3. The use of spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40)

This long section on spiritual gifts may be divided into several sections. The first emphasizes the source of the gifts, the Holy Spirit (12:1-11); the second the diversity of the gifts in their unity (12:12-31a); the third, the necessary ingredient of love in the exercise of all gifts (12:31b-13:13); the fourth, a discussion of the priority of prophecy over tongues with rules for the exercise of each (14:1-25); and finally, Paul teaches that all church worship must be done decently and in order (14:26-40).

a. The Holy Spirit, the source of spiritual gifts (12:1-11)

1 This section presents a new subject and an answer to another question asked by the Corinthian delegation (cf. peri de, “now about,” 1Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 16:1).

2-6 In saying that they had been “led astray to dumb idols,” Paul implies that the Corinthians had experienced the effects of evil spirits in their former pagan worship. In contrast, he now stresses the twofold test of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life. Negatively, no person by the Spirit can curse Jesus; and positively, only by the Spirit can a person openly testify that Jesus is Lord (v.3). The term kyrios (“Lord”) is used by LXX to translate Jehovah in the OT (cf. Matt 16:16; John 4:2, 3, 15). In this context Paul recognizes the deity of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit in the use of the phrases “Jesus is Lord” and “Spirit of God.” Anathema (translated “be cursed”) was, strictly speaking, something that was devoted to God and that could be thought of as given over to him with a view to its destruction. So it could be thought of as being “accursed” (cf. Josh 6:17, 18)—the meaning consistently used in the NT. (See Hodge and Grosheide, in loc.).

By using the words diakoniai (“servings”) and energemata (“workings”), Paul indicates that such gifts were useful in serving the Christian community (vv.5, 6). In vv.4-6 he teaches that the Trinity is involved in administration of these gifts: the Spirit; the Lord; God (cf. 2Cor 13:13 and Eph 4:3-6).


7-11 Paul goes on to declare that many spiritual gifts are given by the spirit for the total good or profit (sympheron) of his church. Different gifts are given different people—not all have the same gift (cf. 12:29, 30). The gifts given to each person are clearly intended to be used for the common good.

The gifts listed begin with the most important one—the ability to express the message of God’s wisdom in the gospel of Christ. The second is the ability to communicate with knowledge by the Spirit. “Knowledge” (gnosis) in the biblical sense is to be taken as the knowledge of God’s way of salvation through the cross, not the secret heretical gnostic teaching about working one’s way to heaven. Compare the esoteric use of “know” in the Gnostic Gospel According to Thomas, tr. A. Guillaumont et al. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959).

The gift of “faith” does not refer to the initial trust in Christ for salvation but to deeper expressions of faith, such as undergoing hardships, martyrdom, etc., and so pistis (“faith”) can in this case be rendered “faithfulness.” Others view faith here as exemplified in gifts of healing, tongues, etc. But this does not seem to be in view, since Paul speaks of these gifts in vv.9, 10.

The next two gifts—the outwardly demonstrable ones of Healings and miracles—belong together and were particularly applicable to the ministry of Paul and the other apostles (Acts 19:11, 12; 28:7-9; 2Cor 12:12). Dynameis means literally “acts of power” (cf. Acts 1:8), which here and in 12:28, 29 specifically means miracles. The mention of the gift of prophecy anticipates 1 Corinthians 14 and seems to include an ability to give insights into, and to convey the deeper meanings of, God’s redemptive program in his Word. It is to be distinguished from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2Tim 3:16) given the apostles and their associates to prophesy in setting forth God’s truth. Paul separates the apostles’ office from that of prophets in 12:28, where the prophetic office is listed between that of the apostles and the teachers and did not
include in it, in this period of church development, the miracle-working function listed separately in 12:29. The latter function was often included in the earlier practice of the prophetic office (cf. John the Baptist, Christ, and his apostles). See a specific treatment of this point in W. Harold Mare, “Prophet and Teacher in the New Testament Period,” JETS, vol.9, no.3 (Summer 1966), pp. 146–148.

By the gift of distinguishing between spirits (v.10b), Paul must be indicating a distinct ability beyond that which the apostle John calls on Christians in general to exercise (1John 4:1). The ability to speak in different kinds of tongues has been taken to mean speaking in ecstatic, humanly unintelligible utterances, possibly similar to the ecstatic speech exhibited in pagan Greek Dionysiac expressions. In the light of Acts 2:4ff., where it is said that the Holy Spirit gave them ability to speak with different kinds of language, i.e., known foreign languages (Acts 2:7-11), we are safe to say that the ability mentioned here in 1Cor 12:10 is the ability to speak unlearned languages. LSJ does not list under glossa any meaning under the category of ecstatic speech. Rather, the emphasis of the word is “language,” “dialect,” “foreign” language.

