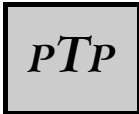


*The Action of
the Holy Spirit
in the
Assembly*

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The Action of the Holy Spirit in the Assembly

(1 Cor. 12)

The subject of which the apostle treats in this chapter, as an exposition of the principle (which is continued in the next chapter, where we have the spring of power, and in the one after, where we have the practice) was one most deeply needed at that time by the Corinthian saints, and not at all less now. For there is no greater forgetfulness of any part of the truth of God among Christians, than as to their great need of the Holy Ghost on the one hand, and as to God's great gift of Him on the other. Indeed, it is bound up with all the distinctive blessing of the church. Not that these chapters contain all, not that they exhaust every side of the blessing; for we have here the church more particularly viewed as the scene of God's power, not so much as the object of Christ's affection. For the latter we must look into Ephesians. But here we have the truth of the church (not the individual) viewed as that to which God had given the Spirit of power, of love (which the apostle treats of in the 13th chapter), and of the sound mind that should be shown (which we have in the 14th).

The Spirit of power was there, but, whatever the energy He works in, the Holy Ghost has in no way set aside responsibility. Man cannot understand this. A divine person -- His office is to be here, that He might be in the saints, the dwelling of God, and that they should have therefore an infinite resource; but, at the same time, not so that the might of the almighty Spirit of God could not be thwarted and hindered, or the testimony which was intended to be borne not be spoiled -- not only ruined in its object, but turned to wholly different objects.

This was the state of things which came then before the apostle's mind, as a matter for warning, especially in cp. 10. Much more is it that which is actually found around us at the present moment, out of which the word of God has called us to emerge. But what we have to remember, beloved brethren, is that every one of us is apt to turn back more than we suspect to what we have left behind. And hence there is a continual source of weakness, even greater than, though not so gross as was found amongst the Corinthian saints. We see plainly in them how little the evil effects of that out of which they had come had disappeared from them. They were no doubt but young in the truth; but length of time does not eradicate evil, being in no way a cure for anything that savors of man. There is only one means, and that is divine power by the truth; for, if it works in us, it works in self-judgment. Divine power invariably -- if there is to be deliverance from evil -- makes us sensible of it, as well to judge ourselves

in the light of God. There is not, nor can ever be practical deliverance, until the Lord, by the power of His own truth brought home by the Spirit, makes us to sit in judgment on ourselves, searching and trying ourselves to the very core.

But as for the Corinthian saints, they were accustomed to a good deal of a different species of evil -- having been under the influence and working of Satan, as he wrought powerfully in the heathen. Even before Christ came, there was a vast deal of demoniacal power in the world. We see it surrounding the blessed Lord at every step. No doubt there were different forms of Satan's power; but one of the worst was that which, usurping the name of God, had given to the Corinthians the idea of religious power. Out of this terribly false condition the Corinthians had come into the church.

And have we no special danger? or if so, what? We have emerged from a state of things, not, it is true, of that gross character, but from what is not less really foreign to the mind of God. We have come out of what is in point of fact a corruption of Christianity, and hence, therefore, we are very apt to bring in thoughts, feelings, and habits, which we do well to bring to the test of the word of God -- even the oldest of us. But those who are comparatively young in the way need it more particularly; they have never yet proved duly their convictions; they have accepted a quantity of things, much more than they are aware of, on the evidence of others, rather than by divine teaching for themselves. Along with much that is good there is always the danger of our mingling a little of ourselves in every step of that process, and in particular we ought not to let in or slip back into what we have got out of.

But now for the principle. There are two main ideas among men around us, out of one or other of which we have all come. The one which most extensively prevails is that which I may call the *catholic* idea, though perhaps most individuals in this room have known comparatively little of it as experience. Still it is before our eyes, and, we are constantly in contact from time to time with persons who suffer from it; and it is well to know how to meet it. The Catholic idea is mainly characterized by this: all blessing, all privilege, is in the church. The grand object of God is the church; there is the Savior, life, pardon, every blessing; the only means of having these is to be in and of it; and this, too, as a *present* thing. For the Catholic idea does not venture far into the future; nor is heaven so much the object of its contemplation as is the earth. The notion is that, all privilege being concentrated in the church, the *individual* has scarcely any appreciable place. He is merged. He is only a cypher, and all his importance is because he belongs to the church. As to himself, why he is not even allowed to call himself a saint; and, as to being a saint at all, it is entirely a question for the church to settle. Not God, but the *church* determines whether he is to be a saint or not; and perhaps it is not done until fifty years after he is

dead and gone. Now, no doubt all this is very gross ignorance, but it is the form that the Catholic idea has taken; And remember, in speaking of this I am not referring merely to Romanism, but to ancient Christendom, under whatever guise it may present itself.

We have remains, as you know, which show how greatly this theory had taken root not very long after the apostles themselves disappeared from the earth. No doubt there has been development since; but still the great idea was and is much what I have been endeavoring to set before you. This only is essential: all else is matter of detail and may differ. It is found in Romanism as well as in the Eastern Christian bodies; so it was early after the apostles left.

But a new thing began at the Reformation. When the Catholic system had ripened into a monstrous head of corruption, when the results were morally unbearable among men, when the thought of the church had completely ruined or blotted out all right understanding of God, when, on the one hand, these who belonged to it, individually considered, were so little in the mind of men that it was no question of living faith, provided they belonged to the church; and, on the other hand, when all who were outside the church, no matter how real their faith or love, were considered heretics, and deserving of no better fate than to be punished soundly in this world for the good of their souls; then came up another and counter thought in which the *individual* only is prominent. The one point here was that a man should read the Bible for himself, that he must believe and be justified for himself, and that as by faith he becomes a child of God for himself so he should have his conscience left free to serve God for himself. Here all thought of the church was completely lost, and consequently, giving up consideration of the church of God, individuals of this way of reasoning combined and formed churches for themselves. This grew, no doubt, to a far larger extent, and was carried out more fully, than was contemplated when first acted on.

But we find, in fact, that those who justly insisted on the importance of *individual faith* as the saving principle for the soul, and as that which alone glorified God, began to collect together at last, sometimes in a country, to themselves, and then again, when in that country there began to be divergences of opinion among them, they made their own distinct churches. If they did not like the great public church of the country, they chose to split off into different religious societies, all essaying to become churches. One was, as they considered, as good in principle as another, but the best church was that which suited a man's own mind. This was the *individual* idea carried out to its natural results, and such is exactly what we find around us now.

We have the two systems confronting each other in fact. We have the old Catholic notion in those bodies who make everything to be a question of church

privilege, who say that it is in the church alone can be found eternal life, or at any rate the hope of it -- I might almost say, the chance of it, for it comes to that. The whole system is a question of the *church* dispensing, the *church* acting, the *church* pronouncing, the *church* teaching what is truth, and really saving: everything is a question of the *church*. But in the other case the church is lost in the *individual*. It is the *individual* who by faith has received the gospel and become a Christian, who consequently uses his own judgment in forming his own church, or joining the church he likes best. Such is the state of things around us.

Let me now ask you, what is the truth of God respecting it all? And this is where the importance of revealed truth comes in. The Corinthians were in danger of drifting into one or other of these two things, as we shall clearly find in these chapters. It is not, indeed, a very uncommon thing to find a mixture of the two, and this mixture we may trace among the Corinthians. The great thing I want to call your attention to is this: the blessed manner in which the Holy Ghost interferes in order to establish the believer in the truth; and so, without controversy, the soul finds itself able, while kept from what is wrong in each of these principles, to enjoy all that is right in both, as God's will alone is.

There is no possibility of a thing holding its ground on earth, unless there be something which gives it a moral claim. There must be a fragment of truth in order to win and keep Christians together. So it is when we look at the *Catholic* idea, and in what may be called the *Protestant* one. There is a measure of truth in each; but when we get to God's word, there we have the truth about both, and in this order: -- it is not the church first and then the individual, but the individual first and then the church.

So it is introduced to us in this chapter, as it is always in Scripture. Take Matt. 17; What is the question the Lord first puts? "Whom do men say that I am?" One of them gives an answer for himself -- an answer which would have done for each, though he who spoke went beyond the rest, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." This was a full confession of Christ, owning Him to be not the true Messiah only, but a divine person in the nearest relation to the Father; and the moment the Lord Jesus hears it, He brings out the thought of the church -- "On this rock I will build my church." He had not then begun to build it, and He has not done building it yet.

Again in the Epistle to the Ephesians the same order is most marked. The individual Christian always precedes the body. Take for instance the first chapter. It is only in the last verse we see the church; and, if you look through the whole of the Epistle, it is regularly so. The individual is always set in his own place, and this necessarily is a question of faith; for faith is indispensable to the individual, and must be so. He cannot have faith for another. Each must

have faith in God for himself. There may be *the* faith -- the common deposit of the truth, which we all own; but still, when we look at faith itself, it is necessarily individual in the soul. Then comes the question of the church as the body of Christ.

When one believes the gospel, one receives the Spirit, who is not only the seal of salvation, but also unites him to Christ as a member of His body. These are divinely given relationships, whether individual or corporate; but the corporate follows the individual, the power in both being the Holy Ghost after redemption was effected, for the Holy Ghost was not given until Jesus was glorified.

