

## “Spiritual Things (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 12:1) and Gifts of Grace (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 12:4)”

CUI Chapel Service, Tuesday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. The Christian Church at Corinth -- not unlike the Church today in many instances -- was characterized by one of the most basic signs of sin having come into the world and much to our great alarm, even into the Church itself: division. Division in many cases is quite simply a calamity. In our lives whether it is the division we see in a marriage or a family, division caused biologically when cancer invades the body, or psychological division of doubts about who we are, why we are here, and where we are going, or spiritual division when yes to this day demons are active in trying to tear us away from Jesus Christ, division is depressing and painful.

And to be sure the Corinthian Church was divided: their worship towards the Lord was divided in that they were committing idolatry; false worship while wanting to mix the worship of demons with the worship of God; their fellowship and communion were divided even as some of them were drunk in coming to the Lord's Supper; and they were also experiencing some very divisive ideas about what is commonly referred to as “spiritual gifts.” Exactly how would this contribute to divisiveness? The answer is because they were more interested in showing off than in using these gifts for the edification of the church (Theodoret of Cyr, ACC, 117).

And that of course is the great problem when it comes to “showing off” or acting as if what you are capable of doing is from *yourself*, *your* power, *your* skill. When we do so in the sense that we begin to treat our God-given gifts as personal possessions dependent on human initiative, then we lose touch with the real meaning of what St. Paul was teaching about. If you want to really put this in perspective: if you think you have such and such a gift at this moment in time, then consider: since that gift or those gifts are from the Holy Spirit who works “when and where He pleases,” there is absolutely no guarantee that the gift “you have” today is the gift you’ll have tomorrow. None. The duration, quality, and effect of spiritual things from God and gifts of grace are utterly and totally in the hands and the will of the Lord.

Basil hints that the proper care of those gifts of grace may correspond to your understanding that what you are able to do in the body of Christ is given and becomes “the common possession of the others (ACC, p. 121);” St. Paul was serious in a prior chapter, “you are not your own (chapter 6).”

So in arriving to a proper understanding of “spiritual gifts” which we love to hear others say that we have, at 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:1 perhaps the better translation is “spiritual things” and at 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:4 it seems clear that St. Paul is writing about “gifts of grace,” both of these translations seem to leave behind our cultural preference that these gifts *belong* to us. We just can't afford to be this arrogant. The gifts are God's. In fact, there is no proper way of

approaching 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12 apart from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 10 (at least verses 16-17) and chapter 11 on the Lord's Supper. Cyril of Alexandria attributes our being one body to the reception of the Sacrament and as a result of God's gift – and no one will ever argue that the Sacrament *isn't* God's gift – Cyril says "It is impossible that Christ be divided." What Ignatius of Antioch described as "the medicine of immortality, the antidote against death" (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, Vol 1*, pg. 169) is also the antidote against division! Once you receive the gift of Christ and it seems that Paul waits until 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 9:15 before he will talk about individual gifts and he does so only in the context of the "inexpressible gift" of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself given to you who have been given faith in Christ (Lockwood, CPH Commentary, 416).

And here we arrive to that safeguard to all that St. Paul is warning about. Know what the gifts are for: the purpose of the gifts as St. Paul writes in Ephesians (4:13-16) is "the unity of the faith;" and for us "to grow up...into him who is our head, into Christ," and be built up as one body "in love (ibid, 420)." That is to say, grace gifts can only be understood in grace, in the Gospel itself. The giver of all gifts the Father sent His Son; the giver of all gifts Jesus Christ gave Himself up unto death to cover your sins with His blood; the giver of all gifts the Holy Spirit joins you to the crucified and resurrected Christ in and through Holy Baptism and this Word that is traveling through these air waves right here and right now. In Christ whose redemption gifts make possible all gifts of the Spirit, you are given the one work of the Spirit that really matters. Rejoice in this alone, and everything else will pan out just fine, be it your expression of the gifts of wisdom or knowledge; gifts of languages or healing; gifts of music or various gifts of service; whatever the gifts may be that God chooses to work in and through you, what is really assuring is that you are in Christ and those who are in Christ are led by the Holy Spirit to confess...no, not confess "your gifts" or what you do...but to confess Jesus Christ.

This is our joy, our desire, our preoccupation...we aren't worried about other gifts; those things will take care of themselves because they are from God; our preoccupation is a confession: "no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 12:3)." Once the Roman Empire persecuted Christians so intensely that it was this very teaching of St. Paul that was used against Christians: if a suspected Christian would curse Christ and worship statues of gods and the emperor, they would be permitted to live; but Pliny the Younger wrote in A.D. 112 to Emperor Trajan that "those who are really Christians cannot be made to do [this] (Lockwood, 414-415)." It wasn't because they were especially strong in themselves. If anyone is faithful and confesses Christ it is as Scripture says, "by the Holy Spirit."

By the Holy Spirit you are joined to Christ; by the Holy Spirit you have received the renewal He works in the sacred washing; by the Holy Spirit Christ's blood is applied to you from His cross of

A.D. 30 to today in A.D. 2011; by the Holy Spirit you are in the Risen Christ and have already crossed from death to life; by the Holy Spirit you confess “Jesus is Lord” as one whose sins have been washed away by His blood.

“Jesus is Lord:” say it loudly, say it clearly, and all the other gifts will take care of themselves and you will know who you are: a disciple of Jesus Christ; you will know why you’re here: to worship Him and to serve Him in love as you serve others through fair weather or through the storms of life; and you will know exactly where you are going: to meet the Lord in glory, and along the way all of the exciting places right here in this world where your confession “Jesus is Lord” will echo and where the gifts belonging to the Lord will be shared.

At the end of the day, we see that division cannot overcome Christ. The Lord Jesus has already made His Church one (John 17) and He gives His victory to His Church which cannot be overcome by any division, not even the gates of hell. This is why our confession is also a celebration. By the Holy Spirit we confess “Jesus is Lord,” and may we do so boldly until the day we meet the Lord face-to-face and when all of our sad divisions will absolutely cease.