to Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul wanted 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.

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I'm not sure this is a complete list of the gifts. I believe the Spirit equips us for the ministries that each congregation is called to do. Maybe we don't need speaking in tongues since all of us speak English. Maybe we don't need the gift of physical healing with most of us within 10 minutes of a state of the art hospital. But we definitely continue to need to be equipped by the Spirit. Paul's teaching is that people are divinely gifted for a specific reason: the common good, the building up of the community (12:7). Since God's will is the flourishing of the church at all times and places, should we not expect that the Holy Spirit remains poised to gift us, even us, in contextually appropriate ways as well?

What gifts might the church need today? It is thrilling to imagine how gifts might be manifested. Instead of leper healers or miraculous multilinguists, what if we saw an emergence of gifted new visionaries and seers able to steer Christianity through the Whitewater changes of the twenty-first century? What if we saw the gospel communicated through compelling new forms by magnetic poets, storytellers, and artists, via the Internet and social media? What if we put our worship services on YouTube and people could watch them at any time. How comforting it would be if Christians used their gifts to reach a new generation of spiritual practitioners, "panini generation" caregivers (caring for children and aged parents), ecumenical healers, and urban missionaries working the outposts of grit and need in neighborhoods near and far. Would we not again witness "deeds of great power" if God's power surged through revitalized activists

and peacemakers, collaborative influencers, and powerful social-media evangelists?

Perhaps the modern lesson from our scripture is less "unity amid diversity" in the gifts that equip us for ministry, than it is "energy amid exhaustion." Our gifts can be used in different ways of service in our fast-paced society. When we reclaim God as the true source of vital and powerful spiritual gifts, our faith community will be transformed beyond what we think is humanly possible. As in Corinth, we would see the Holy Spirit go viral and equip us for our work of ministry. **Suzanne Woolston Bossert**

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