It is just the same thing in the chapter which is before us now.

The apostle opens the matter thus: -- "Concerning spiritual [gifts] brethren, I would not have you ignorant." It will be observed that the word "gifts" is inserted by the translators. Nor is it correct; for the subject, though embracing gifts, goes farther, and takes in what is of far deeper moment as being the source of all, the presence of the Spirit working in the sovereign power of a divine person in the church, and by its members. Perhaps "spirituals" would give the idea if our language could bear it without any addition. If we must, for clearness, supply one, it should be "manifestations" rather than "gifts."

Next, he tells them, "Ye know that *when*¹ ye were Gentiles" -- not "that ye were." It was nothing new to tell them they were Gentiles, but "*when* ye were Gentiles, ye were carried away unto those dumb idols even as ye were led." That is, it was not a mere leading, but rather in those heathen days a carrying away to what they would now look back on with pain, seeing the excessive folly of it as well as its daringness. It was Satan's direct opposition to the truth of God. They would learn that the true God is anything but a dumb idol -- that He is one who has not only spoken to us by His Son, but who opens the mouths that were once dumb to speak for Jesus Christ the Lord by His Spirit.

Thus the apostle brings in the test of spirits in the confession of Jesus as Lord (v. 8), "Wherefore I give you to understand that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed." Here he does not, of course, mean only the precise term "anathema," or "accursed"; but what he has, as I judge, in his mind, is this: whatever lowers Jesus is an impossibility to the Holy Ghost -- a very simple principle, but one which is the only perfect test for all truth in the church of God. The apostle gives it in a double form, a criterion for as well as

1. The Received Text omits *ὅτε* on small authority, and to the destruction of the sense which requires the adverb; but we have it in all the great witnesses to the ancient text, N, B, C, D, E, L, P, more than fifty cursive manuscripts, Vulg., old Latin, Syr., Sah., Arm., Aeth., and many Fathers, Greek and Latin.

against. “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.” If man ventures without the Spirit of God, he becomes a prey to the evil one who seeks to lower Jesus. The Holy Ghost alone knows what is proper to Jesus. And He does not speak of Him merely as the Son of God. The point where error comes in is in the Son of God becoming a man; for it is the complex person of the Lord Jesus that exposes persons to break down fatally. There are those, no doubt, who *deny* His divine glory; but there is a far more subtle way in which the Lord Jesus is lowered, and this is where He is owned to be a man, but where the manhood of the Lord is allowed in some way to swamp His glory, and neutralize the confession of His person. Thus, one is soon perplexed, and lets that which puts Him in association with us here below work so as to falsify what He has in common with God Himself. There is but one simple thing which keeps the soul right as to this, and that is, that we do not venture to pry and never dare to discuss it, fearing to rush in human folly upon such holy ground, and feeling that on such ground as that we are only *worshippers*. Wherever this is forgotten by the soul, it will invariably be found that God is not with it -- that He allows the self-confident one, who of himself ventures to speak of the Lord Jesus, to prove his own folly. It is only by the Holy Ghost that he can know what is revealed about the Lord Jesus. But then we have the double guard: if a man lowers Christ, it is *not* by the Spirit and if a man truly says that He is Lord, it *is* by the Spirit. Here is the chief test for perpetual use in the church of God.

This is the truth about which we ought above all be jealous. For there is a divine nature in the child of God that is sensitive to what affects Christ, and ought to be so. I cannot conceive anything more destructive to the soul than losing this sensitiveness. The person of Christ is a matter too serious, too fundamental, for any speculation to be allowed, and, in point of fact, the reason of it is this: the Holy Ghost, by whom is all true teaching, is not really with the soul that ventures to teach out of his own resources. *He* is here for the express purpose of glorifying Christ. Now this is a great thing to be simply settled on. The Holy Spirit of God is here for the purpose. It is not merely for comforting or edifying, though both come in; but the purpose constantly in view is this, -- He is here for exalting Christ, and guarding Him from all that lowers Him. It is the aim and work of the Spirit of God as presented in the teaching before us.

Now that the apostle has brought in this great two-edged sword, as it were, to guard the glory of the Lord Jesus, we find him turning to another grave truth in verse 4, “There are diversities of gifts.” The Corinthians acted as if the only gifts worth talking about, and these above all and evidently grand, were such a manifest display of the divine power as in speaking many tongues without having learned them, or in working miracles. No doubt they did draw attention to the person who had the power so to speak or work; and it is very evident that

there was divine power acting in a special way. But the Spirit of God recalls to one of the most characteristic truths attached to His own presence in the church -- "There are *diversities* of gifts." Whatever does not leave room for every gift that God has given is not the church of God acting as such. Whenever it is an accepted principle or a settled practice, whenever there is a state of things which shuts out the diversities of gifts that God is now giving to the church of God, it is a state which He disowns. It is contrary to the nature and aim of the church of God. Nor do I mean an opening for their exercise here or there in outposts, or in less important and comparatively private ways, but on the greatest occasions, the coming together of all saints as God's assembly (*ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ*) whether for the Lord's Supper or at other times. So the Lord ordained as is shown by the apostle in all the context where, correcting disorders, he maintains this intact.

There are diversities of gifts, "*but the same Spirit,*" because although these gifts differ immensely in their character, yet they all come from the same source. God has to do with one as truly as another. There is an immense difference between the lesser and the greater gifts, but "the same Spirit" and if I would respect the Spirit of God, I should respect the least gift that comes from Him. Then there is another thing which the Corinthians had forgotten (verse 5), "And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord." One cannot have a gift without being a servant; that is, one is not his own master in the use of the gift, but a servant of the Lord Jesus. This the Corinthians had forgotten. They were acting independently. Even the Holy Ghost Himself has deigned to take the place of a servant, and, having come down to that place, He lifts no one above it. This is the next great truth presented to us -- not only diversities of gifts and the same Spirit, but differences of administrations, that is to say, of services, yet the same Lord. And, lastly, there were the results produced by these powers which wrought in subjection to the glory of the Lord Jesus. For if there were these differences or "diversities of operations" as they are called (verse 6), "it is the same God that worketh all in all." What an immense fact in a world of vain show!

If this was rather the general statement of divine power in the church of God, we come in the next place to its working in each individual. The apostle has been showing the common principle. There was the same Spirit, by whom all gifts were distributed, the same Lord, and the same God; but now he comes to the particular forms of the gift (verse 7): "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." It was not to display the individual himself but for others' benefit. For these gifts to effect common good is the grand aim of all these workings of the Spirit of God in the church.

Then (verse 8) we have "For to one is given by the Spirit [not miracles,

but] the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge.” Note that he carefully adds “by the same Spirit,” because knowledge has a considerably lower character than wisdom, but at the same time the “knowledge” that he owns here is as truly by the Holy Ghost as the “wisdom.” What is this word “wisdom” as compared with the word “knowledge”? To gather truth by serious study of God’s word is far from being wrong. Indeed it is of the Holy Spirit; and the result is “knowledge,” and the utterance of it He gives is “the word of knowledge.” So Timothy was called to give himself wholly up to it. In fact, what is gathered thus is most justly to be considered the “word of knowledge,” and this no doubt has its value; as everything has that God gives by the Holy Ghost to the church of God. What a person gleans, spiritually laboring in the field of the word of God, has its place, is meant for all, and is refreshing to the saints of God. But it is not exactly the same as the “word of wisdom ;” for the word “wisdom” indicates that the soul is occupied not merely with scripture, but with Him who gave it that one might know Himself; where the soul, furnished by the word of God, knows what it is to gather God’s own mind; not merely to have it in details, as given here and there in scripture, but by a deeper appreciation of His word, to enter into that acquaintance with Him that is found not so much in studying texts, as *from* communion with His own nature, ways, character, and above all with Christ Himself. He was found, I need not say, always “the wisdom of God.” Christ is never called the “knowledge of God,” nor could He be, but the “wisdom of God.” It is rather, I repeat, to be drinking not merely from the stream, but at the spring of all in God Himself. It is thence that the “word of wisdom” is drawn, following the course of the river up.

Now you will have noticed that the apostle does not commence with what was so evidently *striking*. He begins, on the contrary, with that which the Corinthians had very little love for, what they had evidently neglected and set aside in seeking after those mighty displays that occupied their active minds. The apostle takes them first to what *edifies*: “To one is given the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge.” He then passes on to the gift of “faith,” namely, that power which enables the soul to break through difficulties. This is the faith that is referred to here. You must remember the gift of faith does not mean the act of believing the truth, which, of course, is indispensable to all saints.

Then we come to what was sensible to everybody or palpable even to an unbeliever. “To another the gift of healing by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits.” The latter means not discerning whether or not people were Christians, but discerning whether the spirit by which they spoke was of God or of Satan. In short, it was special power in the application of the preliminary criterion given in the third verse, which we have already noticed.

