

AVOIDING THE CORINTHIAN PROBLEM

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The church at Corinth had its share of difficulties, and some erroneously think that spiritual gifts were the source of their trouble. The problem at Corinth was not the spiritual gifts. The problems at Corinth were rooted in a number of other dysfunctions that compromised the operation of spiritual gifts in the church. Paul's corrective words in 1 Corinthians helped to preserve the integrity of spiritual gifts in the church.

Relational Issues

Relationships in the Corinthian church were out of order. For a church to become an environment in which the spiritual gifts function properly, its members need to be functioning properly in relationship with one another.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was addressed to "the church of God in Corinth."¹ "Church of God" and "Corinth" were almost contradictory terms. Apart from the grace of God, to speak of the "church of God" *in* "Corinth" would have been unthinkable. Corinth was an "every man for himself" self-serving society, and traces of that culture had made its way into the church.

Yes, the Corinthian church had its problems, yet Paul affirmed who they were in Christ. He continues in verse two, writing, "To the church of God in Corinth, to those *sanctified* in Christ Jesus and *called to be holy*." He further blessed them and affirmed their giftedness, saying,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge.²

The "grace given" to them was that which enriched the Corinthian believers in their speaking and in their knowledge.

Paul's first reference to spiritual gifts in his first letter to the Corinthians is found in 1:7 where he said, "You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." The Apostle acknowledges the sufficiency of the spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church, but then to this very spiritual church, he offers correction.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:2.

² 1 Corinthians 1:3-5.

Not all was well at Corinth. There were divisions in the church. In 1:10, Paul wrote, "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."

Paul's call for agreement was not just a general preventative measure. It was a remedial measure, for a very real and specific division had taken place. In 1:11-12, he said, "Some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'" They took pride in their identification with certain teachers or leaders.

The Apostle then confronted their divisive attitude, saying in 1:13, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" The obvious answer is "no." Scholars have referred to this thing that was going on in Corinth as a "party spirit."

Then to this spiritually gifted church, Paul brought another word of correction. In 3:3, he said, "You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?"

Paul said, "Are you not acting like *mere men*?" In other words, he is saying, "Are you not acting like you are *just human*?" Our initial response as readers might be, "Well, of course they are *just human*!" After all, is it not true that the one acceptable and justifiable excuse for weakness that we all can use is the claim that we are "just human"? Not so. From Paul's point of view, believers are *not* just human. We are supposed to live like we are truly the righteous sons and daughters of God. Jealousy and quarreling should have no place among us.

Pride

Not only did the Corinthian believers take pride in their identification with certain teachers or leaders, but they also took pride in their intellectual abilities and their knowledge of philosophy. In 1:25-31, Paul confronted this intellectual pride, stating,

The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

In 2:1-5, he continued,

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except

Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Paul's ministry among the Corinthians was totally unimpressive by Greek standards. However, a demonstration of the Holy Spirit's power accompanied his preaching. The result was that the people were focused more on "God's power" than they were on "men's wisdom."

Pagan Influence

Starting with 1 Corinthians 12:1, Paul speaks of things that do not initially make sense to us twenty-first century readers, but they made perfect sense to the original recipients of the letter who lived in the context of a pagan society:

Now about spiritual gifts [spiritual matters or things], brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.³

Paul is speaking into a specific set of circumstances which we know little about, but the implication in this text is that some were resisting or objecting to supernatural manifestations. They were concerned about deception. In their former years of idolatry, they had become familiar with supernatural things driven by demonic forces. How could they be sure that these manifestations were truly God at work and not something else?

There are two important points for us to make here. First, spirits which are not of God will not exalt Jesus as Lord, and the Spirit which is of God will always exalt Jesus as Lord. Second, when a person is being moved by the Holy Spirit to speak prophetically, in tongues or in interpretation, he need not fear that he might say something that does not honor Christ. He will not say "Jesus is cursed," or anything like that, and the Holy Spirit speaking through him will always exalt Christ.

When we ask the Father to fill us with the Holy Spirit or to impart to us some gift of the Spirit, we are not to fear that we might get something that is not of God. Here we are reminded of Jesus' words in Luke 11:9-13:

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

³ 1 Corinthians 12:1-3.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, Paul goes a little further in his attempt to preclude error and to relieve concerns and fears rooted in past pagan experiences: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men." Of course, we take it for granted that there is only One Spirit behind these gifts, ministries, workings and manifestations, but to these Corinthians who had come out of a pagan environment motivated by a multitude of evil spirits, the emphasis on one Spirit was necessary.