

Spirit-Graces and Unity & Diversity at Corinth:

An Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

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Introduction

For Paul's words about the *source* (God) and *purpose* (communal edification) of *charismata* to be heard today, we must appreciate and respect the range of possible interpretive options for the key words and concepts within this short but weighty passage – which has been pushed in many an interpretive direction.

Context

This 'gifts'¹ passage comes in a passionate letter to a proud *ekklesia* ('church', 'assembly' or 'gathering'). Paul's intent throughout is to under-cut their boasting by 'reframing' their cherished 'hallmarks' such as *sophia* (wisdom) and *gnosis* (knowledge) as *charismata* ('unmerited gifts').² From 1:5 (“...you have been enriched in him, in speech [*logos*] and knowledge [*gnosis*] of every kind” NRSV – see **Appendix I** for the usage of key terms in 12:4-11 throughout the letter), Paul seems to be building up to what appears to be a (the?)³ major issue he will deal with in chapters 12-14 – the Corinthians' use of *glossa* (tongues).

At 12:1, Paul has raised – or responded to – the topic of 'spirituals'⁴ and laid down the Christological standard for spirit-inspired speech; a brilliant introduction to a 3-chapter-long⁵ stream of skillful rhetoric primarily dealing with the Corinthian mis-use of *glossa*. Having distinguished in 12:1-3 between what kind of utterances belong to the Spirit, and those which never can, Paul offers a sampling of other things that are given and energized by the Spirit in 12:4-11.

Before establishing love as the criterion for true spirituality (ch 13) and addressing the need for order and edification in their gatherings (ch 14), Paul innovatively employs the *soma* (body)

1 Called "grace-gifts" by Garland, *1 Corinthians*.

2 Strom, *Reframing Paul*, 194

3 Garland suggests tongues as *the* subject of ch 12-14, *1 Corinthians*, 559

4 Thiselton points out Paul's intentional transition from '*pneumatikon*' (Corinthians' prize) to '*charismaton*' (Paul's point), *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; see also Ekem, ““Spiritual gifts" or "spiritual persons"?”; and also cf. Horsley, “Pneumatikos vs. Psychikos Distinctions of Spiritual Status among the Corinthians.”

5 Or the entire 5-chapter section? See Smalley, “Spiritual Gifts and I Corinthians 12-16,” 427.

Verses 8-10

The subsequent (non-comprehensive¹⁵) nine-item listing has been categorised in many ways: according to “headings hinted at” in 4-6,¹⁶ according to 'natural'/'supernatural',¹⁷ most to least important,¹⁸ according to use of *allos* and *heteros*,¹⁹ and others.²⁰ But as Fee says, Paul's emphasis is not on distinguishing categories for the gifts,²¹ but on their variety and origin.²² We will treat them as follows: word of wisdom and word of knowledge; faith; gifts of healings and miracles; prophecy and discernment of spirits; kinds of tongues/languages and interpretation of tongues/languages.

The **word of wisdom** (*logos sophias*) and the **word of knowledge** (*logos gnoseos*)²³ are both 'verbal' and 'insight' related, and have been thought to be related to understanding and proclaiming the Christian message from the Hebrew Scriptures.²⁴ They are often thought to be a spontaneous, supernatural insight, but Fee (while not denying the potential for that kind of activity) questions that for our passage.²⁵ The *modus operandus* of these gifts may not be clear, but their *source* (God) and *content and/or character* (wisdom and knowledge) is.²⁶

The gift of **faith** (*pistis*) does not refer to 'saving faith',²⁷ but to either the faith to endure severe hardship or related to miracles. Blomberg's balanced definition: 'faith' is “a special measure of faith that God can work miracles... or to sustain a person when he chooses not to work them.”²⁸

Gifts of healings (*charismata iamaton*) and **working of 'powers'/miracles** (*energemata*)

access to divine mind', Hunt, *The Inspired Body*, 112; against 'claims' and 'anxieties' to 'status differences', Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 933-934

15 Contra to common talk of 'the 9 spiritual gifts', see Fee *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 164; and *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 585-586.

16 Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 165

17 Fee says "emphasis [here] is on the supernatural.", *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 591; and Garland (following Carson, 1987) who sees the list as mixed, *1 Corinthians*, 580

18 Mare, '1 Corinthians' in “The Expositor's Bible commentary. with the New international version of the Holy Bible Volume 10,” (ed. Gaibelein) 262.

