

The Spirituals

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

When you hear the term *body building*, what do you think of? These days, many people think of the *sport* of body building. This body building concentrates on developing all the muscles of the body. People build their muscles so they're huge and bulge all over the place when you flex them the right way. They have *body building competitions*. They get on a stage before a panel of judges and a paying audience and flex their muscles. The audience goes *oooh* and *aaah* and wishes their own bodies looked that impressive. That's the rather showy form of body building.

There's another form of body building – although people don't often use that phrase to describe it. It's much more common in our society – yet still not as common as the health professionals would like. Rather than the sport of body building, it's the body building of sport or exercise. It's practised by:

- Those who jog in their lunch hour.
- Those who power walk in the mornings.
- Those who eat the right foods – stuff you only buy in health food shops for five times the normal price.
- Those who attend exercise classes and aerobics.

They seek to build up their bodies in the sense of having fit and healthy bodies – bodies that will work and keep going. They're concerned about cholesterol levels. They avoid junk foods. They want to reduce their waist-lines.

Two types of body building:

- One's flashy and showy. It's fairly impressive. Its results are mainly external.

- The other's more subdued – not as impressive, but far more beneficial.

Paul speaks about body building in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 – but it's not building up our physical bodies; rather, it's building the spiritual body of the church. He contrasts:

- the flashy and external and dramatic way the Corinthians go about the task; and
- the more subdued and internal way Paul tells them.

About the Spirituals

Paul starts a new topic in chapter 12. He gets to the next question the Corinthians ask. They wrote Paul a letter. They raised certain questions. Paul's answering them.

- In chapter 7, he deals with a question on marriage.
- In chapters 8-10, it's a question about food sacrificed to idols.
- In chapter 11, there's stuff about head coverings and their conduct at communion – though it's not clear if these are extra questions they asked or if Paul's still dealing with the issue of Christian freedom.
- In chapters 12-14, it's a question about spirituality.

It's another topic they raise – though the exact question they ask isn't clear to us today.

I want to stress at the outset that Paul takes three chapters to deal with this topic. Chapters 12 to 14 belong together, including chapter 13 – which people often treat without reference to the two chapters either side. We'll take several weeks cover them – so you may be tempted to forget they form one overall unit.

But what's the unit about? The NIV starts:

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers ...

The ESV is much the same. But what the Greek says is:

Now about the spirituals, brothers ...

The Greek uses a plural adjective without any noun. So, in translating it into English, it's right to supply a noun. Simply to leave it:

Now about the spirituals, brothers ...

doesn't really flow properly in English. The question is: which noun do we supply? Many use the noun *gifts* – as in the NIV and ESV. Spiritual gifts are a big part of what Paul writes in these chapters. No one doubts. So you can make a good case that the noun *gifts* should be supplied here. But the word in verse 1 isn't the word Paul uses for *spiritual gifts* later in the passage. It's a different word. So we need to be open to the possibility that he actually may mean something different by it.

We could translate the verse:

Now concerning spiritual things, brothers ...

That leaves it reasonably vague at the start, and you fill in the content as you read on in the passage. From that content, you may still want to say it's about spiritual gifts – or you may recognise that, while Paul says a lot about spiritual gifts, these chapters actually deal with spiritual things in a way that's not confined to spiritual gifts.

We could also translate:

Now about the spiritual people, brothers ...

The Corinthians may have asked Paul about a certain group in their church who took the title *spiritual* and applied it to themselves. Or perhaps others in the church applied that title to them because of the way they thought about those people or the way those people acted. The way they used their spiritual gifts, or the sorts of spiritual gifts they had, may well have been a big part of what's

going on – but Paul doesn't think that the only spiritual issue involved.

All that's to say: I don't think it's helpful to see these three chapters as only being about issues of *spiritual gifts*. That's a big part of what Paul says – and an important part. But I think the overall subject is broader than that. I think Paul deals with general issues of spirituality. How people use spiritual gifts is one example of where you can see their underlying spirituality – or where you can see their lack of underlying spirituality.

- What is true spirituality?
- How do you tell who the truly spiritual people are?

These are the issues. We're back to the same underlying issues of chapters 1 and 2.

The Corinthians' View of Spirituality

For what's the Corinthians' view of spirituality? How did they determine the more spiritual amongst them? What's their pecking order of who's advanced furthest into the realms of the spiritual?

Some at least – maybe even a majority – seem to place the emphasis on what may be called *impressive* spiritual gifts – gifts that smack of the supernatural in a fairly obvious way. It seems they especially focused on the gift of tongues. When someone got up and spoke in tongues, they thought that showed evidence of the person's spirituality. These strange sounds seemed supernatural. They took it as physical evidence that this person was spiritual. It looked like there was spiritual reality in their life. Was that the right focus? Is that the real measure of spirituality? To go back to the early chapters: does that demonstrate the power and wisdom of the cross?

