

Jesus is Lord! (1 Cor. 12:1–3)

By Jacob Gerber

In John 4:23, our Lord Jesus gives us one of the clearest definitions of worship in all the Bible: “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.” We must worship with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—that is, “in spirit”—and we must worship according to truth. This is *confessional* worship, where we go beyond merely acknowledging the truthfulness of what God teaches us in his word, but where we bear witness to our confidence in this truth from the depths of our souls. Christianity is nothing if it is not confessional, worshiping God in our spirits, according to the truth that he has revealed to us in his word. Specifically, Christianity is nothing apart from a faithful confession that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

Confessional worship, though, is impossible for us, according to our own strength, on our own. We are born in sin, with darkened, ignorant minds, and rebellious, hard hearts. To confess that Jesus is Lord requires God himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, to lift our spirits to love the truth of the only Redeemer between God and man, Jesus Christ. Unlike mute, speechless idols, the Holy Spirit speaks to us, bearing witness to the gospel of God accomplished for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Before Paul moves on to talk about the various spiritual *gifts* that the Holy Spirit gives to the spiritual *people* in the church, Paul begins with a clear focus on the object of our confessional worship: *the Holy Spirit leads us to confess that Jesus is Lord.*

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In 1 Corinthians 12:1, Paul transitions to a new topic. Once again, Paul uses the phrase “now concerning” to introduce a topic that the Corinthians themselves have raised (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 16:1, 12. since the word translated as “spiritual gifts” is not the word commonly used for spiritual gifts (χαρίσματα; *charismata*).¹ Here, the word is simply (τῶν πνευματικῶν; *tōn pneumatikōn*), a plural form of the word “spiritual,” which could refer either to spiritual *people* or spiritual *things*.² Primarily, this word has to do with “things of the Holy Spirit,” as Gordon Fee explains: “When the emphasis is on the manifestation, the ‘gift’ as such, Paul speaks of *charismata*; when the emphasis is on the Spirit, he speaks of *pneumatika*.”³ Paul’s ambiguous language is probably a direct response to the Corinthians’ original inquiry, which we do not have, which makes it difficult to know whether the

¹ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 162.

² “Four times it refers to persons (2:13, 15; 3:1; 14:37), six times to things (2:13; 9:11; 10:3–4; 14:1), and four times to the contrast between the body animated by the Spirit and the body animated by the soul (15:44–46).” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 561–62.)

³ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 638.

Corinthians wrote about the people directed by the Spirit, or the gifts that manifest the work of the Spirit.⁴ Regardless, Paul's emphasis here is on the work of the Spirit, as we will see in v. 3, as well as this wider section.⁵ Specifically, Paul wants them to know that *all* Christians are *spiritual*, in the sense that they are guided by the *Spirit*.⁶

The Spirit-led status of the Corinthian Christians stands in contrast to their former lives (1 Cor. 12:2). Formerly, they were “Gentiles” (ἔθνη; *ethnē*). Many English translations choose the word “pagans,” which accurately reflects the former religious practices of the Corinthians. Nevertheless, the word is “Gentiles.” As in 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul is saying that the Corinthians are no longer to be classified as Gentiles, clearly implying that they have been grafted into Israel (cf. Rom. 11:17–24; 1 Cor. 10:1).⁷ When they were still “Gentiles,” they were led astray toward worshiping mute, unspeaking idols. The language does not suggest any kind of ecstatic, religious action.⁸ Paul does not describe that the Corinthians had been led *by* the idols, but only that they were led *toward* worshiping the idols in their unbelieving ignorance.⁹

What, then, does Paul want them to know about the difference between their former and their current lives? It is difficult to know what has in mind by the phrase “*Anathema Jesus!*” (1 Cor. 12:3). Does this describe someone rejecting Jesus *as* anathema, cursed justly as though he were a blasphemer?¹⁰ Does Paul have in mind the Jews in particular, who pronounced Jesus as anathema for claiming to have been the Messiah, and the Son of God?¹¹ Or, did some Corinthian misunderstand Paul's teaching that Christ became “a curse for us” (cf. Gal. 3:13)?¹² Or, was someone invoking Jesus' name and authority to curse *someone else*: “May Jesus curse my enemy!”¹³

Regardless of which option is correct, Paul's larger point is clear: only by the influence of the Holy Spirit can anyone instead confess that “Jesus is Lord.” As Leon Morris writes, “The Lordship of Christ is not a human discovery. It is a discovery that is made and can be made only when the Spirit is at work in the heart.”¹⁴ This does not mean merely pronouncing the words, but confessing the words with a heart that matches the words: “To confess Jesus as Lord (*kyrios*) involves the whole self in an *attitude* of trust, obedience, commitment, loyalty, and reverence to Jesus as the Lord who has the care of one's life.”¹⁵ This is clear from how Paul pairs the confession that Jesus is Lord with the

⁴ “Paul takes up a new topic—‘now concerning’ (περὶ δὲ, *peri de*)—that he will address in chapters 12–14. The genitive plural τῶν πνευματικῶν (*tōn pneumatikōn*) can be read as masculine, ‘the spiritual persons,’ or as neuter, ‘the spiritual things or gifts.’ The ambiguity reflects the fact that he picks up an issue raised by the Corinthians. They would understand what he means, even if we do not.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 558.)

⁵ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 192.

⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 561.

⁷ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 209.

⁸ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 253.

⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 565.

¹⁰ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 240–41.

¹¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 570–72.

¹² Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 163–64.

¹³ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 193.

¹⁴ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 164.

¹⁵ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 194–95.

necessity of faith from the heart elsewhere: “...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). A true confession requires that our verbal acknowledgement of Jesus’ Lordship matches our faith from the heart that God raised him up from the dead. It is faith that saves us, so that our confession serves as an expression of our faith.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it so important to know that we worship a *talking* God? Why has God exalted above all things his name and *his word* (Ps. 138:2)? When God speaks in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, what does God principally teach us (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, #3)? How much room (time/attention) do you give God to speak to you through his word?
2. In what way do the Scriptures bear witness to Jesus as Lord? What do the Scriptures tell us about the *person* of Jesus? What do the Scriptures tell us about the *work* of Jesus? Why do people misunderstand this message? Why do people reject this message?
3. What role does the Holy Spirit play in leading us to confess that Jesus is Lord? How did the Holy Spirit *inspire* the writers of the books contained in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible? How does the Holy Spirit *illuminate* us as we read the Bible, so that we understand the message? How do we get it wrong apart from the Holy Spirit’s ministry? How do you pray for the Holy Spirit to open the eyes, ears, and hearts of the lost? of fellow believers? of you?