Then we have (v. 10 to 12), “To another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: but all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.” Here we have the fundamental principle that I wish to assert tonight with all plainness of speech; and hence we perceive how the divinely taught may take in whatever is true of the two ideas that we have seen at work, give its just place to each, and combine them both, instead of setting them at war one with another.

Anything that really weakens faith would not be of God. Whatever would intercept the soul, whatever dared to come between it and the object of faith, could not be of God; and hence, therefore, the word of preaching that God employs for our conversion has exactly this for its object, viz., to put the individual before God -- to present Christ to him, to meet his wants and his misery, and his distance from God. There, consequently, it is entirely a question of faith. By faith it is that a man is justified; by faith he becomes a child of God. All the great individual blessings turn on faith in Christ that a man has for himself, given to him by the Holy Ghost through the word of God. It is through Christ (I need not say) brought and revealed to his soul that this faith is produced.

But there is more than this to see. When he *is* a believer, what follows? When he submits to the testimony of God, when, he has received the word of truth, when he has given to him the Holy Ghost, what is the effect? He is brought into the *unity of the body of Christ*. It is not simply that he has got the Holy Ghost, giving him the joy of the truth he has received, and withal power and liberty before God; but, besides, the Spirit gives union with all those here on earth who belong to God, who are set free for God and to God.

Here then is exactly how we find the combination of the two principles entirely dislocated by man. He has divorced what should be always bound together. If you look only at *man*, there can be no doubt that the *individual* (or, as we may say, the *Protestant*) principle of faith is an incomparably safer one than the *Catholic* one, which makes the church all. But, beloved friends, we are not looking at things simply with regard to man, but also as to *God*; and we are bound to do so, and the Holy Ghost is here for the purpose of taking care of the glory of God, which is done by making Christ the object. He only is the object of all the purposes of God, and the consequence is, that until we enter into God’s purposes there never can be the sure or large enjoyment of the truth.

For when we have the Spirit of God, as He now is given to the believer, it is not only individually; but he is baptized into, or made to belong to, the *one body*. He is “one spirit with the Lord.” He is, consequently, one with all that

are the Lord's. This, then, brings us face to face with the further truth that the Holy Ghost does not merely imprint unity upon the saints, and then leave them, but is here to make good all the objects of the glory of God. It is of very great moment that the children of God should look at the thing *personally*. I am even afraid -- and particularly so where people trust creeds instead of scripture -- that the simplicity and the force of the simple truth that the Holy Ghost is a divine *person* is but little understood and little believed. Such is the case now, I believe, among those who are commonly called "Evangelicals," whether they are Dissenters or Churchmen. Faith in the Holy Ghost as a divine person being feebly entertained, you will find that they generally talk about the Holy Ghost as an "*influence*." It is not that they deny the existence of the Spirit of God, but they do not see the all-importance of His being a divine person; and, further than that, a divine person who is here working in God's saints and in God's assembly, sovereignly or as He will, to glorify the Lord Jesus.

Now here precisely we have the truth that the Corinthians too so little appreciated, and therefore the apostle brings it out in this distinct manner. "*All these*," not "*some of them*," not those only which made themselves so conspicuous, but "*all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that body being many are one body: so also is [not the church only, but] Christ.*" The apostle is no doubt looking at the church, but he looks at it with the Head, as inseparably united together. He does not so speak to the Ephesians. They did not require it to be so impressed upon them as the Corinthians. Impossible to have been so loose as the Corinthians were, if they had remembered that the whole being, head and body, was all one Christ. They looked upon themselves as invested with power, and this was the whole affair practically. But the apostle would show them that these powers are but a small part, and an inferior part, of a vast system of divine working in the church on earth. It is a body one with Christ, and even called so, of which each and all of us are living members. "So also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

Then we have (v. 14), "For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not of the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?" There plainly we have discontent with what the Lord had given. And was there never greater reason for this to be looked at than now? Whenever a soul is found to be using the gift that is given to it, there will always be blessing; but if, on the contrary, the one with a humble gift, such as would be represented by "the foot," should covet what he has not got, his own proper work is lost by ignoring his own place in the body. The whole thought

therefore is dishonoring to God. So again (v. 16), "If the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?" It may run through the members, the highest as well as the lowest.

In the 17th verse he puts it thus, "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?" The blessedness of the body is in each member doing its own function; because it is not merely my *ear* that hears, but *I* that hear, nor is it only my *eye* that sees, but rather *I* who see. It is the man. And this it is which gives, therefore, such a sense of unity and is so real a means of blessing to every member, the least just as much as the greatest. They all contribute; and indeed there would be a most sensible loss, were the least member to fail in doing its part. This is what the Corinthians had seriously lost sight of; but we are in just the same danger as they were, and indeed we are more particularly in danger, because, having come out of systems where there was only room for *the* priest or *the* minister, we naturally tend to it. There is nothing that people sooner slip into than this kind of isolation and individuality; because for the most part they have come from where individuality was strong, and the place of the church was unknown or swamped. For not more truly does the "church" principle destroy the "individual" one, than the "individual" principle does the "church" one, if each stands alone.

The blessedness of the truth is that we have both -- the individual blessing first clear, and then the corporate one, and both, too, made good by the Spirit of God. If the Spirit of God brings my soul to know Christ, to rest on Him, and rejoice in Him before God, I cannot have that without looking after others who have the same blessing. This is the way in which God brings the two principles together and conciliates them round the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. For it is not merely that I have Him as a Savior; I have Him also as the Head of the body, as we are told here. "So also is Christ." What an ennobling yet truly humbling standard for our practice, that all we are is a representation of Christ! I do not mean individually alone, but when we come together in the assembly, for this is the public way of showing the church. How jealous ought we to be, therefore, that every meeting of the assembly should present Christ in truth! If we belong to God's church, what matter about any other church? His is the only church worth contending for; if we are Christians, we *are* of it. All we need to see to is that we walk, and meet, and worship accordingly.

This, then, is the first violation of the thought of unity, viz., discontent with the place the Lord has given us, the desire for something greater, something more prominent than that which is ours. "But now," says the apostle, "hath *God* set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased Him." How establishing this is to the soul! This is what, beloved brethren, we all want to

be more distinct about. Perhaps there are persons in this room who have come in merely believing that here we are enjoying things more simply and with more purity. I believe it; but that does not give you the true measure, nor explain why we have left what man has done in self-will. It is the fact that we have to do with God in the matter, and that God has to do with us; that we meet because and as it is the will of God. Surely God is still carrying on that building, His holy temple; surely He is still carrying on the work of the Holy Spirit according to the figure that is spoken of here -- the body of Christ. Whatever may be the difficulties, or disorder, or confusion, it abides, and of that body are we. We have come to that which expresses it, and it is as members of Christ we meet as we do. Each meeting of the faithful that we have our part in is a witness to the one body, though we frankly own the ruin-state in which the church is here below; even the humblest soul that is accepted in the name of the Lord Jesus, as made by the Holy Ghost a member of Christ's body, has just as real a place in it as any other. Not merely so are the prominent members, but no less are those described according to the apostle's figure here as the "uncomely" ones (v. 23). It is of practical moment that we should accept unreservedly, the truth of God respecting this. So that, supposing there are real Christians that cause trouble or difficulty, it is the teaching of the Spirit of God that we should heartily accept these. What sort of a mother would it be that would find fault and become impatient with one of her children which had anything the matter with it? A true mother would anxiously care for that child more than any of the others, because it would most need her love. May I not, then say that it is exactly thus the Lord really calls us to be? For what is a spiritual mind, but a mind in possession of affections and of a judgment according to *God*, so that we shall be found seeking just the same things as Christ -- not in the least wishing to get rid of a trial or difficulty or anything of the kind, but bearing it, not only in patience, but with love exercised by it.

Let us take up briefly the other form in which the working of the Spirit of God is apt to be set aside (v. 21). "The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee; nor, again, the head to the feet, I have no need of you." Here we have the exact counterpart to what we have been looking at. It is not the inferior part that wants to be something greater, but the superior part that disdains the lesser one. These things, brethren, ought not so to be. But as they were then and are now, so we do well to lay this instructive warning to heart. The very nature of the body rises up to rebuke the greater gift which would look down or hinder the less. Let us be thankful to the grace which has given us any place; let us discharge earnestly the functions God has given us in the body of Christ; but let us prize and make the most of every other member, and not least those who have a place wholly different from our own. Disdain be as far from us as discontent.

Here we have the two great hindrances that are too often at work. In both

cases we see clearly *flesh* and not the *Spirit of God*; for the Spirit of God, as He works in all, so He takes up each and gives each his place, and this because it is *God* that has put them there. Consequently, whenever the Spirit of God works thus in souls, there should be the shrinking from anything that would weaken or frustrate the will of God: especially if love also is drawn out towards each member of the body of Christ, because it *is* a member. However we need not enter into that further now.

You will note that in the 21st verse the apostle is more peremptory than in the 15th. We have in the former, “The eye *cannot* say unto the hand,” whereas in the latter it is, “*If* the foot should say.” The one is the danger of the strong or greater gift, the other of the weak or less; and the former is of the two the most offensive to the Lord.