We still face this issue today. How do you tell if a person is spiritual or not? How do you tell if you're progressing in spiritual things? There's always the temptation to measure spirituality in terms of what's outwardly impressive and spectacular – even miraculous. And so

- If someone comes with marvellous ecstatic utterances, we automatically think them spiritual.
- If someone comes performing marvellous instances of healing, we think them spiritual.
- If someone has the ability to move mountains, we think they must be spiritual

We're impressed by the unusual. Our culture gives a certain mystified respect to those who can do things that have no scientific explanation. We see the unusual and think this person has authority in the spiritual realm. And we adopt this value-system into the church.

The reality is that not everything in the world that appears miraculous is from God. Both good and evil beings inhabit the spirit world. Some wonders performed by evil spirit beings are fairly impressive. Papua New Guinea's full of stories of supernatural things done by those in contact with the spirits. Many of those stories are true. Yet, the people doing those things aren't Christian. They don't acknowledge the true God. They've made no progress in Christian spirituality.

The Corinthians also knew people like that outside the church. They had their fair share of false religions in Corinth – and some who were part of those religions displayed supernatural wonders. Outside the church, such people were given respect and honour because of their *obvious* spirituality. The Corinthian Christians adopted

that worldly way of evaluating things and used it to judge spirituality in the church. I think that's a significant part of the issue Paul deals with in these chapters.

The Basic Foundation

Paul begins with the basic foundation in verses 2 and 3. In effect, he says: OK, you want to know about spirituality. Well, the first thing you must realise is that true spirituality centres on the Lordship of Jesus. That's absolutely crucial and central and foundational. True spirituality maintains the Lordship of Jesus.

Does it mean as long as I can get the words "Jesus is Lord" out that I'm OK? I don't think so. Anyone can say the words. If I got the current year 12 in from Denison College and simply asked them to say the words: "Jesus is Lord" – do you think any of them wouldn't be able to manage it? Would that mean they're all Christians or they're all suddenly converted?

Or what of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!"

These three words aren't some magical formula whereby everyone who manages to say them automatically gains entry into heaven.

These people have the right terminology. They call Jesus "Lord". They even think they have impressive evidences

of true spirituality – prophesying, driving out demons, doing miracles. Those things would impress the Corinthians. But they hadn't even got to first base – for their lives didn't acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus. The way they lived betrayed their lack of true spirituality.

Yet, having said that, the basic test remains. Who are the spiritual people? Who are the ones who have the Spirit of God within them? The test focuses on Jesus. Your attitude to Jesus determines whether you're spiritual.

- Those willing to acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and submit to His rule – they're the Christians; they are the spiritual ones; they have the Spirit of God.
- Those not willing to acknowledge Jesus as Lord – they're the non-Christians; they're unspiritual; they don't have the Spirit of God.

Being spiritual involves acknowledging Jesus as Lord.

It's a question of allegiance. Who has your loyalty? For these people in Corinth, there were competing gods and idols. Before they became Christians, they gave their allegiance to those other gods. Then they became Christians. Their allegiance changed. They turned from false gods and acknowledged Jesus as their ultimate boss. That's when they became truly spiritual people.

We face that same question of allegiance today. Sure, we don't have the various pagan temples with their false gods and idols clamouring for our attention. Yet, there's much in our culture that demands the ultimate allegiance only Jesus should have – money, power, work, family, leisure, popularity. Those things aren't wrong in themselves – but if they're given the allegiance that should be given to Jesus, then they become false gods and idols in our lives.

The test of spirituality isn't the ability to be involved in or to perform the supernatural. False prophets and total pagans may also do that. The test is whether the person maintains allegiance to Jesus – especially in the face of a hostile world. Where Jesus is honoured as Lord, there is the ministry of God's Spirit.

Ultimately, I think that's the only test. We never really progress beyond that. It isn't as if you can make Jesus Lord – sort of master that step – and then move to step two on the ladder of spirituality. There is no step two. There is no ladder. There's only the Lordship of Jesus. But that's probably to move beyond Paul's point here.

The Place of God's Gifts

Having reminded them of that foundation, Paul then discusses a matter that seems important in their evaluation of spirituality – the matter of spiritual gifts. There are several important points in verses 4 to 11.

First, there's a great variety of gifts. Paul mentions nine in these verses – but they aren't the only nine. As you probably know, other passages in the New Testament mention other gifts – Romans 12; Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4. 1 Corinthians 7 mentions the gifts of marriage and singleness. Even all those lists together don't exhaust the possibilities of the various gifts. There's a great diversity in the way the Spirit can manifest Himself in a person's life. Speaking in tongues, for example, isn't the only way or the most important way.

