

1 Corinthians 12A

- We now launch into the next major section of Paul's letter and a new topic
 - Paul is ready to tackle the next question he received from the Corinthian church as delivered by Chloe's delegation
 - The new topic is spiritual gifts in the body
 - Paul is going to use the next three chapters to cover this issue in depth, so we'll be discussing gifts for a few weeks
 - This topic is probably the most controversial of any of the issues Paul raises in this letter
 - It was controversial in Paul's day
 - And it's still controversial today
 - But it hasn't always been controversial
 - In fact, Paul's letter largely settled all questions on the purpose and operation of spiritual gifts in the body
 - And those issues remained settled for nearly 1,900 years
 - Until the controversy returned at the beginning of the twentieth century
 - We'll look at that history in the course of studying the next three chapters
 - But for now, let's see how Paul introduces this next topic, beginning in the opening verses of Chapter 12

1Cor. 12:1 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

1Cor. 12:2 You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led.

1Cor. 12:3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

- The chapter begins with "Now concerning," which is the tell-tale sign that Paul has entered into a new topic
 - We've left behind the subject of Christian liberty and moved into a new area of discussion

- But Paul doesn't announce the new topic until he reaches v.4
- Instead, in vs.1-3 he first establishes a fundamentally important principle of Christian experience that we must understand to appreciate spiritual gifts properly
- It's no exaggeration to say that if a student doesn't understand Paul's point in these first three verses, that student is doomed to misunderstand the rest of Paul's teaching
- Paul ends v.1 saying he doesn't want the church to be unaware of something...
 - The better translation would be "I don't want you to be ignorant"
 - That phrase was Paul's polite way of telling the church they were ignorant
 - There was a fundamental fact of Christian theology that had escaped their understanding
 - And if they had any hope to appreciate spiritual gifts in the body properly, they needed to know this one missing fact
- So in v.2, Paul moves to explaining what they were missing
 - Prior to coming to faith, unbelievers are led astray in a variety of ways
 - Notice Paul ends v.2 saying "however you were led"
 - Unbelievers are prompted to say and do many things through the influence of a wide variety of forces and desires and temptations
 - But these forces universally lead them away from the truth
 - In particular, in the area of religious worship, all unbelievers are astray
 - Unbelievers chase after so-called gods and mute idols, giving them their allegiance and worship, and doing so in full conviction and sincerity
 - Unbelievers are convinced of the reality of false gods and false beliefs
 - Despite their sincerity and conviction, in the end they are devoted followers of lies

- Even atheists are devoted to a false idea, to the idea that the creation lacks a Creator, which is a faith in itself
- This is the condition of every single unbeliever on earth
- Paul's point is that religious fervor and zeal cannot be – by itself – a proof of God working or of spiritual truth
 - Even unbelievers can put on a convincing display of spiritual commitment and devotion
 - We know these displays lack any real spiritual power, because they are worshipping things that don't exist
 - They may worship demons indirectly, as Paul said earlier, but it's not as though unbelievers are constantly under the control of demons
 - For the most part, they are led astray by self-deception, propelled by fleshly desires with hearts set against God
 - Therefore, when we see someone displaying religious zeal, we can't automatically assume we are witnessing a work of the Lord
 - Paul points out the Corinthians once worshipped mute idols that they now understand were never really there
 - That was evidence to this church that spiritual truth is not a matter of personal experience or feelings
 - Our feelings lie to us
 - Personal experiences are not proof of anything
 - We can be led astray by emotion and experiences and false displays
- But there is a truth to be found, and there is a specific way in which it is found
 - As we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we move out of the spiritual wilderness and come into a true knowledge of God by the Spirit
 - Paul makes that point in v.3
 - He says "therefore I make known to you..."
 - This opening phrase is a mild form of correction

- Paul is saying essentially, “I want you to correct your thinking on this point so you will know the truth”
 - Paul says no one who is speaking under the influence of the Spirit of God can say Jesus is accursed
 - And no one can profess Jesus is Lord except by the power of the Holy Spirit
- Paul is making two important points related to the topic of spiritual gifts
 - First, looking at the second half of the statement, Paul says every believer is indwelt and under the control or influence of the Holy Spirit
 - At the time of our salvation, we receive the Holy Spirit as a permanent indwelling of God
 - We receive the Holy Spirit in the moment of our belief in Christ
 - In fact, in Romans Paul teaches that it is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which is the defining characteristic of a Christian

Rom. 8:14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are **sons of God**.

