

The Corinthian Worship Services in Corinth and the Corinthian Enthusiasm (1 Cor. 12-14)

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Today's lecture will be about the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14. At the end, you will realize that these three chapters in 1 Corinthians give you some material for the ever difficult stewardship sermons. That may sound strange. What do ecstatic spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues have to do with stewardship? Let us see.

I. The Elements of the Corinthian Worship Services

Let us look at the Corinthian worship services. In 1 Cor. 14:23-24, Paul presupposes that once in a while non-Christian outsiders drop by for the Christian worship meetings, observing what is going on. Let's pretend to be one of these outsiders. We would be really *outsiders* and surprised standing on the doorstep of the atrium and observing. These early Christian worship services were very different from ours. They were also different from those in the synagogues. Paul had not shaped the worship services in Corinth according to the synagogue model. Let's see what is going on. The eucharist (1 Corinthians 11) is not part of these worship services, but a separate ceremony on Sunday or Saturday evenings. What we are talking about now are worship activities either on Sunday mornings or *after* the eucharist in the evenings. Which elements of the worship service can we distinguish (14:26, 6)? Is there a certain order for these elements? No, there is not (cf. 14:26ff.). The input of the individual is spontaneous, and a very un-Presbyterian disorder is the rule. Christian psalms and hymns are sung. Several people speak in tongues in a state of ecstasy where they utter sounds that nobody in the congregation can understand except for some who are gifted with the capacity of translating these speeches. Once in a while, but not always, they translate the speeches in tongues. Chapter 14:28 presupposes that the individual who speaks in tongues does not always understand himself or herself. We are not talking about speaking foreign languages, as in Acts 2. We are talking about a sort of undiscernible babbling that is known in all kinds of ecstatic religions, not only in Christianity. Apparently the Corinthians think that angels speak through them when they ecstatically speak in tongues (cf. 13:1). The ecstasy is a controlled ecstasy, because the

individual speaking in tongues is able to stop when no translator is there (14:28). A similar controlled ecstasy has been observed in many other cults, for example, in Africa, where women roll on the floor in ecstasy, with babies on their backs, and the baby is not hurt because the mother is still aware of it—controlled ecstasy. Back to Corinth.

Other elements besides singing and speaking in tongues are prayers of inspired congregation members. The congregation responds to them with “Amen” (14:16). Acclamations like “Jesus is Lord!” belong to the worship service (12:1ff.), sometimes also curses for those who need to be excommunicated (16:22 and chapter 5). The holy kiss belongs to the liturgy, as do liturgical blessings as we find them at the end of Paul’s letters. As I already said, the sequence of all these liturgical elements does not follow any rules. It is spontaneous.

The next element is prophecy (14:29). Prophecy is a spiritually inspired speech, but it is not ecstatic. So everybody can *understand* prophetic speeches. When a prophet, a man or a woman (11:5), stands up in the congregation to speak, then the audience can expect all sorts of things. The content of prophetic revelations varies. On the one hand prophets foretell future events, mainly eschatological events, as for instance in Revelation or in 1 Thess. 4:17, where one of these prophetic words is preserved. The prophet reveals God’s secrets about the future (cf. 1 Cor. 13:2). On the other hand, the prophet gives ethical advice. He or she calls to repentance, admonishes ethically, and encourages and consoles (14:3). And when some outsiders like ourselves enter the atrium of the house church, it can happen that a prophet discloses the secrets of our hearts, and calls us to repent and to worship God, as 14:24 and 25 word it.

When the prophet sits down, others in the congregation examine whether his or her speech was valid or not (14:29). In other words, proclamation and preaching are not the task of one person, but a task for at least several, if not for the whole congregation. Thus the worship service comprises dialogue, sometimes even dispute.

