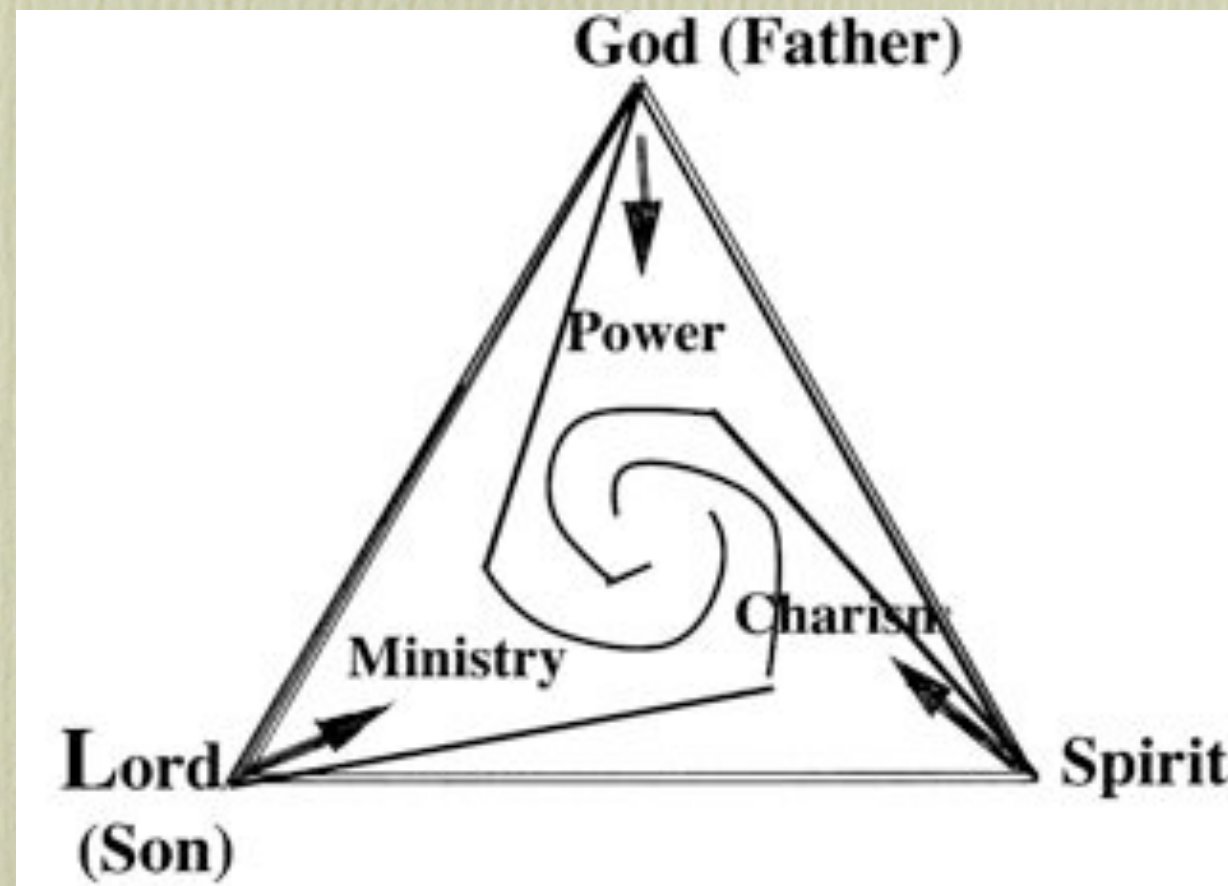


07. 1 Corinthians 12:1 – 13:8





The way in which Paul introduces this topic indicates that, once again, he is replying to a question put to him by the Corinthians. The first concerned celibacy (7:1); the second was about eating food that had been offered to idols (8:10); and now the third is about ‘spiritual gifts’ (πνευματικά).