19 With *allos* (another of a same kind) and *heteros* (another of a different kind) creating an A-B-A (word-deed-word) structure, Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 244.

20 Thiselton refers to a 3-3-3 structure (Weiss & Allo), a 2-5-2 structure (Collins) and a categorisation between gifts related to 1) intellectual power, 2) special energy of faith, and 3) language, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 937

21 Thiselton, “The "interpretation" of tongues,” 35

22 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 587

23 Two oft-used words in this epistle - *sophia* esp. in chs. 1-3, and *gnosis* esp. in chs. 8 & 12. (See Appendix I)

24 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 593; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 943

25 Fee notes that Paul would likely have used revelation-language (*apokalupsis*) for such spontaneous phenomenon, Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 592

26 Ibid, 592.

27 Mare, '1 Corinthians' in “The Expositor's Bible commentary. with the New international version of the Holy Bible Volume 10,” (ed. Gaibelein) 262; Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 285

28 Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 244; see also Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 593

dunamaton) – are likely over-lapping concepts (healing a specific example of miracles in general). That these gifts are listed in plural may signify non-permanence (to one person, such as a 'healer'²⁹), suggesting that each healing or miracle is “a gift in its own right.”³⁰ Thiselton provides a wide and inclusive scope of meaning for these gifts.³¹ They almost certainly refer to miraculous or supernatural phenomena and as such are inevitably understood according to one's worldview and experience.³² Various commentators offer helpful and balanced guidance against assumptions from either extreme positions.³³

The nature, role and reality of these gifts have been hotly debated, and Cessationism³⁴ has been challenged by a wide variety of scholars, whether Pentecostal, 'Charismatic' or otherwise. Fee's critique is apt: “[S]uch rejection is not exegetically based, but results in every case from a prior hermeneutical and theological commentment.”³⁵

Prophecy (*propheteia*) and the **discerning of spirits** (*diakriseis pneumatikon*) is another pair that could well be linked. Prophecy had both Greek and Jewish influence, but for Paul it is understandable speech to the gathered *ekklesia* for edification and encouragement³⁶ (cf. Ch. 13-14) and as such is more valued and desired than 'languages/tongues'.³⁷ It has often been thought to be spoken while in an ecstatic, or 'trance-like' state,³⁸ but this was not necessarily the case, and Paul certainly viewed prophets as “in control”.³⁹

29 On the 'healer' not necessary being the gifted one, Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 947

30 Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 166

31 "The kinds may appear to include sudden or gradual, physical, psychosomatic, or mental, the use of medication or more 'direct' divine agency, and variations which are not to be subsumed in advance under some stereotypical pattern of expectation." Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 948; Pinnock adds, "[healings] that are granted point to the coming kingdom but do not replace the need for complete renewal." *Flame of Love*, 136.

32 Unfortunately, to even begin to properly treat such hugely relevant, important and detailed topics as epistemology and worldviews would take us far afield from our purposes here.

33 Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 249-250; Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 167; See also Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 137; and further Chafin, *Mastering the New Testament.*, 149.

34 Stitzinger provides a fair representation of the cessationalist view: “Discerning Christians who embrace *the biblical teaching of cessationism*, must take this matter seriously, since almost every branch of evangelical Christianity has embraced some form of charismatic theology.”(emphasis mine) and “The pursuit of charismatic theology today has all but drowned out *clear biblical exposition* on this vital issue.”(emphasis mine), Stitzinger, “Spiritual gifts.”

35 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 600; see also Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 132.

36 Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 170-171; Barrett suggests that it is the "instructive discourse" which is the actual spiritual gift, not the wisdom or knowledge behind it, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*.

37 Dodd, *The Meaning of Paul for Today.*, 155

38 Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 286

39 Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 171; on Greek-Hellenistic background and its possible influence on Corinthians, see Callan, “Prophecy and Ecstasy in Greco-Roman Religion and in 1 Corinthians,” 128, 140; see also Gillespie, “A Pattern of Prophetic Speech in First Corinthians,” 74, 95.

Prophetic utterances were also to be held up to apostolic teaching⁴⁰ by those present – thus the link between prophecy and discerning of spirits. Fee again: “As tongues need to be interpreted, so prophecy needs to be discerned.”⁴¹ Discernment of spirits, then, can be seen as a testing of prophecy, where the 'spirits' (plural)⁴² are “prophetic utterances that need to be 'differentiated' by the others in the community who also have the Spirit and can so discern what is truly of the Spirit.”⁴³

Kinds of languages/tongues (*gene glosson*) and the **interpretation of languages/tongues** (*ermeneia glosson*) are understood vastly differently.⁴⁴ The Corinthian use (and understanding?) of *glosson* is problematic:⁴⁵ when they are used, some, most or all present do not understand and are not edified. Paul's corrective response: 1) strive for prophecy, 2) always interpret *glosson* in the gathering (for edification) and 3) limit speakings to 2-3 (for order).

