

There are Varieties of Gifts but always the same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

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Introduction

The passage above falls under the larger unit of 1 Corinthians 12–14, where Paul deals with spiritual gifts – gifts of tongue, prophecy, teaching, counselling and so forth. In the midst of this, Paul registers the fact that the most important of God’s gifts is love. Through the expression *ou thelō humās agnoein* (I do not wish you to be ignorant, 1 Cor 12:1; cf. 1 Thess 4:13; 1 Cor 10:20), Paul underscores his desire for the Corinthians. Paul is worried about the community he has founded in Corinth and this worry is out of his love for them. He uses the expression above when he is reminding his audience of something they are already aware of, and when he is introducing something new. In our passage, the two ideas are at work. Paul has spoken about Spirit and spiritual gifts before. So, here, it is like a reminder as well as adding something new.

Furthermore, if one reads 1 Cor 7:1, one will discover that Paul seems to be responding to some issues raised by the Corinthians in the letter they addressed to him. There was the tendency among the Corinthians to justify any individual or collective impulses as a movement of the spirit.

Paul knew that the strength of an emotion does not guarantee its authenticity and he lets the Corinthians know this by taking them back to their past: *You know that while you were pagans, you were being led away to dumb idols as if you were carried along* (v. 2); swept along by the attitude of the society in which you lived; you had accepted the worship of idols as entirely natural. It had seemed the right thing to do and this was confirmed by the moments of ecstasy. Paul ironically suggests a contrast between the dumb idols, unable to answer the petitions addressed to them (1 Kings 18:26-29; Isa 46:7; Psa 118) and the

noisy uproar of their frenetic worshippers.¹ Since there were many spirit-powers, some form of objective criterion is necessary in order to determine what impulses come from the Spirit of God.

Paul is happy with the growth among the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:4-9). He founded this community and in his absence the community is growing and acquiring spiritual gifts and producing people who are rich in prophecy. Paul recognizes these gifts; however, he is worried that the Corinthians are deviating from the norm he taught them and going back to the pagan ecstasy.² He defends his authentic teaching, which is under attack.

1 Corinthians 12 can be divided into three parts apart from the introduction (1 Cor 12:1-3). 1 Cor 12:4-11 deals with the theory of charisms; 1 Cor 12:12-26 centres on the symbol of the body; while 1 Cor 12:27-30 relates the symbol of the body to the variety of charisms. These gifts must be, for the benefits, and at the service, of the whole Church. Yes, the sole purpose of these gifts is for the edification of Christ's body. Paul quietly refutes the excessive claims of the Corinthians' "spirituals". The paper will examine Paul's exposition of various gifts in the Church, gifts of the Spirit and discernment of such gifts with an aim to giving proper approach to charisms in the Church. The Corinthians claim they have reached a certain level of growth, but Paul thinks otherwise. This is Paul's fundamental problem with them.

Exegetical Analysis

The Corinthians lived a spiritual phenomenon from their pagan liturgical rituals. Paul is condemning pagan rituals based on idolatry. He frowns at the Corinthian practice of spiritual gifts, which takes place in an uncontrollable manner. They claim that they are under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and so, they engage in uncontrollable verbal expression as they used to do in pagan cult. In 1 Cor 12:3 Paul gives a standard for distinguishing true spiritual gifts from false ones. Christ is the all-time

¹ Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1985), 117.

² Mauro Pesce, "l'apostolo di fronte alla crescita pneumatica dei Corinti (1 Cor 12-14), Tentativo di analisi storica della funzione apostolica" *Monographische Reihe von Benedictina*, 7 (1983), 51-90 (87).

standard. Any gift that is in line with Christ's teaching is a true one. According to B. Demetrios,³ the focus in our passage is on the giver and not the gift. Once it is ascertained that the gift is from Christ, then, its authenticity is indisputable. The distribution of the *charismata* is not an arbitrary action but the result of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, aiming ultimately at the edification of believers. Through the manifestation of the various *charismata*, the integrity, completeness and authenticity of the Gospel message is maintained.

Paul seems to have created an exegetical problem when he divides the gifts into *charismata*, *diaconiai* and *energēmata* and relates them to the Spirit, the Lord and God. The gifts are given by the Spirit, the services are rendered to the Lord while the works are done by God. However, it is doubtful whether there is a strict correspondence between *charismata* and the Spirit; service and Lord; work and God. On God's side there seems to be crescendo but not on the side of the gifts, services or operations. The rational triadic presentation constitutes the multiplicity of phenomena, a unity of divine manifestation and shows that each of the persons of the Trinity has a gift. The triad has theological relevance for the self-understanding of the Church. The revelation between the unity of the Spirit's operation and the plurality of expressions may be seen in the fact that *charismata*, *diaconiai* and *energēmata* are not three different groups of operations. They are simply different descriptions. They are operations of the one Spirit (v. 11). The operations are supernatural but not magical or mechanical. For one can cultivate (*zelow*) these gifts (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1) as well as make them grow.