To this point in his letter, Paul has not only responded to the two earlier questions, but also brought up matters that were concerning him, matters that were causing divisions in the community. Besides the failure of the community to confront a case of incest (5:1), and their use of pagan courts to sort out their differences (6:1), he has addressed the whole question of ‘knowledge/wisdom’ (1:17ff), of the way in which some women were conducting themselves when the church gathered to pray (11:3ff), and of the behaviour of some of the richer members at the Eucharist.



# The Gifts of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-3

Now concerning spiritual gifts [πνευματικά], brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord!' except by the Holy Spirit.

In their pre-Christian days they experienced ecstatic 'visionaries' uttering words interpreted by the temple priests. They seem to have expected similar experiences in the Christian community.



The Corinthians are impressed by those who display the gift of tongues. Those who do not have it are being made to think that they do not have the Spirit. Paul reassures them. It is their acceptance of **Jesus as Lord** that demonstrates that their gifts are truly spiritual (πνευματικά) and that they truly have the '**Spirit of God**'.

This is a reassurance; it is also a challenge, for Paul is not just speaking of words here. He is speaking of the way we live: 'Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).



To reject Jesus crucified is to align oneself with those who consider him accursed (ἀναθεμα, see Galatians 3:13). This takes us back to the first theme developed by Paul in the early chapters of this letter (see especially 2:6-16). To take pride in 'knowledge' that causes one to despise the poor broken ones whom Jesus loves and for whom he gave his life is to reject Jesus crucified.




To enjoy a feast with one's peers while the poor go hungry is to reject the Messiah crucified for it is to reject the Holy Spirit of God: 'Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord' (16:22).

They will know that the Spirit of the risen Jesus is dwelling within them and inspiring their lives, if in their prayer, their attitudes, their decisions, their words and their actions, they live the life of the crucified and risen Jesus.



[πνευματικά?] 1 Corinthians 12:4



There are varieties of gifts [χαρίσματα] but the same Spirit

In choosing to speak of charismata, he is emphasising that there is no place here for self-glorification, ostentation, or envy. The gifts of which he is speaking are gifts of divine grace, and as he wrote earlier: ‘What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?’ (4:7). He emphasises that there is a variety of these gifts of grace in order to draw the attention of the Corinthians away from their fascination with the more striking phenomenon of inspired speech or, as it is sometimes called, glossolalia. The Corinthians are seeking assurance that they are in communion with Jesus through the gift of his Spirit. Paul assures them that there are many ways in which the Spirit is manifested in people’s lives. Whatever way they have been gifted by grace, Paul assures them that it is one and the same Spirit that they are experiencing.



## 1 Corinthians 12:5

there are varieties of ministries [διακονία] but the same Lord;

They can be sure that it is the risen Lord, Jesus himself, who is giving them his Spirit, and that whatever gift they receive it will always be in view of carrying out Jesus' ministry (διακονία). The reference point is always God. Jesus is the servant of the Lord. His ministry is that of carrying out the will of God. Paul is speaking here of the variety of ways in which the gifts of grace enable Jesus' disciples to continue this service.



## 1 Corinthians 12:6-7

there are varieties of ways of exercising power [ἐνέργημα]  
but it is the same God who activates them all in everyone.  
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for a good  
purpose. (6:12; 10:23 'beneficial'; 'with a view to what is best')

Finally, whatever their gift, with it comes all the power of the Creator, making each disciple an instrument of God's creative and redeeming will.