In v. 21 the apostle takes in the two greatest extremes of all. “Neither again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.” He is looking here, of course, simply at the body, and bringing out the moral force of the comparison, which is, that the highest gift cannot treat the lowest as if he were needless to him. And, indeed, it is so where grace works; for I am persuaded that you will find that the greater the gift (where there is spirituality as well as gift), there will be the more hearty desire for the working of the least gift that God has given for the good of the church. There will be no such thought as that, because one person has a superior gift, all others are to hold their peace while he is present. The spring of blessedness in the assembly is God Himself, and not any particular member of the body, though he may be by grace a very important channel of working for the good of the assembly. The great point is the sense that *God* it is who works in the church; and God may, even in the presence of the very greatest, it might be even of the apostle himself, be pleased to use, in a true way to edification, a very simple and lowly member of the body of Christ.

The main thing is that neither the lesser members are to desire a greater place than they have, nor the greatest ones in any way to act as if they could do without the least. They are all precious in the assembly of God. “Nay, much more” (and this brings in what I referred to), “those members of the body which seem to be more feeble are necessary.” It is not that they have their place only, but “they are necessary.” They may be trying enough by times, and too plainly show the feebleness of those who have not the power to rise above the circumstances and things around, but still “they are necessary.” “And” (v. 23) “those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need.” Take for instance the face. Care of that is not wanted, for it is of itself a comely part. But we take more

care naturally of that part which has not the same comeliness, as for instance the foot. So here we find the divine aim: "But God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body." See to it then that there be no setting aside of what God has given for the good of the church, whether it be the lesser or the greater ones opposing each other. If so, the same result, in either case, is produced. It is man thwarting the government of God, nay, His richest grace in the church: would he even make the Spirit appear a party to the dishonor of the Lord? May we be kept and guided in the path of Christ!

The apostle goes on (v. 26), "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it." And then, in the next verse, he brings in a statement well worthy of our mature consideration, "Ye are the body of Christ." Not, of course, that they were independent of any others throughout the world; but still they were the expression of Christ in that particular place. Strictly speaking, it is neither "a" body as if there was more than one, nor "the" body as if they alone completed it, but "Christ's body." They had the privileges and the responsibility attached to it. They were His body there. If you went to another place, you would find not another body but still the same. Looking at them individually, we see that "they are members in particular."

Each member is a member of Christ, not of a, but of the church, His body. In fact, there is no such thing in scripture as a member of a church. Scripture repudiates such language, which proceeds from the "individual" idea that we have been looking at. There everything is individualized, even the church itself, as well as every person that belongs to it. It is all on a false foundation, not for our relations as Christians, but for those of the church.

The truth is that the Holy Ghost, being a divine person -- equally, therefore, acting in all the assemblies throughout the -- world necessarily make all *one*; and this is the reason why there was no such thing as "one body" until the Holy Ghost came down. In this way it is not *faith* that unites to Christ. I quite admit that, unless there is faith, a man will never get to heaven, and therefore nothing is more important. This was true before the church existed at all; but now with it something more is true. A divine person is come down, who never took flesh like the Lord Jesus, and never therefore was pleased, so to speak, to unfold His glory in any method so circumscribed as having a body prepared to be incorporated with His divine nature, *i.e.*, to be Himself a man while yet God. But now in fact the Holy Ghost, never having been pleased so to take a body or become incarnate, takes up all those who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and brings them into unity, This is the true account of the church, and no other; and the consequence is therefore that, no matter where it may be,

it is always the "body of Christ." It is so wherever they are met in His name. Wherever they are met in His name, there the Holy Ghost is left free to work for Christ's glory. Alas! how many true saints are scattered in sects, not so met. The state of things around us is that the two things are not found together. There are "members in particular," but not holding to Him as the Head, or gathered on the ground of "the body of Christ.: I speak of the fact, not of intelligence. There are many real Christians, no doubt, but they are not found simply on that footing. I speak now of individuals scattered up and down among the denominations. They are Christ's members; but could one say of them denominationally that they are met as "the body of Christ"?

Now, our wisdom is to own and act on this truth as on every other known to us. God has shown us the failure and the ruin of the church, and that whatever does not uphold the principle of the body of Christ will always be wrong. If I think only of the ruin of the church, there will be no confidence, nor a happy going forward according to the mind of God: the fact of the ruin will be used as an excuse for doing nothing. But, where we believe that God has His church, although it is at the present time in a state of confusion, we ought, if members of it, to grieve over it, and humble our souls about it; but we must see that we be not acting inconsistently ourselves. If there are ever so few meeting together who own this truth, these the Spirit of God will own. The grand principle of it is true now as it ever was, because the Spirit of God is as truly here now as He was then. Say I this to encourage assumption? God forbid! for I should not myself meet with any who would arrogantly claim to be *the* church of God, any more than such as meet on any other ground than that. Let us cleave to the truth, and this practically, without setting up to be more or other than we really are, not daring to meet in any other way or name but His, but owning the present ruin-state. The only sound and sacred principle to meet on is the one body, and this the body of Christ.

We are next told (v. 28) "God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings helps, governments, diversities of tongues." Observe it is the same design as before -- putting down to the lowest place that which the Corinthians had set first. "First apostles," and last of all are these "diversities of tongues." None of the brethren, however possessed all the gifts, as we find in the 29th and 30th verses: "Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?" Further, they are set in *the* church not in a church; and it is the church on earth, not in heaven. It is real living unity in practice. Nationalism or Voluntarism are therefore excluded no less than Romanism. They all deny the one body in principle and in practice.

The chapter closes with an exhortation to “covet earnestly the best gifts;” that is, those that were for edification, though they had less of display than of power and blessing for the assembly.

The Action of the Holy Spirit in the Assembly

(1 Cor. 14:20-40)

Before taking up the portion just read, I may add a few words as connecting the previous part of this chapter and the chapter before with what we have already had. I showed, in chapter 12, that the great principle is laid down, not merely of gifts, but of what is called “spirituals” -- the word “spiritual” being much more than a question of spiritual “gifts.” What appertains to the Spirit is the point. Now the most important of all is this -- not so much these gifts, in which is displayed His power in various forms, but, above all, the presence of God; the presence of God now made good in this especial form of it, that the Holy Spirit is here to act sovereignly in the assembly.

This, therefore, is a deeper question, and of greater moment than any display of particular gifts; and we must not forget that it is included in the doctrine of chapter 12. It shows, no doubt, that there are various forms in which He works. But who is it that works? it is *God*; and it is not only in a general way in which He may be said to do everything, but the solemn truth that is brought before us, and which we must each value according to the measure of our appreciation of divine things, is this -- God present in a new and intimate way, as He never was before, nor could be apart from the accomplishment of redemption. It immensely clears the subject where the soul enters into this.

We know very well that at all times in the history of the world God intervened. Never did He fail to leave Himself a witness of His power and goodness. But it is another thing to have Himself so present as to give character to the place where He has been pleased to come and make it His dwelling. Granted that it is no question now of a visible sign. In Israel it was; and they being dull, and its being according to the character of His general dealings, Jehovah there gave a palpable proof of His presence. There was the cloud that betokened it. This gave the certainty, therefore, to an Israelite that God dwelt there in a way He had never done before. If they were redeemed out of Egypt, they had God Himself thus taking His abode in the midst of His people. But then this was only a sign; and it was a sign of God dwelling in the darkness too, for such was the nature of it -- of a God who could not be approached too near, of a God who was purposely bringing out the sinfulness of the people that stood in

this comparative nearness to Him. Still there was amongst them sin, and no offering as yet which could put it away for ever.

Now, on the contrary, the basis of the presence or dwelling of God with us is the glorious fact that sin is judged in the cross, and that God accordingly can be present not merely judicially, nor merely with a sign of His glory, but in the reality of His grace; not closing as yet the place of responsibility of course, nor taking us out of the path of faith, but strengthening us in it. Accordingly the grand point throughout all these chapters is this: whatever consists not with the presence of a God of grace who is Himself in the midst of His people -- actually there, whatever is not suited to Him is unsuited to them. It is not a question merely of the people being Christians -- which is all taken for granted -- but of fidelity, care, dependence on God in the use of the means that He gives us to glorify the Lord Jesus by the Spirit in His assembly.

God is here in our midst: not merely dwelling in each, which is perfectly true, but God making us, when gathered together, His dwelling. This principle is laid down, not merely in chapter 12, but in chapter 3, and supposed throughout the Epistle. We must remember that it is a presence *here*, not merely one by-and-bye, but *here* on *earth*. At that time they had God acting according to the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ over Satan; so that there were healings, and miraculous powers, the fruit of complete victory over what even the judgment of God had brought into the world. But besides that, there was what is of permanent value for the testimony of God here below; as, for instance, grace edifying the members of the body of Christ by teachers and the like -- the word of wisdom, and of knowledge, etc. On this I need not dwell, but simply recall the two great facts: a dwelling of God on the earth; and, secondly, that dwelling, while really good and true in each particular spot, as really one wherever it may be found. That is, there is a stamp of unity about it, which is bound up with the fact that the Holy Ghost is there, who by His presence is incapable of imprinting anything else than unity. Who does not see *one Spirit* emphatically brought before us in the chapter?