Besides the prophets, the Corinthians have teachers (12:28; 14:6, 26). They are responsible for the next element in the worship service. Their teaching includes the Christian tradition (cf. Gal. 1:12), the christological tradition, for instance. Their teaching also includes the interpretation and exegesis of the Old Testament Scriptures. Taking the risk of oversimplifying, we could say that the teachers are responsible for the horizontal

continuity of the Christian tradition (Greeven), while the prophets are responsible for the vertical connection with the Lord. They convey new revelations from God. They save the church from becoming too legalistic and traditionalistic. The teachers, on the other hand, save the church from becoming too fanciful, too enthusiastic, and too gushy.

The prophets and the teachers are the only ones besides the apostles who have somewhat official posts in the church. All the other functions in the church life are fluctuating: speaking in tongues, translating of these ecstatic speeches, healing miracles and other miracles, down-to-earth services like cleaning up, helping, supporting, and administrating, distinguishing between the spirits—that is, examining prophetic speeches to determine whether they are valid or not. You have a list of all these functions in 12:4 and the following verses and in 12:28. All these functions are fluctuating. Basically, everybody in the congregation can fill these functions. Today the Spirit grasps me and heals through me; tomorrow it's your turn. This kind of fluctuation is typical for new groups. Social psychologists have observed that in newly constituted groups, in principal every group member can fill all the functions and tasks that need to be done in the group life. And only gradually some specialists emerge who repeatedly fill one and the same function, and only this one function. These specialists start to have posts in the group. In Corinth, only prophets and teachers are such "specialists." All the other functions are still open for everybody in the congregation. And even prophesying (11:5) and teaching principally can still be done by everybody, even though some in the congregation have specialized in these fields already. *Several* of these prophets and teachers speak during the worship services. Our one-sermon worship service would have been strange in Corinthian eyes.

It is interesting that even the function of steering and leading the congregation is not tied to one specific person yet, not even to a fixed group of persons. No one presides at the worship services. No individual leader is responsible for its order, for its beginning, for the sequence of its elements (cf. also 11:17-34). The *whole* congregation is responsible (14:26ff.), and that is important. Thus the worship service is spontaneous. The Holy Spirit leads; that's it. And everybody whom the Spirit inspires can perform leading acts in the congregation, especially those who labor hard for the church and who therefore deserve some respect, according to 1 Thess. 5:12, 1 Cor. 16:15-16, and Rom. 12:8. One of them is Stephanas. He and his household were the first Corinthians who had been converted to Christianity. Stephanas works hard serving the Corinthian church. He performs leading acts,

but he is not the only leader. The function of leading is still in multiple hands. No rule, no order has been constituted yet in this respect.

Let me sum up this first part, this description of the Corinthian worship services. They are a little chaotic. The whole Corinthian worship happening is spiritually guided. Therefore, a lot of spontaneous action and even dialogue take place. There is no rule for a certain sequence of the liturgical elements. No leader presides. The *whole* congregation is responsible, and *all individuals* can participate actively.

You probably realize that the Protestant churches, even the Calvinistic churches, are far away from what happened in Corinth, even though especially the Calvinistic churches have tried to go back directly to the Bible when they organized their worship services and the structure of their congregations.

II. The Corinthian Problem

This title may surprise you. Especially for the Presbyterians among you, there probably were already enough problems in what we discussed so far. But for Paul the Corinthian disorder was not the main issue. Of course, in chapter 14 from verse 26 on, Paul tried to organize the Corinthian disorder a little better. But the Corinthian lack of “Calvinistic” order was *not* the main issue that troubled Paul. Something else was the problem. The spiritual gifts have led to tensions within the congregation (cf. 12:25). The ecstatic speakers in tongues think that they have received the most important spiritual gift. They look down at the others in the congregation. And the others who fill other functions start to think that they have only minor gifts. Those who, so to speak, clean up the dishes (cf. 12:22-23) feel inferior. It is questioned whether or not they are pneumatics at all, that is, whether or not they are spiritually gifted persons at all. The Corinthians have begun to be competitive. Everybody desires the highest spiritual gifts, or what they perceive as higher gifts, speaking in tongues being the highest in the eyes of the Corinthians. Nobody wants to “clean up the dishes” any more, and those who can only do these minor services are sad and feel like second-rate Christians. At least the others who look down at them rank them like this. In other words, the definition of a true charismatic Christian is debated in Corinth (cf. 12:3). Who is a truly spiritual Christian? Is there a hierarchy of spiritual gifts? Are those who clean up the dishes not spiritual Christians? Let’s see.

