

Same Spirit, Same Lord, Same God (1 Cor. 12:4–7)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Upon the foundation of Jesus' lordship that Paul addressed in the first three verses of this chapter, Paul begins to speak about the nature of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11. First, Paul contrasts the diversity of the gifts (using a diversity of words to characterize the nature of those gifts), with the unity of their source. The great range of spiritual gifts within the unity of the church are, as John Calvin calls it, “a manifold unity” that functions like an orchestra, where several instruments combine to form one, unified sound.¹ Paul himself is leading up to the metaphor of the one body composed of many members (1 Cor. 12:12ff).

In v. 4–6, however, Paul calls these diversities “gifts” from the same Spirit, “services” to the same Lord, and “activities” of the same God. In these descriptions, Paul seems to be varying his language in order to present them from different aspects: “Viewed in relation to the Spirit, they are gifts; in relation to the Lord, they are ministrations; and in relation to God, they are operations, i.e. effects wrought by his power.”² Notice that Paul contrasts the diversity of gifts with the unity of the source of the gifts; however, Paul names the unity of the source of the gifts (God) according to the triune distinctions between the three Persons in the Godhead.

Part of the way that Paul is illustrating the diversity of gifts in the unity of the church is by reminding us of the distinctions of Persons in the one God. In Trinitarian theology, it is an axiom that the external works of the Trinity are indivisible.³ The work of the Father may be distinguished from the work of the Son, and both their works may be distinguished from the work of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are working jointly, in an inseparable, indivisible, common effort as the one God. In this passage, Paul does not give us a formal, explicit prooftext for the Trinity, but his language clearly reflects his persistent Trinitarian thinking.⁴ Here, Paul teaches that *the Holy Spirit gives gifts to empower our common mission*.

The Spirit Distributes Varieties of Gifts (1 Cor. 12:4)

This indivisible work of the Triune God manifests itself in the diverse apportionments given to the various members of the church. The Holy Spirit works by giving “gifts” is (*charismata*), a word that emphasizes the *gracious* nature of the gifts. David Garland suggests translating this word as

¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 397. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xix.ii.html>>

² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 242.

³ In Latin, this standard phrase is *Opera ad extra sent indivisa aut communia*. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 496.

⁴ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 164.

“grace-gifts” so that we do not consider the goodness of the gift apart from the grace of the Giver.⁵ The Spirit graciously disburses these various gifts to the various members of the church.

The Lord Jesus Commissions Varieties of Service (1 Cor. 12:5)

The “Lord” (that is, the *Lord* Jesus Christ) works by assigning varieties of “service,” or “ministry” (*diakonia*). By this aspect, we see the authority of the Lord Jesus to assign ministers (servants) to establish the rule of his reign. He is the Lord whose lordship includes commissioning, governing, and overseeing the work of his church. In turn, the work of the church is to proclaim the lordship of Christ, in order that many might come to confess Jesus as Lord.

The Father Empowers Varieties of Activities (1 Cor. 12:6)

The Father (“God”) works by “empowering” (*energōn*) various “activities” (*energēmatōn*). The idea comes out more clearly through the related words in Greek than in translation, but the idea here has to do with the translation of God’s power to the powerful work of the various members of the church: “Paul’s meaning is, that although believers may be endowed with different powers, they all take their rise from one and the same power on the part of God.”⁶ Indivisibly, the three Persons of the Triune God graciously give, assign, and empower individual believers for their work in one body of the church. Or, as Charles Hodge puts it, these various gifts/services/activities “are all and equally gifts of the Spirit, modes of serving the Son, and effects due to the efficiency of the Father.”⁷

There are Many Manifestations of the Spirit, but One Mission (1 Cor. 12:7)

In v. 7, Paul draws his conclusion about the purposes of the various gifts within the unity of the church: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Lenski summarizes this contrast well: “Two things are thus made prominent: each believer has his gift, and every bestowal of a gift is for the common good.”⁸ Again, the analogy of the diverse work of the unified church is to the Trinity: each Person of the Trinity gives from a different slant, and yet in a unified, undivided way. In the same way, the diverse church receives diverse gifts, but for the common, unified, singular good—namely, the good of glorifying Jesus as Lord.

We should note, however, that while these gifts of the Spirit are ministries of the Lord and activities empowered of the Father, Paul most explicitly attributes these gifts as “the manifestation of the Spirit.” In this manifestation, “the Spirit of God does there manifest himself — in an active sense, because the Spirit of God, when he enriches us with any gift, unlocks his treasures, for the purpose of

⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 575.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 399. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xix.ii.html>>

⁷ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Reprint: Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000; Originally published 1857), 242–43.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 497.

manifesting to us those things that would otherwise have been concealed and shut up.”⁹ That is, the Holy Spirit manifests himself in order to reveal Christ to us, who, in turn, reveals to us the Father.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the work of the Holy Spirit connect to the work of redemption that the Father sent his Son to accomplish? How do the Spirit’s gifts connect with Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection? Why does the church need the gifts of the Holy Spirit to complete her mission? What is the mission of the church?
2. What do we mean by saying that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:6; cf. v. 5)? What do we mean by the “activities” or “energies” empowered by the Father? How do the distinct works of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and the Father connect together? What do we mean when we say that the external works of the Trinity are indivisible and common? Why is this important?
3. How does the church reflect the diversity and unity of the Trinity? In what ways is our diversity-in-unity similar to the Trinity? In what ways is our diversity-in-unity different from the Trinity? How does the unity and diversity of the church glorify Christ and his lordship?

⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 400. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xix.ii.html>>