

Lesson 17  
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Following his discussion of the Lord's Supper, Paul turns his attention to other aspects of worship. His primary concern is the use and abuse of spiritual gifts by the Corinthian church. These opening verses of chapter 12 reveal more about the work of the Holy Spirit in New Testament days than any other part of the letter. In fact, since Paul's discussion of the Spirit in 2:4-14, he has not discussed spiritual gifts.

v. 1 -- "Now concerning" is the sign that Paul is addressing an issue raised in the letter from the Corinthians. Paul does not quote the letter as he had earlier (7:1; 8:1), and all exegetical reconstruction is speculation. All that is known for certain is that the Corinthians raised issues related to spiritual gifts. Given some of their earlier conduct, it is not even safe to say that they were seeking Paul's instruction; they may have been trying to instruct Paul.

Note that once again he calls them "brothers." Paul uses the term frequently in the letter, and it seems that it is used most often when he is addressing sensitive issues. Paul is not adverse to "writing off" brethren, but he sets a worthy example in being reluctant to do so. Very often today brethren are "written off" not for what they have said or done, but because of what we have heard they might have done. Correction can be attempted without condemnation. It is another matter if that correction fails.

The topic as described by Paul is "spiritual." That word stands alone in the original. Some translations add "persons to complete the thought; others supply "gifts." Paul's applies "spiritual" to persons in 2:15, 3:1, and especially 14:37 where he writes, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet, or spiritual. . ." favors the former. However, the certain use of the neuter plural in 14:1 (12:1 can be either masculine or neuter in the context) where it refers to at least prophecy and tongues, plus Paul's overall argument that deals chiefly with spiritual gifts in the church and not with individual spirituality, leads most commentators to favor the latter.

Paul's use of "ignorant" is not necessarily a criticism. He does not want them to be without knowledge of the proper use of spiritual gifts. His use of the term may mean that he is not so much going to impart new information to them as he is going to correct some of their improper views.

v. 2 – Having declared their lack of knowledge he begins to inform them by reminding them of something of which they were not ignorant – their past life as Gentiles. They were, of course, still Gentiles; he is comparing their position in Christ with their former manner of life. They were led astray to mute idols. (Psalm 115:5; Hab. 2:18-19.) Their former gods were not only voiceless; they had nothing to say. The passive verb implies an agent. They were not led by Christ. The alternative is that they were led by demons. Some commentators suggest that Paul is contrasting the inspired speech that is the gift of the Spirit with the ecstatic gibberish that characterized certain practices in Greek temples. More about this will be discussed in connection with speaking in tongues.

v. 3 – Having reminded them of their former manner of life, Paul now instructs them on how to determine the work of the Spirit. Negatively, no one curses Jesus by the Spirit of

God. Positively, no one is able to say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. This verse is troubling to some because, taken by itself, it says that anyone who says that Jesus is Lord is speaking by the Holy Spirit. There is a sense in which this is true – all that we know about Jesus came from experience in the lifetime of Jesus, or by inspiration of the Spirit after his death. 2:6-14. Given the context, however, this may be more of a generalization that is broad enough to give comfort to those who find difficulty in harmonizing what Paul says here with the realization that “Jesus is Lord” is easy to say and many people do while denying him in their lives. Matt. 7:21-24; Luke 6:46. In the context Paul is instructing them on the proper use of spiritual gifts. He has reminded them that in their former life they heard all types of utterances. “Jesus is cursed” is certainly one of the things that they could have heard in their pagan temples. Those who spoke by inspiration would never use such a term. They would confess Jesus as Lord. Couple this with the significance of the confession in the first century and Paul’s point becomes clear. The confession was a renunciation of all allegiance except to Jesus. To the Jews the confession was blasphemy; to the Gentiles it was foolishness; to the Romans it was treason. No one would use the expression except those to whom it was true.

vv. 4-7 – Paul now begins to discuss the varieties of spiritual gifts. These three verses reveal that each of the Persons of the Godhead is involved in the dispensation of spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts fall into three broad categories – gifts, ministrations, and workings (ASV). These terms emphasize their freeness (gifts), their purpose (ministrations (service)), and the effect or result of the work of God (workings).