As for the Corinthians' practice and/or understanding of *glosson* and also Paul's corrective advice concerning it, different commentators speak with different levels of certainty with different conclusions and emphases.⁴⁶ The major questions revolve around the nature of *glosson* itself.⁴⁷

40 On broad spectrum of prophetic activity, from authoritative apostolic decree to tested statements within gatherings, see Turner, “Spiritual Gifts Then and Now,” 16.

41 Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 171; concurring is Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 286.

42 On plural 'spirits', see discussion on helpfulness of Jewish v. Athanasian-Cappadocian views to illuminate NT language in Tibbs, “The spirit (world) and the (holy) spirits among the earliest Christians,” 330; on 'good' v. 'bad' spirits, see Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 29

43 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 597

44 Given a) the vast amount of discussion of *glossolalia*, and b) the fact that this is not an exegesis on chapter 14, the discussion of tongues will be kept to a summary level appropriate for exegesis of the present passage.

45 Relevant verses all outside our passage, mostly in Chs. 13 and 14.

46 Barrett on *glosson*: “inspired unintelligible speech”, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 299-300; Bittlinger on *glosson*: content is prayer, thanksgiving, intercession, declaring mighty works of God, speaking to God, *Gifts and Graces*, 51; Blomberg on *glosson*: not Pentecost tongues; may or may not have had discernable linguistic structure; glossa broad enough semantic range to cover any audible vocalization, *1 Corinthians*, 245; Fee (Pentecostal theologian) on *glosson*: ‘language of angels’, use for private enjoyment & public with interpretation (thorough treatment, though no detailed analysis of ‘interpretation’ given), *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 572-598; and *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 148-170; Garland on *glosson*: natural part of Christian experience, but not for everyone; ‘language’ not ‘babbling’; to God, not humans; possibly ‘angelic language’; rational mind not engaged, but person ‘in control’, no mention of ecstasy; status indicator for Corinthians – additional problem to unintelligibility; possibly ‘groanings too deep for words’, *1 Corinthians*, 584; Grosheide on *glosson*: “the speaking of a miraculous spiritual language that had its own sounds” (goes far beyond text in description), *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 288-289; Thiselton on *glosson*: not just ‘one thing’, Paul takes pains to refer to different ‘species’; critical of ‘angelic language’ idea, “[O]ther reasons for unintelligibility and transcendent God-directed nature... more readily suggest themselves, especially... ‘sighs too deep for words’”; possibility of foreign language, “[S]ome would be present who would not know Greek or Latin and would require a translation.”; (following Theissen) Paul, Corinthians and *glossolalists* in G-R world all understood *glossolalia* differently, but with points of overlap; and concluding, *glossolalia* is “the language of the unconscious – language capable of consciousness”; (far and away most thoughtful and thoroughgoing treatment), *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 970-988.

47 Among commentators surveyed, little or no detailed treatment on 'interpretations' was found, which could indicate an incoherency with some notions of the nature of *glossolalia*.

Verse 11

Paul then repeats the emphasis on the source of all the charismata – the one and same Spirit, adding that these distributions are the Spirit's choice. Fee puts it well, “This is the Pauline version of ‘the wind/Spirit blows where it/he wills’” (John 3:8).”⁴⁸

Summary

To the Corinthians divided over *pneumatikon*, Paul wrote about unity concerning *charismaton* (v 4). All at Corinth – not just the spiritually elite - had been enriched by the same spirit, lord and God, (v 4-6) leaving no room for boasting. Those with prized abilities (v 8-10) had them as a result of the same divine *charis* that had also given other less-desired abilities to any and all for their collective (not individual) good (v 7). The Spirit graces people with gifts as He chooses (v 11) and is no respecter of persons.

