



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
by Richard Wolfe

AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 18

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40, Unity and spiritual gifts

OUTLINE: Lesson 18

1 Corinthians 12:1-11, To benefit everyone

1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Many members, one body

In chapter 8, Paul introduced the topic of eating foods offered to idols, but then appeared to wander from that topic to discuss the exercise of personal rights. In reality, he had not wandered from the topic, but discussed at length a Christian's responsibilities towards his or her brethren even as we exercise our rights. Only in chapter 10 did he finally give a direct answer to the Corinthian questions of eating foods offered to idols and eating in pagan temples.

In chapter 12, we find a similar situation. Paul is going to respond to a Corinthian question about exercising Spirit-given gifts in the congregational assembly. But before addressing that question directly, he devotes chapters 12 and 13 to the matter of relationships in the church body. The purpose of any gift or talent, miraculous or not, is not to give star power to the person receiving and using the gift, but to edify the church and individual members of the church.

He opens chapter 12 by affirming the importance of the multiplicity and variety of gifts in the church, followed by the extended analogy of the church as a body in which every member is important, and every member is dependent on the other members. The proper use of any gift or ability is guided by our concern for each other in a context of service-oriented love (chap. 13). Only with this foundation firmly established does he speak directly about the assemblies of the church in chapter 14.

We should keep in mind that this is not primarily a treatise on spiritual gifts. He does not define the various gifts. That is not his purpose. His concern is the attitude of the people using the gifts. We should see the entire discussion as an expression of Paul's theme statement in 1:10. Church members should avoid division by being joined together in the same mind and judgment as members of one body.

DISCUSSION

We will deal more with the nature of certain gifts, especially "tongues" and prophecy, in chapter 14. For now, we will attempt to determine and appreciate Paul's immediate message.

1. Paul says three things about the knowledge of the Corinthian Christians. What does he say about what they didn't know, what they knew, and what he wanted them to know?

- a. They were ignorant (not knowing) of something. He didn't clearly identify that something, but it had to do with recognizing that only the Holy Spirit would lead a person to acknowledge Christ.
- b. They knew that the idols they formerly worshiped couldn't speak.
- c. Paul made known to them that the Holy Spirit led people to confess Christ.

2. Identify the irony in verses 2 & 3 about what idols couldn't do and what the Spirit of God did. What thought here is like the description Old Testament prophets gave of idols (cf. Isaiah 44:13-20)?

In Isaiah, the prophet showed the foolishness of idolatry since an idol was made by a man using raw materials made by God, and then the man worshiped the inanimate object he had crafted instead of worshiping God. Likewise, Paul shows the foolishness of worshiping idols instead of the Spirit of God. The idols couldn't speak or reveal truth, but the Spirit of God gave inspired speech and revealed the word of God.

It is also possible that prior to their conversion to Christ some of the Corinthians had engaged in ecstatic speech thought to be driven by idols that couldn't speak for themselves.

3. It is possible to say the words, "Jesus is Lord," without having any gift of the Holy Spirit. To what did the Spirit of God lead a person that no pagan force would ever lead one to believe or do?

It would be possible for someone claiming to be inspired by the Holy Spirit to stand up in a Christian meeting and say the words, "Jesus is accursed." However, this probably wasn't happening. If it were, Paul would probably have been more upset about it and dwelt on the topic longer. It is more likely that such things were declared by "possessed" pagan prophets in pagan ceremonies. But only the Holy Spirit would produce the gospel message and work on a person's heart leading them to recognize Christ as Lord.

This should have been understood by the Corinthians as in indication that any prior ecstatic or "spiritual" experiences they might have had in pagan services were not models for behavior in Christian services.

4. What is the purpose of gifts given by the Holy Spirit?

To benefit (profit, NKJV) everyone (in the church). The NIV & ESV both have “for the common good.” This is a key thought to the entire discussion of chapters 12-14. The Corinthians were using their gifts for selfish reasons with little thought to helping each other. The only “each other” thoughts were to outdo each other. Rather than using their gifts to build the body, they were using their gifts to divide the body.

5. How many times does Paul use the words “to another” in verses 8-10, and what is the significance of this repetition?

8 times in NKJV, ESV & NIV. In Greek verses 8, 9 & 10 each use a word better translated as “to one” 3 times, with “another” used 5 times. To this we should add “to each one” in verse 7. The idea is the same in all these cases. Paul is emphasizing what he will illustrate in 12:12-31 about Christians all being different and being gifted differently. There are many kinds of gifts (vv. 4-6) given to various (all kinds of) people (vv. 8-10), but all gifts should be used by each recipient for the benefit of all members of the body. No gift is to be used for selfish purposes.

6. Paul has already mentioned baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. What was his topic when he introduced the idea of baptism there?

Division in the church and a call to be united. This was where he first stated that he was writing because of reported division in the congregation. The implication is that since we are all baptized in Christ, we should not be divided.

- **Baptism is also used as a metaphor in 1 Corinthians 10:2. In what way was Israel baptized into Moses? Could this association help us understand the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian baptism?**

Moses led Israel through the water, and it can be said the people are led by the Spirit when they hear the gospel, believe and are baptized.

