

WHITE MEMORIAL

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

WMPC - Men's Bible Study

First Corinthians - Winter-Spring 2017

Lesson 7

Read 1 Corinthians 12

Three Sets of Questions:

Q1: Paul transitions from diagnosing and offering correction to the Corinthian church's distortion and perversion of the Lord's Supper in chapter 11, to broaching the subject of "spiritual gifts" in 12:1-11. Notice that he raises the subject in 12:1, but then delays directly addressing spiritual gifts until 12:4. What do you make of 12:2-3? How does reminding the congregation of their new identity serve Paul's larger aim in 12:1-11? (Remember: "Jesus is Lord" is a totalizing thesis; it is an identity-constituting confession that signals a fundamental allegiance. See, e.g., 1 Cor 8:4-6.)

Q2: How does Paul's view of spiritual gifts agree or disagree with notions of spiritual gifts that you're familiar with? What's the purpose of spiritual gifts within the church? Are some spiritual gifts more important than others? Given what we know of the Corinthians and the divisions within the community, why is it crucial that Paul emphasize that the common source of spiritual gifts is the Spirit? What, then, is *not* the source of the gifts?

Q3: Remember, as with other sections of the letter that begin with the phrase "now concerning" (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1), Paul is addressing an issue that the Corinthians have asked him about via a letter which they have written to him. In particular, what do you think the Corinthians have asked him about concerning "spiritual gifts?" Does 12:22-23 tip us off to a kind of spiritual superiority that's present in the community, thus contributing to the "quarrels among [them]" (1:11)? How does thinking of other believers as "members of Christ" shape and/or change the way you see them?

Three Insights:

I1: "Same Spirit...Same Lord [i.e., Christ]...same God" (12:4-6). Paul here employs a trinitarian formula to signify that the many different manifestations of spiritual gifts in the church all have their origin in one source. While Paul may not have had a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity, we see here that Paul *experienced* God as trinitarian. While "Trinity" may not be a biblical word, it is a biblical reality. Previous Archbishop of Canterbury and theologian Rowan Williams writes the following on the Church's involvement in the life of the Trinity as a result of its union with Christ through the Spirit:

To be in the Church is to be in the middle of that divine life, which Jesus uncovers for us—the outpouring and retrying and sharing, gift and response and renewed overflow of giving, the threefold rhythm of love, Father, Son, and Spirit. Those are the waves that surge around you as you try to live the life of discipleship, which is not the following of a distant figure in the past or simple obedience to a distant figure in the present, but participation in the rhythm that sustains the universe. When we think of life in the Church, perhaps we ought to think less in terms of signing up for a society and more in terms of swimming in an overwhelming current of divine loving activity. (*Tokens of Trust*, WJK [2007], 136)

I2: Is the church as the "body of Christ" a metaphor or a kind of mystical reality? While much ink has been spilled unpacking this question, Richard Hays thinks this is a false dichotomy:

Certainly "body of Christ" is a metaphor; just as certainly, Paul believes that this metaphor illumines the truth about the church's union with and participation with Christ. The church is not merely a human

organization; rather, it is brought into being by the activity of the Holy Spirit, which binds believers into a living union with the crucified and risen Lord. We should not be afraid to speak of such truths in metaphorical language, for there is no other way to speak of them adequately. (*First Corinthians*, WJK [1997], 213-14)

For other Pauline texts that develop or imply the body metaphor, see Romans 12; Ephesians 4; and less explicit but equally powerful, in Second Corinthians 8-9, 11.

I3: Paul makes two things exceedingly clear in chapter 12, two things which must be carefully balanced in the body of Christ. First, the church of Jesus Christ is a *charismatic* community. Second, the church of Jesus Christ is a charismatic *community* (Hays, 199-20). Thankfully (especially for we Presbyterians!), Paul doesn't limit the Holy Spirit's activity to manifestations we would refer to as "charismatic"—i.e., speaking in tongues and miraculous healings. But if we're taking Paul's vision for the church and the Holy Spirit's activity seriously, we must remain open to the possibility of such gifts emerging from within our midst. On the other hand, "charismatic" churches must take seriously Paul's insistence that manifestations of spiritual gifts are to be exercised for the benefit and upbuilding of the community (12:7) and *not* as demonstrations of one's own spiritual virtuosity. The analogy here is of a symphony composed of many musicians playing a variety of instruments. The musicians are playing different parts, but their respective parts combine together into a beautiful piece of music. Problems arise, however, when some musicians, feeling superior to others, feel the need to highlight or accentuate their part. But this can result in the whole symphony being out of balance or out of tune.

Links for Further Study:

L1: Brian Volck, "[A Nose Hair In The Body of Christ.](#)" However big or small, we all have a role in the body of Christ.

L2: Malcolm Guite is a contemporary English poet, priest, and singer-songwriter. (Check out his blog [here](#).) Here's a sonnet of his that is loosely derived from Paul's words in 1 Cor 12:13: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The poem is simply titled "Baptism":

Love's hidden thread has drawn us to the font,
A wide womb floating on the breath of God,
Feathered with seraph wings, lit with the swift
Lightening of praise, with thunder over-spread,
And under-girded with an unheard song,
Calling through water, fire, darkness, pain,
Calling us to the life for which we long,
Yearning to bring us to our birth again.
Again the breath of God is on the waters
In whose reflecting face our candles shine,
Again he draws from death the sons and daughters
For whom he bid the elements combine.
As living stones around a font today,
Rejoice with those who roll the stone away.

L3: First Corinthians 12 has inspired innumerable hymns. Here's a listing on [hymnary.org](#) with links to further explore each hymn.