“To each is given” does not necessarily mean that each Christian received a spiritual gift; more likely it means “to each person who has received a spiritual gift it is given for the benefit or profit of all.” By these verses Paul emphasizes that the Corinthians should not be arrogant because they have been given what they possess; they should not flaunt their gift because it was given for service; they should not be jealous because what is wrought in them is the working of God.

vv. 8-11 – Paul now begins to list the specifics of the varieties of gifts. Remember that it is not Paul’s purpose to instruct the Corinthians on spiritual gifts per se. Therefore, he is not concerned with their number and kind. He does not give an exhaustive list of the varieties of gifts. Rather he gives them a representative list that he hopes will make them stop being singular in their own emphasis. This is evident from the fact that Paul has six lists in this argument (12:28,29-30; 13:1-3, 8; 14:6, 26), no two of which are exactly alike in number or content. Some try to distinguish between “gifts” and “manifestations.” Paul uses the terms interchangeably; however, if there is a distinction to be made, “manifestation” places emphasis on the Spirit in the sense that the gifts are a manifestation of the Spirit in their presence.

Since this is the first of Paul’s listings of “gifts,” it has generated a great deal of interest in terms of the nature and meaning of the gifts listed. Various attempts have been made to classify the gifts. Some suggest that they are listed in a descending order of value; others have rearranged them by categories. One of the more popular classifications is:

1. Gifts of instruction (wisdom and knowledge);
2. Gifts of supernatural powers (faith, healings, miracles); and

3. Gifts of inspired utterance (prophecy, discerning prophecies, tongues, interpretation of tongues).

Regardless of characterization, what are the gifts? Although there is general agreement, the answer differs according to the commentator. The definitions here given are suggestive. Most definitions are speculation bases on the name Paul gives the gifts.

### **GIFTS IN 1 CORINTHIANS 12**

Paul here sets forth fully the diversity of the gifts, but checks any tendency to boastful comparison by showing that the gifts emanate from a common source, and are operated by a common will, and are bestowed according to the pleasure of the Spirit, and not because of any inferiority or superiority on the part of the recipients. The nine gifts spoken of may be described as follows:

1. The "word of wisdom" was the ability to reveal divine truth which was possessed by the apostles and partially by prophets.
2. The "word of knowledge" was the ability to teach the truth thus revealed. Paul emphasizes that the second gift was as much a work of the Spirit as the first.
3. Faith, in this connection, is more than that which comes by hearing. It is that energy of faith which carries with it divine power (Matt. 17:19-20; ch. 13:2).
4. "Gifts of healing" was the power to supernaturally restore the sick (Acts 5:15-16; Jas. 5:14-15). This gift may have been separated from the one next named, because some had their miraculous power limited to this field.
5. "Workings of miracles" was larger than the one which preceded it, for it included acts of judgment as well as mercy. It was exercised by Paul in striking Elymas blind, and by Peter in the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira. Paul here names healing first possibly because those who are called upon to exercise God's mercy stand higher in his esteem than those who execute his judgment, for pagans and unbelievers have often been used by him to mete out punishment. But in verse 28 he reverses the order, for the greater includes the less.
6. The "gift of prophecy" enabled one to speak the truth under the unerring guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament this gift was a very important one; but in the New, the "word of wisdom," which embraced all the larger scope of prophecy, seems to have been mainly confined to the apostles, and so we find New Testament prophets merely foretelling things of a temporary or personal nature, as in the case of Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:9-11).
7. "Discernings of spirits" was the power to recognize the difference between the utterances of genuine inspiration and those of a demoniacal or an unaided human spirit.
8. There has been much dispute as to what is meant by "kinds of tongues." Some modern commentators have attempted to show that the gift of tongues mentioned in the Epistles was entirely different from the ability to speak foreign languages manifested on the day of Pentecost. Speaking with tongues was not an incoherent, meaningless jargon uttered by the speaker in ecstatic rhapsody, nor was it "spiritual language unknown to man, uttered in ecstasy. The second chapter of the Book of

Acts shows us clearly what it was, and the New Testament never explains it as being anything less or different.

9. "Interpretation of tongues" was the ability to interpret what was said by the one who spoke with tongues. The gifts of speaking and interpreting were sometimes given to the same person (14:13), and sometimes to different persons.

The outline of Paul's argument is clear. Diversity has its roots in God (vv. 4-6). God, through the Spirit, gives diverse gifts to people for the common good (v. 7). His point is illustrated (vv. 8-10). V. 11 concludes the argument by repeating and thereby reinforcing the prior themes.