Word Study

To fully understand the text, it is necessary to take a closer look at some key terms in our pericopé. *Glōssolalia* is from *glōssa* meaning tongue, language. The common expression in Greek is *glōssaislalein* (speaking in tongues). Technically speaking, it denotes the language of the Spirit, a miraculous language, which is used between God and the angels (1 Cor 1:31) and to which one may attain in prayer as he is seized by the Spirit and caught up in heaven (2 Cor 12:2; 1 Cor 14:2, 13-19; Acts 10:46;

³ Bish Demetrios, in *Monographische Reihe von Benedictina, Biblisch-ökumenische Abteilung* 7 (1983), 98-99.

2:11). The synonym of *glōssaislalein* is *heteraislalein* (speaking in other languages, Acts 2:4; 1 Cor 14:21). *Heteraislalein* is the synonym of *xenolalia* (speaking in a strange language). As noted above, *glōssolalia* indicates the divine power of the Spirit's rule in the community.⁴ In my judgment, *xenolalia* and *heteraislalein* are strong synonyms and the two are somewhat distinguished from *glōssolalia*. It would seem to me that the apostles were able to understand one another in Acts 2 because they were given the gifts of understanding as well; whereas when this gift of understanding is lacking *glōssolalia* and even *xenolalia* or *heteraislalein* would make no sense, and this is the reason Paul discourages speaking in tongues when there is no one who interprets.

Glōssolalia comes first as a heavenly speech. Paul recognizes that this phenomenon is the work of the Holy Spirit. He points out the ambivalence of ecstasy (1 Cor 12:1-3). Confession of *kyrios* (Lord) is one of the standards, criteria for discerning the proper work of the Holy Spirit. Paul notes that speaking in tongues and its interpretation should be for the up building of the community. He had already taught something about the Spiritual gifts and prophecy (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 1 Thess 5:19-22).

In 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12, Paul describes *charismata* as an ecstatic phenomenon at divine worship which is regarded as operations of the Spirit. In 1 Cor 2:10-16 no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. In the above passages, Paul gives teachings on spiritual gifts and prophecy and how these should be handled. In his teaching, he makes it clear that if someone speaks in tongues, there should be someone who interprets (1 Cor 14:27-28). If there are prophecies, their authenticity should be discerned (1 Cor 14:29-31). In this passage, Paul singles out those gifts, which are closely associated with preaching and teaching (1 Cor 12:11). His aim is to stress that these gifts within the Church are from Christ. Authenticity of the Spirit does not really depend on how loud one shouts or how strong one's emotion is. It depends more on conformity with the Lord and his teaching, his ways and his ideas.

⁴ Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol.1 (Grand Rapids – Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub Company, 1999), 726.

Charismata or charisms are extraordinary favours conferred by God primarily for the benefit of the community. The Corinthians attributed an exaggerated importance to some of these gifts, supposing that they constituted the fundamental activity of the Holy Spirit. This enthusiasm for extraordinary spiritual phenomenon was, for the Gentile converts, a carry-over from paganism, where the exotic rites of idolatrous worship abounded in strange mystical occurrences. Paul wishes to point out that the Spirit can be present without conferring such gifts, which are not his principal activity, for every believer possesses the Holy Spirit. It is evident to everyone that the Spirit never inspires anyone to curse Jesus.⁵ It is impossible for anyone to make an act of faith in the divinity of Jesus without the inspiration of the Spirit. There is no such thing as purely natural faith in revealed truths. Only the gift of the Spirit can make us confess that Jesus is Lord, the central truth of the Christian faith, and it is this, not speaking in tongues, which constitutes the Spirit's principal activity.⁶ There is only one Holy Spirit; but this Spirit manifests his presence by conferring a great variety of spiritual gifts. These gifts are various forms of service to the community attributed to Christ. They are works of power, which proceed from God the Father, who is the source of all that is accomplished in everyone. Paul states both the unity and trinity of God. The Spirit distributes his gifts differently to different persons as will best serve the common good.

These extra-ordinary favours, which all come from the same Spirit, are now enumerated in decreasing order of value. The first two pertain to teaching: the utterance of wisdom is the gift of expounding the most profound mysteries of the faith; the utterance of knowledge and more fundamental truths. The other gifts are faith, which is confidence in God's help which inspires us to undertake difficult tasks; the power to heal infirmities miraculously and to work other miracles. The last group includes those gifts which most fascinated the Corinthians and which Paul will explain further in chapter 14; the ability to deliver edifying discourses; to identify the source of the charisms, distinguishing the authentic from the diabolical, to utter ecstatic, unintelligible sounds in a

⁵ Claude J. Peifer, *1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1960), 44.

