

4. Paul's treatment thus far has highlighted the symbiotic and synergistic nature of Christ's body and how this "body life" dynamic implicates and depends upon the diverse functioning of the Spirit's gifts. The Church's order, well-being and growth depend upon the proper functioning of the members' gifts and endowments, but as they are utilized in a certain manner arising from a certain understanding and mindset: *The Spirit's gifts operate properly and so serve the "common good" of the body of believers only when, and to the extent that, they are a sincere exercise of love.*

This is the subject to which Paul turned his attention (12:31-13:13), but this shift in focus is not at all a shift in context. Paul was not moving on to a new topic, but to that which is the core issue in the matter of spiritual gifts and their relation to Christ's Church. It is no accident that the "love chapter" is situated at the center of Paul's treatment of the Corinthian questions concerning *pneumatika* (12:1); it is the centerpiece of his treatment precisely because it speaks to the central concern in matters of the Spirit (indeed, in all matters pertaining to the Church and its life and work as Christ's body).

This means that chapter 13 must be read and interpreted within the larger topic of the Spirit's gifts and their purpose and proper function in the Church. More narrowly, this means that Paul's discussion of love must be read against the background of his body analogy as it speaks to the Church as Christ's body.

- Paul represented the diversity in the Spirit's *people* in terms of the various members of the human body, and the diversity of the Spirit's *gifts* in terms of the unique function of each respective part.
- Moreover, the body analogy allowed him to spotlight and clarify the principle of "unity in diversity" – the fact that a body is many members (12:14) while, at the same time, all the members together constitute one body (12:20). An organism exemplifies "unity in diversity" and underscores the fact that this concept must be understood in terms of *symbiosis* and *synergism*: An organism is symbiotic in that each *part* is suited to and functions in harmony with all of the other parts; it is synergistic in that the *function* of each part is essential and works in combination with the functioning of the other parts unto the good of the whole.
- But Paul's concern wasn't physiology, but ecclesiology. His discussion of the human body had its purpose in informing and correcting the Corinthians' understanding and approach to the "body" that is Christ's Church (12:12).
- Paul was working from the human body back to Christ's body; he intended the Corinthians to correlate the symbiosis and synergism of a human body to the Church's life and experience as a "body." *And this means answering the question of how the Church manifests the truth of its "unity in diversity" in terms of the essential principles of symbiosis and synergism.* The human body functions as a harmonious, organic whole rather than a collection of parts functioning independently, in isolation or at cross-purposes. How does Christ's body realize this essential quality characteristic of every "body"?

Paul's answer to that crucial question is love: Love is what makes the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit symbiotic and synergistic, and so it is with the community of image-children which shares in the inter-trinitarian life and relationship. Without the bond and authentic operation of love, Christ's body is merely a group of independently-functioning – albeit perhaps richly gifted – individuals; it is like an organism which possesses all of its members, intact and fully functional, but with each part acting on its own. *Every member might be healthy and functioning properly, but there is no body because there is no effective symbiosis and no synergism.* Whatever may be true of the body's individual parts, the body itself is diseased and dysfunctional.

So it is with Christ's body: Without love, a community of believers is reduced to a sick and dysfunctional organism set at odds with itself. It is like a body filled with cancer in which all of the cells are operating energetically, but independently and chaotically; *whatever their vigor, their life processes are working only toward the destruction and death of the body itself.* A community of believers may be greatly gifted and zealous in the use of their gifting, but, in the absence of love, their gifts serve only to undermine and weaken the body, not build it up and nurture its wholeness and well-being.

- a. This is the framework for understanding the relation of chapter 13 to the larger context of chapters 12-14, and it is key in interpreting Paul's transitional statement in 12:31. The most basic aspect of that interpretation is determining whether Paul intended his first sentence as a statement of fact (indicative) or an exhortation (imperative). The grammar is ambiguous, so that Paul could have meant either "You are zealous for the greater gifts" or "Be zealous for the greater gifts." Settling the matter depends upon the larger context and, more narrowly, Paul's second sentence ("And I show you a still more excellent way."). For Paul's two statements are clearly interdependent, so that the interpretation of the one is affected by and also affects the interpretation of the other. This means that they must be considered together.