Application

The modern 'find-out-which-spiritual-gift-you've-got' approach⁴⁹ and the reality of continual division over 'the gifts' are both examples of utterly missing Paul's point. If unity within diversity is the unifying theme of this passage, all modern applications of it must also revolve around this theme. A few closing points:

- *Unity* is not *uniformity*, and *diversity* should not bring *division*. The differences of emphasis, interpretation, experience and expression reflected in both Sunday meetings and speaking or writing of all kinds *must not be allowed to separate what God has joined together*. To put it another way, views on *charismata* must not be allowed *centrality* or to become the *defining characteristic* of a community.⁵⁰
- Christians need not feel 'restrained' or 'hindered' by order or liturgy. Spontaneity and ecstasy are no more 'spiritual' than planning and solemnity.⁵¹ Ecstatic⁵² experiences might be most

48 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 599.

49 Berding, “Confusing Word and Concept in “Spiritual Gifts” ,” 51

50 The view that miracles have 'ceased' – or don't happen at all – is perhaps just as divisive and arrogant (not to mention biblically irresponsible) as the view that only 'true' Christians 'speak in tongues'.

51 Somewhat contra to Pinnock's strong appeals, *Flame of Love*, 134, though he is fairly balanced in general.

52 Paul's precise view of ecstasy itself is uncertain, but it certainly should not have any higher degree of spirituality attached to it.

appropriate in private, as it may well be somewhat antithetical to gathering for the purpose of being *with one another*.

- Both anti-supernaturalism and hyper-supernaturalism are both subverted by Paul's reminder (v. 7) that God is the one who work all things in all people.⁵³ That God's power is seen both through his quiet, gentle and continual⁵⁴ work in all creation as well as through powerful signs of the coming restoration can be an oft-needed reminder to those at both extremes.⁵⁵
- Whatever form it takes, spiritual elitism must be confronted with both grace and boldness – following Paul's example. His critique is patient, yet direct – and centered on love.

53 On God's ability to spiritually gift people who may not even know it, see Bittlinger, *Gifts and Graces*, 25; and Kärkkäinen (on Moltmann), “Moltmann insists that the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts for service in the world, for example, prophetic speech in liberation and ecology movements.” Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 129

54 See Bittlinger on '*didotai*' in 12:8: “[It] denotes a present continual sense... The believer is constantly filled anew with the Holy Spirit. (You can compare this to the universe; the elements of the atom are constantly being renewed. Matter does not exist as something that *is*, but as something that is *happening*.)”(emphasis his), *Gifts and Graces*, 24.

55 Again, often deriving from an exaggerated and/or false anti-thesis of 'natural' and 'supernatural', e.g. Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 137

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Appendix I

Key Greek roots from 12:4-11 & their appearance per chapter in 1 Corinthians

chapter	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
<i>charis...</i> (grace/gift)	2	1					1					5			2	1
<i>diak...</i> (service)	1											1				1
<i>energ...</i> (workings)												4				1
<i>logo...</i> (word)	2	4		2								2		4	2	
<i>soph...</i> (wise/wisdom)	14	7	6			1						1				
<i>gnos...</i> (knowledge)	1			1				6				1	4	1	1	
<i>pist...</i> (faith/trust)	2	1or2		2			1			1	1	1	3		2	1
<i>iama...</i> (healing)												3				
<i>dunam...</i> (power/miracle)	2	2		2	1	1						3		1	3	
<i>proph...</i> (prophecy)											2	2	3	13		
<i>diakr...</i> (discern/distinguish)				1		1					1	1		1		
<i>glos...</i> (tongue/language)												4	2	15		
<i>ermen...</i> (interpret/translate)												2		5		

Appendix II

διαρεσεις δε χαρισματων
εισιν το δε
αυτο πνευμα
και διαρεσεις διακονιων
εισιν και ο
αυτος κυριος
και διαρεσεις ενεργηματων
εισιν ο δε
αυτος εστιν θεος ο ενεργων τα παντα εν πασιν

εκαστω δε διδοται
η φανερωσις
του πνευματος
προς το συμφερον

ω μεν γαρ δια
του πνευματος διδοται
λογος σοφιας
αλλω δε
λογος γνωσεως
κατα το αυτο πνευμα
ετερω δε
πιστις
εν τω αυτω πνευματι
αλλω δε
χαρισματα ιαματων
εν τω αυτω πνευματι
αλλω δε
ενεργηματα δυναμεων
αλλω δε
προφητεια
αλλω δε
διακρισεις πνευματων
ετερω δε
γενη γλωσσων
αλλω δε
ερμηνεια γλωσσων
παντα δε ταυτα
ενεργει το εν και το αυτο πνευμα
διαιρουν ιδια εκαστω καθως βουλεται