

THE TEST OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS
1 Corinthians 12:1-3
March 12, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

It has come from the lips of more than one Southern Baptist leader that the two greatest issues today in Southern Baptist life both begin with the letter “C”: Charismatics and Calvinism. Some are honest and approach Calvinism with integrity when they state that Arminians and Calvinists (unfortunate titles) can exist together under the same umbrella as long as Calvinism does not kill one’s missions and evangelism. With this separation of Calvinism and hyper-Calvinism I heartily agree. I am encouraged that Drs. Paige Patterson and Al Mohler will dialogue on the issue of Calvinism, in particular the doctrine of election, at this year’s Pastor’s Conference that precedes the Southern Baptist Convention in June. I pray this will be a healthy dialogue that will lead to a better understanding of the biblical teaching of election for all Southern Baptists.

However, what about *charismata*? “Charismata” is usually translated “spiritual gifts” in the English, but a better translation would be “grace gifts.” We will look at these gifts in detail over the next few weeks. As we do so, keep in mind that *charismata* are the hottest topic of discussion in Southern Baptist life at present. I suspect that it will dominate much of the business that comes from the floor in June’s SBC. This issue has arisen due to the increasing number of International Mission Board applicants who have doctrinal questions in their review process concerning a “private prayer language,” which they attempt to distinguish from speaking in tongues, and reports of the practice of this gift on the field. Further, Jerry Rankin, president of the IMB, admittedly uses private prayer language. He expressed this during the interview process with trustees for the presidency and recently, in restating that he exercises this gift, reiterated that his practice is always in private, never in public.

The issue of tongues and private prayer language was brought to the forefront in May 2005 when the Personnel Committee of the IMB adopted a new set of guidelines concerning *glossolalia*, speaking in tongues or private prayer language. It reads:

In terms of general practice, the majority of Southern Baptists do not accept what is referred to as “private prayer language.” Therefore, if “private prayer language” is an ongoing part of his or her conviction and practice, the candidate has eliminated himself or herself from being a representative of the IMB of the SBC. This policy is not retroactive. [Taken from IMB web site, www.imb.org]

The trustees later adopted this guideline in November 2005. Notice that the decision was based on what the majority of Southern Baptist accepts. This can prove to be a dangerous precedent in other issues that might come along. This problem is further exasperated because, in an effort to affirm doctrinal integrity, the president requests that every missionary on the field, those applying for the field, and those in leadership in Richmond all sign an affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message. The problem is that the BF&M says little about spiritual gifts.

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, *exercising the gifts*, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth... While both men and women are *gifted for service* in the church,

the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. [VI. The Church, p. 13, emphasis mine]

Nowhere in the document are these gifts spelled out, so those who adhere to miraculous gifts or sign gifts can sign in good conscience.

However, when one trustee expressed his concern that the guideline goes beyond what is written in the BF&M, it was suggested that he be removed as a trustee of the IMB for “issues involving broken trust and resistance to accountability.” It was suggested that this be brought to the floor of the convention for vote in June. After an outcry against such a measure, the suggestion has since been retracted.

Welcome to Southern Baptist life! However, this controversy over spiritual gifts is not restricted to Southern Baptist life. As John MacArthur correctly states, “Spiritual gifts” are “a controversial subject today within many parts of professing Christianity. Perhaps no area of biblical doctrine has been more misunderstood and abused, even within evangelicalism, than that of spiritual gifts. Yet no area of doctrine is more important to the spiritual health and effectiveness of a church (and, I would add, a denomination). Apart from the direct energizing of God’s Spirit, nothing is more vital to believers than the ministry of their spiritual gifts, their God-given endowments for Christian service” [*1 Corinthians*, 277].

The Corinthians had questions about spiritual gifts as well. Their use and abuse was causing confusion in the church. In chapters 12-14, Paul addresses this concern over spiritual gifts.

1. A Knowledge of Spiritual Gifts (12:1)

Paul turns to the third question that the Corinthians had in their letter written to him for clarification on some of the things that were going on in the church. Paul’s response to each of these questions is introduced by the Greek phrase *peri de*, translated “**Now concerning**” in the English. It is a phrase that introduces an important topic to be addressed. In chapter 7, the question was marriage. In chapters 8-11, the issue was Christian liberty. Here, in the context of worship in the local church, Paul addresses this question of spiritual gifts.

Notice that the word “gifts” is not in the original Greek. It is included in the English for clarification. The word translated “**spiritual gifts**” is the Greek word *pneumatikon*. A literal translation would be “spiritual things.” However, given the context of what follows in Paul’s discussion, “**spiritual gifts**” is an accurate rendering from the Greek. With this in mind, D. A. Carson concludes that “Paul wants to remind his readers that whatever might truly be considered ‘spiritual’ is better thought of as a gracious gift from God. The quest for an individualizing and self-centered form of ‘spirituality’ was in danger of denying the source of all spiritual gifts, the unbounded grace of God” [*Showing the Spirit*, 23].