And that's the point, isn't it? All these things are gifts from God. All of them show God's work in a person's

life. Can we then turn round and say there's some pecking order of spirituality associated with these gifts? Does having the gift of miracles make me more spiritual than someone who only has the gift of helps? No. Does having an obviously supernatural gift make me more spiritual than someone whose gift seems less supernatural? No. All the gifts are equally God's gifts.

Now, Paul does later appear to rank the gifts. But that ranking's done on the basis of the usefulness of the gifts for the church and her ministry both to her members and in the world. It's not a ranking that indicates different levels of spirituality among her members.

Secondly, in all this variety and diversity of gifts, it's one and the same God who's at work. There's that remarkable Trinitarian statement in verses 4 to 6. God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – all three persons of the Trinity are unified in this gifting of God's people.

There are three different words used in verses 4-6:

- *gifts*;
- *service*; and
- *activities*.

There are differences in the meanings and nuances of these words. But overall they highlight the broad way in which Paul thinks of God's gifts. There's a great range of manifestations that come from God – some seemingly supernatural, some seemingly not so supernatural; some fairly spectacular, some not so spectacular; some dramatic, some not dramatic at all.

I don't think too much should be made of the differences envisaged by these three words. In particular, I don't

think we should take it to the point where we say:

Well, I have a manifestation of service, so that must come from Jesus rather than the Father or the Spirit.

That would contradict the point Paul makes: that the Triune God is united in giving great diversity of gifts or manifestations to His people. Father, Son and Spirit work together.

You often hear the term *gifts of the Spirit*. In some ways, it's a misnomer – especially if you emphasise the word *Spirit* to imply the gifts come from that member of the Trinity alone. This passage says the gifts come from the Triune God. Thus, it would be equally appropriate to call them the *gifts of the Father* or the *gifts of Jesus*. Why has the church singled out one member of the Trinity in relation to the gifts. Certainly, verse 7 refers to *the manifestation of the Spirit*. – and perhaps that's a significant part of the rationale. But we should remember the overall context refers to them as gifts of the Triune God.

Thirdly, note the brief comment at the end of verse 7 that speaks of the purpose of these gifts.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

They aren't given as signs of spirituality. They aren't given for personal self-glorification. They aren't given to build up the pride of the recipient. They aren't given for personal satisfaction. They aren't given to determine the pecking order in heaven or the church.

They're given for the *common good*: for the benefit of others. That is, the focus isn't on the one with the gift but on how the gift may be used for the good of others. It's the same emphasis as the previous chapters. In Jesus, we

have great freedom. How's that freedom to be used?

- Is it to be used to demand my own rights and serve myself?
- Or is it to be used to serve others?

It's exactly the same with these spiritual gifts. They aren't particularly given for the various whims of the person receiving them – they're given to enable that person to effectively serve others. That underlies much of what Paul says in these chapters.

Now, that doesn't mean they have absolutely no personal benefit or they should never be used for personal benefit. In these chapters Paul speaks of the private use of the gift of tongues where there's no apparent direct benefit to anyone else. So it's not necessarily sinful to personally benefit from these gifts. But that's not their primary focus. The primary focus is to help others – to follow Jesus' example who came to serve, not to be served.

Fourthly, these gifts are given as God determines (verse 11). It's up to Him. I think we are permitted to request certain gifts. In 12:31, Paul writes:

But eagerly desire the greater gifts.

Again in 14:1

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

Those verses are probably addressed at a church level rather than an individual level – yet, they do seem to allow the possibility of praying for specific gifts.

Even then, such praying must remain in the context of God's sovereignty. He knows what's best for us. He distributes His gifts according to His purposes and His plans. It's not in response to whether we deserve certain gifts or

whether we attain a certain level of spiritual maturity or even if we'll use the gifts properly. It's clear these Corinthians received gifts even though they're immature and tending to use them in wrong ways.

Conclusion

In concluding, let me use myself as an example. As your pastor, presumably I have certain gifts associated with my pastoral ministry. If we sat down together, we may even be able to come up with an agreed list of exactly what those gifts are. Let's ask two questions.

- Was I given those gifts because I'm more spiritual? No – they're simply the gifts that God, in His sovereignty, gave me. I didn't get them because I was more spiritual. Actually getting them didn't make me more spiritual. They're simply God's gifts.
- Does my exercise of those gifts as pastor make me more spiritual than others in the congregation? No – for I can use those gifts in a spiritual way, just as I can use them in an unspiritual way. The use of the gifts in themselves doesn't make me more or less spiritual.

The issue comes back to the Lordship of Jesus. Do I use the gifts God gives me in a way that's consistent with truly serving Jesus? That's the issue. In relation to that issue, the identity of the gifts is irrelevant. They don't contribute one way or the other to my supposed spirituality. That doesn't mean they aren't important – they're still God's gifts given for God's purposes. They are important. But they don't define a person's spirituality. They aren't the test. But that's to anticipate some of the things Paul says in the coming verses.