

1 Corinthians 12:1-13 ^{NIV} Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. ² You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³ Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, {10 Or languages; also in verse 28} and to still another the interpretation of tongues. {10 Or languages; also in verse 28} ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. ¹² The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by {13 Or with; or in} one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

“Now, about Spiritual Gifts”

When I was in elementary school our school system made special effort to inspire and not hold back students whom they dubbed “gifted.” I don’t know if that was a good thing or not and moreover, if I should admit it that I was one of those “gifted” children. When I was in first grade they considered me “gifted” in art. Why? Well, I painted a picture of...I don’t remember...and the superintendent of art programs for the Waynesboro Public Elementary Schools was so impressed that he had a few of us in my class use an overhead projector to reproduce it to be a giant wall painting to hang in the entrance of the school. It was still there when I graduated college but has since been removed. Oddly, if you could see me draw now you’d think the superintendent had a strange idea of what made good art. Art like any other talent needs to be practiced and developed and I did not do that. Moving on in my history of “giftedness”, the summer between fourth and fifth grade I was one of handful of students selected from the Waynesboro School system to attend a regional summer program for gifted children. Everyday for about two weeks we went to another city to do things that “gifted” children do. The result...well, I remember taking a tour of a television station, TV3 in Harrisonburg, VA and being interviewed as a class on a quilt we made. WOW! I also remember visiting a nursing home and the sight of a little old man with a bald head unconscious and bed ridden made it difficult for me to eat baloney for several years. That visit may have paid off because I really enjoy and would say I’m “gifted” with old people in that environment. Finally, when I was in sixth grade a few of us “gifted” mathematicians worked ahead so that by the end of the year I was halfway through seventh grade. In my adult life, the craving for math and science is so strong that I would pay top dollar for a high school physics textbook with actual physics problems to do and one of the things I enjoy reading the most about is physics both quantum and astro.

Anyway, why is it that when we talk about being “gifted” it always seems to be about singling somebody out because they excel in something. Is that a good thing to do? Singling me out as a “gifted” child only made me believe that I was “gifted” in everything and it was a real shock when I came against areas that were difficult for me and actually had to work. The downside of singling out the “gifted” is what to do with children who don’t appear to be gifted in any of the thing. My best friend growing up had to go to special classes because they thought he was close to being mentally “retarded”. As he grew up, he was the one who became the artist. He could take a car apart and put it back together without instructions. Now he builds computers for a living. Unfortunately, he does bear a wounded esteem because the school system singled him out as not being very bright. Our standardized system of education with its valuations of average, gifted, or retarded in abilities deemed necessary for the continuance of our society really does nothing to determine a child’s individual giftedness and develop it and I believe, I know, every child is gifted. People tend to look at children with Downs Syndrome and value them according to what extent they can be integrated into society. Yet, Downs children tend to be geniuses when it comes to understanding community and affection to the extent that we should value ourselves according to how well we can integrate into the way they do society.

But any, when we talk about spiritual gifts and giftedness for ministry we are not talking about a standardized scale of ability for the tasks churches do where some people are ministerially gifted and become ministers or Sunday School teachers while others are ministerially retarded and don’t do anything and for the most part most people are just average and are willing to do whatever is asked of them because they will feel

guilty if they don't. That's not the picture of the New Testament church that Paul gives, but...it seems to be the way we do church. The problem with doing church this way is that we get into set and stagnant patterns of what we believe a church is supposed to do and mistakenly call it ministry. Eventually it all winds up just being something a handful of duty motivated people do and which they begin to resent as well as resent the people who say no or don't do as much. Moreover, guilt can and really does too often become the primary motivating force for church involvement.

Paul gives us an altogether different way of being and doing church. He says that everyone who has drunk of the Holy Spirit has been given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. The Holy Spirit gives to each of us giftedness for particular ministry or service that demonstrates that Jesus is Lord and that his kingdom is in-breaking and that God activates that gift and makes it effectual. Throughout his letters Paul gives an extensive list of what the spiritual gifts are. More naturally speaking, there are the gifts of artistic creativity, craftsmanship, giving, hospitality, knowledge, mercy, music, organization, voluntary poverty, and wisdom. There are also gifts related to more formal types of ministry: apostle, counseling, evangelism, helps, leadership, missionary, service, shepherding, singleness, and teaching. Finally, there are gifts of the more charismatic or spiritual nature: deliverance, discernment, faith, healing, interpretation, miracles, prayer, prophecy, suffering, and tongues. The Holy Spirit has gifted each one of us with one or more of these gifts for ministry in the church and for the common good of the church. Our task as individual Christians is to discover our gift(s) and minister accordingly

Let me describe what the church in Paul's day looked like. First, there would not have been church buildings. They met together in homes. Usually a wealthy member would open up his or most likely her home for the gathering because it would have the largest dining space. There wouldn't be a formal worship service as we have. Rather, they carried on the meal tradition that Jesus started. Jesus did most of his teaching at meal time and anyone was welcome at the table. In the early church, they would gather around the table for a love feast, a meal that at some point they would share the Lord's Supper. As the presence of the Lord was with them in the Holy Spirit they would worship Jesus and the Father with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. There would be reading of Scripture and teaching. People would be moved or urged by the Holy Spirit to say what Jesus wanted to say. People would share their needs and be prayed for. Everyone exercised the gift that the Holy Spirit gave them. Everyone participated. Everyone ministered. This is so different than how we be and do church.

For the folks in Corinth, this way of being and doing church was a markedly different way of doing religion as well. The Corinthian Christians were mostly Gentiles and were at one time pagan. They were accustomed to going to temples to hear from an oracle, or to make a vow, or to get the priest to bless something or perform a curse. Sometimes they would feast and the feasts got way out of hand. Paul indicates that in Corinth they were having difficulty with the conduct of the Lord's Supper. The rich would party while the poor stood back and watched. The idea of rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, slave and free sharing a meal together and ministering in the Holy Spirit to one another was a stretch for them. Indeed, it looked like the Kingdom of God had arrived and it had.

Today, there are those who say either by common sense or by prophecy that in the next ten to fifteen years our denomination and others like us will most likely cease because the primary age group that's keeping us going financially and who do the stuff that churches do will have died. Some say there is going to have to be a huge merger of denominations to keep our way of doing church going for a little longer. Others say, that there will be a huge closing of churches and that the people will either go to one of the more charismatic churches or just stop going or will meet together in their homes. The latter would be, will be, my choice. That's a rather bleak prediction, but I do wonder if the Lord is taking us back home, so to speak, so that we will be the New Testament church again. Or...we can let him have his way now and strive to discover our giftedness as individual believers and as a congregation and let the Lord lead us into kingdom work rather than just doing church work. Amen.