

Jesus, Light Given to Us

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Dear holy ones,

We frequently speak of Jesus as the greatest Christmas gift that's been given. It becomes an act of piety for us as Christians to think of the giving of our many individual Christmas gifts as a reflection of God's one-time giving of this single greatest gift. That's good. Continue to think that way. But don't let it stop after Christmas. We've been given this great gift. Are we going to leave it sitting on a shelf? It was concern for this great neglect that St. Paul wrote to the saints at Corinth: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed." Jesus has gone out as a light for the nations, but more than that, he is a **light given to us**.

I. A Mighty Gift Found in One Place

"There are two types of people in the world." You hear that sentence in movies, read it in books, hear it from deep thinkers. And each time you hear it, it seems to end a different way. There are, it seems, countless ways to divide humanity into two groups. Clint Eastwood said, "There are two kinds of people in the world: those with loaded guns, and those who dig."¹ We could also say, "There are two types of people in the world: Pepsi-lovers and Coke-lovers." St. Paul gives us the divide, however, that really matters:

¹ Clint Eastwood, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, 1966.

“I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” So there are two types of people in the world: those in the Spirit, and those not in the Spirit. Paul wishes to emphasize to the saints at Corinth, as well as the saints sitting here and listening to the Word: you are in the Spirit, you’ve been given that gift. So look like it. He applied this directly to them, saying, “You know that when you were pagans,” that is, those who are *not* in the Spirit of God, “you were led astray to mute idols,” to idols which cannot help you confess any truth, especially not the truth that Jesus is Lord, “however you were led.”

There are all sorts of paths a person can take in this life. Imagine hypothetically that you can be one who is not on any of those paths. Imagine yourself looking down at all the world’s different ways, all the different philosophies and religions that are possible. You can approach it as a buffet, you can select which one suits you best. Maybe the peaceful intellectualism and selflessness of Buddhism is attractive. Maybe the absoluteness of Islam is comforting. Maybe the respect for the natural world of Wicca seems right. But Paul says now, “however you were led,” knowing that there are countless ways that a person can be “led astray,” notice that word, “astray to mute idols.” “All roads lead to Rome,” as they say. So, “however you were led,” as a pagan “you were led astray to mute idols.” “*Therefore,*” says God’s Word, “no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed,’” here is the divide between the two types of people, “and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” All these other roads lead to mute idols, whose confessions are useless. But only one road leads to true

confession, true faith, faith in Jesus as Lord, and as St. John says, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15), and as St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

Thus, there are two types of people in the world: those in the Spirit of God who confess Jesus as Lord, and those led astray to mute idols, however they are led. Now think of these two groups as being divided by a line. Imagine if you could stand on that line and look both directions, as though it were a border between two states. Coming into the right, the way to the group which confesses Jesus as Lord, there is only one road, “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life” (Matt. 7:14). But crossing over to the left, “astray to mute idols,” there are countless roads, “For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many” (Matt. 7:13). So to the left, you see hundreds, thousands of branching roads all funneling down to one ultimate end: destruction. But to the right you see one road, the road of faith in Jesus, and it, if you understand Paul correctly, leads into a beautiful country all lit by one and the same Spirit, but simultaneously is divided into dozens, hundreds, thousands of branching roads, all already within that life. This is what he means when he says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” The road you’re on, confessing, “Jesus

is Lord!" leads unwaveringly to salvation. The road is marked by the signpost of Jesus' cross, on which he died,

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard. (Col. 1:19-23)

Hear and believe the Gospel of this sacrifice of Christ: this is the Holy Spirit working in you. This is the first great and mighty gift. Paul speaks of "spiritual gifts," and the word he uses is *χαρίσματα* — "gracious gifts or abilities from God."² It's plural, and it's varied, having different shades depending on where you find it, but it is derived from a much more important word, which is singular, and is essential to all who are saved: *χάρις* — grace. So Paul, when he answers questions about the *χαρίσματα*, emphasizes that the first and greatest spiritual gift is "the Holy Spirit himself, through whom we confess Jesus as Lord," and then, derived from that gift, filtered down in individual ways that differ from person to person, "there are varieties of gifts," all "parceled out" for the common good.³

II. Varieties of Gifts for the Common Good

This is a variety in unity, and Paul emphasizes how believers can all look and behave so differently and yet be equally saved by referring to the Trinity of the

² *Lutheran Study Bible*, p. 1902, "gifts."

³ Lenski 495.

Godhead: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same *Spirit*; and there are varieties of service, but the same *Lord*; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same *God* who empowers them all in everyone.” The Trinity is here listed inverse from our usual order: Spirit – Son – Father. With the reference to the “Spirit,” he emphasizes the source of these gifts; with the mention of the “Lord,” that is, Jesus, the Son, he emphasizes the purpose of these varieties of service; and with the mention of “God,” that is, the Father, he emphasizes the power of these activities.