Now I press this, because there is not a single religious system on the face of the earth which has not in some way let slip that unity -- even those who boast most of it. Take, for instance, the Church of Rome. After all there is a vast deal, even in Rome, of what you may call independency, as admitting not only of its separate parishes and distinct dioceses, etc., but of totally distinct orders of priesthood. The only thing that has the appearance of unity is that there is one, governor over all. They and others talk about unity of doctrine, discipline, and the like. But they do not see how utterly short this is of the "one body." For there might be the same kind of doctrine and discipline in half-a-dozen bodies, and no unity whatever; as, for instance, in the Methodist bodies, or in the Presbyterian ones, which are apart from one another.

But what a different thing is *unity* in the mind of God -- how wholly distinct the oneness of the church according to scripture! For there we do not see "One Spirit" and many bodies, even if they had a similar polity, but One Spirit and one body. And what a blessed thing to know, beloved friends, that this unity is ours, and that it is ours not in an *exclusive* but in an *inclusive* sense—that the unity of which we remind one another, as to which we need continually to rebuke our narrow hearts, is that which we maintain for all that are His! It is not a strange place that we wish to compel the saints into, it is not something which we crave as an object near to our hearts in a selfish way, and therefore cry it up; but our one motive is that -- it is the truth, this unity of the Spirit according to the will of God. It is a relationship, and this in grace, which God has established by the presence of His Spirit for all that are His on earth, the great effort of the devil being to hinder its manifestation, to destroy the sense of it, and, consequently, all just action upon it in the minds and ways of God's saints. For I press it, that it is not merely a question of the world coming in, but the more solemn thought that God's saints have lost even the idea of this unity. Consequently, when most look at the various churches that are existing around them, it is with a feeling of complacency, not of shame and sorrow for the Lord's injured name. But even if they grieve, let them rise and do the will of the Lord themselves without waiting for others; especially as to obey is better than sacrifice, and example gives the more force to precept. Why should they go on with what is unscriptural? Who asks this at their hands? Certainly not the Lord.

The doctrine of chapter 12 is that "*God* has set some in the church, first apostles," etc. (v. 28). That is, the Spirit of God blots out all the efforts of man to arrange matters so as to avoid difficulties, and allow what he calls rights to be maintained, and best secured, as he thinks, against collision. Men have got the notion that there is no truth, but only "views" as to divine things; so that it is impossible, where souls come freely together, that there should not be difficulty and danger. Granted; we all admit that. If we have the idea that, coming and finding ourselves upon the ground of God's truth about the church, we shall not find difficulties, and avoid all collision, we have certainly deceived ourselves. And, beloved friends, it is far better that we should be convinced of this from the beginning, and that we should remember that God never guaranteed His assembly that there should not be trials thus to prove us. On the contrary, it is there I look for them, and they are sure to be found; but then is that all? Is the church merely a number of godly persons who come together and who seek grace to bear with one another? Nay, it is God's dwelling-place; and is not God there? He is verily, and displaying Himself, not by a cloud, as in the days of old, but by the Holy Ghost -- as it is said, "The habitation of God through the Spirit." The Holy Ghost has the same place now to us, as the cloud of glory had for Israel; and what was then only a visible though glorious sign is now a divine person in power. For if there be any person in the Godhead to whom it belongs to act in

power, it is the Holy Ghost. whatever may be the counsels of the Father, and whatever may be the work that the Son has done to give effect to those counsels, the Holy Ghost is always the One that brings them out; and the Holy Ghost now has taken this very place. There is the secret of the *unity*. Who is it that is in the church, and what makes it to be the church of God? Not, I say, godly men merely, but in fact the Holy Ghost's presence. It is therefore a question of whether we really do believe in it, and whether we look for it. If we do, the consequence will be that our faith will be tried and put to the proof; but then we shall find that faith, however tried, is never disappointed. If we have brought in any unbelief of our own, any thoughts natural to ourselves, any expectations of our own, they, no doubt, will be disappointed; but this will be a blessing. It is good for us to be corrected of the Lord and He has brought us where He can deal with us as One present with us, and acting for His own glory.

And as this is what chapter 12 sets before us, so, following it up, the apostle reminds the Corinthians that there was one thing even better than gifts. This was love. Hence, therefore, the place of chapter 13. Looking at God's nature, no doubt He is *Light*, but what is the energy of that nature? It is love. It is this which actively comes to us from God and blesses us. As He has taken His place in the church, it is no question of His law for a people in the flesh who could not draw near, because God Himself is there. It is not put simply in the form of *grace*. Love is the energy of the divine nature, as grace its special way towards the evil with which it deals, and which it rises above. Thus love may be where there is no question of what it deals with, being the spring of what expresses the divine nature in its delight and activity in good. This is developed in the most blessed manner in chapter 13. It is what Christ showed us to be in God; it is what the Spirit would now exercise in us.

It is impossible for the assembly of God to move healthfully or to enjoy happily the truth, unless the effect of truth is to free us from what hinders love -- to judge all the roots of that which would impede the exercise of this divine principle. Hence, therefore, the apostle insists upon it that, whatever might be the value of prophecy, or knowledge, or any other gift they all sooner or later depart. They are suited only to an imperfect condition, after all found necessarily here below; but love is not so. Like Him who is its source, it abides and changes not. Nevertheless the blessed fact is that love is also a present thing, an never more truly needed than now, as a holy spring of activity for the saint, as such, or in the church. This the apostle shows us in the last verse of the chapter -- "*Now abideth faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*"

In coming to chapter 14, then, we have not the principle (that we have in ch. 12) nor the spring of power as in ch. 13, but the practice, the application, of the great truth. It is true -- and I make the remark because I have seen it objected to not very long ago -- that we do not hear very much about gifts in chapter 14. The

reason is because God supposes that we have read chapter 12. He does not write the word to save people trouble, nor is it written, as men preach, in texts; by which the scriptures are divorced, and their strength in connection destroyed. Not so; God has written His word to be prized, to be a matter for waiting on the Lord, that we may enter in and fully enjoy it, though it may not be understood all at once. How wisely it is so! I thank God that His word is so written that there never was a soul since the world began that could take it up and fathom it -- even the apostles and prophets themselves. I thank God that His word does call us to take the place of learners. The more God gives us to know, the more He makes us feel how much there is yet to learn, and so we are kept, as He would have us, in the attitude of waiting. No doubt this does not suit the world. It suits much better to talk as if all was understood, while, on the contrary, it will be found how little is actually known.

The point here is this, that ch. 14 is an integral part of the great argument which is begun in ch. 12.; and ch. 13 is not, as men suppose, a mere digression on love, but a most necessary element of all. For, whatever may be the place of love individually, how much more is it necessary when we are brought into the place of such nearness, of such scope for affection, of such need of patience, of such call for faith!

No doubt our coming together as God's church supposes our redemption. it is not a question of some peculiar gift or doctrine, but of God's presence who redeemed us -- that He might enjoy with us, and we with Him, whatever He has given us. This is the church of God. Accordingly, then, it is the place where love has its full exercise; and I do not hesitate to say that there could not be such a sphere for love as that which is given us now. We shall have it in heaven in another way, and in a fullness without alloy suitable for heaven. There, of course, all will be positive perfection and enjoyment; but here, in a place of difficulty, of sorrow, of trial, in a place where we have constantly to walk superior to circumstances, is a sphere where love can grow, and its effects may flourish.

In ch. 14 the gifts, of which the apostle had been speaking in ch. 12, are supposed. To argue as unbelief does, as if there were nothing in ch. 14. of the same nature as in ch. 12 is mere folly. But, coming to the point now, there is one thing I would desire to explain before mentioning the general argument of the apostle. In the beginning of the chapter he contrasts prophesying with tongues at great length, speaking of the former in these terms (v. 3), "He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort." Now, there is many a person that understands this to mean that whoever speaks to exhortation and comfort prophesies. This is to mistake him. You could not invert the sentence and still hold the truth. What the apostle means is this: the man that only speaks in a tongue does not edify, nor does he exhort nor comfort; the man that

prophesies *does*. The truth is, that prophesying is the highest character of divine communication through man. It is not a question of opening futurity, but of bringing God and the soul together. An instance of it we may see in the case of the woman of Samaria. What Christ said to her evidently brought God Himself home to her conscience, and she at once awoke to the conviction that He who spoke was a prophet. Prophecy is therefore the most intimate and direct communication of God in dealing with the soul, giving a person the certainty that the mind of God is being expressed. Of course the man that prophesies does edify; but there are many other forms of ministration to the soul. There is comfort and exhortation in teaching; and again, in preaching the gospel there might be great comfort to the soul; but still these things are distinct from prophesying.

