

## **SPIRITUAL GIFTS: HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW? 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-30**

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Paul now turns to a third subject relating to worship at Corinth. Having already discussed head coverings for women (11:2-16) and observance of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34), he considered the role of the gifts of the Spirit in worship. The topic of Spiritual gifts extends from 12:1-14:40, but this material divides into three major sections: 12:1-30; 12:31-13:13; and 14:1-40. Paul continued to follow the three overarching principles that had guided his discussion of other aspects of worship. Specifically, he was concerned with: 1) the honor of God; 2) the edification of other believers; and 3) the testimony of the church before the unbelieving world.

The apostle first concerned himself with the value of diverse gifts in the worship of God (12:1-30). Some Corinthian Christians tended to exalt particular gifts of the Spirit as more important than others, and likewise exalted those who manifested the best gifts. Paul vigorously opposed this spiritual elitism by demonstrating the God had given all sorts of gifts to the church to be used harmoniously in his worship. Paul discussed the issue in three main sections: Identifying the Spirit (12:1-3); the Unity and Diversity of the Spirit's Manifestations (12:4-11); and the Unity and Diversity of Members in the Body (12:12-30).

### ***EXCURSUS: SUPERNATURAL MANIFESTATIONS TODAY***

Much controversy exists over whether or not the supernatural manifestations of the Spirit listed in this passage continue in the modern church. The controversy generally centers on the issue of special revelation. Some believe that special revelation continues today, while others staunchly deny the giving of new special revelation. Evangelicals take many different positions on this subject, but for the sake of convenience evangelical positions can be categorized under three basic headings.

- 1) *Continuation*: Some traditions affirm that the *infallible* transmission of special revelation ceased with the closure of Scripture. Even so, God continues to speak to his church through apostles and prophets, and through other supernatural means such as tongues, word of knowledge, word of wisdom, etc. These groups apply Paul's discussion of Spiritual gifts such as tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecy rather directly to their situations because they believe these manifestations of the Spirit continue in modern times.

- 2) *Modification*: Other traditions hold that significant changes have taken place between the days of Paul and our day. First, the offices of apostle and prophet were foundational offices of the church (Eph. 2:20) specifically designed to transmit infallibly special revelation to the church in its early stages. In this view, these offices have ceased from the church. Instead, in the modern day these offices in the church give, at best, advice and counsel that may prove to be true with time. These traditions evaluate such officers and their messages with Scripture, using Paul's words in 1 Corinthians as general, authoritative counsel to their situation.
  
- 3) *Cessation*: Some branches of the church hold strongly not only that all supernatural special revelation has ceased, but also the idea that God communicates with his church today only through the Scriptures. These branches of the church usually hold that the miraculous gifts seen in the New Testament have ceased, believing that miracles only existed to demonstrate the authority of God's infallible spokespersons. When God stopped sending infallible spokespersons, the Spirit ceased to bestow miraculous gifts. For the most part, Paul's comments on the supernatural gifts are largely irrelevant because these gifts no longer exist at all. Preachers and teachers of the word today merely have the responsibility of reasoning carefully through the logical implications of Scripture.

To meet the needs of each position, this commentary will focus primarily on Paul's original meaning to the Corinthians in this passage. Different readers must apply these matters to their situations according to their orientations toward *Continuation*, *Modification*, and *Cessation*.

### IDENTIFYING THE SPIRIT (12:1-3)

Paul knew that the Corinthians' pagan background made them susceptible to being misled by supernatural manifestations. For this reason, he told them how to identify those who truly spoke by the Spirit.

**12:1.** Paul began this discussion with the expression "**now about spiritual gifts.**" The terminology "**now about**" (*peri de*) indicates several times in this epistle that Paul responded to questions or issues raised by the Corinthians themselves (7:1,25; 8:1; 16:1,12). He did not reveal their precise concerns regarding **spiritual gifts**, but emphatically stated that he did not **want them to be ignorant** or unaware of this topic. Once again, Paul created a familial mood by addressing the Corinthians as **brothers** (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15).

**12:2-3.** As he began to correct misunderstandings the Corinthian believers had about spiritual gifts, Paul provided them with a central criterion for distinguishing the

Holy Spirit's work from the experiences of pagan religion. He did this by reminding them of something they knew, calling on the Gentiles in the church to remember their religious practices before they became Christians.

Paul's argument is not easy to discern, and has led to many interpretations. It is evident that Paul set up a contrast between the times **when** the Corinthians **were pagans . . . and led astray to mute idols**, and their Christian experience of **speaking by the Spirit of God**.

Nevertheless, the precise nature of this contrast is still debated. Some interpreters argue that Paul merely contrasted the fact that pagans were led by idols and Christians by the Holy Spirit. Others have argued that Paul specifically contrasted the extraordinary supernatural experiences of ecstatic speech in pagan religion with the supernatural work (especially tongues and prophecy) of the Holy Spirit in the church.