Commentators are divided, even where there is agreement on the fundamental indicative/imperative question. Scholars see all sorts of nuances in Paul's reasoning and purpose for these statements, and it would require considerable space to interact with even the more popular interpretations. At bottom, there are reasonable arguments for both the indicative and imperative views, and a general rendering of Paul's meaning in each instance goes something like this:

- 1) *Be zealous for those gifts which truly are superior rather than those which only appear to be so. But even so, there is a more excellent way – a way of approaching all of life in Christ – which transcends even the greatest gifts and actually enables them to function as the Spirit intends.*
- 2) *You Corinthians are obviously zealous for what you perceive to be the greater gifts; you are concerned with excellence in regard to the things of the Spirit, and yet there is a more excellent way to think about and approach the Spirit's gifts and their manifestations.*

Verse 14:1 is often cited in support of the first (imperative) view, since it seems to reiterate the same exhortation to “earnestly desire spiritual gifts.” However, in this verse Paul returned to the noun *pneumatika*, whereas he used *charismata* in verse 12:31. Moreover, this change in terminology reflects the fact that he was making a slightly different argument in these two passages. Thus his imperative in 14:1 cannot be used as direct support for the same meaning in 12:31.

In the end, although both of the views have legitimate contextual support – and the two meanings are not entirely dissimilar, the second (indicative) option seems to fit best with Paul’s overall argument. Several reasons could be cited, but perhaps the most compelling is the fact that he’s been arguing that all of the Spirit’s endowments have equal necessity and value; why, then, would he now exhort the Corinthians to seek after the *greater* gifts? The context indicates that they were already ranking the Spirit’s gifts and exalting those they deemed superior; this was something Paul was rebuking, not encouraging. Thus it makes better sense to have him saying to the Corinthians: *You are zealous for what you believe to be the greater gifts; let me show you a yet more excellent way – the supreme manifestation of the Spirit which you ought to earnestly desire.*

- b. And that “more excellent way” is the way of love. Love is what determines the proper exercise and effectiveness of the Spirit’s gifts and so also their fruitfulness in the Church. Without it the Spirit’s endowments are unprofitable and even detrimental; they act to undermine the community they’re given to build up, just as the autonomous functioning of individual body parts compromises the well-being of the whole organism. Again, *this is the case even when the parts are themselves perfectly healthy and function properly and with all vigor.* And as with the human body, so with Christ’s body. Paul makes this point in powerful fashion by means of a series of contrasts involving the Spirit’s gifts and their operation.

The broader context suggests a fascination among the Corinthians with the *pneumatika* of tongues, knowledge and wisdom, and so it was appropriate for Paul to draw on those in his examples. He presented four hypothetical scenarios (13:1-3), each of which follows the same pattern: Paul assigned each particular gift its superlative form and function and then assessed it – and the individual possessing it – when that gift exists and operates in the absence of love.

Paul’s first scenario involves the *gift of tongues*. Viewed alongside the other three, it seems clear that he was employing hyperbole as a rhetorical device. Thus he posited a gifting that goes beyond the bounds of human language to embrace heavenly utterances – so-called “tongues of angels” (12:1). Paul was not commenting on the fact or nature of angelic speech, let alone implying that the Spirit gifts human beings to speak in a heavenly language used by angelic beings. Many charismatics make such a claim in order to justify “tongues-speaking” that is incoherent and has no relation to human languages. But as with each of his examples, Paul was simply allowing for the gift of tongues to assume its greatest conceivable form and expression in order to make his point regarding love.

“If the Spirit had so gifted me that I could transcend human language and speak as one of God’s holy angels, in the absence of love even my sublime heavenly utterances would be nothing more than obnoxious, incoherent noise. Without love, my astonishing and enviable gifting renders me, not an exalted voice from heaven, but a noisy gong or a banging cymbal.”

Paul conjoined his second and third examples pertaining to *prophecy, knowledge and faith* (ref. 12:8-10).

- The *gift of prophecy* involves communicating the things of God to men, and so implies knowledge of heavenly truths and mysteries. Here again Paul employed hyperbole, posing the impossible scenario in which he was gifted as a prophet who apprehended *all* knowledge and fathomed *all* divine mysteries. Endowed in this way, Paul wouldn’t merely have the ability to communicate divine truths to men; he would effectively speak to them *as God Himself*, for there would be nothing God could reveal to men which Paul could not communicate to them.