Now the apostle singles out (I make this remark for the purpose of a little help to the understanding of the general scope of the chapter) two gifts, one of which was slighted, the other overvalued, by the Corinthians. They slighted prophesying, because they were not in the least degree exercised about the enjoyment of God. They valued signs and tongues; and the apostle has given them various severe blows, from the beginning to the end of the epistle, as to their low condition in this very particular. In short, they were walking as men. They enjoyed intellectual exercise, lively speculations, sparkling flow of eloquence. All these things had charms for the Corinthian saints. I do not mean that it was not about scripture. Of course it may have been; but what they did not enjoy was God dealing with their souls. And the reason is plain. They were in an unbroken state. They were some of them getting litigious, others making light of heathen temples and sacrifices; there was disorder in worship, foundation-doctrine questioned, some of them (as we know) not even moral, gross sin being very slightly judged.

Well, as we saw, the apostle confronts these two gifts, prophesying and tongues, chiefly, because they are the antipodes, as it were, of one another -- speaking in a tongue being one of the lowest forms in which God's Spirit wrought, as prophesying is the highest. He censures them for their continually speaking with tongues in the assembly of God, while there was no real value felt for prophesying. How came this? They had started upon a false idea. Their notion being that the church was the place for the display of divine power, and speaking with tongues being one of the most striking and conspicuous proofs of God's power, it was, they thought, the most fitting display for the church of God. Not so, says the apostle, who therefore brings in, as a means to help him in what follows, the bearing of love. There is nothing so characteristic of God amongst His own as love. For we are not here speaking of love going out towards the rebellious, as for instance the gospel used in winning souls. It is remarkable, the gospel never occurs in this chapter, most precious as it is in its

own place. In the Epistle to the Ephesians the evangelist is an essential feature; and there accordingly the Lord puts him forward in a most important way, not merely as connected with souls but with the church. This ought not to be forgotten, the evangelist being one of those who are given “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). *Here* he disappears, because it is not the witness of love to the church, still less to the world, but the presence of God in the church before the world that is the point in our Epistle.

The Corinthian idea was that whatever displayed power in them before the world was the thing for the church. Not at all, says the apostle, and for this reason there is no love in it; and, consequently, as he shows here (ch. 14, v. 3), there is no comfort, nor anything that acts upon the soul to edification. This is the effect of divine love. There never can be real edification without divine love in some way or other being that which acts on the soul, or in which the soul itself is acting.

So the apostle brings these two gifts together at considerable length. He shows the perfect folly of these unknown tongues being dragged into the church simply because they were a display of divine power. But what follows? We have the striking way in which the Spirit is brought before us here in His action; and again, how saints, unquestionable saints, having unquestionable power in the Spirit of God, may after all be fighting against the will of God.

What a lively picture it gives us, first of all, of the fact that the Spirit of God is come down to *serve*. His action might be all perverted, but still He was there. He did not withhold these powers. This is a very solemn thought. It is not only full of comfort in what is good, but extremely humbling as to what is evil.

And now, on what does this wonderful fact rest, that the Holy Ghost is here and abides with us, and this forever? It is not because of the saints; but because of Christ and Christ’s redemption. This is the reason why no dark ways of men, no break-up of the church, drove Him away. The Spirit of God abode on and on; and will abide until the church is completed. Therefore it is no use for persons to say, “Where are those powers now?” This is not at all the question. The point is the presence of the Spirit Himself. But yet you will observe, when they had the power, there might be and was the greatest confusion. And when these powers are no longer displayed, what then? It is there unbelief comes in, and would ignore the grand truth of the presence of the Spirit in the church.

I ask you, beloved friends, can you say that God has taught you this truth; or are you indifferent about it? Is the presence of the Spirit that which brings you together to honor Him as Lord who died for you? I am sorry to say that it does not seem in many cases as if it were; for I am afraid that some of God’s children who have not sickness or other lawful hindrances, allow themselves just the breaking of bread, and no more, and so fail to magnify the Lord in His will and

ways, and hinder their own blessing immensely. If it were a question of persons who could not get out, or of those who had no other opportunity, it would be most worthy of love and respect for souls to be quietly bearing such trial and difficulty; but I confess to you that it is great pain where one sees brethren who only put in an appearance on Lord's day morning -- just keeping within the verge of that which entitles them to have their place in name, and no more. Precious as is the Supper of the Lord, when partaken of in the fellowship of saints, and according to the word of God, if thus it forms not only the staple but the whole of one's Christian service and worship in public at least, it seems to be only another form of Ritualism. The Lord does not deserve this at our hands; nor would He receive it from such as feel who it is that is waiting to meet us when we come together. And is the Lord there only when we break bread? Is He not there when we come together to join in prayer? Have we no petitions to offer? Or do we suppose that, because we do not take part actively, we have no place there?

It is indeed great forgetfulness of God, and of His working in all; for it is not only the great gifts, but, as we have it in Ephesians, "What *every* joint supplieth." It is not a question of chief men only, but what every one owes the rest. Surely, beloved friends, whatever may be the humble place that a saint of God has in the body of Christ, he *has* that place which is given him by God in the body -- the church. If scripture is believed, you cannot deny that it is a reality here; and if it be so, then there is not a joint in that body but what is meant, not merely to receive, but to supply good. No doubt, one great source of our weakness lies in the little faith that each saint has in the importance of his place to all the others. God is not working in the spiritual body, or in the natural one, entirely independent of the state and condition of the particular members. The spiritual body is a living body, and it is an intelligent body. In the house of God the Spirit dwells and acts. Is He not the "Spirit of power, of love, and of a sound mind?" and is that true of those only whose voice is heard in the meetings of the saints? Is it not true of every one in whom He dwells, of each one that is a constituent part of Christ's body, as every saint is?

Let us have more faith, therefore, in what God has written for the common blessing of all, and more confidence in the Lord using those that may be little or weak. Their presence is a great thing, and still more the activity of their souls when thus present. Our place is not to criticize, nor to be displeased at this or that, to indulge in partisanship or any work that would thus grieve the Spirit; for in either way we should be coming together for the worse and not for the better. When there is the *certainty* of God being there, and that we are each forming a part of that which glorifies Him, what a difference it makes! How is it? Why, because in love we are seeking the edification of all; and, I say again, that it is not only what is said or what is prayed, but the tone of all, too, which has a great

deal to do with it, the spirit in which we are there. Is it true, that when assembled we really are found in the truth of what we are there for -- our souls going out in prayer, worship, or whatever it may be? Inasmuch as it is a divine person that is present with us, He knows all hearts, and we need to look well to it how far we are hindering or helping on the object for which we come together -- the glory of Christ.

But as the Corinthians were childish in this matter of the tongues, the apostle rebukes them severely, and demands (verse 7) what the effect would be if all were a jargon of sound; using all this to convict them of the folly of that which was practically a mere jumble of undistinguishable sounds. That the speaker should be understood is pressed in repeated forms (vv. 11-17). Not that the apostle did not speak with more tongues than them all; but in the assembly he had rather speak five words with his understanding, that he might teach others, than ten thousand words in a tongue (vv. 18, 19). He brings it down to this point (v. 20), that they were only children as yet. "Brethren, be not children in understanding; howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men."

Whether it be individually or as an assembly, the end for which God has redeemed us is His own glory, and the way in which He forms us for that glory now is through One who is here with us on whom we are called to lean, whose work and delight it is to exalt and commend Jesus. He has sent the Spirit on whose action we are called to count, no matter what the difficulty may be. Now take, for example, a case of discipline: I mention that because you are familiar with it. How would this show itself in the assembly as contrasted with the ways of men, or with a company even, of God's children acting on human grounds? How would the latter decide it? At best they would try to settle it, after the facts had been brought before them, by a *majority*, by a show of votes. This is man's way. He knows no better, because the prominent idea is the *men* who are there, the *individuals* whose business it is to judge. How would faith in the presence of God -- of His Spirit, how would this influence such a matter? The case is brought before the assembly. There may be a difference in the minds of those present. The facts are stated. There is perhaps a sense before a word is said that there is something lacking. There is dead silence. A brother rises (for God would not have us depart from the order of His assembly; there may be some sisters who may have a simple spiritual judgment as truly as men, but they do not violate the order of God), who states that he feels a difficulty, and he suggests that it would be well to inquire, to wait on God a little further. The assembly bows. Discipline is a thing that may not be forced. It is not a question of a majority, but rather of God giving an intelligent conviction to the assembly. Accordingly there is a pause in the proceedings. The case is examined a little more fully. The point of doubt is looked into. God does not refuse His light. Facts are brought forward again; during the pause the truth is brought forth convincingly. The doubt

whether the case was not fully known, whether the sin under judgment was as grave as it appeared, is entirely removed. The facts are too plain; there is no doubt remaining any longer on the mind of any spiritual person; and discipline must take its course.

The church of God is entitled, by virtue of Him who is in it, to look for divine light; not to act in the dark, but to wait on God with the certainty of learning His own mind. Now, I do not deny that there may be in certain cases a mistake, but then there is always an intelligible ground for seeing how the mistake has been made. The assembly might act hastily, and this very thing would convict it; for supposing you show that in a certain case of discipline they have been too ready to act upon a single testimony, no wonder they have not had the guidance of the Lord. For it is a plain scriptural principle that “in the mouth of *two or three* witnesses shall every word be established.” It is an extremely humiliating thing when an assembly has to acknowledge that it has acted hastily; for the very fact of our being so gathered together is meant, as far as means can go, to correct what may be lacking in us as individuals. When really subject to the Lord, all is sure.