Although the former outlook may not be ruled out entirely, several considerations support the latter view. 1) Mystery religions popular in the Mediterranean world at that time practiced ecstatic speech. 2) In this passage, Paul did not focus on Jews, but on Gentiles who were likely to have been involved in such idolatrous religions. 3) Paul said that the Gentile believers were formerly **influenced and led astray** by someone or something (perhaps a demon? [10:20]). 4) He described the idols as **mute** (see Ps. 115:5; Jer. 10:5; Hab. 2:18-19), which in this interpretation would be a great irony. 5) The general context of this verse focuses on the nature and restrictions that apply to speaking in tongues, a Christian experience which was behaviorally similar to the ecstasy of pagan religions. It would appear, therefore, that Paul reminded the Corinthians about their past extraordinary religious experiences of idol worship.

Paul drew attention to these past experiences to deduce (**therefore**) general instructions on distinguishing the Holy Spirit's gifts from pagan religious experiences. First, Paul noted that the Holy Spirit never leads anyone to say, "**Jesus be cursed.**" If someone in the church at Corinth spoke such words (even under supernatural influence), he was not speaking by the Spirit of God. Second, Paul commented that the Holy Spirit empowers those who proclaim that **Jesus is Lord**. Many interpreters have suggested that this was one of the earliest and most basic confessions of faith within the first century church.

Put simply, Paul began his discussion of spiritual gifts by saying that mere religious ecstasy does not validate a phenomenon as originating with the Holy Spirit. At least one criterion must be used to identify the Holy Spirit's work. Does the religious experience honor Christ as Lord or not? If not, then it is not from the Spirit. If so, then one can at least begin to believe that the Holy Spirit is behind the experience.

## DIVERSE SPIRITUAL GIFTS (12:4-11)

Having laid down the general criterion for distinguishing the Holy Spirit from pagan supernatural phenomena, Paul turned to the various ways in which the Holy Spirit manifests himself in the church. His presentation guards against two extremes — on the one hand, in the preceding verses he warned against too broadly identifying the gifts of the Spirit with every supernatural religious phenomenon (12:1-3). On the other hand, in this passage he warned against too narrowly identifying the Spirit with only one manifestation in the church (12:4-11). The gifts of the Spirit are manifold, and each one has an important place in the worship of God and the ministry of the church.

**12:4-6.** Paul introduced the theme of variety with a Trinitarian formulation. He spoke of **gifts** in association with **the Spirit**, **service** (“ministries” NASB, NKJV) in conjunction with the **Lord** Jesus, and **working** (“effects” NASB; “activities” NRSV, NKJV) in association with **God** the Father. In each case, Paul intended to show that diversity and unity coexist. There are **different kinds of gifts**, **different kinds of service**, and **different kinds of working**. Yet, each variety is associated with a person of the trinity: **the same Spirit**; or **the same Lord**; or **the same God**. The authorization by the triune God indicates the unity that exists within the great varieties. This tension between variety and unity governed Paul’s entire discussion of Spiritual gifts.

The three terms — **gifts**, **service**, and **working** — closely relate to each other, but they are not precisely synonymous. Put simply, each item is the source of the one that follows; service comes from gifts, and working from service. The term **gifts** appears frequently in this epistle with reference to the various manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers (1:7; 7:7; 12:4,9,28,30,31). The **gifts** of the Spirit empower each Christian to perform functions in the body of Christ. “**Service**” derives from terminology that Paul frequently used to describe a variety of ministerial activities occurring within the church (*diakonia*) (Rom. 11:13; 15:31; 2 Cor. 5:18; 8:4; 9:12; Eph. 4:12; 2 Tim. 4:5). He apparently had in mind the ways in which spiritual gifts lead to various services performed in the Christian community. “**Working**” (*energema*) is an uncommon noun in the New Testament, appearing only here and in 12:10. Paul also used its cognate verb “**works**” (*energeo*) in the same verse, which verb generally connotes effectual work (compare Matt. 14:2; Mark 6:14; Rom. 7:5; 1 Cor. 12:11; 2 Cor. 1:6; 4:12; Gal. 2:8; 3:5; 5:6; Eph. 1:11,20; 2:2; 3:20; Phil. 2:13; Col. 1:29; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:7; Jas. 5:16). Thus, it may be better to translate the noun as “results” or “effects” (as the NASB), rather than as “working.” Just as Paul mentioned in 3:6-9, although humans perform services in the church, only God the Father makes these human efforts effective. He brings about the results of the **gifts** that are used in **service**.

The final words of this section also convey an essential aspect of the outlooks developed in the verses that follow. Not only is there diversity in unity, but also broad distribution of gifts. God causes all these results **in all men**. In other words, all kinds of people — men, women, old, young, Jew, Gentile — receive gifts of the Spirit and

perform ministries in the church through which God produces results. The Old Testament prophet Joel predicted this democratization of the Spirit's blessings (Joel 2:28-29), and Peter saw this Old Testament hope fulfilled in the church (Acts 2:17-18).

Paul's outlook spoke powerfully to the Corinthian church where some believers felt that their particular gifts (especially tongues) were more important than others. This elitist attitude hardly conformed to reality. Because all Christians are part of the body of Christ (12:27), and all are necessary to the body (12:21-22), God blesses all Christians with gifts, ministries, and results (12:7).