- The *gift of faith* is also closely related to knowledge. Whereas a prophetic gift has to do with the proclamation of divine truths, the gift of faith has to do with the personal conviction and power arising from those truths. As a spiritual gift, faith does not refer to so-called “saving faith” – the faith by which a person believes the “good news” and entrusts himself to Jesus Christ. Rather, it is a depth, strength and courage of conviction that enables a person to cleave with unshakeable confidence to God’s word of truth and power in the most trying or seemingly impossible circumstances. Once again Paul posited this gift as being possessed in superlative form: The faith he spoke of is not the mere courage of one’s convictions, but the sort of faith that believes God even for the miraculous or impossible (cf. Matthew 17:14-20, 21:18-21; also John 3:1-15, 11:1-44).

Surely an individual who possesses and exercises gifts of prophecy and faith to such a superlative degree is worthy to be esteemed as a distinguished man of God. Surely even Paul would regard himself that way if, as he proposes in his scenario, *he* were the one who was so gifted (cf. 2:6ff). And yet he insisted that, in the absence of love, he would be *nothing* (13:2). Once again Paul notably passed judgment, not on the gift, but the person endowed with it. His point is clear and arresting: Even if he transcended every other human being by virtue of possessing all knowledge and insight, without love he not only would not surpass his fellows, he would fall beneath them all as a man of no consequence.

Recall again that, in ranking the Spirit’s gifts and their operations, the Corinthians were ranking the individuals associated with them. In their minds, a prominent gift implied a prominent person, and this thinking likely was the reason Paul spoke as he did. The Corinthians needed to understand that love makes a person significant in Christ’s Church, not gifts, however notable or potent.

Paul's final example is a hyperbolic treatment of the *gift of giving* (cf. Romans 12:8) – giving in its superlative expression of delivering over everything one possesses, including one's own life (13:3). Importantly, Paul's scenario involves voluntary surrender, not compelled compliance; he was concerned with giving as *pneumatika* – a matter of the Spirit, not that which is reluctant or coerced. Accordingly, Paul treated this giving as altruistic and devoid of selfish concern or personal agendas: The person's material possessions are given as a matter of *philanthropy* and his life is given as a matter of *self-sacrifice*. And once again Paul assigned this manifestation of the Spirit's gifting to himself:

"If I were to give all that I possess to provide for the needs of others and even deliver over my own body to be burned in the flames..."

Surely no one would hesitate to commend such an individual. Indeed, human philosophies and religion have always regarded sacrificial giving as a hallmark of virtue and piety. The reason is the universal recognition that giving which is free of conditions or personal interest is antithetical to the intrinsic self-centeredness of human nature. Giving doesn't come naturally to people, and so those who are "givers" tend to be noted and honored. Indeed, men esteem philanthropy and self-sacrifice even when motivated by selfish concerns – even when, as Paul observes here, such giving is devoid of love (cf. Matthew 6:1-18, 23:1-28; Luke 11:37-44, 18:9-14). *How much more would a person be worthy of distinction and honor if his giving were absolute and entirely altruistic?*

But even assuming this unimaginable scenario – and no doubt to the amazement of his Corinthian readers, Paul insisted that such a giver profits nothing in the absence of love. The issue in determining the worth and profit in one's giving isn't its absoluteness or its altruism, but whether it is an expression of love. Where that is not the case, nothing is gained. Paul's previous examples indicate that he was here speaking primarily of benefit for the giver – benefit in the form of honor, distinction or praise. But the notion of benefit or profit does have secondary application to the act of giving and even to the gift itself.

Paul obviously recognized and would have acknowledged that any act of giving benefits the recipient in a material way. But, in the absence of love, philanthropy and self-sacrifice are reduced to merely human enterprise and human exertion; whatever benefit they might supply, they are not the working of the Spirit and His gifts and so are stripped of their worth and true efficacy.

- c. By these scenarios Paul has suggested what he will soon make explicit: Love is the indispensable element in the things of the Spirit (*pneumatika*). Love makes the Spirit's *charismata* truly "spiritual"; without it, even authentic and potent gifts are rendered fleshly and unprofitable (for the gifted one and those he serves). Love informs and empowers the Spirit's gifts, but it also transcends them because it is more than the truth and power of the divine *gifts*; it is the essence and power of the divine *life*. The Spirit's gifts are for this life and this age; love abides forever.