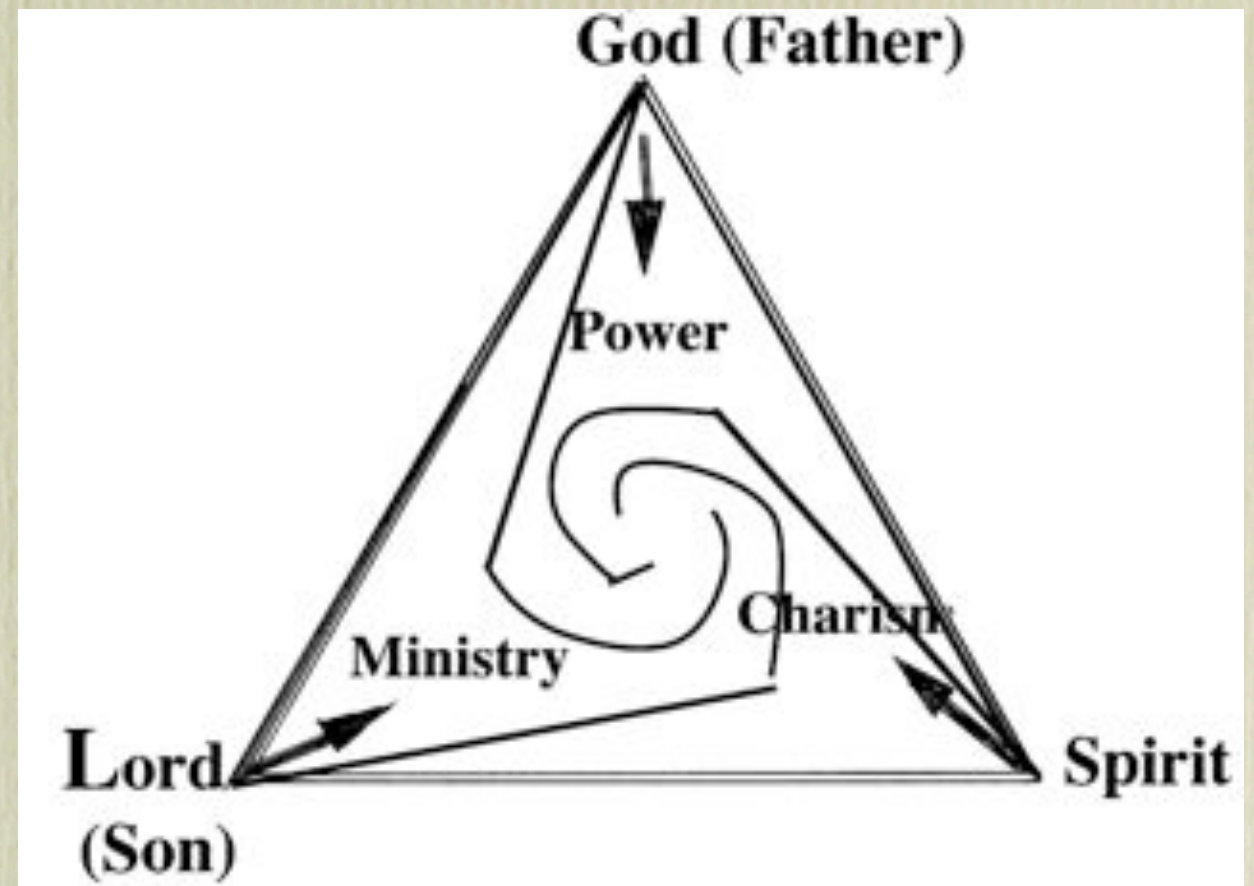
Notice the Trinitarian dimension of Paul's teaching. Each member of the community has a special share in the communion of love which has its source in God. It is mediated to us through Jesus, the Lord, by the gift to us of the Spirit of love that binds him to the Father.



# 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

[πνευματικά?]

There are varieties of gifts [χαρίσματα]  
but the same Spirit;  
there are varieties of ministries  
[διακονία]  
but the same Lord;  
there are varieties of  
ways of exercising power [ἐνεργήματα]  
but it is the same God who  
activates them all in everyone.



To each is given the manifestation of the  
Spirit for a good purpose.

(6:12; 10:23 'beneficial'; 'with a view to what is best')



Each disciple has his or her special gift through which the Spirit is manifest, and it is given for the good of the person who receives the gift and for the good of the community. There is only one Spirit and so all who experience God's gift of grace should experience being bonded to others who are enjoying the same communion. There is only one divine Breath breathing into the various instruments of God's orchestra. We should expect a divine harmony. Since God is the almighty Creator, if we open ourselves to the will of the Lord, and if we allow his Spirit to fill us and to activate us, we can be sure that the will of God will be done through us. Since God is love, from our communion in the triune life of God, and according to the unique gift of the Spirit with which each of us is graced, God's all-powerful love will bear fruit in our lives.



