

## BIBLE BACKGROUND

### 1Corinthians 12:1-3

#### Verse 1

**And now concerning spiritual gifts. Brothers, I do not wish you to be ignorant.** Paul deals with another matter raised by the Corinthians and reported to him. **Spiritual gifts** πνευματικων had become an issue because of the competition they caused between members. Paul knew what was motivating many but rather than attack them on this score, he speaks about what they and how they are given. He uses a term here that was used by many, spiritual gifts, but in verse 4 he switched to the term **charismatic gifts** or **charismata** χαρισμάτων. Literally, these are grace gifts, or simply graces. Paul deliberately contrasted this with their boasting about spiritual power and ability for the special skills and roles Christians have in the church are God's gifts.

#### Verse 2

**You know that when you were pagans you were being led astray by mute idols as you were moved.** Most of the congregation had a heathen background and had been participants in idolatrous practices. Jewish people commonly ridiculed idols as voiceless lumps of wood or stone. This was never a simplistic attack on idols. Modern practices in Buddhism and Hinduism indicate that devotees do in fact consider the golden or stone statue as a living god that one offers food, drink and prayers to. There were other practices too and Paul hints at these when he says **as you were moved** ὡς ἂν ἠγεσθε. While it is not specific, it clearly refers to the fact that the Corinthians once experienced ecstatic phenomena in these cults. Indeed, the taking control of the devotee by demonic forces, is the explanation that Paul gives to the ecstatic phenomena (1Corinthians 10:20). This explains the fascination they had with spiritual gifts rather than clear teaching and an orthodox confession of Christian truth. Gifts of the Spirit that endow a person with abilities in certain Christian activities raise the question of authority. When the gift is emphasized, a Christian can easily slip into the danger of emphasizing a personal ability or experience over against the authority of God's word. Luther called this an enthusiasm, when subjective experience has a greater authority than the objective gospel of Christ. Not what you can do but what you can believe, is the important thing.

#### Verse 3

**Therefore, I want you to know that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed". And no one is able to say, "Jesus is Lord", except by the Holy Spirit.** Paul wants the Corinthians to divorce themselves from the old ways of losing self-control whilst under the influence of pagan ecstatic practices. The distinguishing feature of the person under the influence of the Holy Spirit is the confession of Christ as Lord (Rom 10:9). What one says about Christ is more important than a special ability given by the Spirit.

**Speaking by the Spirit of God** ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ λαλῶν is not necessarily a peculiar charismatic activity, such as speaking in tongues. Paul considers normal intelligible speech that proclaims Christ as in fact being under the direction of the Holy Spirit (14:19). Not how one speaks but what is said, is the important thing.

Could it be possible that a Christian could say, **Jesus be cursed**? We consider this impossible and so it is necessary to understand this phrase as a hypothetical construction to balance the orthodox confession, **Jesus is Lord**. Paul is in effect saying, "It is unimaginable to say, Jesus be cursed." Since we are in possession of ourselves, even in Christian ecstasy, the true test of the Spirit's work is in the doctrinal truth of our utterance.

This special truth and confession of Christ is not a human proposition, that is, it cannot be arrived at by human powers of reason. Christ said this himself (Matthew 16:16,17). God must reveal this to people. Likewise, Paul speaks of our natural state as being darkness and being spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Therefore, **no one is able to say...Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit** εἰ μὴ πνεύματι ἁγίῳ. It is the power of the Spirit that enables someone to have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

**Jesus is Lord** ΚΥΡΙΟΣ ΙΗΣΟΥΣ is an ancient Christian confession (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11). But what does it mean? Certainly, Jesus is the King of kings (Revelation 17:14). However, before we turn to kingship as the meaning of lordship, it is important to understand that when Jesus came, he reinterpreted lordship to be one of the saving activity of God. We know that Jesus considered his role as service, sacrifice, and redemption through the cross (Matthew 20:28). Luther too, considered this to be the primary thing about Christ's lordship (see his explanation to the second article in the Small Catechism). Of course, we cannot overlook that **Lord** is the Greek translation of Yahweh, supplied to first century Christians through the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). Yet, even in the Old Testament, it would be foolish to overlook the servant passages in Isaiah (for example, Isaiah 53) and the suffering of the righteous person in Psalm 22 and elsewhere. Therefore, to be Lord, Christ is first of all our Saviour and then our King.

Christ is the head of the church and therefore his leadership is crucial for Christian discipleship (Ephesians 1:21-23; Philippians 2:9-11). The term Lord then, conveys to us the power of God in Christ to save us through humility and sacrifice, and also the power of God in Christ, to rule over us and change us to be like him. Possession of the Spirit cannot lead to disobedience but to willing discipleship (1John 5:1).