### **TONGUES IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

The glossa gift in the early church must be understood as languages. All of the New Testament evidence points toward this. It was identified as languages known by men when it first came upon the apostles on the day of Pentecost. All of the other evidence in the New Testament fits this early definition. There is no need to try to read the pagan phenomenon of ecstatic utterance back into the New Testament text. If the glossa gift could be explained psychologically as the pagan phenomenon the miraculous element would be gone. In interpreting the Scriptures, one should always interpret the unknown in terms of the known. It is known that the glossa gift was languages on Pentecost. It should be so interpreted in other places unless inspired men redefine it.

#### **ECSTATIC UTTERANCES OR LANGUAGES**

Much of the confusion that exists over "tongue speaking" is over the misunderstanding of the nature of the glossa gift in the New Testament. Four different views are generally held today concerning the nature of the New Testament gift.

- (1) Ability to speak in a foreign language without having learned it.
- (2) Ecstatic utterances coming from a supernatural working of the Holy Spirit.
- (3) A combination of the above views which makes the gift on the day of Pentecost foreign languages and the phenomenon in the church at Corinth ecstatic utterances.
- (4) Ecstatic utterances which are nothing more than psychological phenomenon explainable in human terms.

In studying the New Testament evidence, one must be careful not to interpret the New Testament phenomenon in terms of the glossolalia experience today. They are to be studied independently. Only after one has discovered the nature of the glossa gift in the New Testament can he compare it to the present phenomenon.

Jesus predicted "tongue speaking." After he gave the great commission in Mark, He says: "And these signs shall accompany them that believe: in my name shall they cast

out demons; they shall speak with new tongues. . . .” Mark 16:17. This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem: sometime later at the household of Cornelius in Caesarea; still later at Ephesus; and finally after many years at Corinth. The promise of Jesus was one. Its fulfillment must also be one. All of the occurrences of the fulfillment of the promise must be considered as one even though they are separated in time and distance. There is no evidence that any one fulfillment was different from the others.

### **The Definition of Luke**

The first occurrence of "tongue speaking" in the New Testament was on the day of Pentecost. Luke gives a very full description of the phenomenon in Acts 2:4-8, 11.

Luke understood the gift to be languages. Three conclusive points show this in the account.

First, Luke uses the words *glossa* and *dialektos* interchangeably. The apostles were speaking in tongues, *glossa*. The apostles were speaking in language, *dialektos*. The tongues- or languages -that they spoke were not some heavenly unknown language. The languages were known by the men who heard. What they heard was their own native tongue -- the language wherein they were born.

Second, the crowd that gathered around the apostles were amazed and marveled. The men they saw were Galileans, but the language they heard was their own. The marvel of it all was that men who were known to be of one dialect could fluently speak another language.

Third, some fifteen nationalities are listed by Luke in connection with the "tongue speaking" sign. These nationalities probably refer to Jews of the dispersion who no longer knew Aramaic. If languages of these nationalities were not meant, why would these different nationalities be mentioned? The different nationalities were saying, "We hear them speaking in our tongues.

Pentecost was the first occurrence of the *glossa* gift and should thus be used to define the gift in other passages. The first time a thing is mentioned, it should be defined and described. Luke did this in Acts 2 and assumed that the reader understood the gift in the other passages.

It should also be noted that Luke was writing to Theophilus, "that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed. " Luke 1:4. He must have been an unbeliever or a new convert who needed further instruction. It was necessary to explain the *glossa* gift to him. Those to whom Paul was writing in Corinth would not need such a definition. The *glossa* gift was very common there and had been known for a long time. Paul could assume that his reader would not need a definition, Luke could not. It would be foolish to ignore Luke's plain definition and try to pick a definition out of Paul's Corinthian letter.

Luke's description in Acts is decisive for what Paul writes to Corinth. Some scholars tend to reverse this process. They try to determine what happened at Corinth and then to either square the two accounts or conclude that two different gifts are mentioned .... Luke is the one who fully describes what the tongues are, while Paul takes for granted that his readers know what they are and therefore offers no description .... Luke writes for a reader (Theophilus) who may not have heard of the gift. Paul writes for readers who have often heard members of their own congregation speak in tongues.

If a word is used to describe a practice in the New Testament, it should always be taken to mean the same thing in other places unless the new context will not allow it.

### **The Phenomenon at Corinth**

Paul did not need to define the glossa gift when he wrote to Corinth. Everyone understood it. Everything in the discussion of the gift in I Corinthians 12-14 fits the definition as given by Luke in Acts 2.