III. Paul's Response

You may feel that we have already gotten a little closer to some of the material out of which a stewardship sermon could be created. Sometimes we encounter similar thinking in our churches, similar to the Corinthians. People are proud of their ordination that distinguishes them, proud of the higher functions that they fill, or which they at least value as higher than others. They may be proud of their high financial donations, or proud of the power they have over the minister, who bitterly needs their financial contributions, etc., etc. All groups develop certain hierarchies, and the churches are certainly not free from this social-psychological rule.

Let's look at Paul's response, at his criticism of the Corinthians. I will try to list his critical remarks. The first one can be found in the difficult verses 12:2-3. According to these verses, all pneumatic and ecstatic experiences are ambiguous. As pagans before their baptisms, the Corinthians also had ecstatic experiences. An ecstatic experience in itself, therefore, does not tell you anything about your nearness to God. There is no guarantee that God's Holy Spirit inspires you and not some other spirits. Your ecstatic experience always needs to be accompanied by your Christian confession (v. 3) which comprises words that everybody can understand and not just babbling in tongues. In other words, the ecstatic experience is *subordinate* to the confession which can be understood. Not only the Christians, but also the pagans can be pneumatic, spiritually gifted persons (12:2). Paul is right at this point: The Dionysus cult and other cults, indeed, also practiced speaking in tongues. Only the intelligible Christian confession (12:3) makes the pneumatic and spiritually gifted person a Christian. And later we will see that, for Paul, even another criterion is needed besides the confession to determine whether a pneumatic person is a truly Christian person. We will come back to this additional criterion, which is the love that a Christian practices.

So far, we have learned that Paul devaluates the Corinthian ecstatic experiences, for in themselves they do not indicate anything. Paul subordinates them to the intelligible Christian confession. And by doing this he turns the Corinthian hierarchy of values upside down. The Corinthians claim that all kerygmatic teaching has to be accompanied and legitimized by pneumatic miracles like healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. Only then is this teaching proved to be right and true, according to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:12). They subordinate kerygmatic statements under the criterion of pneumatic signs. No, says Paul, it is just the opposite way around.

Second, still in 12:3, who is a true pneumatic among the Corinthians? You remember that some tensions over this question had shaken the Corinthian congregation. Paul answers, *everyone* who says “Jesus Christ is my Lord” is a truly pneumatic and spiritually gifted Christian. In other words, *every* Christian has God’s Spirit, even those who only wash the dishes and not only those who ecstatically speak in tongues. Chapter 12 compares the church with a human body, with an organism, and makes clear: Even those members of the body who are considered to be less honorable and weak are still members of this body, even indispensable members (12:22-23). In 12:5, 28, and in Rom. 12:6-8, the down-to-earth services like serving the meals or cleaning up are counted among the spiritual gifts by Paul. Not only speaking in tongues, miracles, and ecstasy are spiritual gifts, but also these down-to-earth services. And in Rom. 12:6-7 they are even named right after prophesying as one of the top spiritual gifts that are important for the congregation. Speaking in tongues, however, in 1 Corinthians 12-14, is always mentioned at the end of the enumeration of the spiritual gifts: in 12:10, 12:28, 12:30—always at the end. Paul does this on purpose in order to criticize the Corinthian over-estimation of this spiritual ecstatic gift.