We are entitled, I say, to look for the guidance of God; but one quite admits there may be such a thing as a mistake. The assembly is no more infallible than an individual Christian. For what makes the assembly to be that of God is not that they are Christians, but that they have His presence there -- God present and left free to act by His own word. And this is the ground upon which we do look for guidance. But then the same thing is true of an individual. He has God’s presence in him, but does this make him infallible? The truth is, there is no such thing as infallibility except in God Himself; but then we must hold, that, so far as an individual waits upon God, he is proportionately guided; and, of course, so far as the assembly waits upon God, they enjoy the same gracious guidance. But there is no ground for anything like high pretension, or the notion that there may not be a mistake, through haste, on the part of the one or the other, though it is far less likely in the assembly. We have to pray that, just where apt to be hasty through over-confidence, there we might be made watchful; as, on the contrary, we must bear in mind that just because God’s grace has put us into the place of the church of God, in that place Satan is peculiarly anxious to lower, pervert, and dishonor the name of the Lord Jesus by our means.

This should teach us to lean on the Lord, and, as God’s assembly, seek to be faithful to His word. But it is most important to remember that God’s assembly as a whole is now in a state of ruin. I should not trust the man who held this precious truth of the presence of God in the church, without the sense of the condition of things at this present moment. We need this deeply; for where this is lost sight of, there is apt to be rashness, and such dangerous high-mindedness in the use of truth, as would leave us outside the action of the Spirit of God.

So with a person who is brought to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not merely that He is brought to God through faith. This is quite true; but there is that also which puts the soul in the dust in the confession of its total ruin, as truly as there is the sense of the blessedness into which it is brought. And so it is now, when God has not merely placed us in such intimate relations with Himself as an assembly, but has also shown us the state of the church generally. And of all persons on the face of the earth, we ought to remember it most.

But again we observe another point of interest. We see in the course of this chapter the fact coming out that in the assembly, as Paul knew it, you have the same kind of action as we are familiar with. We have singing, we have praying, and we have blessing. The grand center of the last was the table of the Lord, as we learn from the preceding chapters (10 and 11) Here, on the other hand, it is the action and presence of the Holy Spirit. But I would recall to you that we here read of just the same elements as are met with now, not all that then were, but as far as they go.

Coming to our subject, we see in this chapter that, powerfully as tongues might serve as a sign to unbelievers, what the apostle prefers a great deal is that which acts in and by the understanding of the believer. He takes particular pains to show that his feeling on the subject was not through jealousy, or because he had not so many gifts as they had. The apostle had no ground *personally* to decry in any way the gifts about which he was speaking; for (v. 18) he says, "I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all." But what he wanted was *edification*, that is, the building up of the saints. And the growth of the saints is inseparable from the activity of divine love on their behalf: This he therefore pressed. Whatever was not given for edification was unsuited to the church of God.

Here I may say as a principle, that this should guard us against any love of singularity amongst the saints of God -- such as, among the young, the vanity of preaching on hard scriptures. Now, no doubt, by dwelling on some such portions of the word of God, there may be a kind of factitious interest attached to it, or by giving some application of a plain text that no one else has heard of. It always seems to me uncommonly small; and, further, I cannot but think it really shows rather a want of self-judgment and of earnest desire for the edification of the saints of God. The thing we should wish is what will manifest God. Could one conceive of Christ doing such a thing? I find in our blessed Lord exactly the contrary. He was the absolute perfection of all grace and truth. How He takes the simplest fact, the most common subject of daily life! how He turns to account even the woman sweeping her kitchen floor, if I may so say, for a lost piece of silver; or the shepherd seeking for his lost sheep! The most trivial incidents in His hands are vehicles of the highest truths for the soul. For there it is where real power shows itself -- bringing God into them, and making them the witness of

His gracious interest in our souls. There is far more power when one sees in the most simple subject the dignity and grace of the Lord. It brings home to us God acting in Him. As for the other, it may be ingenious; but what if we never can trust it, whether it be true or not? How unlike God's ways!

But I merely mention this now, as giving a practical turn to the very principle that was then at work among the Corinthians. They were occupied with what would astonish and surprise, and not with that which would help the growth of the soul in the knowledge of God Himself:

The apostle comes now to another fact (v. 21). He draws attention to the scriptures in the Old Testament that speak of foreign tongues. Whenever God's people came in contact with these tongues, they had got all wrong. If Israel had remained in their integrity such strange sounds would have been kept far away. They were let loose on them when they departed from their true place. The Corinthians would do well to ponder, that foreign tongues in Israel's case had not a good connection; they might remind them of their folly and evil, being in no way an honor to the Jews.

Besides, for whom were the tongues meant? "Wherefore" (v. 22), "tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not." The Corinthians were using them for a display among believers -- most wrong and unintelligent. "But prophesying" -- that which they really slighted -- "serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe." This is its direct use. But now he shows another thing, that although prophesying is not in its direct use addressed to unbelievers, it may have a mighty effect on them, and in a way too that tongues could not have. This he puts in a pungent form (v. 23). "If therefore, the whole church be come together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?" Such would be the effect, supposing they were all speaking with tongues (and if it was good for one, it was for all). But (v. 24!) "if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all; and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest." The result is that he is constrained to say "God is there."

This is a point that I do impress on you as of the greatest importance for ourselves. We are called on to look to the Lord that we may not hinder the manifestation of God in the conscience even of an unbeliever. When we do come together as His assembly, let it never be that we may take part, but that He may work as He will, and by whom He will. Neither, again, let us be impatient. Our part is to count on Him; neither hindering others, nor refusing to go forward if He leads. Suppose that there is a silence that may be painful to some -- never surely a sign of the power of God there, but, on the contrary, that there is something which hinders -- still let us not doubt but believe. He knows how to try and humble as well as comfort. The main thing is to seek now His unailing

presence and action. In the long run He never disappoints as man always does. But we do not go to sit silently, but to worship audibly and be edified. Silence is quite exceptional. For our God is not a mute God, but One who has spoken to us, and who gives us now to speak for Him and to Him. The church of God therefore is in no way the witness of a dumb idol, but of the living and true God who is in the midst of it. We ought to desire when we come together that there should be no restraint; but even this is not so painful as the forwardness of those who would speak because there is an open door, not because God gives them the word.

We ought to pray then that, when we come together, God would manifest His presence there in our midst, and that nothing should be done that is not suitable to Him. It may be a very simple soul that He uses. I am sure that God can do it by one who has nothing of this world's learning, and that He loves to do so. But still we must cry up neither unlearned nor learned, or suppose that there is any particular virtue in the mere *circumstances* of the saints of God, though it is great witness that there is liberty in the assembly, when the simplest are welcome in their desires to edify. But this, remember, is for *God*, and not for *ourselves*. It is not done by giving out a hymn, or reading a chapter, because there is silence, and we can bear to wait no longer; nor is it because a particular chapter has blessed ourselves that it should be read. Why should not I be content to enjoy the chapter myself? Why bring it out then? Have I the assurance that *God* would have it to be read there? This is a very severe test; but surely, where it is God who gives the word, those who are spiritual would have the sense of it. Who is sufficient for these things? Our sufficiency is of God, who has given us His Spirit for this and all other ends in the church now.

The great thing, then, is the manifestation of *God's presence* in the assembly. It was, no doubt, an extreme case where the apostle supposes them *all* prophesying, but the principle is true in all cases. And we find, in fact, an important regulation as to this soon follows.

Another point we have in the 26th verse -- "How is it, then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation." Now the apostle does not condemn this. He leaves it as an open question, to be judged on spiritual principles. I do not say that he approves of it: he states the simple fact; but he now brings in what was to judge that fact on every occasion. What is the great criterion here? "Let all things be done to edifying." Could they say so? Could the man who had a psalm say that his motive was to edify, or the man who had a doctrine or the like? Let them search and see. There is One who knows the truth; and this One is pleased to act in the church of God. It is thus a challenge, as it were, to God where the soul dares in His presence to act out of its own will and inclination. Can anything be more solemn than for a person to take part in the assembly

unexercised, without continual self-judgment to see whether his motive arises from simple obedience to the will of God?

To press this would not hinder *God's* action, it would only question *our own*; and this is why God lays down the principle. It would give seriousness. A man should think of Him before he speaks or reads. He should not give out a hymn simply because it was a sweet one in itself, or a favorite of his own. All those things might be true; and they might be well enough in one's own home; but here God is acting with a view to the edification of the assembly, and the point is, Am I confident in my soul that it is *God* who is guiding me? Now, the apostle Peter lays this down most positively where he says, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God"; not merely according to the oracles of God. One might speak according to the scriptures, and yet be out of season; for in this he might be wrong, because it is not what God is giving then, for He alone knows what is best and for His glory. The meaning in fact is, If any man speak, let him speak as His oracle, or mouth-piece *then*. It is a serious thing for one's soul Am I sure that God would have this to be spoken *now*? Is it suited for God's assembly at *this* time? I ought to wait, if I am not sure about it. It is what the Spirit of God implies in the exhortation, "Let all things be done to edifying." But the later Scripture puts it expressly.