**12:7.** In the next paragraph Paul elaborated on the three themes of unity, diversity, and distribution (12:7-11). He first presented a general statement that God gives a **manifestation of the Spirit** to each person. The Holy Spirit is not distributed only to some believers. He is the down payment or guarantee of every believer's future inheritance (Eph. 1:13-14). For this reason, all who have received salvation also receive the Spirit. But Paul did not merely speak of the Spirit's indwelling presence here. Rather, he focused on **the manifestation of the Spirit**. This terminology indicates that every believer has some display of the Holy Spirit's presence in his or her life.

Paul's general statement had an additional qualification. **The manifestation of the Spirit** has a particular purpose, namely, it is **given for the common good** (compare 1 Pet. 4:10). The gifts of the Spirit are not principally for the edification of the individuals who receive them. Instead, God has designed them for the **good** of all believers.

**12:8-10.** Elaborating on this general statement, Paul listed several manifestations of the Spirit's gifts. He mentioned **the Spirit** four times in these verses to remind the Corinthians that all of these gifts come from one divine source: the Holy Spirit. The list, however, indicates that **the same** or **one Spirit** manifests his presence with great variety. Comparisons with other lists of the Spirit's manifestations (Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11) reveal that this catalogue is but a sampling that probably corresponded to the gifts that Paul knew the Corinthian church manifested.

Paul listed nine manifestations: **message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues**. Interpreters have attempted to group these manifestations in different ways, but no pattern can sustain scrutiny. It is best to treat them individually. But even in this regard Paul's list is not altogether clear. Apparently, these displays of the Spirit were so well known to the Corinthians that Paul did not need to define his terms. Christians today, however, have difficulty understanding Paul's list because they do not have the help of the same common experience with Paul. Only limited insight into these gifts can be derived from this passage.

**Message** (“word” NASB, NKJV; “utterance” NRSV) **of wisdom**: It is best to understand this manifestation in terms of Paul’s discussion of wisdom earlier in this epistle. Some people within the Corinthian church exalted the wisdom of this age (1:18-2:16; 3:18-20). The message of wisdom from God’s Spirit, however, rejected the wisdom of the world as folly and found true wisdom in the gospel of Christ’s saving work (1:18-2:16). It is unlikely that Paul had anything akin to “good advice,” “special intuitions,” or “deeper insights” in view here. In context of 1 Corinthians, his use of the term **wisdom** more closely related to the declaration and explanation of Christ as the only way of salvation in a culture that highlighted human wisdom.

**Message** (“word” NASB, NKJV; “utterance” NRSV) **of knowledge**: Here Paul contrasted the manifestation of the Spirit with claims to “knowledge” which some believers at Corinth had made (8:1-3,7). Little evidence exists for thinking that Paul had in mind the ability to gain factual knowledge through supernatural means. In context of 1 Corinthians, he had in mind either knowledge of God in Christ that comes from direct revelation, or the ability to teach correctly.

**Faith**: Although Paul said that salvation comes through **faith** in Christ, this cannot be the meaning of the term here because it is only given to some. Instead, it probably refers to the kind of “faith” which Jesus described as “faith as small as a mustard seed” (Matt. 17:20; 1 Cor. 13:2). This specific kind of faith is the strong conviction that God will move in one way or another in a specific circumstance.

**Gifts of healing**: The supernatural healing of the sick is well attested in the ministry of Jesus and the early church (Matt. 10:8; 14:14; Mark 6:5,13; 10:52; Luke 4:40; Luke 10:9; John 5:8-9; 9:7; Acts 3:6-8; 5:16; 19:11-12). Healing the physical body was a foretaste of the resurrection of the body on the last day. The plural form of “**gifts**” may indicate that this manifestation of the Spirit takes different forms at different times, rather than remains a permanent fixture in the recipient’s Christian life.

**Miraculous powers** (“effecting of miracles” NASB; “working of miracles” NRSV, NKJV): This general term probably refers to an assortment of supernatural powers other than healings that the Spirit manifested in the church at Corinth. These **miraculous powers** would include slaying by word (Acts 5:1-10); causing blindness (Acts 13:10-11); raising the dead (Acts 9:40-41; 20:9-10); exorcisms (Acts 16:18); etc.

**Prophecy**: From the background of the Old Testament, we know that prophets spoke God’s word under direct inspiration from God (Num. 12:6-8; 22:38; Deut. 18:18-20; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). There is no justification for thinking that the office of prophet in the New Testament was substantially different in this regard from the Old Testament office of prophet. Joel prophesied that in the final chapter of redemptive history, prophecy would be widespread among different classes of people (Joel 2:28-29). The words of true prophets of the Spirit were to be received as the word of God himself (Exod. 4:14-16;

Deut. 18:18-19; 1 Kgs. 12:22-24; 13:1-2; 2 Kgs. 1:16-17; 7:1; 1 Chr. 17:3-4; Isa. 37:21-22; Jer. 5:14; 13:12-13; 19:3; Ezek. 12:26-28; 25:1-3).