- **What is the value or result of baptism (immersion in water) if the Spirit of God is not involved?**

Immersion in water without the Holy Spirit is a good way to get wet, but nothing else. In chapter 1, the baptism is certainly immersion in water. There is no reason to assume that the baptism of chapter 12 is a different baptism.

7. Paul makes a connection between the Spirit and spiritual gifts, and he makes a connection between the Spirit and being baptized into one body. What direct connection does he affirm between baptism and spiritual gifts?

He doesn't make a direct connection between baptism and spiritual gifts, although we could say that by baptism we enter the one body and that the gifts are given to members of the body for the good of the body. Also, the Spirit is involved in both baptism and the gifts. But a careful reading fails to discover any explicit statement about a cause and effect relationship between baptism and gifts.

8. As part of his introduction to the discussion of the importance all the different body members who fill different roles in the church, Paul explicitly acknowledges some of the different groups of people in the congregation: Jews and Greeks, slaves and free (v. 13). In Galatians 3:28, he makes a similar point and mentions these same groups and adds male and female. What are the common points made in both passages? Is he saying that all members have the same role, or that they all have important value?

1 Corinthians 12 says that they are baptized "into one body," and Galatians 3 says that they are "baptized into Christ," and "are all one in Christ Jesus." The emphasis is on the oneness or unity that is created at conversion, regardless of the different identities. The rest of the passage affirms equal value regardless of the different roles. This is especially clear in 1 Corinthians 12, but the message is the same in Galatians 3.

9. Paul makes some important points about the nature of the body of Christ with a unique analogy that uses talking body parts. One attitude is presented in verses 15-16, and a different attitude is presented in verse 21. What are these two ideas?

In vv. 15-16, someone is feeling inferior because they envied another body member who seemed to be more important (i.e., had better gifts) than they. Their thinking resulted in self-devaluation. In verse 21, it is just the opposite. Someone is so proud of his gift that he thinks he doesn't need the members who have less important gifts. His thinking produced self-exaltation.

- **In what way does the attitude of the body member in v. 21 reflect the same problem that Paul discussed in 11:17-34?**

In both passages, some members discounted the value of "lesser" members and didn't think that they had any need for them. In chapter 11, the discrimination was socio-economic and in chapter 12 it is based on different spiritual gifts, but the basic bad attitude is the same.

10. Through most of this passage (i.e., vv. 14-26) Paul described the church body in somewhat generic terms. What changed in verse 27, and what was the importance of this change to Paul's readers in Corinth? Hint: There is a similarity between Paul's approach and that of the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1-7.

Other than as part of the analogy in verse 21, Paul has not used the 2nd person plural pronoun "you" since verse 3. He has been describing a body, any body. But now, in verse 27, he makes it clear that he is talking directly about the Corinthians. This is certainly not about a biological body, but the spiritual body of Christ, and more precisely the local church in Corinth.

11. Why has God composed the body with different roles, gifts and levels of honor (vv. 17, 19, 24, 25)?

For a body to function well or even to be viable, it needs a variety of contributors with different gifts, talents, viewpoints, roles, etc. No one person or gift can do all that needs to be done in a church body.

Our differences and even our relative strengths and weaknesses give us opportunities and motivation to care for one another. For example, if we all had the same weaknesses, we would be ill equipped to help each other. If we all had the same strengths, we would be rivals. If all were leaders, who would follow, and vice-versa. If no one had any weaknesses, we would never be called to help someone in need. If we were all identical, unity would be harder to maintain than with our God-given diversity.

12. There are 3 lists of gifts in the chapter: vv. 8-10, v. 28, vv. 29-30. What differences do we see between the lists and the order in which the gifts are listed in the different lists? What do these differences (or lack of uniformity) suggest about the composition of the lists and the importance of the gifts themselves in relation to each other?

vv. 8-10 (NKJV)	v. 28	vv. 29-30
Word of wisdom	Apostles	Apostles
Word of knowledge	Prophets	Prophets
Faith	Teachers	Teachers
Gifts of healings	Miracles	Workers of miracles
Working of miracles	Gifts of healings	Gifts of healings
Prophecy	Helps	Speak with tongues
Discerning of spirits	Administrations	Interpret (tongues)
Kinds of "tongues"	Varieties of "tongues"	
Interpretation of "tongues"		

The lists are not hard and fast or exhaustive. There could be other gifts that are not mentioned. The three lists are not identical, though they are similar. They add or omit certain gifts and rearrange the order. Other than apostles, prophets and teachers, the order probably is not important. They are not intended to present a strict ranking by importance or level of authority. Paul's main message and purpose is to show that there are several different gifts and there should not be rivalry or jealousy between the people receiving one gift or another.

13. What is Paul's main message in this chapter? Considering the message, does it change anything if we are considering miraculous gifts or non-miraculous gifts in the church?

The main message is that whatever a person's gift, it is from the same God and/or Spirit of God. It is given for the building up of the church and should not be cause for division or arrogance. It is unclear if all these gifts are miraculous (e.g., helping, administrating) or not. (More on that in chapters 13 & 14.) But it does not matter. Even if we are considering skills and talents that God has given us through non-miraculous means, the goal of the gifts remains the same: the building up of the one body of Christ. The elements are the same: one source, multiple gifts, multiple body members, one body.