To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for a good purpose.  
To one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom,  
and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit,  
to another faith by the same Spirit

Paul gives examples of various gifts of grace which manifest the Spirit. He begins with wisdom, the gift which enables us to receive God's self-revelation. It is wisdom which enables a person to see in Jesus' dying on the cross the revelation of who God really is. Then comes knowledge – whereby we are able to grasp the meaning of revelation and its implications for living. The Corinthians have been priding themselves in their knowledge (see 8:1), but forgetting that true spiritual knowledge is related to both wisdom and love. Then comes faith (see 2:5), the gift which enables us to hear the gospel, to recognise it as God's gift, and to open our minds and hearts to accept it and to base our lives upon it.



to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,  
to another the working of miracles

Healing and the working of miracles will be mentioned again (12:28-30). The power of God, which is the power of infinite love, can work wonders in the heart, mind and body of those who open themselves to it. We do not necessarily have the wisdom to know what is truly beneficial (12:7). We can be like the baby that wants bread but reaches out for a stone (Matthew 7:7-11). However, we can expect God's power to be working in our lives to make possible the next step of love, whatever that may be.



to another prophecy,  
to another the discernment of spirits,  
to another various kinds of tongues,  
to another the interpretation of tongues.

<sup>11</sup>All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

‘Prophecy’ will be treated at length later in the letter. Some are given the gift of being able to discern what is and what is not a manifestation of the Spirit. Paul leaves to the end the gift of being able to speak ‘various kinds of tongues’ (γλῶσσαι, hence ‘glossolalia’), along with the necessary complementary gift of its interpretation.

‘Tongues’ [γλῶσσαι] is one of the gifts. However it is the one that has fascinated the Corinthians. Their hearts are set on it, and its absence has made them doubt the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul puts it in its place and insists on the need for spiritual interpretation.



## 1 Corinthians 12:12

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with the Messiah.

- The Christian community is like the human body
- The Christian community IS the body of the risen Jesus (12:27)

## 1 Corinthians 12:13

For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

‘You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus the Messiah and in the Spirit of our God’ (6:11).

‘All were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Messiah’ (10:2-4).



## 1 Corinthians 12:14-20

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.