This submission to Christ is to be evident in the way he is confessed. In a trance like situation or when a person is inspired in some way, the manner of a message's delivery is not important but the content of what is said.

Verses 4-6

**There is a distribution of gifts but the same Spirit. There is a distribution of ministries but the same Lord. And there is a distribution of miraculous acts but the same God who miraculously performs all things in all [people].**

Paul is emphasizing the unifying nature of the various ways the Lord works amongst his people. He apportions these manifestations of his person in different ways. **There are a variety or diverse distribution** διαίρεσις **of gifts.** Rom 12:3,6 mentions that the Lord apportions gifts according to the faith or grace each Christian has been given. There is a rational rather than a capricious system that God uses when distributing gifts.

Because various gifts come from God, Christians cannot claim anything for themselves. Indeed, **gifts** χαρισμάτων mean just that, gifts coming from God's gracious and kind nature. The word literally means, graces. They are not physical blessings but gifts of a spiritual nature.

**Ministries** διακονιών, positions of service, are activities through which members build each other up in faith, understanding, and maturity in Christ, particularly, love and holy living (Eph 4:12). Eph 4:11 may refer to offices, particularly offices connected with the word of God, and ministries would then be lower functions such as the distribution of funds, care of widows etc (Acts 6:2-4). The same distinction is made in 28.

Following this come **miraculous acts** ενεργημάτων. The coming of the gospel is accompanied by signs and wonders (Heb 2:4). These acts may be equivalent to the Spirit's power in 2:4, but power there is mostly the coming to faith of unbelievers and the power of the Spirit to change lives. See verse 10.

**Same Spirit, same Lord and same God** is Trinitarian. Jesus is Lord (3), the Spirit is clearly mentioned and God refers to the Father (8:6). The important thing is that God is the giver of all spiritual blessings and the unity of his person should be manifest in the unity-producing application of these blessings (Eph 4:4).

Verses 7-11

**To each one he has given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to**

**another miraculous acts of power, to another prophecy, to another the judgement of the spirits, to another [various] kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But the one and the same Spirit works all these things, apportioning individually to each one as he wishes.**

Paul is clear that all baptized believers receive gifts, which he calls the **manifestation** φανέρωσις **of the Spirit**. It is an interesting term. The working of the Spirit is a clearly observable experience in believers. Sometimes, what is considered natural Christian behaviour should be labeled for what it actually is: the Spirit providing a gift **for the common good**. Pride or boasting has no place here.

When Paul lists examples of spiritual gifts, he begins with two gifts that have to do with the word of God: the **word of wisdom** and the **word of knowledge**. Proclaiming the word of God, particularly the gospel, is the central activity of the church and suitably gifted people are required for this. Paul does not mean human wisdom or philosophy but the preaching of the cross (1:17,24; 2:4,7,13). The gospel is the Spirit's preaching because the incarnation, cross, resurrection and ascension are beyond human creativity or understanding. **The word of knowledge** has to do with understanding the testimony of Christ (1:5). It is simply the subjective side of the gospel: wisdom speaks and an understanding person gains knowledge. However, Paul can speak of being known by God (8:3; 13:12).

**Faith** is a somewhat odd gift because faith is given to all. Does Paul mean a special faith that exhibits a trust when situations reduce others to fear and doubt? If we look at 13:2 he may mean such a confident faith that miraculous things happen. Jesus spoke of such a faith (Mk 6:5; Matt 17:20 et al). **Healing** can easily be understood. **Miraculous acts of power** ενεργήματα δυνάμεων: miracle and power mean the same thing. A miracle occurs because of the Spirit's power. **Prophecy** has been described as preaching (14:24). Certainly this is the case but the foretelling has to be a part of it. **The judgement** διακρίσεις **of the spirits** or discerning has to do with distinguishing true and false doctrine (1Jn 4:1-6). **Kinds of tongues** indicates that a single known language is not being spoken of here but various languages, known or unknown (14:10, 14). **Interpretation of tongues** is obviously required (14:6,13).

**The same Spirit**, repeatedly mentioned here, emphasizes the need for unity. Different gifts and their variety could easily produce comparisons and divisions between people. But the important operator is not the person but the one Spirit at work in all believers. **Apportioning individually to each one as he wishes** is not simply a reference to the Spirit's sovereign will but how his choice is right for each person. He freely acts and bestows gifts and this makes clear that he acts in grace, treating each person in proportion to the person's faith. His intelligence, his grace, his careful manner and his love for the congregation are at the forefront rather than individual ability or spiritual capacity of each believer (7:7).