

1 Corinthians 12:1–3

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Now concerning spiritual gifts, my brethren, I would not have you ignorant. Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.

Three Chapters — Power, Love, and a Sound Mind

Mr. Kelly, in his paper on the action of the Holy Spirit in the assembly, remarks with pointed irony that the Holy Spirit expects you to have read chapters 12 and 13 before coming to chapter 14. There is a reason for that. Take something out of context and it becomes a pretext. These three chapters form a series, and someone once likened them to the verse in 2 Timothy 1:7 — the Spirit of power, of love, and of a sound mind. Chapter 12 is the Spirit of power. Chapter 13 is love. And the sound mind is just what the Corinthians were not displaying in the assembly, as chapter 14 makes plain — for the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets, and there is such a thing as self-control in connection with the gift.

Not Spiritual Gifts — Spirituals

The opening of verse 1 deserves attention. The word *gifts* is in italics in the Authorised Version, and Darby places *manifestations* in brackets — for the Greek word is simply *spirituals*, and there is no exact English equivalent. The term is left deliberately broad: spiritual manifestations. These can flow from demonic power, or they can be operations of the Spirit of God. The apostle has a reason for this breadth, because he is about to speak of speaking not by the Spirit of God but by another spirit — and has already spoken at length about demon power and idolatry in the preceding chapters.

Spiritual manifestations are a sanctifying thing — they set people apart. Idolatry sets its devotees apart; an evil spirit makes a separated class of those under its influence. In either case the separation is real and significant. Men love distinctions, and there are countless trivial ways of being set apart — by race, ancestry, nationality, education, locality, or even the sports team one follows. All of those things are more or less of small consequence. But spiritual manifestations that set people apart are of very great significance. That is part of what makes 1 Corinthians 12 so important.

Four Sections of 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 1:30 reads: *But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.* Four significant things: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. One way to read 1 Corinthians is to trace each of those four themes across four sections of the epistle. Chapter 12 belongs to the section on sanctification — just as chapter 5 belongs to the section on righteousness, and chapter 15 belongs to that on the redemption of the body.

The Significance of a Spiritual Manifestation

James Randi, the sleight-of-hand practitioner, once had his organisation post a standing prize of one million dollars for anyone who could demonstrate paranormal behaviour. He was looking — precisely — for a spiritual manifestation. He did not believe one existed; he wanted it demonstrated so as to disprove it. But the very fact that he invested such effort in it shows that any genuine manifestation of something beyond human reason remains highly significant in the minds of men, even of sceptics. If that is so in the natural mind, how much more ought the spiritual manifestations of the Spirit of God matter to us.

Dumb Idols — and the Powers Behind Them

Verse 2 is almost patronising in its language: *ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led*. There is their spiritual manifestation. They had a lump of rock, a piece of carved wood or stone, and when they stood before it — it said absolutely nothing. That was what they were looking for in a spiritual manifestation. The religious fervour of the flesh invests such dumb idols with a seeming significance and power — but it is all false. In Elijah's day they could not stand. Elijah mocked them, and was entirely entitled to.

Yet behind the idolatry, there are spiritual forces. As the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 10:20: *the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God*. Those of the nations are led away to such things. Note the word: led. Passively carried along, finding fertile ground in their minds, but under the direction of something external to themselves.

Darby's translation gives a somewhat different and illuminating sense to the close of verse 2: *in whatever way you might be led*, rather than simply *even as ye were led*. This supposes that there is a spiritual power there capable of changing tactics — adjusting its method of leading when one approach did not work, trying

another. The intelligence behind that kind of work is real. It is, in effect, the point made in chapter 10: these are not mere lumps of stone — there are demons behind the idols. And demons are not simple.

The Man with the Legion

The contrast with the operations of the Spirit of God is illustrated in the Gospels. When the Lord met the man who had a legion of evil spirits, and cast them out, the man was found afterwards seated, clothed, and in his right mind — a three-fold change that addresses the three-fold ruin of the demonic state he had been in. Untameable, running naked through the tombs, he could not be controlled. But the work of the Spirit of God in the soul always produces calmness, order, and the exaltation of Christ. That is the very point being pressed in contrast to what the Corinthians had been used to at the heathen shrines.

No Man Saying 'Curse on Jesus' by the Spirit

Verse 3 gives two tests. First: no man speaking in the power of the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed. That is not how the Spirit operates. He would never be the source of such words about the Lord Jesus. The demonic powers that the Corinthians had formerly been subject to could produce just such an utterance, and it would carry with it the force of the spirit behind it — not an empty word, but an expression of that spirit's attitude toward Christ.

The second test is the positive one: no man can say *Lord Jesus* but by the Holy Ghost. This is not a matter of repeating words — one could be asked to say the words and repeat them without difficulty. The verse speaks of the source and the owning of it. To say *Lord Jesus* in the sense the verse intends is to confess His person, to own Him as such. And the flesh never genuinely confesses His person. The flesh may, under the goading of a demonic power, say curse on Jesus — but it cannot, in the power of the Spirit, genuinely say Lord Jesus.

Lord Jesus — Confession and Affection

Romans 10:9-10 carries the same thought: *If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.* That is not a form recited by rote — it is a divine reality worked in the soul by the Spirit of God. Thomas gives us a scriptural example of precisely what verse 3 means: *My Lord and my God.* That was the confession of His person.

Philippians tells us that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But that coming universal confession will in many cases be by compulsion — not by the Spirit of God. The distinction is important. Darby notes that the expression *Lord Jesus* — the order in which the name is placed — is the one associated with affection for Him. That is different from owning His full title and place in *Lord Jesus Christ*. When Stephen said, *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*, there was something tender and personal in that. When the book of Revelation closes with *Even so, come, Lord Jesus*, it is the language of longing and love.

There is a note in 2 Thessalonians 2 where it says the Lord Jesus will consume the Antichrist with the breath of His mouth. It is the Lord Jesus who does that — because the Antichrist is the thief of those very affections that belong to Christ. The title used carries the mark of the injury done. And as the hymn expresses it: every tongue shall confess Jesus the Lord of all — but *O, Thy grace has taught us now before that day to bow*. We bow now, in advance, by the Spirit — and that sets us apart with a distinction that is real and lasting.

One Spirit, Not Many

The chapter closes its opening movement with a contrast to what has gone before. There were dumb idols in the plural. Behind those idols there was a plurality of spiritual powers — demons, many of them, as the man with the

legion makes vivid. And in idolatry there were many centres of worship, scattered everywhere. But that cannot be for the manifestation of God in the midst of His people. In the Old Testament, in due time, God established one place where He was to be worshipped — not many. That one place was expressive of the unity of God Himself.

So now in verses 4–6, the Spirit brings before us the three divine persons, and the unity that underlies everything: one Spirit, one Lord, one God. There are distinctions of gifts — but the same Spirit. There are distinctions of services — but the same Lord. There are distinctions of operations — but the same God who operates all in all. This is not a plurality of spirits or a multiplicity of divine powers. Christianity has nothing to do with that. It is one God, manifested in three persons, undergirding and accounting for everything that is done in and through the body of Christ.

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