If there is solemnity on the one hand, there is also love and liberty on the other. If I am too much afraid, I must take care that I am not wrapping up in a napkin what is lent for the good of others. So we see one cannot escape from danger on either hand. The man who is always silent, because he is afraid, what witness is he of the grace that feeds the flock in due season? and on the other hand, the man who is always so ready to come forward, what witness is he? Alas! only of his own spirit, of his own self-confidence, nothing more. Hence what we have to look for is that *God* act here, and nothing should satisfy us short of that. The spiritual will appreciate it, and every child of God reaps the blessing, though the carnal would, no doubt, prefer what pampers man.

But, further, the apostle lays down (v. 27) that "If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, and at the most by three, and that by course, and let one interpret." If there were no interpreter, it had no business there. Edification is the rule absolute in God's assembly.

In due course we come to the other thing -- prophesying (v. 29). Surely you could not have too much prophesying! This is what he says, "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge." Why so? Because God is thinking of the edification of His assembly. Supposing half a dozen persons were to speak one after another, what would be the effect? Why it would really be too much of a good thing. It must be bewildering to many, particularly to the simpler saints; and God always thinks of the little ones: the stronger ones do not need so much His care, or, at least, not precisely in the same way. They might even get good

by it. But God, I repeat, thinks of the little ones; and what would perplex the simple or be too much God here forbids. "Let all things be done to edifying." So that, whilst the Spirit of God stops the strange tongues unless they could be turned to edification, He does not allow even prophesying beyond the measure that would be for the profit of all.

Then another thing laid down (v. 32) is that the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. Because what some of these Corinthians maintained (judging from the blow that is struck at it here) was that they could not *interfere* with prophesying. If any had the Spirit to speak, they *must* speak. Paul says to them, You are talking as men might who are possessed by spirits; that might be the case with a man under a demon; but is it so with the Spirit of God? The Spirit of God never puts a man, as it were, into a vice. He in His operation makes it no kind of *necessity*. In a moral way, He may lay it on the heart; but never do we find that a man is absolutely tied and obliged to speak. Balaam might have been in an extraordinary manner forced to give an utterance, just as his ass then spoke under that imperative power; but surely no one would speak of either as being analogous to the action of the Holy Ghost in God's assembly.

No, the Corinthians who said or pretended (as an excuse for their love of hearing themselves speak so often) that it was a necessity, were all wrong. This is a most important principle, and that too on the side of good, as well as a warning on the side of evil. For, as the 30th verse tells us, "If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace." Revelation had this simple place of superiority over anything else. The scripture was not yet all revealed. "For (v. 31) ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." No power delivers from responsibility to the Lord in the use of the power; and He who is Lord has regulated the due use of each gift by His word, as here by the apostle's Spiritual power must subserve His lordship and bow to His authority. Irresponsible or irresistible power is not of the Holy Spirit.

In v. 34 we hear of one class, and only one in the church of God, who are not allowed to take any part in public, viz., the women. Not that God does not give as precious gifts to women as to men; but whatever gifts be given them to exercise, it is not in the assembly that they are to be manifested. I am aware that some have used this as a reason for women preaching. The idea of women preaching to the world was an irregularity not even yet contemplated. It is not supposed that woman had so completely forgotten the propriety of nature. No Corinthian even wished women to go with unblushing face before the world, nor yet pleaded the case of "perishing sinners" as an excuse for forfeiting that retirement which always becomes a woman.

As for the women spoken of here, they might have argued thus -- and I

suppose they did: -- "If we cannot preach, surely we might speak in such a holy place as the assembly. There the men will not misunderstand, or impute it to any want of decorum." If there was any place at all where women might speak, it surely was in the assembly. But it is forbidden there -- not meaning by this that, they were free to preach before the world, but that they might not speak *anywhere* publicly, not *even* in the assembly. I grant you that in their own homes or with women, there is a place; or a married woman might speak with her husband; but in the assemblies of the saints, I repeat, even there it was forbidden. What therefore was to be done? "If they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (v. 35). He does not suppose that the young unmarried ones even wished to speak in the assembly, but only the elder ones. Of course, the younger ones would ask their parents.

"What," continues he, "came the word of God out from you, or came it unto you only?" The word of God comes out from no church, and it comes to no saints exclusive of others. What a principle, and how deep-reaching and important for all! The reverse of this is what the church has always desired in one form or another. I do not know a single society that is called a church of man that has not sought to originate what ought to have been left to the word of God. ² When a church lays down its rules, when it formulates its beliefs, when it puts forth anything to be acted upon for discipline, or government, or doctrine, which is not in simple subjection to the word of God, it falls into the same error that the Corinthian church is here guarded against. It is evident that this church was really (not in the form, of course, but in principle) the progenitor of the present disorderly condition that exists in Christendom from the Pope down to the smallest sect of Protestantism. For what we find in the Epistle is, not that the Corinthian church was the only place where these gifts of the Holy Ghost were, but the place where He was interfered with, where much was perverted, where human principles were allowed to hinder the blessed action of the Spirit of God. To their charge accordingly was laid interference with the *Lord's* place.

For there are two grand principles in the chapter, both working in connection

2. Take the Congregationalists, who used to take their stand on the sufficiency of scriptures. Yet even they always fail at the first step, the choice of a preacher or pastor by the votes of the congregation. This being absolutely unrecognized in scripture, and in principle wholly opposed to what is found there (which shows the Lord giving gifts and God setting in the church as He will), decided the late Mr. Isaac Taylor, of Ongar, to abandon dissent. But it is certainly no improvement to admit the choice of a bishop or the nomination of a patron. Apostles, or their delegates, did choose or appoint elders; but they, according to scripture, have no successors. The gifts were always immediate from the Lord, and never required human appointment. *He* abides to give, not they to choose. Christendom pretends to choose without authority, and despises the gifts of Christ, save where they fall under its own unfounded and unscriptural usurpation.

with the central truth of God's presence in the assembly. Around that uniting fact are these two guards -- "Let all things be done to edifying" (v. 26), and "Let all things be done decently and in order" (v. 40): one, the working of the power of divine grace, and the other correcting and guarding the display of it; that, whatever might be done in the desire for edification, there should be submission to the authority of the Lord Jesus. The church is for His glory, edification the aim, and this in comely order according to the word of the Lord.

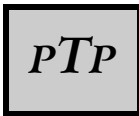
It is instructive to remark here, as has been often done before, that no elders appear to have been as yet in Corinth. Such there were in many of the assemblies; and they were of course desirable in all when the due time was come. But in Corinth none are spoken of, where, if anywhere, it would be reasonable to hear of them. This is of great moment, because it proves that they are in no way essential to what God addresses as His assembly. In the most ecclesiastical of the Epistles, where church discipline, both in putting out and in restoring, are most developed, where we have the fullest light as to the Lord's Supper and the assembly of God, elders are ignored, and, as I believe, evidently were not. But it is mere ignorance to conclude that, where elders were, as at Ephesus, etc., the gifts were not exercised, or that the assembly of God was not looked to act as in 1 Cor. 12 and 14. The happy thought is that, when there are no apostles to choose, the Lord continues the presence of His Spirit. Have we faith to act on the ground of His assembly? But the one-man ministry, when used (as it is in Christendom) to deny His action by whom He will, and this in His assembly, is as unscriptural as the Papacy. They are guilty of impiously implying a change in the apostle's mind, who try to pervert 1 Timothy or Titus, or Revelation 1-3, so as to neutralize 1 Corinthians as well as to justify the device of the one-man minister. But it is all vain. Scripture, being divine and of course consistent, cannot be broken; and the Lord is speedily coming to judge the many idols of those who bear but deny His name.

Thus then we have the presence of the Spirit of God making good the precious truth that God is in the assembly. There is the activity of His love in seeking the edification of His saints as the motive, but there must also be no infringement of the commandments of Him who is Lord (v. 37). All these canons were no doubt written by the apostles, but they are none the less His commandments. The word of God comes *to* the Corinthian church -- it does not originate thence. Further, it comes not to these saints *only*, but to all. The place of the church is never to teach but to bow to the word of God. The church has no authority in such matters -- it can originate neither doctrine nor government. The church's place is to be subject, and this of course to the Lord. It is not exactly that the church is under the presidency of the Spirit of God: this I believe to be an unscriptural expression. The *Lord* is in that place; and hence the apostle brings in the *Lord* where it is a question of authority. The Spirit has taken the

place rather of service; and hence (as pointed out the last time I spoke), where operations are brought in, the *Spirit of God* works all in power, but where it is a question of authority, it is the Lord Jesus. He it is accordingly whom the Spirit gives us to know as in authority over us when we come together, as at all other times. But we have to guard against the snare of those who avail themselves of Jesus being Lord, to deny that the Spirit both divides sovereignly and works all in all.

Let us be careful, while we seek only what is for edification, that all things be done decently and in good order, our aim being the promotion of the glory of the Lord Jesus. Let us judge ourselves continually by the standard of the word, and, in particular, the assembly by these special scriptures which apply to it.

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