There have been differences adduced, differences that can be shown not to be basic, between the tongues-speaking at Pentecost in Acts 2 and that in 1 Corinthians 12-14. The following supposed differences were proposed by J. Oswald Sanders (quoted by David M. Howard in By the Power of the Holy Spirit [Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973], pp. 115, 116):

1. At Pentecost the disciples spoke to men (Acts 2:6) but at Corinth the speaking was to God (1Cor 14:2, 9). Reply: In Corinth, though the speaking in tongues was to God, it was also a speaking to men when there was speaking in the church service with someone to interpret (1Cor 14:26, 27).

2. At Pentecost tongues were a sign or credential to believers but at Corinth to unbelievers (1Cor 14:22). Reply: At Pentecost at the time when the people heard the tongues they were unbelievers (Acts 2:12, 13); it was only when they heard the message in Peter’s sermon that many of them believed (Acts 2:41).

3. At Pentecost the unbelievers were filled with awe and marvelled (Acts 2:7, 8), but at Corinth the unbelievers thought the Christians were mad (1Cor 14:23). Reply: In Acts 2 the unbelievers also were bewildered (v.6); they were amazed and perplexed (v.12), and some even thought the believers were intoxicated and they made fun of them (v.13).

4. At Pentecost there was harmony (Acts 2:1), at Corinth confusion (1Cor 14:23). Reply: This contrast must not be pressed to imply a difference in the nature of the tongues spoken; it only reveals the generally disorderly conduct of the Corinthian congregation seen in their party spirit (1:10-17) and in their reprehensible conduct at the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34).

The foregoing points of Sanders do not prove a genuine difference in the nature of tongues between Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12-14. The only concrete evidence we have as to the nature of the tongues-speaking in the early church is to be found in the only clear scriptural example we have—that given in Acts 2 where the speaking is a speaking in foreign languages that were to be understood, and were understood. Since in this initial instance in Acts 2 the speaking in foreign tongues was done by the apostles and their close companions, it is logical to conclude that as the apostles were involved in the subsequent scriptural examples of tongues-speaking (Acts 10:44-46; 19:1-7; 1Cor 12-14), in these situations also speaking in tongues is to be understood as speaking in a foreign language.

In 1Cor 12:10d Paul hastens to add that such speaking in tongues should be accompanied by interpretation or translation by someone with that ability. This subject is expanded in 1 Corinthians 14. (Also see my article “Guiding Principles for Historical Grammatical Exegesis,” in Grace Journal, vol.14, no. 3 [Fall, 1973], p. 14.) That Paul is simply giving a sampling of gifts is evident from his expansion of the list in 12:27-30 and Romans 12:3-8.

Paul concludes that regardless of what spiritual gift each person has, the Holy Spirit has sovereignly distributed them to produce his own spiritual results (v.11). Therefore, no one should despise another person’s gift, a gift given by the Spirit for the good of all (v.7). This theme the apostle develops in vv.12-26. The Spirit mentioned here is set forth as one who is sovereignly God (he wills to give the gifts) and personally active (he “works” all these gifts in the lives of his people).

b. Unity in the diversity of gifts in the body of Christ (12:12-26)

Paul now illustrates the diversity and unity of the spiritual gifts by the example of the human body. It is made up of many parts, all of them of importance, and yet the whole body functions as a unit. By the words “So it is with Christ,” he means so it is with Christ’s body, the church. That the church, the invisible church, is an organic whole is seen in that every believer, regardless of racial and religious connection (Jew or Greek) or social standing (slave or freeman), has been united by the one Spirit into one spiritual body in baptism. The figure is now reversed—all the believers have drunk one Spirit; that is, each one has received the same Holy Spirit (cf. 1Cor 6:19; Eph 5:18-20). Some have taken these thoughts as references
to the Christian sacraments—water baptism and Holy Communion. But since there is no imagery of the cup, as in 1 Corinthians 11:25, it is doubtful that this is Paul’s primary intent. Rather, he is emphasizing spiritual baptism, and the communion of spiritual food and drink (cf. Rom 6:4; 1Cor 10:3, 4). It is not the local church alone Paul is speaking of here, but the church universal. This drinking of the Spirit is seen in Jesus’ invitation in John 7:37-39.