⁶ Peifer, *1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, 44.

state of transport; to understand and interpret such sounds. All of these are free gifts of the Spirit, who distributes them as he sees fit.⁷

Interpretation

In 1 Thess 5:21, Paul says: “Test everything and hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil”.⁸ The criterion for testing the Spirit is Jesus Christ. No utterance inspired by the Spirit can be against Jesus since every word from Jesus is inspired by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). With the use of the name, Jesus, Paul intends to stress the historicity of the risen Christ. The Corinthians tended to exalt Christ at the expense of Jesus and to focus on glory rather than on the cross (1 Cor 2:8). It is unlikely that they ever said: “cursed be Jesus,” but their neglect of the lesson of his historical life (2 Cor 5:15) carried overtones of contempt. Paul is concerned with the implication of their behaviour (1 Cor 10:14-22) and he formulates a shocking hypothesis to show them where they were heading.⁹ On the contrary, anyone who says either verbally or existentially (1 Cor 11:26), that *Jesus is Lord* can be sure that their conduct is inspired by the Spirit (Rom 10:9), because they take the historical manifestation of God’s love (Rom 8:35, 39) as the model of their obedient service.

Having established the fundamental framework within which the impulse of the Spirit must be understood, Paul passes to the individual gifts that the Corinthians have received. The stress on his words suggests that the presence of such gifts within the community had given rise to a competitive spirit. Some gifts appeared more extraordinary than others and singled out the beneficiaries in such a way that they began to assume an air of superiority. Others not so fortunate experienced a feeling of discontent at the quality of their gifts, while still others might have begun to wonder if they had received any gift at all. The situation was ripe for an explosion of envious rivalry.

⁷ Peifer, *1 Corinthians*, 2 *Corinthians*, 45.

⁸ I recall the question one of my seminarians asked me: The student in question asked: When Paul says test everything does that include evil. I referred him to the next line where Paul says: *Avoid every form of evil*.

⁹ O’Connor, *1 Corinthians*, 117.

Therefore, Paul has to emphasize that the *charismata* are gifts bestowed by the Spirit. They are not derived from the natural qualities of individuals. The purpose of such gifts is the service of the Lord and edification of the faithful. They are not to be used for self-gratification and self-aggrandizement. Service is an action, which supposes power. The power that is active in them is God working through them (2 Cor 4:7). It is not expected that each one will receive the same measure of the Spirit. Unity is not a matter of material quantity. It resides ultimately in the one Spirit, who gives; the one Lord, who is served; and the one God, who is at work. Each one, however, has received some gift whose purpose is that all may profit (1 Cor 12:7; 14:12). The Church has no common good distinct from individual members of the community, since the community exists to enable each one to be conformed to Christ. The one who knows the needs of the members best is the Spirit,¹⁰ who, in consequence, distributes his gifts as he sees fit (1 Cor 12:11). Those who receive gifts should be on the alert for those who need the service they have been enabled to render.

Paul's point in enumerating various gifts (1 Cor 12:8-10) is to emphasize that they all come from the same Spirit. The list is illustrative and comprehensive (1 Cor 12:28, 29-30; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11). All the lists overlap to a certain extent but each mentions gifts that the others do not. It is possible that different terms are used to designate the same function, but it is impossible to fix precise limits to each gift or even to define them all with anything approximating certitude. In particular, it should never be taken for granted that the conventional definitions current in charismatic groups express Paul's meaning.¹¹

Contextualisation

We thank God for the gifts of the charismatic group in the Catholic Church. The first Pentecost took place among the apostles and this gave birth to the Church (Acts 2:1-13). The Modern-day Pentecostalism came into existence in the following manner.

¹⁰ O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*, 118.

¹¹ O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*, 118.

Charles Fox Parham (1873-1929) is seen as the founder of modern-day Pentecostalism. At a prayer session, Agnes Oznam, a student asked Charles Fox to lay hands on her so that she could receive the gift of the Spirit. She was recorded to be the first to speak in tongues in this prayer session, followed by Parham himself, who also spoke in tongues three days later.