Both the apostolic and prophetic offices authoritatively solidified the teachings of the church in its early years through special, unquestionable revelation. All who declared words contrary to these foundational teachings were to be judged and rejected (1 Cor. 14:37-38). To be sure, the Corinthians lived in the times of the apostles when such special revelations still occurred. So, Paul could have had this manifestation of the Spirit in mind here.

At the same time, however, Paul encouraged the church to “test” or “critique” prophecy (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20-21; compare Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1). Thus, although he used the same terminology, it would appear that here he intended “prophet” in the more generic sense of “spokesperson who is not beyond question.” In all events, the church today is not in its foundational stage, and therefore the office of inspired prophet has ceased (Eph. 2:20). “Prophecy” as the proclamation of God’s Word still continues, but it does so in a manner that is not infallibly inspired.

**Distinguishing spirits:** Even in the Old Testament the nation of Israel had false prophets and teachers whose true character had to be discerned (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20-22). The same has been true of the church from its inception (Matt. 7:15). Behind these false teachers are demons and evil spirits (Deut. 18:9-15; 1 Kgs. 18:19-26; 22:19-23; 2 Kgs. 10:19; 17:7-17; 21:1-9; 2 Chr. 33:1-9; Isa. 19:3; Jer. 2:8; 14:13-14; 23:13; 27:9-10; Ezek. 12:24; 21:21-23, 28-29; Hos. 4:12; Zech. 10:2; 13:1-4; Acts 13:10; 16:16-18; 1 Cor. 12:2-3; 2 Cor. 11:14; 2 Thess. 2:9-10; 2 Pet. 2:1-2; Jude 4; Rev. 16:13-14). It was extremely valuable for someone to have the ability to discern the spirits at work in any verbal or non-verbal display of supernatural power. Of course, the teaching of Scripture provided the Corinthians with many guidelines for distinguishing between the Holy Spirit and other spirits. Yet, the deception of evil spirits could be so extensive that supernatural ability was also necessary, especially in the early church where the Scriptures were scarce. Apparently, Paul had this kind of manifestation of the Holy Spirit in mind.

**Tongues:** This gift is at least as controversial today as it was in Paul’s day. Much of the controversy centers on whether **tongues** were known human languages spoken by someone who did not know the language (Acts 2:1-11), or ecstatic utterances not known to humans, perhaps even **the tongues of angels** (13:1). A few interpreters have even argued that **tongues** included language that could be understood by listeners as if it were their own native language, though it was not (Acts 2:11).

A crucial consideration lies in the fact that Paul did not merely say **tongues**, but **different kinds of tongues** (12:10). Paul appears to have been intentionally ambiguous, allowing for a broad range of phenomena under the rubric of **tongues**. This breadth appears in the way Paul drew a comparison between Christian tongues and pagan religious ecstatic speech earlier in this chapter (12:2-3).

It is important to add that there is little or no reason to think that **tongues** always involved infallibly inspired speech, even in the apostolic period. It is likely that some of the **different kinds** may have included infallible speech by apostles and prophets, when the Spirit inspired them infallibly. Yet, it is also likely that not all **tongues** were infallibly inspired any more than all preaching or proclamation was. One of the questions various traditions need to answer clearly is that if infallible **tongues** did once exist (just as infallible preaching and prophecy clearly did), do they continue in the church, and if so, how do we discern them.

Whatever the case, at least four characteristics of speaking in tongues must be remembered: 1) The speakers were not delirious; they were able to control how and when they spoke (14:27-28). 2) Both the speakers and at least some hearers were unable to understand what was said (14:14,16). 3) The Holy Spirit enabled someone in the church to interpret or translate the tongues (12:10,30; 14:5,13,26,27). 4) Paul much preferred that people speak in church in languages that everyone in the church could understand (14:2-5,12-19).

**Interpretation of tongues:** The word translated “interpretation” (*hermeneia*) may also be rendered “translation” in the usual sense of the word. Presumably the ability to interpret tongues differed in ways that corresponded to the kind of tongues uttered. Even when a known human language was spoken, however, this gift was more than the ordinary ability to translate a language known to the translator. It must have been a supernatural ability to translate an unknown language. If **tongues** involved ecstatic or angelic speech, **interpretation** would have involved translating the tongue into understandable human speech. Paul later gave instruction that when tongues occur in worship they are to be interpreted, if at all possible, so that all may benefit from what is spoken (14:5,13,27,28).

**12:11.** Having covered a short catalogue of Spiritual manifestations, Paul closed this list with another general comment. **All** of these gifts (and all other spiritual gifts) come from **one and the same Spirit**. As he pointed out in the preceding verses (12:4-7), the diverse gifts within the church do not come from different sources. They are all legitimate and important to the church because they come from the Holy Spirit. Beyond this, **each one** in the church has received different gifts, not because of differences in qualifications or circumstances, but according to only one standard: **just as** the Spirit **determines**. Simon Magus (Acts 8:18-19) quintessentially exemplified the error of thinking that human will determines the manifestations of the Spirit, and his fate clearly demonstrated the inaccuracy of such a view. Although Christians rightly desire the manifestations of the Spirit (12:31), the Spirit alone decides to whom gifts are given. For this reason, no one should take pride or feel superior to others because he possesses a particular manifestation. As will be seen, some in Corinth thought they were superior because they spoke in tongues. Here Paul began to counter this attitude of superiority.

## UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF MEMBERS IN THE BODY (12:12-30)

In the church of Corinth, some believers having the manifestation of tongues had begun to think of themselves as more important than others. Paul addressed this problem directly, pointing out the importance of each spiritual gift in the church by means of an extensive analogy. He likened the church, the body of Christ, to the physical human body. Beginning with an introduction of the analogy (12:12-13), he focused first on the image of the human body (12:14-26), and then closed by pointing out the implications of the analogy for the church (12:27-30). He compared the interdependence and special honor of each part of the human body with the interdependence and special honor of each member of Christ's body.

**12:12-13.** The apostle issued three statements that set up the basic structure of his analogy. First, the human **body is a unit** — it is **one body** even though it has **many parts**. Second, just as one human body has many parts, so it is **with** the body of **Christ**. Paul often called the church “the body of Christ” (Rom. 7:4; Eph. 4:12), and used the body analogy for the church in many ways. Here he pointed to the unity in diversity that exists in the church as Christ's body (compare Rom. 12:3-8). Third, Paul explained (**for**) how Christ's body resembles the human body. To stress the diversity within the church, he mentioned racial and social diversity first; **Jews, Greeks, slave, and free** all coexist within and contribute to the church. He drew attention to these diversities because he found it remarkable that people from such different backgrounds shared a common faith. No matter what had previously separated these people, they **all** had been joined together in **one body** by means of the **one Spirit**.

Paul stressed two experiences of the Holy Spirit that all believers share and which bring unity among them: 1) they are all **baptized by one Spirit**; and 2) they are all **given the one Spirit to drink**. On the surface, this pair of baptism and drinking may appear to refer to water baptism and the Lord's Supper, but many interpreters argue against this view, sharply dividing baptism of the Holy Spirit from water baptism and noting that drinking of the Spirit appears as a metaphor for receiving the Spirit at conversion (John 7:37-39). The reason for this approach is that in the modern church people often profess faith in Christ and remain unbaptized for long periods of time. As regenerate believers they have the Holy Spirit even though they have not been baptized. Thus, interpreters hesitate to equate “**baptized**” too closely with “**given the one Spirit**.” Also, no account of the Lord's Supper refers to partaking of the Holy Spirit in the cup (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25).

Despite these considerations, Paul still may have alluded here to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. A similar connection between baptism and drinking occurs in 1 Corinthians 10:2-4 where Paul clearly drew an analogy between Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper on the one hand, and the experience of Israel under Moses on the other hand. To be sure, Paul did not identify the Spirit with water baptism, nor was the Lord's Supper a magical ordinance. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are outward symbolic experiences through which God's grace is received only

as participants exercise faith in Christ. Even so, the New Testament church could hardly conceive that followers of Christ would remain unbaptized, and it was nearly impossible to find believers who did not partake of the Supper. Such believers would have been considered odd indeed (Acts 2:42-47; 10:47-48). These ordinances were signs and seals of the New Covenant that all true believers were expected to undergo. For this reason, Paul spoke of baptism and the Lord's Supper as experiences shared by all true believers that symbolized their union with each other in the Spirit and in the body of Christ.

It is important to note the way these verses lay out Paul's argument. Specifically, Paul assumed the unity of the church on the basis of the Spirit. Verses 14-24a especially do not argue for the church's unity so much as they assume it. They argue for diversity. In the modern, fragmented church, many consider diversity an obstacle to be overcome in the quest for unity. From Paul's perspective, however, unity was to be sought in the Spirit, not in uniformity. The church's fullness and ability to function properly depend upon its diverse manifestations of the Spirit.

**12:14-17.** Paul turned next to human body imagery (12:14-26) to illustrate the importance of proper regard for all parts of Christ's body. After repeating the motif of 12:12, **the body** has not **one part** but **many**, he presented two imaginative scenarios which subtly conveyed his outlook on the disharmonies in the Corinthian church. First, he imagined parts of the body thinking too lowly of themselves. A **foot** may say to itself that it does **not belong to the body** because it is **not a hand**. Even so, even if it thinks this way about itself, it does not **cease to be part of the body**. The same would be true of **an ear** that felt it did not **belong to the body** because it was **not an eye**.

By analogy, Paul meant that Christians are not cut off from the body of Christ simply because they think they have no importance or place of service. In fact, believers must remember that each part of the body has a unique contribution to make to the operation of the whole. How foolish it would be for the whole body to be one part. **The sense of hearing** would vanish if the **whole body were an eye**. **The sense of smell** would disappear **if the whole body were an ear**.

One might expect Paul to have reversed the perspective of this section, attacking those who valued themselves too highly rather than addressing those who had low opinions of themselves. Paul probably took this approach for two reasons. First, he wanted to make doubly certain that the arrogant Corinthians had no basis to discriminate against other Christians. Second, he recognized the harm that such discrimination does to its victims, and saw the need to build up those who had been abused. It was not enough simply to stop the arrogant ones from hurting the others. Rather, the situation required active, loving encouragement.