The Greek word for spiritual gift is *charisma*. By counting the mundane services among the spiritual gifts, Paul enlarges this category. What is a spiritual gift? According to Paul, it is something that *everybody* in the congregation can have, not only the miracle workers and the ecstatic speakers in tongues. Serving meals and other services can be done by every church member. Everyone is pneumatic and spiritually gifted, and the down-to-earth services are even ranked very highly by Paul because they build up the church, while the ecstatic experiences of individuals do not.

Third, the word *charisma* in itself includes a polemical tone, criticizing the Corinthians. This term is introduced into the debate by Paul. The Corinthians call their spiritual qualities *pneumatika*, spiritual things. *Charisma*, however, means gift—a gift of grace. The term points back to God as the origin and author of all spiritual experiences. The Corinthians are proud of their spiritual qualities. They treat them as if they were their *own* qualities, as if they were a possession which they have at their disposal. No, says Paul, *God* gives you all these spiritual experiences as an act of grace. They are *charismata*, gifts of undeserved grace. “What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (4:7). The same is made clear in 12:6 at the end: *God* works all these human activities. You cannot separate the spiritual phenomena from God as the only author of these phenomena.

The fourth element of Paul's criticism is related to this. Chapter 12:4-11 emphasizes: There are *all kinds* of functions and spiritual gifts in the church, but in spite of this pluralism, one and the same Spirit works all these different activities. Only *one* Spirit is behind all these manifold functions. Therefore the persons who have these manifold functions need to stick together and to demonstrate unity instead of looking down on each other and creating tension, as has happened in Corinth.

The fifth critical idea in chapter 12 can be found in 12:19, but you may also compare 12:28-30, 12:21-26, or 12:15-16. The image of the human body teaches that an organism needs *different* functions and gifts in order to be a body. It needs the diversity of its members. If all were filling the same function, if all were one and the same member of the body, if all were an arm, there would be no body! If all were ecstatic speakers in tongues, there would be no church. It is short-sighted that all Corinthians strive to the so-called higher spiritual gifts, to the ecstatic gifts. Not all can be speakers in tongues; not all can be apostles; not all can be prophets. If the Corinthians accept this, then they cannot look down on each other any more. Then the one who cleans the dishes does not need to feel inferior any more. The organism cannot exist without these basic services. It may be able to exist without speakers in tongues, but not without people who serve at the table and work in the kitchen. Chapter 12:22-23 reads like this: "The parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor"; we clothe them nicely. The church cannot live without the down-to-earth services. They need to be appreciated.

The sixth critical idea prepares chapters 13 and 14. In chapter 12:7, the main criterion for the assessment of the different spiritual gifts is whether a particular gift builds up others, whether it serves others, whether it is useful for the congregation. Here we hit the nerve of Paul's criticism, and we learn why he appreciates the down-to-earth services while he devalues the speaking in tongues. Ecstatic experiences build up the individual who has them, but not the congregation. Therefore the ecstatic babbling has to be translated, or the speaker in tongues has to hold his or her tongue. The Greek word for building up others and serving others is *oikodome*. Does a function or a spiritual gift build up others or not—that is the question, that is the criterion for the assessment. Chapter 13 develops this criterion of *oikodome*. Chapter 13 is this wonderful hymn singing about love. It probably had already been formulated by Paul some time before the dictation of 1 Corinthians. The chapter is only loosely connected with its context, but it

clearly serves a purpose in this context. What is called *oikodome* in chapter 14 is called love in chapter 13. Chapter 13 applies the criterion of love and *oikodome* critically to all the different human activities in the church. Verse 1 applies this criterion to the speaking in tongues. If this spiritual gift is exercised without love for others, without translation for others, but in a competitive mood of showing off and of looking down on others, then this gift is nothing, even though the angels may speak through the ecstatic person. Chapter 13 shows the purpose of each charismatic and spiritual activity: It has to serve others in love; otherwise it is nothing. The same is true about prophecy (v. 2a). To reveal all kinds of divine secrets is nothing if it does not help your audience and if it only shows off your prophetic skills. This kind of prophecy serves nothing but your pride. The same is true about a strong faith that does miracles (v. 2b). It is also true about asceticism (v. 3). It is even true about giving alms and money to the poor in the church (v. 3a). This is the most surprising statement, because especially this kind of financial help seems to demonstrate love. Is there any financial donation that does not aim at helping others in love but at flattering and upbuilding the donor himself or herself? Paul thinks yes; this kind of donating is nothing in his eyes—a very polemical and unpleasant verdict.