William Joseph Seymour (1870-1922) helped to spread this experience which could be said to have begun with Parham. Seymour showed a lot of interest in Parham lectures, especially, Parham's doctrine of the baptism in the Spirit. After some time, Seymour moved to Los Angeles in 1906 as a preacher. Convinced that speaking in tongues was a sign of baptism in the Spirit, it was said that he would pray for some people and lay hands on them whereupon they would fall on the ground as if unconscious and begin speaking in tongues. He later founded his group of worshippers at 312 Azusa Street. The house was rather an old building, a former African Methodist Episcopal Church. Their daily but spontaneous meetings, which were made up of people of all colours, lasted almost all day, with rough planks being used as benches on sawdust-sprinkled floors.¹² During their meetings, people jump, run, shake all over, shout to the top of their voices, spin round in a circle, fall out on the sawdust-blanketed floor, jerking, kicking and rolling all over. Some of them pass out and do not move for hours as though they were dead. They claim to be filled with the Spirit.¹³

While people had spoken in tongues prior to 1906, the Azusa Street Revival gave new impetus to modern day Pentecostalism, which views speaking in tongues as the initial physical evidence of baptism in the Spirit. Some Catholics became interested in it and got attracted to this new movement. There was the experience of Duquesne Weekend, where each of the young people on retreat experienced a baptism of the Holy Spirit at various times and in various ways. In this way, the first prayer group came into existence, the official beginning of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR).

¹² Emmanuel Dim, *Pentecostalism and Its Challenges: The Pertinent Question* (Lagos, Sovereign Printers Nigeria Ltd., 2012), 7.

¹³ Dim, *Pentecostalism and Its Challenges*, 8.

While inaugurating the Vatican Council II, Pope John XXIII prayed that the Council might be a new Pentecost for the Church. It is pointed out that the Catholic Charismatics Renewal members now see themselves as the fulfilment of that prayer. Leo Cardinal Suenens Joseph was the Primate of Belgium and one of the four moderators of the Second Vatican Council. He had become from 1973, the acknowledged leader of the Catholic Charismatics and advisor to the Pope on Charismatic issues. He and many others helped in giving the Charismatic Renewal its present structure. The movement is expanding very rapidly. It is a very strong group in the Church today. In 1975 Pope Paul VI addressed a Weekend Congress of 10000 Catholic Charismatics in Rome in which he encouraged the spiritual renewal of young people, who would shout out to the world the greatness of Pentecost. On that occasion Cardinal Suenens celebrated the first “Charismatic” Mass in St Peter’s square.

Today it is a welcome development in the Church. However, speaking in tongue should not be seen as a criterion for Baptism in the Spirit. The effect of the Spirit is similar to many people touching a hot iron. One person will shout, another will shriek in pains in silence, yet another will scream. Some other person may not make any sound but endure the pain quietly. Today we have priests termed *ordinary priests*, *spiritual priests*, *charismatic priests*, *men of God* and so forth. The Renewal is good in itself, but what Paul was warning the Corinthians must equally be watched – extremism. While acknowledging the wonderful contributions and enrichment of the Pentecostals and charismatics, excesses, shortcomings and abuses must be eschewed. The traditional prayer is: *Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of the faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love*: Today what we hear among the Charismatics is: Holy Ghost – Fire and so forth. The Lord will destroy your enemies for you! Father Lord!

There are priests in the Church as well as lay faithful, who have received special spiritual gifts. These priests should realize that whatever gifts they have received remain gifts. In Cor 4:7, Paul asks a rhetorical question: “What have you that you have not received? And if you have received it, why do you boast about it?” Such priests should, therefore, not brag about the gifts received. They should realize that such gifts are for the edification of God’s faithful. They need proper guidance and

direction, and this is why they need to listen attentively to their parish priests, superiors and bishops. Authenticity of prophecy should be judged by the community (1 Thess 5:19-21; 1 Cor 1:1, 4). Let us discern the movement of the Spirit so that we do not go astray, believing that we are led by the Holy Spirit when it is our own selfish motivation operating surreptitiously. Proper comportment and discernment should accompany any spiritual gifts received. Spiritual gifts are not for the persons who receive them to prove their authenticity or for self-affirmation, promotion and superiority, rather, they are for the edification of the Christian community. Today there are many pastors and prophets who claim to have the gifts of the Spirit.

Many Pentecostal pastors today claim, as was the case in Paul's days (T.B. Joshua; Enoch Adeboye, Oritsejafor, Benny Hinn, Kumuyi, and so forth) to be led by the Spirit? The common expression is: *The Spirit ministered it to me*. There is someone here looking for the fruit of the womb, receive it! There is somebody here looking for a job, receive it! There is somebody here suffering from ulcer, receive your healing now! There is someone here suffering from terminal cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer. Receive your healing right now! Someone say Amen! It looks like this was the kind of phenomenon Paul was challenging in Corinth.

Conclusion

The paper has been able to examine the passage 1 Cor 12:4-11 exegetically noting that spiritual gifts such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, teaching and the like are important, but they must be properly discerned and properly channelled. Every gift and prophecy must be scrutinized with the lenses of Christ's teaching since Christ is the all-time standard. Every gift received is for the benefits of the Christian community and so, must be at the service of the Church.