

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. 1 Corinthians 12.1.

As we have worked our way through 1 *Corinthians*, we have discovered 2000 years ago a dysfunctional church. The root cause of the deep divisions in this congregation was snobbery. The Roman society in which these early Christian converts were brought up was desperately class-conscious. These new Christians just couldn't give up their old ways of the rich looking down on the poor. But tragically there was an even more deadly form of this snobbery destroying the little Corinthian church, and that was *spiritual* snobbery. And here in chapter 12 we finally get to the cause of that spiritual snobbery - the possession of spiritual gifts.

Some people today think they are better than others if they are richer, or better educated or more influential. Some of these Corinthian Christians thought they were better Christians than the rest of the congregation because they possessed certain gifts of the Spirit which the others didn't have. After all, they could speak in tongues. The wooden-tops at the back couldn't do that! They could prophesy. They could do miraculous healings. They *must* be special to be able to do these spectacular things. God must have chosen *them* to receive these spiritual gifts, because they were closer to him. Clearly their hearts were more open to the things of the Spirit, unlike those dullards over there who were just spiritually dead. No wonder God was not using them. That is what I mean by *spiritual* snobbery. They were more spiritual. They were *real* Christians.

When I was an undergraduate at Durham in the 1970s, I remember hearing exciting rumours spreading among the students. Something really special was happening over at St Margaret's Church. People

were talking in tongues. Worshippers were being slain in the Spirit, and actually fainting. Members of the congregation were prophesying. God had really come close to this church. The Holy Spirit had come upon them in power. The mood was electric. This was cutting-edge Christianity. Of course, though we didn't realise at the time, this was the beginnings of what became known as 'the charismatic movement'. (*Charisma* is the Gk word for a gift of the Holy Spirit).

It was a great time, but, unfortunately, underneath there was a sinister element. *Some* of the people at St Margaret's caught up in this spiritual excitement fell into the same trap as the Corinthian spiritual snobs 2000 years earlier. With their speaking in tongues, prophesying and fainting, *they* were clearly at the spiritual cutting edge. *Their* church was where it was at - not like those spiritually dead stiffes in the Cathedral or the college chapels. *That* was just formal, dead worship. Singing Psalms, and using the Prayer Book? For goodness' sake! *That* isn't Christianity. *We're* the *real* Christians.

I am quite sure that if some Pentecostals and happy-clappy charismatics were to come to St Paul's, they would think that we were spiritually dead also. 'Far too stiff. Far too formal. Hymns too old-fashioned. Organ? Get real! Get a band! Get the hands up in the air and let go. Let the Spirit in'. No doubt there is much spiritual deadness here. But it is spiritual snobbery and elitism to judge the whole congregation and write us off without knowing anything about us. This spiritual looking down the nose at other Christians is something I want to address later, because it afflicted Corinth 2000 years ago, and is still dividing churches.

In the meantime I would like us just to think about these

gifts of the spirit, what the NT calls *charismata*. Let's have a look at them on p1153, 1 Cor 12.8-10... There are nine. I can hear you say, 'These gifts of the Spirit are not for me. I can do without all this happy-clappy nonsense, speaking in tongues and prophesying'.

I can sympathise with that. It's not our style, is it? We're buttoned-up Presbyterians. But never forget that when we talk about 'gifts of the Holy Spirit', we are referring to 'gifts of the Holy Spirit'. These are things *given* to us by God the Holy Spirit himself. Who are we to refuse what God wants to give us?

I am definitely, and unashamedly a Reformation man. Despite modern trendy thinking, what Luther and Calvin were on about was not a mistake. But something was turned off at the Reformation. There was much superstition and abuse in the mediaeval church, but the people did have a sense of the *immediacy* of God. He was very near to them. He was in that saint's bone. That communion bread was Christ's real body. You could actually touch him. Angels were all around you. When all that physicality was swept away at the Reformation, Christianity was reduced to something in the head. You *thought* about God now. You *talked* about him, but it was all very cerebral. Christianity became just talk and morals. Jesus was just a good example to follow in your daily life. He was a teacher.

But you couldn't feel his *closeness*. How could you now actually *experience* God? And this is where the Pentecostal movement comes in, because at the end of the 19thC Christians went back to their Bibles and rediscovered these dramatic *actions* of God the Holy Spirit. No longer was God just an idea, but he was seen to be *real*. He could actually *do* stuff. *And* he was democratic. Only scholars

could understand the theology, but the poorest could speak in tongues or prophesy or drive out demons. People could now actually *feel* God's closeness, the very *power* of God in their own lives.

This is where so many of our 'type' of church have gone wrong. God is an idea to us. He exists in our minds. It's all words. But have any of you actually experienced the reality and power of Christ? If you have, there would be nothing that would keep you silent about him; nothing that could keep you from his house. We need to open not only our *minds* to Christ, but our *hearts*. We need to know the reality of his power actually to *do* things in our personal lives, and in the situations around us. God isn't an idea; he is an almighty God who can do amazing things. Not the least is his raising his Son, Jesus, from the dead. So, let's not shut out the things God wants to give us, the 'gifts of the Holy Spirit'.

And look at bit closer at these 'gifts of the Spirit'. They're not all 'speaking in tongues' and 'prophesying'. There's 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' in v8... V9 has 'healing'. Healing through prayer and healing through a doctor: it's all healing, and it's the same God at work. The miracle is that human beings are able to be healed at all. *How* it happens is not important. God doesn't recognise our distinction between the natural and the 'supernatural'. He is Lord of all. And look over to 11.27-30... There are those who speak in tongues and prophesy and work miracles, but they're not all. Look at v28! Even boring old admin is a 'gift of the Spirit, v28... Artistic gifts are gifts of the Spirit also. P95, *Exodus* 35.30-35... Open your life to the Holy Spirit. Receive his gifts, and know the Lord Jesus not just as an *idea*, but as a living, powerful *reality* in your life.