The use of *barbaros* in 14:11 would indicate that the Corinthians understood the gift to be languages: "If then I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be to him that speaketh a barbarian and he that speaketh will be a barbarian unto me." 1 Cor. 14:11. A barbarian in the Greek world was one who was not Greek in culture and language. One of the major definitions of *barbaros* given by Hans Windisch in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament is: " 'of a strange speech,' or 'the one who speaks a strange language' (i.e., other than Greek.)" The use of *diermenouo* in I Corinthians 12:30, 14:5, 13, 27, would allow languages to be understood as the gift of tongues in Corinth. Most versions translated *diermenouo* "interpret." The verb can mean either "to translate" or "to interpret." The first meaning given by the Arndt-Gingrich Lexicon is "to translate." Johannes Behn in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament gives one meaning of the verb as being "to transfer from a foreign language into familiar." Some have tried to make a case for the gift of tongues in Corinth being ecstatic utterance by forcing *diermenouo* to mean only "to interpret" and not "to translate." Carl Tuland affirms: "The tongue speaking in Corinth was ecstatic utterance or babbling, to be understood by others it had to be interpreted, but not translated." This can not be done. *Diermenouo* can not be confined in definition to just "to interpret." It also means "to translate." The context determines which meaning is given to it. To argue that the glossa gift was ecstatic utterance in Corinth and attempt to prove it by the definition of *diermenouo* is uncritical. It assumes what is to be proven. It is circular reasoning.

If the use of the context is to determine the meaning of the verb, then "translate" would be the best term to use. Luke defines the glossa gift as languages in Acts 2. It must be assumed to have the same meaning throughout the New Testament unless a different context demands a different meaning. If *diermenouo* is to be translated by "to translate" and *glossa* is to be translated by "language," the meaning of I Corinthians 14 27-28 becomes more understandable.

*If any man speaks in a language, let it be by two, or at the most three, and that in turn; and let one translate; but if there be no translator, let him keep silent in the church.*

Paul's quotation in 1 Cor 14:21 from Isaiah 28:12 within the discussion of the glossa gift shows that languages are meant. It is clear from the context of Isaiah 28 that "other tongues" refers to the speech of foreigners. Isaiah rebukes the priests and prophets of Jerusalem because they rejected his message. He warns them that if they refuse to listen to his speech they will be forced to listen to the same message from the unaccustomed speech of foreign soldiers in their streets. He says: "Nay, but by men of strange lips and with another tongue will he speak to this people . . . yet will they not hear. Isa. 28:11,12. Isaiah was not speaking of ecstatic utterances, but of a foreign language. The apostle uses the context of the Isaiah passage to teach a lesson to the Corinthians.

Some of the arguments in favor of interpreting glossa as ecstatic utterance in I Corinthians are thought to be found in the text itself. A collection of these arguments from several sources are as follows (all verses are from chapter 14):

- (1) The speech is addressed to God (vv. 2, 28.)
- (2) The speaker in the spirit speaks mysteries (vs. 2.)
- (3) The speaker edifies himself and not others (vs. 4.)
- (4) The speaker's understanding is unfruitful (vs. 14.)
- (S) The speech was not understood by the hearers (vs. 19.)
- (6) Outsiders hearing the speech will think it is madness (vs. 23.)

It is true that all of these arguments fit ecstatic utterance. They also fit speaking in a foreign language that is not understood.

One with the gift of language would be speaking in the spirit since he had not learned the language by natural means. What he would be saying would be both a mystery to himself and his hearers who did not understand the language.

One with the gift of language would be speaking to God if neither he nor his hearers understood the language.

One with the gift of language would only be edifying himself with his speech if there were no one present who knew the language. No one else would understand his message and therefore could not be edified. He would not understand the message either but would be edified by the knowledge that God was using him to speak a foreign language.

One with the gift of language would not be understood by the hearers unless the language was known by them as was the case on Pentecost. The situation on the day of Pentecost was the only time in the New Testament accounts that there was a multilingual group assembled when the gift of tongues was exercised. In Caesarea, Ephesus and Corinth one finds the gift being exercised. There is nothing said about understanding the speech except at Corinth and then only with the aid of an interpreter.

One with the gift of language speaking in an assembly in which no one understood would be acting irrationally. An outsider seeing this situation would think that it was madness.