Of these gifts, Paul writes, “**Brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.**” In keeping with our Greek lesson this morning, the word translated “**unaware**” would be more accurately translated “without knowledge” or “ignorant.” Ignorance leads to all sorts of wrong practice in the Christian life. So Paul’s concern is that these at Corinth and beyond would have a proper understanding of the source, the nature, and the role of spiritual gifts in the life of the believer and the congregation.

We must remember that all of this in response to the question the Corinthians had about the practice of spiritual gifts in worship. There were evidently two groups that existed in the church. One group was made up of charismatics (in the modern sense of the term) who sought to elevate

their giftedness as some sort of spiritual proof of their spiritual life. These would flaunt their gifts in such a way as to lead others to believe they lacked the Spirit if they did not practice the same gifts in the same way as they did. The other group, also charismatic, was skeptical of those who abused the gifts in this way (Calvin – ostentation and show). Their concern arose from their pagan backgrounds and what they saw in the practice of those who were “ecstatic” and appeared no different in their practice in the church than they did in the pagan temples. They saw the effects of paganism in the exercise of these spiritual gifts just as they did in eating meat offered to idols (chapter 8). Their practice was disruptive and caused dissension in the body.

This describes the congregational climate to which Paul responds concerning the question spiritual gifts at Corinth. There was confusion in practice that led to confusion in worship. So Paul, while not discounting the practice of gifts, wants to make sure they understand source of these gifts.

2. A Reminder of Pagan Practices (12:2)

In v. 2 Paul expands on the ignorance of the Corinthians and spiritual gifts by reminding them where they came from, from what they had been delivered. **“You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led.”**

“**Pagans**,” from *ethnē* in the Greek, often refers to all non-Jews. Paul regularly uses the word “Gentiles” to distinguish non-Jews from Jews and all of the things that God had provided for the Jew so that they might be saved. His choosing them, His covenant with them, His promises to them, the Law He provided for them and His temple were all given to the Jews, not the Gentiles. We know that it was through the Jews disobedience that the grace of God and the things of salvation are made available to the Gentile (Rom. 11:11-12).

However, John MacArthur points out that the word *ethnē* is also used to describe all non-Christians, and given the context, that appears to be the correct translation in this case. Paul says that as “**pagans**” they “**were led astray.**” “**Led astray**” is a term of forcefulness. It carries the idea of being under the power of someone or something else. We see this emphasis by the word “**to.**” Paul does not say that they were led “*by*” these idols but “**to the mute idols.**” This would harken back to Paul’s earlier discussion concerning idols in chapter 8. In 8:4 Paul wrote, “We know that there is no such thing as an idol in this world.” If there is no such thing as an idol, then an idol cannot lead anyone to do anything.

So what power were these former “**pagans**” once under? Some believe that Paul here refers to the demonic influences the Corinthians were under when they worshiped in the pagan temples and the ecstatic demonic displays they exhibited in this worship. The assumption in this case would be that *all* Corinthians worshipped these pagan idols. However, this seems to limit what Paul means here. While this might have been the case, we have no proof of that in Scripture or any other extra-biblical accounts. While it would not be an exaggeration to assume that a majority fell under these influences, it is an overstatement to believe they all did.

A better interpretation here, coupled with v. 3 that we will look at in a moment, is that Paul is referring to their life prior to faith in Christ as an unbeliever. If this were the case, then we have ample biblical evidence of the power by which they were “**led astray.**” In Romans 1 we read that though they had a knowledge of God, they did not honor Him as God. They became “futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” The result of this was they “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man.” They “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the

Creator” (Rom. 1:18-25). This happened as a result of them being “slaves to sin” (Rom 6:17). Therefore, these “**pagans**” were bound by their sin nature.

Paul described this further in Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, ² in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. ³ Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Here we see how those that are not in Christ live their lives. They live according to their nature, which is dead in trespasses and sins. They are led by the world, the flesh, and their father, the devil.

Not only are these bound by their nature but they are blind in their understanding. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:17-18:

So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, ¹⁸ being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.

So Paul’s concern with these at Corinth is that they not be ignorant as the unbeliever is ignorant concerning these gifts. And the only way to know if the gifts one is exhibiting are from the Lord or from their former paganism is to know the spirit by which these gifts were given and practiced.

3. A Test of Contending Spirits (12:3)

The problem at Corinth was that some had come to judge the validity of spiritual gifts on the basis of experience rather than content. The more showy and bizarre a demonstration was, the more “spiritual” the act was judged to be. Paul, having reminded them of their paganism, here reminds them that the showy and bizarre were also manifest in the pagan temple. So how was one to know whether the gifts displayed were truly in the spirit or some manifestation of wickedness?

Paul offers a test to judge in these matters. He begins with the negative aspect of this test, a test for a counterfeit spirit. “**Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is accursed.’**” Satan is in the counterfeiting business. Satan’s goal is to make something appear to be of the Spirit of God when there is nothing of God in it. Satan attempts to make something appear to be the real thing. This was happening at Corinth. Some, claiming to be speaking by the Spirit of God in manifesting some prophecy or teaching, were actually cursing the name and nature of Christ they claimed to be worshiping. “**Jesus is accursed**” is a blatant attempt to defame the person and refute work of Christ. It is a statement against Jesus’ very nature as God and Christ. It is blaspheming the character of Christ. So some at Corinth gave the appearance of being in the Spirit of God, all the while tearing down His holy name.