- In other words, the indwelling of God’s Spirit is both the cause and consequence of saving faith
 - God’s Spirit living in a person defines who is truly saved
 - And the Spirit’s presence in us forever separates us from the world and from the person we used to be
 - Furthermore, in 2 Corinthians Paul calls the indwelling of the Spirit a pledge or down payment on God’s promise to resurrect us and grant us an inheritance with Christ

2Cor. 1:21 Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God,
2Cor. 1:22 who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.

- It’s critically important to note that Paul says in v.3 that the very words of our confession of faith must be prompted by the Spirit of God
 - We believe and confess Christ because of the Spirit
 - So until the Spirit is in us, working to prompt faith, we are incapable of making a true confession of Christ

- This fact refutes any teaching that suggests the Spirit doesn't come upon a believer until some time after coming to faith
 - The Spirit is with us from the moment of our confession, Paul says
 - At this point, you think back to examples in Acts where believers received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at a point after coming to faith
 - Specifically, there are three very important and very limited exceptions in the time of Acts when the Spirit acted in this unusual way to fulfill His prophecy
 - We covered the reason behind those three exceptions in our Acts study
 - I encourage you to listen to that study to find out why these three exceptions happened in the early church and why they have never happened since
- Moving back to our text, Paul says only by the Spirit can someone confess Christ, but Paul doesn't mean it's literally impossible for an unbeliever to speak the words "Jesus is Lord"
 - Of course, any human mouth can form those words and make that statement, physically speaking
 - But that's not the issue
 - The issue is whether a person can make that confession truly agreeing with the statement in their heart
 - Paul says apart from the work of the Spirit in their heart, it's impossible
 - Jesus said the same thing to the disciples in John 6:

John 6:63 "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.

John 6:64 "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him.

John 6:65 And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."

- The Spirit is the One Who gives a person eternal life through a faith in Jesus

- The flesh profits us nothing, Jesus says, because apart from the Spirit, no man can know the truth
 - So Jesus says that unless the Father grants us grace to know Christ, we can't and won't come to know Him
- Secondly, looking back at the first half of that statement, Paul says that no one who has come to know the Lord truly can ever cease being a Christ follower
 - We can never return to a point where we say that Jesus is accursed or damned with true conviction
 - Once we have been made a child of God, we've become a new creature, and the old us is gone forever
 - We are like the butterfly that's emerged from the cocoon
 - There's no way to return to the caterpillar we once were, Hallelujah!
 - As with the earlier statement, Paul doesn't mean it's impossible for a Christian to say the phrase "Jesus is accursed" – I just did!
 - Speaking the words are not the issue again
 - In fact, some believers rebel against Christ's authority to the point that they live lives indistinguishable from an unbeliever's
 - And some of them even declare that they no longer believe in Jesus
 - But Paul says that no born again believer is ever capable of truly rejecting their belief that Christ is God and Savior
 - They can never returning to a belief that Jesus was just a man who died accursed on a cross
 - Despite their protests and bad behavior, the Holy Spirit is still with them as a pledge and seal for their salvation
 - And because the Holy Spirit is indwelling the believer, the Lord cannot turn His back on us despite our disobedience

2Tim. 2:11 It is a trustworthy statement:

For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him;

2Tim. 2:12 If we endure, we will also reign with Him;

If we deny Him, He also will deny us;

2Tim. 2:13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

- Paul says it's a trustworthy statement: if we died with Christ by faith, then we will live with Him
 - Once we have become born again through faith, we are forever linked with Christ
 - Just as He rose from the dead and lived a life to the Father, so will we
 - Salvation is based on faith alone, not by good works
- Furthermore, if we endure hardship on His behalf, then we will be rewarded in the Kingdom
 - We will reign with Him, which means we will receive reward in Heaven in the form of authority and privilege
 - But if we deny Him our endurance and service, then the Lord will deny us eternal reward
- Finally, Paul says even if our disobedience should rise to the point of faithlessness, nevertheless we know the Lord will remain faithful to us
 - We may lose eternal reward, but we can never be separated from God
 - Because He cannot deny Himself, that is He can't turn His back on His own Spirit living in us
 - So the presence of the Holy Spirit living in each of us is our proof that God will complete the good work He began in each of us
- So the two fundamental truths Paul teaches in vs.2-3 is that coming to Christ is a work of the Spirit alone, and once we have been saved by the Spirit, we remain Christ's forever
 - Now Paul is going to draw an important and inevitable conclusion from these truths on the matter of spiritual gifts in the body
 - That conclusion is that there are not "levels" of the Spirit or degrees of the Spirit separating believers

1Cor. 12:4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

1Cor. 12:5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.

1Cor. 12:6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.