Verses 4-7 in chapter 13 are composed like a Hellenistic rhetorical aretology—like a Hellenistic list of virtues. What is love? What is love not? These features are put in front of the human being in order to criticize his and her behavior. These verses are polemical again because no human being really does bear *all* things, hope *all* things, and endure *all* things. These verses are a negative verdict for all human acting. Every human being, even every Christian, is far away from *this* love, and verses 8-13 explain why. The love described in chapter 13 is an eschatological event. Only in the eschaton will God enable us to live this love perfectly. Now we are supposed to *strive* for this love and make it our *aim* (14:1). But we will not fully reach this aim before the eschaton. In other words, this love is not within the reach of *our* possibilities and of *our* capacities. It is only within the reach of God's possibilities—it is an eschatological event. And our loving here and now is only an incomplete anticipation of this eschaton. At this point I want you to remember what we said about the Corinthians earlier this week. They indeed try to experience heaven and eschatological perfection already in their present ecstatic spiritual experiences. But Paul, in 13:8-13, takes this illusion away from them. The spiritual gifts like ecstatic speaking in tongues and prophetic knowledge of divine secrets are *not* anticipations of the eschaton and of the divine sphere of heaven. They are *not*, because they will pass away in the eschaton (vs. 8 and 10). They belong

to the *old* eon that will be destroyed in the eschaton. Only love will abide and last, and it will not end in the eschaton (vs. 8 and 13). Only love, faith, and hope, but love is the greatest of these. In other words, if you Corinthians want to experience some of the eschatological reality *now* as an anticipation of the eschaton, then don't go for the ecstatic spiritual experiences; go for the active love towards others. There you will experience a piece of divine heavenly sphere and eschaton already now—there and only there: in the loving service for others, be this in simple help in the kitchen or in prophetic speech that consoles or builds up others. Where you practice loving *oikodome*, building up, there you already experience part of the eschaton in the present.

In the first lecture this week, we said that the Corinthians emphasized the Christology of the gloriously reigning Lord. They tried to be in close touch with the heavenly reality of this Lord by means of their spiritual experiences. The more ecstasy the better. Ecstatic striving towards heaven leaves the earthly reality of the world behind. Paul, however, tries to pull the Corinthians back down to earth by emphasizing the Christology of the *crucified* Jesus Christ. We will be, but we are not yet resurrected with Christ and gloriously reigning. Right now we are crucified with Christ. This cross existence is an existence *in* the world, with responsibility on the horizontal level, while the Corinthians are only interested in the vertical connection with the elevated Lord, with whom they try to get in touch by means of their ecstatic experiences. Paul certainly does not want to abolish the vertical dimension of the Corinthian worship services, but he de-emphasizes the vertical dimension for the benefit of the horizontal interhuman interaction and up-building.

For Paul, the horizontal responsibility is love towards others, and those whose ego is crucified with Christ are led to love patiently and kindly (13:4) and to give up their own interests for the benefit of others (13:5). Christians crucified with Christ materialize the eschatological love reality at least partially in their lives. According to 1 Cor. 12-14, love, building-up of others, is the decisive criterion for the assessment of *all* Christian activities, also for the spiritual gifts. All gifts, spiritual-ecstatic, prophetic, financial-economic, or cooking skills are not private possessions of individuals; they are tasks. They are given for the benefit of the others in the congregation. It is in this way that the eschaton can be partially anticipated already in the present.