**12:18-20.** The foolishness of these scenarios indicates clearly that **God has arranged the parts** of the human **body** according to his divine wisdom. He made them **just as he wanted them to be** — their composition being designed to fulfill his

purposes — and God’s wisdom in so doing should not be questioned. This divine coordination of diverse parts is so essential to the function of a body that Paul asked a final question: “If every part of the body were **one part** — all eyes, all ears, all feet, etc. — **where would the body be?**” Clearly, there would be no body. To drive home this point, Paul repeated yet again the theme of this section (see 12:12,14): human beings have **one body**, but that body needs its **many parts**. Every part is important in its own right.

**12:21-24a.** Next, Paul presented a second series of imaginative scenarios in which the body parts no longer questioned their own value, but the value of others. Paul insisted that it would be inconceivable for an **eye** to tell a **hand**, “**I don’t need you!**” The same inconceivability would attach to **the head** speaking that way **to the feet**. Common sense demands that the opposite is true. The eyes need the hands, and the head needs the feet. The **parts of the body** that appear to be weaker are actually the **indispensable**.

Ironically, those parts of the body which people sometimes consider **less honorable** they rightly **treat with special honor**. This expression probably refers to clothing and ornaments placed on fingers, feet, toes, and other undistinguished parts of the body. Likewise, the church should also learn to give special honor to its members that do not naturally tend to attract honor themselves. Moreover, people take great care to treat **unpresentable** private portions of their bodies **with special modesty** as they give comparably little **special treatment** to their **presentable parts**. The church should behave similarly, going out of its way to honor and exalt those people whom we not only tend to overlook, but to avoid.

**12:24b-26.** In fact, Paul contended that God himself had given **greater honor** to the members of the body that **lacked** obvious honor. He did this for the purpose of making sure that there would be **no division in the body** and so that all parts **should have equal concern for each other**. The interdependence of all parts evidences this design. If **one part suffers** from pain or disease, then **every part suffers with it**. Most people have experienced how things as small as toothaches and ingrown toenails can wreak havoc on their whole bodies. The appendix may be small and have no apparent function, but when it suffers it jeopardizes the life of the entire body. Moreover, when **one part is honored** and treated with great care, then every other part of the body **rejoices with it**. For example, soaking one’s feet in cool water after a long walk brings delight to the whole body. God exhibits his tremendous design in these common experiences. He has arranged the human body so that every part is important to every other part.

In the same way, every Christian is important to the church, and to every other Christian. Because of the union believers share with one another in Christ, what happens to one believer happens to all in a very real sense. The Corinthians desperately needed to learn this lesson, so Paul designed this portion of his argument to address the situation of their divisions specifically (1:10-12; 3:3-4; 4:6-7; 11:18-22).

Like the Corinthians, modern Christians tend not to realize that the misfortune and mistreatment of other believers spiritually redounds to all believers. Similarly, the blessings and joys of individual Christians spiritually benefit all others as well. Further, when believers love one another as they should, they truly rejoice and grieve with others (Rom. 12:15).

**12:27-30.** Next, Paul applied the analogy of the human body to the church as the body of Christ. He did not complete every detail of the comparison, but expected the Corinthians to continue thinking about the truth of the analogy. He began with the declaration, “**Now you are the body of Christ.**” Paul used this metaphor for the church many times in this letter (10:17; 11:29; 12:12,13) and in other epistles (Rom. 12:5; Eph. 3:6; 4:4,12,16; 5:23,30; Col. 1:18,24; 2:19; 3:15). Here he focused on the diversity and honor of the various members of Christ’s body, starting with this general assertion and then pointing to each person in the church at Corinth. **Each one** is a **part** of the **body**. Without exception every person who has trusted Christ receives a place in **the body of Christ**.

**12:28.** To illustrate God’s arrangement of the body of Christ, Paul listed seven appointments God had made in the church. It appears that he listed the first three of these in order of importance (**first, second, third**), but simply listed the last five without indicating any priority (**also . . . and**) other than their subsequence (**then**) to **teachers**. He probably intended this variation because **apostles, prophets, and teachers** have relatively well-defined leadership roles in the church, while the other gifts of **miracles, healing, help, administration, and tongues** do not.

**Apostles** were very special leaders in the church. Jesus called twelve apostles (Matt. 10:2-4; Luke 6:13-16), and Matthias replaced Judas (Acts 1:23-26). Paul (Gal. 1:1) was added to the twelve as the apostle for the gentiles (Rom. 11:13; 1 Tim. 2:7). Other people such as Barnabas (Acts 14:14), James (Gal. 1:19), and possibly Silas, Timothy (1 Thess. 2:6 with 1:1), Andronicus, and Junias (Rom. 16:7), were also called “**apostles**” in the informal sense of “ones who are sent,” which is the term’s most basic meaning.