Every argument that is used to identify the Corinthians tongues with ecstatic utterances also fits foreign languages which were not learned by the speaker and not understood by the hearers. Why would anyone suggest the interpretation of ecstatic utterances if it were not to give credibility to a psychological phenomenon which they do not understand? The explanation of the glossolalia experiences of today are to be found in abnormal psychology, not in the New Testament.

### **Pagan Ecstasy**

There are many similarities between such ecstatic speech and contemporary glossolalia. E. R. Dodds describes the Apollo oracle at Delphi:

At Delphi, and apparently at most of his oracles, Apollo relied, not on visions like those of Theoclymenus, but on "enthusiasm" in its original and literal sense. The Pythia became *enteos, plena deo*: the god entered into her and used her vocal organs as if they were his own, exactly as the so-called "control" does in modern spirit-mediumship. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Boston: Beacon Press. 1957) PP. 70-71.

The names of the gods have changed but the claims of the devotees are the same between the ancient Apollo cult and the modern advocates of glossolalia. Both claim to be possessed by God. Both claim that God takes over the vocal cords. Both obtain this state in the context of religious devotion. Both have total faith in the utterance that comes from such a state.

The Dionysus mystery cult had a similar phenomenon. E. R. Dodds describes this religion also.

*If I understand early Dionysiac ritual right, its social function was essentially cathartic, in the psychological sense: it purged the individual of those infectious irrational impulses which, when dammed up, had given rise, as they have done in other cultures, to outbreaks of dancing mania and similar manifestation or collective hysteria.*

He further states that Dionysus was essentially a god of joy and accessible to all of every class. He was the god:



*. . . who by very simple means, or by other means not so simple, enables you for a short time to stop being yourself, and thereby sets you free .... "Dionysus leads people on to behave madly"-which could mean anything from "letting yourself go" to becoming "possessed." The aim of his cult was ecstasis--which again could mean anything from "taking you out of yourself" to a profound alteration of personality.*

Notice the similarities between this pagan mystery cult and the experiences reported by the modern glossolalists. Both purge the individual of deep tensions within the personality. Both make the individual "stop being himself." Both lead people to irrational behavior. Both make profound alterations in personality.

The question that must be answered is this. In what way are the basic external manifestations of these ancient religions different from the external manifestations of those who practice glossolalia today? Another problem exists. If the Corinthians gift of "tongues" was no more than a repetition of a phenomenon found in paganism, there was nothing distinctive about it. If there was nothing distinctive about the gift of "tongues" when compared with the pagan cults at Corinth, then how could it be a sign to confirm the gospel message?

It is a mistake to try to read an irrational, subjective, psychological phenomenon into the reasonable objective and practical gift of speaking in tongues in the early church. If ecstatic utterances are read into the interpretation of I Corinthians 12-14, they would destroy the purpose of the miraculous gifts in the New Testament. What would be unique about Christians speaking in ecstatic utterances in Corinth when the same thing was going on in pagan cults in the city? If, however, the Christians at Corinth were speaking in other languages by a miraculous gift, this would be unique. This would be something that the mystery cults could not do.

There is nothing in the New Testament which demands that glossa "tongues" be understood as ecstatic utterance. One should not try to press such an interpretation -- against the weight of evidence to the contrary -- in order to try to give credibility to an experience they do not understand. Instead of trying to make the glossa gift of the New Testament conform to a present-day psychological phenomenon, accept it for what it really was -- a unique gift given to Christians in the early church to speak in languages which they had not learned.

Most contemporary glossolalists agree that their speech is language of a sort. James Ash writes, ". . . One of the marked characteristics of the modern movement is an emphatic denial that glossolalia is ecstatic in the sense of being emotionally induced." The question that must be answered is how can that contemporary phenomenon be distinguished from the ecstatic utterances common in paganism and world religions today?

The New Testament gift was language. If glossolalists today possess this same gift, it would be simple to identify it. Modern communication and transportation could

take tapes of glossolalia speech around the world to be examined by the greatest language experts.

A number of recent studies have been made of the glossolalia speech, but none indicate that the speech is "language" unknown to the speaker. If glossolalia speech is not foreign languages, let its advocates go outside the New Testament for their authority. It is not from God. Bob Cannon writes:

*Do those who claim this gift today have what the New Testament Christians had? If not, then they must look for other validation for their "experiences." The New Testament is not their authority.* Bob Cannon. Glossolalia (Privately Published tract). p. 24.