

“Competition, Cooperation, Contribution, and the Common Good”
1 Corinthians 12:1-11 Study Notes
January 17, 2010

Gifts Can Create Competition

Have you ever been part of a church or Christian group that always seemed to be fighting? Where disagreements were at the center of many gatherings? Where disagreements weren't over doctrinal points but over who did what, who wanted to do what, and which areas of service were "better" or "more important"?

If so, you're not alone--the early church struggled with this same problem of valuing each person and each way of service as unique and valuable for its own sake.

Many churches (and Christians) overvalue the gifts of those who serve in public worship, especially those who serve in teaching or leading worship. This is understandable, due to the attention and focus we place on our public worship. I've been told before by well-meaning believers that they wished they could teach or preach and really add value to our common worship. I've also seen different men push to lead worship or teach because of the perceived importance they received when seen using these gifts.

Both these perspectives are wrong. The first attitude overvalues one way of serving and undervalues that person's own unique way of serving that God has given to them. The second attitude is wrong because it focuses on pride and overvalues some gifts at the expense of others. It's the kind of thing the Corinthian Christians were arguing over that caused Paul to correct them in his first letter to them. They competed with each other to see who could acquire the better, more spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy (as they perceived them). Their competition was wrong, and made the church look bad in front of unbelievers.

Gifts are Ways of Serving and Working

In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, which is the beginning of a long section of teaching running through the end of chapter 14, Paul begins his teaching about spiritual gifts, their purpose, and how they should be used.

Spiritual gifts are given by God for the common good (12:7). Spiritual gifts ensure that the community is taken care of (1 Cor. 12:11-12) and God is worshiped in order and peaceably (1 Cor. 14:33). The guiding gift is love, and love for others should be our main aim in serving with our gift.

Spiritual gifts aren't just about "abilities" or "talents," either. In fact, the word "gift" doesn't appear in Greek until 12:4, even though many translations put in 12:1--"Now about the gifts of the Spirit..." (TNIV). In fact, "gifts" might better be understood as modes of working or serving instead of "abilities" or "talents."

Gifts are Manifestations of the Spirit

Paul offers a breakdown along these lines in 12:4-6, where he mentions different kinds of gifts, service, and working. He probably doesn't intend for these to be identified as three different things, because he links each one with a member of the Godhead: the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God are behind all three. They are simply three ways of communicating the same thing--God is active in his church, gracing people with the resources they need to build up the church and function as one body--the body of Christ (which also happens to be the point of his teaching in 12:12-31).

A better way to understand what Paul means by this terminology is to look at how Paul communicates this in 12:7--he calls these things "manifestations of the Spirit." And they're given for the common good. He summarizes his teaching in 12:11 this way: "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines."

So these manifestations are given, not by our ability to learn and grow and acquire, but by the Spirit, as he decides. He does this for the common good.

Gifts are Given for the Common Good

Isn't that interesting? Your ability to serve in an area, or your interest in a particular work, is given to you by the Spirit so you can contribute to the common good.

The different kinds of manifestations are not as important as the manifester and his purpose. It's this lesson--not a lesson about what type of gifts we have or which gifts even exist--that the Corinthian Christians and contemporary Christians need to learn.

The Corinthians were competing with each other. They thought that competition for the "more spiritual" gifts, and the pride that resulted from such competition, was a good thing. This is why Paul interrupts his teaching to discuss love (see 13:1; 14:12). Without love, the practice of spiritual manifestations is empty and does no good.

We are not supposed to compete for the common good, but to cooperate together as one body for Christ's benefit, and to contribute to the common good by serving or working in whatever place the Spirit has placed us. The Spirit gives us ways of serving and working and we simply need to be obedient. This is how we work for the common good, and the result is that everyone is served, the church is built up, and Christ is honored and glorified.

How do we know whether we're cooperating for or contributing to the common good, rather than competing for it? By our ability to look within ourselves and assure others that we are honoring Jesus. This is what Paul means when he says, "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" (12:3). If your work or service is causing division and competition and is tearing people apart, you are not operating under the Lordship of Jesus.