1Cor. 12:7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

- Paul begins his teaching on gifts with a series of contrasts
 - There are a variety of gifts in the body of Christ
 - But all these gifts are the product of the same Spirit
 - When Paul says the same Spirit, he doesn't mean that believers in Corinth were going around claiming there were different spirits of God
 - Instead, Paul means everyone has the same degree or measure of the Spirit
 - Just because you and I exhibit different spiritual gifts doesn't mean we each share in different portions or aspects of the Spirit of God
 - Paul has already established we all have the same Spirit
 - Moreover, we all have all of the Spirit
 - You can't have 50% of the Spirit
 - It's all or none, as Paul established in vs.2-3
 - One Christian might be more submitted to the Spirit than another Christian, but both Christians have the same Spirit
 - Both in nature and degree
- Furthermore, the body of Christ will display a variety of ministries – or works of service
 - But every work of service in the Body is directed for and by the Lord through His Spirit
 - Just because I serve the body in one kind of ministry while other Christians work in different ways doesn't mean we serve different gods
 - It's simply a reflection that the Lord has a lot of work to get done in the world, and he equips and calls individual believers to play different roles in that work
 - We can't expect that all Christians will serve in the same way
 - And therefore, we can't expect the Lord to gift all believers with the same set of gifts

- Just as we wouldn't expect construction workers to arrive at a complex construction site all carrying exactly the same tool
- Likewise, we shouldn't expect that the Lord will give every believer the same spiritual gifts to perform the variety of ministries the Lord desires
- To sum up this point, Paul says in v.6 that there are a variety of effects (or operations) in the body of Christ, but they all originate from the same God
 - I may have one kind of spiritual gift, and I put it to use in a particular ministry
 - You may have a completely different kind of gift, and you will put it to use in a very different ministry
 - But these differences are not to be considered a "problem" to be fixed
 - They are the natural consequence of one God working to accomplish many things
- On the other hand, these gifts and ministries do share one important thing in common: they exist for the good of the Body of Christ
 - Paul says in v.7 that the purpose of God equipping all believers in the body with gifts is to effect good things within the body
 - Every believer receives one or more spiritual talents or abilities at the point they become a believer
 - These new abilities are the consequence of the indwelling of the Spirit
 - They are not natural abilities amplified or simply put to new use
 - They are literally new abilities we didn't have prior to the indwelling of the Spirit
 - That is why we call them spiritual gifts
 - They are the work of God through us
 - These are behaviors enabled by the Holy Spirit, so that as we accomplish a work of ministry in our spiritual gift, the Lord receives the credit for the fruit it produces

- You will know a spiritual gift when you see it, because you'll say to yourself, I could never expect to get the results that person is getting
 - For example, I don't have the gift of evangelism
 - So when I see someone operating with that gift, I'm always amazed at their ability to convert
 - I might present the Gospel to a person, and get no response at all
 - But then a person with the gift of evangelism could speak exactly the same words to the same person, and that person falls to their knee in repentance
- What was the difference between me and them? The Spirit
 - The only way we can explain the difference is to recognize that God was working differently in one of us, hence the spiritual gift
 - On the other hand, the absence of a particular spiritual gift doesn't relieve me from participating in that ministry to the best of my abilities
 - I may not have the spiritual gift of prayer, but I'm still expected to pray
 - I may not have the spiritual gift of evangelism, but I still share my faith
 - I may not have a spiritual gift of teaching, but I still endeavor to teach others God's word – if only my children
- In the end, the Lord has equipped every gathering of believers with a variety of spiritual gifts and a variety of ministries to accommodate the array of spiritual needs in that body
 - These gifts are for our benefit and serve to build us up spiritually
 - They are not magic tricks
 - They don't exist to make us feel proud or special
 - Furthermore, the differences between various spiritual gifts are not measures of spiritual maturity
 - They are not distinctions that reflect God's pleasure or suggest importance or authority

- They are not cause for assigning special recognition to one group over another
- They are intended to unite the body, not divide it
- So whatever else we may learn about spiritual gifts in the weeks to come, we must return over and over again to these fundamental principles
 - All believers possess an equal degree of the one and only Spirit
 - The Spirit made us a part of the body and holds us to the body eternally
 - The Spirit equips us all in one way or another, leading to a variety of gifts and ministries within the body
 - Furthermore, the differences between spiritual gifts are a necessity given the variety of works the Lord intends to accomplish in His body
 - We need not worry that we aren't all doing exactly the same things with exactly the same spiritual gifts
 - Rather, we should be thankful for the wisdom of God to ensure a unique and necessary role for each of us in serving the body and the Kingdom
 - In the end, the union of our individual spiritual gifts creates the symphony of ministry that ensures a common good
 - No more than we would wish for a symphony made up of a single instrument should we want a body expressing the same gift