The office of apostle could not continue because of its strict requirements. These necessary aspects of calling are drawn inductively from Scriptures, as are many important points of doctrine. In this case, apostles witnessed Jesus himself (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1). Paul met this criterion through his experience with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6; Gal. 1:11-12). For this reason, apostleship is called a foundational office of the church (Eph. 2:20). Paul seems to have implied that the Corinthians could not have become **apostles** when he encouraged them to **desire the greater gifts** (12:31), **especially . . . prophecy** (14:1). Apostleship was of greater importance than prophecy, but Paul did not suggest that they should desire apostleship. The best explanation for this omission is that he did not think it was available to them.

**Prophets** in the New Testament, like their counterparts in the Old Testament, were instruments of special revelation from God. The more prominent examples of prophets in the New Testament are Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10), and Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32). Philip the evangelist's daughters were also known as prophetesses (Acts 21:9). Prophets are second to apostles, and all who claim to be prophets must be evaluated in light of the apostolic word (1 Cor. 14:37-38). Yet, they were listed beside apostles (Eph. 2:20; 3:5). The question that various traditions must ask at this point is whether this equality makes this office foundational to the church and thus did not continue after foundational special revelation (and the means to judge that revelation as "special" or simply "agreeable to the Scriptures") ceased.

**Teachers** are of **third** importance. In the New Testament, teachers were like Jewish rabbis. They studied the Scriptures and taught the church sound doctrine. In Ephesians 4:11 Paul closely associated the office of teacher with that of pastor. This office continues throughout the church's history because it is not an office delivering special revelation, but an office of interpreting special revelation. A qualifying question traditions must ask of the text at this point is whether this distinction (and the few others that can be drawn) is sufficient to differentiate between the first two offices and this and the ones that follow, particularly noting that the next office mentioned by Paul is one that some believe has passed away.

**"Workers of miracles"** is not an altogether clear classification, but apparently in the church certain people often had the ability to perform miracles (see 12:8-10). **Healing** is a special kind of miracle in which the sick or dying are brought back to health (Acts 3:6-8; 5:16; 8:7; 19:11-12; 28:8-9). **Help** is not well understood because the word occurs only this one time in the entire New Testament. In all likelihood, it indicates service as an assistant to others in the body. The character of this gift likely varied from place to place and person to person. **Administration** (*kuberneseis*) also occurs only here in the New Testament. It has basic connotations of "leader" or "guide," and its cognate *kubernetes* denotes a ship's captain, but little more can be known. Finally, Paul listed **different kinds of tongues**. The same phrase appears in 12:10 (see comments there).

**12:29-30.** Next, Paul issued a series of rhetorical questions to which he expected negative responses. No gift is possessed universally by everyone in the church. Paul's central concern in listing the different parts of Christ's body (12:27-28) was straightforward. In a word, he noted that the church is not made up of any one of these appointments. Here he repeated much of the list from 12:28, but replaced **help** and **administration** with the interpretation of tongues. Interpretation of tongues also appears earlier in this chapter (see comments on 12:10). Paul intended the Corinthians to conclude the analogy themselves. Just as the human body consists of different but critically interdependent parts, so the body of Christ consists of diverse but interdependent parts.

In the modern church, it is sometimes argued that every Christian possesses every gift, but to the degree that individual Christians lack sufficient faith, they fail to exercise certain gifts. Other churches insist that all believers possess particular gifts, such as tongues, though all may not have manifested these gifts yet. It should be noted that Paul's argument here specifically and directly refutes these positions. Paul's argument for diversity relies on the fact that only some believers possess each gift. It is partly because only some believers have each gift that no Christian is dispensable. Further, manifesting gifts depends upon God (12:6,7,11,18,24,28), not upon the Christian.

## CONCLUSION AND INTRODUCTION (12:31)

**12:31.** The final verse of this chapter is difficult to interpret. It is not clear whether to keep 12:31 as the conclusion to this section (as the traditional chapter division suggests), to divide 12:31a from 12:31b as the conclusion of chapter 12 and the introduction of chapter 13 respectively, or to take the entire verse as the introduction to the next chapter. Possibly, this verse is a Janus verse, both summarizing chapter 12 and introducing chapter 13. Certainty cannot be attained on this, but it seems best to treat this entire verse as the introduction to the next section. Insofar as it has traditionally been considered at least a partial conclusion to 12:1-30, it will be addressed here in brief.

Paul turned his thoughts toward **the greater gifts** only after he had made it clear that no Christian is of greater or lesser value than another, and that no Christian is dispensable. Every believer possesses the same Spirit (12:4,13), and the Spirit works the **gifts** or manifestations according to his own determinations (12:11). No greater honor comes to the one with the greater gift, for God alone receives the credit and honor for such spiritual manifestations. Still, certain gifts benefit the church more than others (14:1-6,12,17-19). Believers should seek the greater gifts so that the church will receive greater blessings and present a more powerful witness. To make sure that the Corinthians did not misunderstand his meaning here, Paul reinforced these ideas by discussing **the most excellent way** of Christian love (13:1-13) before continuing to exhort them to pursue gifts that benefit the church (14:1-40).

## DIGGING DEEPER

### A. Speaking (12:3)

Besides Christianity, many pagan Greek and Roman religions before and during Paul's day employed "inspired" prophetic and ecstatic speaking. Some speakers spoke in understandable languages, while others such as the Delphic oracle of Apollo uttered incomprehensible sounds that Apollo's priest(s) interpreted for the people. In almost every case, those in false religions who prophesied or spoke in tongues did so in trance-like states in which they were supposedly compelled by their gods.