14-20 Paul now emphasizes the necessity of having diversity in a body for it to operate as one. Each part (such as the eye or the ear) must be willing to perform its own function and not seek to function in a role for which it was not made. The whole body cannot be a single part, or it would not be a functioning body. So it is with the church. Members with one gift should not repudiate that gift and complain that they do not have some other gift. The apostles were to function as apostles, the elders as elders (1Pet 5:5), the deacons as deacons (Acts 6:1-6), etc.

The logic of v.17 is compelling: no body can function as all eye, all hearing, or all smelling. So for the church to function properly, it must have different gifts and offices. In vv.18-20 Paul brings the believers back to the sovereign purposes of God. It is God who has organized the body in the way he wants it. The implication is that it is the same with the church; according to God’s will, it is composed of many parts, so that it may function as one body—the body of Christ.

21-26 Here the emphasis is on the mutual dependence and concern of the various members of the body. As the organs of the human body—such as the eye, hand, head, and feet—need each other, so the members of the church with their various functions need each other. Moreover, the least attractive and inconspicuous parts of the body are important and should be treated with respect (vv.22, 23). So also the inconspicuous members of the church are essential—those who pray, those who work with their hands and bring their meager tithes into the church, etc. As the humbler parts of the body are given special attention by covering them with appropriate clothing and, as in the case of the digestive organs, providing them with food, so the inconspicuous members of the church—the poor, the despised, the less prominent—are to be cherished and nurtured.

The alla (“but”) in the middle of v.24 brings the argument back to God’s sovereign purposes. He has brought the members of the body together in perfect harmony. By saying that God “has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it,” Paul means that through implanting modesty and self-respect in our hearts, God has caused us to protect our unpresentable parts (as the sex organs) from exploitation by properly covering them. All this concern for the body is for the purpose of enabling it to operate in unity, so all its parts will mutually respond to each other’s needs—e.g., the brain sending nerve signals to the hand. In using the word schisma (“schism,” “division”) in v.25 Paul reminds the Corinthians of the discussion in 1:10-17. As it is with the body, so with the church (v.26). What happens to one part affects the well-being of the whole.

c. Offices and gifts in the one body of Christ, his church (12:27-31)

As he speaks about that spiritual unity of the body of Christ, Paul declares that each Christian has his function as a part of that body. He illustrates this by a selective list of church offices and spiritual gifts (cf. Rom 12:3-8; Eph 4:11).

27 Some have thought that soma without the article to (“the”) refers to the local congregation and is to be translated “a body [of Christ]” (Grosheide). But the genitive form “of Christ” (without the article) used with the word “body” (also without the article) makes the whole phrase specific: “the body of Christ.” Therefore, the entire Christian church is in mind. Observe also the plural “apostles,” indicating a wider reference than to Corinth alone.

28 Paul is saying that it is the sovereign God who dispenses (etheto; cf. Acts 20:28; 1Tim 1:12; 2:7; 2Tim 1:11) offices and gifts to his church. The order of the gifts is instructive. The first three—apostles, prophets, and teachers—are in the same order as in Ephesians 4:11 (cf. Rom 12:6, 7) and, as placed first, are to be considered of greatest importance. The next gifts are set off from the first three by epeita (“then”) and range in order from miracles to the ability to speak in different kinds of tongues, which, being mentioned last, seem to be of least importance. The office of apostle was all-encompassing, including the gifts of prophecy, teaching, miracles, and the rest. But the prophetic gift (cf. Acts 11:24; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10) did not include apostolicity, though it did include teaching. The teacher class did not compare, per se, with that of apostles or prophets. Paul speaks of the first three—apostles, prophets, and teachers—as classes of persons ruling in the church. The rest of the list includes gifts given various members of the church—gifts that, while of lesser significance, are yet of importance.
Those having the gift of antilempsis ("those able to help others," NIV) are persons gifted in helping the church officers deal with the poor and sick. Those with kybernesis ("administration") have ability to govern and manage affairs in the church.

29, 30 By these rhetorical questions, all of which imply "no" for an answer, Paul stresses the principle of divine selectivity. He is saying that not all believers function in each of the ways listed. God selects individuals and gives them their specific gifts (v.28). Paul ends v.30 with the gift of interpretation of tongues, because he is to comment on this in chapter 14. As in v.28, so in v.30, "tongues" comes last in his list.