

The Nature and Purpose of Spiritual Gifts; Part 2 (1 Corinthians 12:12–31).

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Introduction

1. In the first message we noted that Paul addresses several issues in a very troubled church, one of which is covered in three chapters—the use and misuse of spiritual gifts.
2. In Chapter 12 Paul lays down the foundational principles needed to understand spiritual gifts and use them properly.
3. It is advantageous to examine again the first three verses of Chapter 12.
 - a. Paul began, “*Now concerning spirituals* [an adjective without a noun].”

Spiritual translates the Greek adjective *pneumatikos*, a plural word meaning something belonging to the *spirit*, either human or divine. This adjective requires a noun, which may be assumed; many translators supply the noun, *gifts*. Observing Paul’s style, one may conclude that he deliberately interrupted his thought, to which he returned in verse 4, supplying the noun, *gifts*.

- b. His concern: “*I do not want you to be uninformed*” (v. 1). We must have knowledge to act wisely and godly.
4. In the last message we covered the first two foundational principles: (1) the importance of Spirit-controlled speech (vv. 1–3), (2) the importance of the unity of the body under one God (vv. 4–11).
 - a. The emphasis of verse 3 is that the whole of spiritual life is *initiated* and *controlled* by the Holy Spirit; however, it is possible for believers to function in the spiritual realm without Spirit control (Ephesians 5:17–21).

For example, the Gentile Corinthian believers (in my opinion), reverting to the pagan practice of using the name of their god to curse an enemy (“*anathema Apollos*”), were using Jesus’ name in that way. Paul argues, “*No one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Iesus anathema”*” (v. 3).

Also, the contemporary tradition of people under Roman rule was to give verbal assent to Caesar as lord. Even a believer could speak those words without actually meaning it. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar cannot be, as evidenced by Polycarp’s confession. It is unchristian to say words without actually believing them.

- b. Verses 4 through 11 address the problem of divorcing the gifts from their designed purpose—to build unity in the body (v. 7).

The Spirit administers the gifts under the direction of the Lordship of Jesus as authorized and empowered by the Father (vv. 4–6). The church is to reflect the oneness of the godhead in its purpose and function. The greatest error of the charismatic movement is the focus on individual empowerment through spiritual gifts.

- c. A warning is implied also: not all supernatural manifestations are initiated by the Holy Spirit. How much charismatic manifestation “*is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders*” in order to deceive people (2 Thessalonians 2:9)?

I. The Body (vv. 12–26)

1. The twelfth verse begins with “*for*,” a conjunction or marker to show the cause or *reason* for something.
 - a. Verse 7 states that the spiritual grace-gifts were distributed in the body for the “*common good*” as “*empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills*” (v. 11).
 - b. As the body of a person or animal is one (a unified whole) put together with many parts, so is the church a body composed of many individual believers in Christ.
 - c. Verse 13 explains how this unified whole came into existence and how it continues as a whole.

The singleness of mind and purpose that forms any unity must be maintained by that singleness of spirit. I believe that *spirit* in verse 13 refers to the unity of the body—the single mindset that brought believers together into the one body. Although there is a great diversity in individuals, their union with Christ unites them, and that spirit must be maintained.

“*For [showing cause] in one mind [spirit] we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made [through the Holy Spirit] to drink of that one purpose [spirit]*” (v. 13).

2. Verses 14 through 20 form an extended argument for diversity in the one body because the body could not function without its many parts working in concert for the good of the whole. This is just what God wanted (v. 18). To ignore this truth is to reject God’s design for the church.
3. Verses 21 through 26 address the tendency in the church to value members in the body according to their seeming importance—giving honor to some while discounting others. On the contrary, it is the seemingly less valued parts upon whom God extends the greater honor.

II. The Church (vv. 27–31)

1. Verse 27 begins with *now (de)*, a conjunction showing either continuation (*and*) or contrast (*but*). *Now* is a continuation that translators use to focus on the subject more intensely.
 - a. You are the body of Christ (the unity) and members individually (the diversity). The church belongs to Christ and must promote His values and purposes.
 - b. How can this unity out of diversity be maintained and promoted with sinners? Paul joins verses 27 and 28 with *and (kai)*, showing God’s sovereign directive and order to accomplish this end.
 - 1) First in priority of purpose are the gift offices: *apostles*—church planters; *prophets*—closely aligned with exhortation; *teachers*—those who explain God’s truth (Ephesians 2:20; 4:11, 12).

The church is “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*” (Ephesians 2:20).

- 2) After listing the principal offices, Paul addresses the higher gifts in order of importance to the purpose of God: *miracles, healing, helping, administration, and tongues* (tongues being last).
2. The final verses of Chapter 12 raise several rhetorical questions concerning higher gifts.

Be careful. Those with offices may have higher gifts, but having them does not qualify a person for the office. Gifts enable the person holding the office to accomplish the purpose to which God has called him. The *call of God* to the office qualifies him, not gifts or personal abilities.

These rhetorical questions assume a negative response. Paul, rather, stresses the believers are earnestly to desire spiritual gifts to enable their service in the body. The fifth and last foundational principle—love—has a chapter of its own (Chapter 13).

What Can We Take Away?

1. It is clear that Paul was not focusing on the gifts themselves but on the fact that God administers whatever is needed for the intended function of the church as Christ's body. It is apparent that the Corinthian church was taken by the gifts themselves. This preoccupation with certain gifts caused further division in the church, as it does today.
2. Too many modern Christians see the church as serving them as it meets with entertainment, information, and status. They contribute little or nothing to the body as an organism—maybe some to the organization but little else. Is it any wonder that the church has so little impact on the culture?
3. Believers must be submissive to God's sovereign will relating to each one's place in the body. Although Paul exhorts believers to "desire the higher gifts," the role that one serves in the body may not require any specific gift or any gift at all. Focus on *servicing* and rejoice in the grace that qualifies you for the role you occupy.