For example, praising this trance-like state and calling it “madness,” Plato wrote, “The ancients testify that in proportion as prophecy is superior to augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness, which comes from god, is superior to sanity, which is of human origin” (Plato. Fowler, Harold North, trans. Plato: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus, Phaedrus 244d. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914.).

Corinth most likely would have been familiar with this type of “speaking” through the mystery religions such the Cybele-Attis cult, and through Dionysus’ cult and Apollo’s cult. In fact, Apollo’s Delphic oracle was a close neighbor of Corinth, lying just across the gulf from Corinth. It may even have been to some of these pagan religions that Paul referred when he said the Corinthians had formerly been led astray (12:2). In the mystery religions and Dionysus’ cult, those who spoke did so in a state of ecstasy in which they attempted to release control of themselves to their god. They did so not for the “common good” (12:7), but for their own fulfillment. It was against these types of manifestations that Paul warned the Corinthians — no one so “inspired” could say that Jesus was Lord, but such a manic pagan very well might curse him.

### **B. Service (12:5)**

By “service” (*diakonia*) Paul probably had in mind various acts of ministry to the church. For example, in Luke 10:40, both this noun and its cognate verb *diakoneo* appear in the context of preparing and serving a meal (compare John 12:2). Acts 6:1 parallels this use. Several times, such ministry includes the sharing of material wealth (Acts. 11:29; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1,12,13). It also refers to the apostolic and evangelistic ministry (Acts 1:17,25; 20:24; 21:19; Rom. 11:13; 2 Cor. 3:8,9; 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 11:8; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 4:5), including devotion to “the word” (Acts 6:4). Paul probably had many of these things in mind when he referred to “different kinds” of *diakonia*. In general, though, it appears to refer to actions and measures one takes to care for and assist others.

### **C. Weaker (12:22)**

Paul’s word for “weaker” here is the comparative form of *asthenes*, an adjective he used many times in this epistle (1:25,27; 4:10; 8:7,9,10; 9:22; 11:30; 12:22). In the context of the body metaphor, it has been suggested that the “weaker” members are the internal organs, but identifying particular parts of the body probably isn’t terribly important to understanding Paul’s use here. Rather, Paul certainly meant his readers to associate the “weaker” parts of the body with the “weaker” members of the church.

Throughout the letter, Paul suggested that “weaker” Christians are of three main types: 1) those without human merit; 2) the weak in faith; and 3) the physically ill. Paul tended to define the first category as those who were “not . . . wise by human standards, not . . . influential, not . . . of noble birth” (1:26). He grouped the “weak” with those without honor (4:10), and with the poor (4:11). In the second category, he placed those who did not have a proper understanding of idols, and who were prone to falling into sin because they were encouraged to violate their consciences (8:7-13). The third category applied to those who had fallen ill as a result of mistreating the brethren in the

Lord's Supper (11:30). Of course, *asthenes* has an even broader range of meaning than these uses, as does its verbal form *astheneo*. Still, Paul having employed the term already in the letter in concrete fashion, one is inclined to look to these uses for clues to his meaning in 12:22.

Chapter 12 following as it does the mistreatment of the poor at the Lord's Supper (11:17-34), and the immediate context of 11:22 dealing with the topic of "honor" and indispensability (11:22-26), Paul most likely intended at least the first category. It is hard to see how he would have taught that the weak in faith (8:7-13) should be given greater honor (12:24), unless he intended "special treatment" (12:24) to refer to the voluntary limitation of the stronger brethren's freedom (8:13). The third category is certainly not included here, as it represents people under God's judgment (11:29-30), and such cannot possibly be given greater honor by God (12:24) than those not under judgment.

### ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do some people have certain gifts of the Spirit, while other people have different gifts? Is this a good thing? What is the purpose of gifts of the Spirit?
2. Why did Paul include this chapter in his letter? Do you think it was to correct a particular problem? If so, what was the problem? If not, why does the argument appear here and take the shape it does?
3. What is the point of the "body" metaphor? Did Paul primarily emphasize diversity or unity, or did he treat both equally? Can you defend your answer with explicit examples from the text? Why do you suppose Paul did this?
4. Are there any people in the church who don't need to be there? Is it always bad when someone leaves a church? Why or why not?
5. What spiritual gifts deserve the most honor? How are manifestations of the Spirit related to the faith and/or righteousness of the people who have them? Which people in the church deserve the most honor?
6. Do you tend to give the proper degree of honor to the proper people in your church? Do other people in your church tend to give the proper degree of honor to the proper people?
7. What concern do you show for the people in your church? For whom do you show this concern? Why? Does your church as a whole tend to show concern for the right people in the right way?

8. What do you believe about gifts of the Spirit? What is your church's position on the gifts?
9. How does this chapter relate to the issues in chapter 11? How does it relate to the issues in the first ten chapters? How does it function as part of the overall argument of chapters 12-14?
10. What do you think you would need to know in order to understand this chapter better? Why?