There is much speculation as to who these were that uttered this blasphemy. Some believe that Paul here refers to Jewish leaders who, being against the claims of Christ’s divinity and saving work, advised their people to utter this blasphemy in the temple. However, there is no validity in this argument as Paul is not writing to Jews, but Corinthian Christians in their church,

not Jews in the local synagogue. Others claim that Paul is dealing with a Gnostic influence in the church that taught a dualism of the material and the spiritual. The thought here is that Paul is confronting the Gnostic teaching that the body of Christ was accursed, being material. However, this also lacks validity in that there is no solid proof that Gnosticism existed in its full-blown form at this time. A third thought is that Paul simply uses the words **“Jesus is accursed”** as a mnemonic device to emphasize his next thought that only those in the Spirit can say **“Jesus is Lord.”** In other words, **“Jesus is accursed”** was not actually verbally stated in the church. However, this too lacks credibility in that Paul’s wording here is in the declarative mood, a statement of fact. Paul says that some actually said, **“Jesus is accursed.”** The only viable option as to who Paul refers to here is those who *claimed* to be in the Spirit of God while actually saying, **“Jesus is accursed.”** So Paul offers the obvious, **“no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is accursed.’”** It is an anti-Christ statement.

We might expect to find blasphemy of this sort outside the church. I had the opportunity this week to preach at the Walker County Baptist Association Pastor’s Conference. After the meeting, we all went to lunch at a local eatery in Jasper. I went to the restroom to wash my hands before our meal, and as I turned to leave the restroom I noticed the words “Jesus is gay” written on the back of the restroom door. Needless to say, I was quite saddened in my spirit.

We read and watched this week the saga of three college students from well-to-do backgrounds who were taken into custody for the church burnings in our area. Two of these young men have professed to be Satanists, one stating that these acts were done to “bring in the reign of evil.” My question is, “When did it ever stop?”

Acts such as these are reprehensible to us that know Christ as Lord and Savior. We should not be shocked when acts such as these occur outside the church. However, the acts that Paul addresses in Corinth were not outside the church, but inside, under the guise of the Holy Spirit. Our initial thought might be that it does not take a rocket scientist to see that one who makes a blasphemous assertion like **“Jesus is accursed”** is certainly not in Christ, we must be careful that we do not miss the cultural aspect that Paul is dealing with at Corinth. This was a church in its infancy. They did not have the Scriptures as we do and much of what they did was on-the-job training. While we might easily recognize something as blatant as this being unspiritual, I wonder how much slips by us today, in the name of Christ, which is not really Christian at all and is the work of the counterfeiter.

Paul then offers the positive test in these matters, **“and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”** Here again we must be careful. Paul is talking about a *sincere* confession. It is possible that one can say, **“Jesus is Lord”** while giving the appearance of being filled with the Spirit without truly being in the Spirit. In Acts 16 we read of a slave-girl who professed that Paul and others were “men of the Most High, proclaiming to you the way of salvation.” However, she did so in the spirit of divination. She was being led by a demonic spirit and, while giving the appearance of a Spirit-filled confession, she was in fact mocking Paul (Acts 16:16-18).

However, those that give a sincere confession that **“Jesus is Lord”** do so in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote in Romans 10:9-10, “if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” This demonstrates a sincere confession. Not just simply giving lip service to Christ, but a profession that comes from within the heart of a person. This is the profession that Paul alludes to when he says, **“and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”**

Conclusion

I close this morning with a few points to ponder as we complete Paul's introduction of this section on spiritual gifts and prepare to look at the gifts themselves next week.

- 1) Only those who are truly born of the Spirit of God can exercise spiritual gifts.
- 2) There are many gifts mentioned in Scripture. We will look at some of these next week in this chapter. Other lists of spiritual gifts are found in Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:4ff, and 1 Peter 4:10-11.
- 3) All believers have at least one of these gifts, most probably more than one, but none have all of the gifts. This is important in dealing with our full-blown charismatic friends who believe that if you have not spoken in tongues then you do not have the Spirit of God living in you.
- 4) As we have seen this morning, when it comes to exercising these gifts, one can have the appearance of the gifts while denying the God of the gifts. Perhaps not outwardly like some at Corinth, but inwardly. They profess Christ and His gifts, but do not truly possess Christ and His gifts. Remember, Satan is a counterfeiter. His work is deception. We must be on guard first and foremost for our own heart and mind, examining ourselves to see if we truly do know Christ, as well as on guard for others who might be the unassuming pawns of Satan.
- 5) If you do not know Christ savingly this morning, understand that you live your life with the motto: **"Jesus is accursed."** While you might not verbalize it, that is your spirit. You are at enmity with God and despise the way that He has provided through Christ alone for you to be delivered from His just wrath and punishment to eternal damnation. When you stand before God in judgment one day, you will be judged for cursing His only Son, the perfect and spotless Lamb who was slaughtered on a Cross so that we might have life eternal with Him. Do you know Christ today?