Paul’s purpose is to show us how we should not boast about our gifts – how absurd would that be! – for gifts are, *ipso facto, given*: they *belong* to a higher source and power for a preordained purpose. And therefore these many gifts are acted through the many individuals for many forms of service. God is a great alchemist, having countless jars and vessels and beakers (us), and into the appropriate container he pours the appropriate gift – this leaves us in between two extremes: we do not boast about our individual gifts, for each one has been given his appropriate gift from God, and we do not envy any other’s gift, for we have been given what is appropriate to us, and our neighbors have been given what is appropriate to them. And just as these diversified gifts all have one source, so that one source works them all for a unified purpose: “for the common good.” “To each,” says Paul, to every Christian, “is given the manifestation of the Spirit,” because all these individual gifts are distinct workings of the same Spirit, appropriately manifested for each individual Christian, “for the common good,” the unified Christian Church being built up by the individual gifts, service, and activities of each individual within her. And then he lists several gifts:

“Utterance of wisdom” and “utterance of knowledge” are related, but distinct. Wisdom is “all the gracious, heavenly, and efficacious thoughts of God embodied in Christ Jesus for the enlightenment of our souls...the gospel.”⁴ Knowledge, on the other hand, is “the personal apprehension of the details of the gospel...the explanation, the unfolding, and the correlation of gospel facts, or we may call them doctrines.”⁵ We could say that the gift of knowledge is that of the dogmaticians who can write textbooks for the training of theologians, while the gift of wisdom is that of preachers who can apply the knowledge to the lives of the people.

“Faith” is reliance on God in time of need, which makes one capable of accomplishing what was otherwise impossible, “For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matt. 17:20). These impossible activities are listed in the next few gifts: “gifts of healing” and “the working of miracles,” both of which are supernatural aid effected by God, *at his command*, through us earthly vessels, as demonstrations of the Gospel; “prophecy,” supernatural aid effected by God, again *at his command*, through us earthly vessels, as communications of his Gospel will; “the ability to distinguish between spirits,” the ability to check the healings, miracles, and prophecy, to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1), in a way that is beyond common Christian ability.

⁴ Lenski 500.

⁵ Ibid., 501.

“Various kinds of tongues” cannot be necessarily considered the miraculous giving as at Pentecost, but is simply the ability to speak other languages, just as “the interpretation of tongues” is the ability to understand other languages, to interpret whether the one who speaks, speaks the truth.

These are just a few gifts that the Spirit gives. Wisdom and knowledge are spoken to strengthen the faith of believers. Faith is demonstrated, sometimes through miracles, sometimes through healings, sometimes through prophecy, sometimes through distinguishing these, to provide a community of faithfulness for the faithful to be at home in. Tongues and the interpretation of tongues help the spread of this Spirit through his Gospel to all nations. Your personal gifts may not be found in this list, but you can be absolutely certain that whatever gifts you have, they “are empowered by one and the same Spirit” for the same “common good.”

Since Christ by His blood has purchased [his people] entirely for Himself, it is self-evident that they should place themselves entirely, with everything they have, into His service. This is what Scripture expects of Christians...and Christians are minded, according to the new man, to do so.... However, the old man draws them in the opposite direction and, misusing the doctrine of grace, urges Christians to neglect good works.... Christians should not be satisfied with having performed this or that good work, but they should become rich in good works.... They should not sit at home and wait to be importuned to do good works, but they should go out and seek opportunities to do good works; they should be ‘zealous of good works’ (Titus 2:14, 2 Cor. 8:4), never ‘weary in well doing’ (Gal. 6:9).⁶

⁶ Pieper, *Dogmatics III*, 47-48.

All these many χαρίσματα are drawn and filtered out to each individual Christian from the essential χάρις that belongs to us all. We have been saved. We are freed from sin by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified for us, the grace that leads “to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:21). We are freed from sin, from those “mute idols” to whom we are bound by nature, the idols of sin, Satan, and ourselves among them. And now we can speak in the Spirit: we are in the Spirit able to confess, “Jesus is Lord,” marking ourselves as saved, and this also means that we are able to work to build up the Church, each in our own individual ways. Look at this church in which you sit, this church made up of fellow believers like yourself. All of you, each and every one of you, have been given the grace necessary for salvation. You’ve been given the single greatest gift, and countless other gifts as well. Consider the use of those gifts a reflection of the great gift you’ve been given, for each time you utilize your spiritual gifts for the common good, you are reflecting the gift of God’s grace, and presenting the Gospel of Christ to those who need him again and again.

Amen.