## 1 Corinthians 12:21-26

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

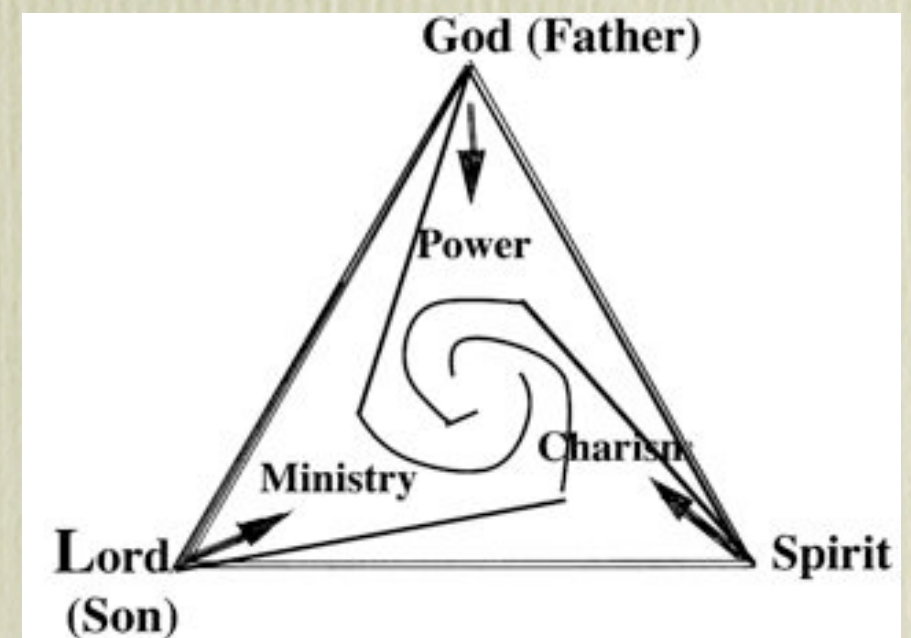


## 1 Corinthians 12:27

**You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.**

Earlier, Paul spoke of the profound personal union that exists between the Christian and Jesus, such that we belong to him (6:15-16). The community (the 'body'), too, belongs to him (see 3:23), for it is his Spirit who gives his life to the body, drawing each member into his communion with the Father.

Just as God arranges the various members of the body as God chooses (12:18), so God 'appoints' variously gifted members of the church. Paul lists a diversity of gifts of the Spirit (12:4), ministries commissioned by the Lord (12:5); ways in which the power of God is effective in the community and in the world (12:6).





And God has appointed in the church

first apostles, [commissioned by the Risen Christ to found churches, 3:10)

second prophets, [through whom Jesus' Spirit guides the community]

third teachers; [explain the implications of what is taught, and heard in prophecy]

then deeds of power, [12:10].

then gifts of healing, [12:10]

forms of assistance,

forms of leadership, [κυβερνησις]

various kinds of tongues. [12:10] - once again in last place!

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?

Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

But strive for the greater gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.



## 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

If I speak in tongues, human and angelic, but do not have love,  
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers,

and understand all mysteries

and all knowledge,

and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, [Matthew 17:20]

but do not have love,

I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions,

and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [καυχησομαι]

[or to be burned [καυθησομαι]

but do not have love,

I gain nothing.



The word 'love' [ἀγάπη] has not featured so far in this letter. Paul mentioned it in passing in 4:21, and briefly in a text which pointed in the direction of this present passage: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up' (8:1). The verb αγαπαω has appeared twice, also without any development (see 4:21; 8:3). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul named ἀγάπη as capturing the essential meaning of the Torah (Galatians 5:1). He also listed it as the first of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).



Though the word has not featured so far in this letter, the reality has been central to everything that Paul has written, for it is not any kind of ‘love’ to which Paul is referring here (see also 1Thessalonians 3:12, 5:13). He is speaking of the love that is revealed in ‘the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). Immediately after the introduction to this present letter, Paul writes: ‘Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose’ (1:10). He goes on to demonstrate the futility of their so-called ‘knowledge’, for they lack the ‘mind of the Messiah’(2:16); they lack wisdom; they lack the ability to recognise in the cross the revelation of God (1:13; 1:17ff). He counters their boast of having power by declaring that the only real power is the power of the cross (1:18) – the power of love.



Paul goes on to reprimand them for their failure to stand up for the truth and to protect the community against the persistent immoral behaviour of one of its members. Once again he speaks of the cross: 'Our paschal lamb, the Messiah, has been sacrificed'(5:7). It is the love revealed in Jesus on the cross which demands of them 'sincerity and truth' (5:8). The Corinthians are claiming to be free to do anything they like (6:12). Paul reminds them: 'You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body' (6:20). He makes the same point later (7:23) when advising them not to concentrate on changing their state of life but on giving their 'unhindered devotion to the Lord' (7:35). Knowledge without love can be destructive: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up ... Anyone who loves is known by God' (8:1,3).



Criticising them for their insensitivity in eating food offered to idols in spite of the hurt it is causing others in the community, Paul reminds them that it was for these others that 'the Messiah died' (8:11). He presents his own practice of becoming 'all things to all' (9:22) as a model for them to follow. He draws their attention again to the cross (10:16), and, in the light of the cross, he appeals to them: 'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other' (10:24). The inspiration for such behaviour is the example of Jesus, an example which Paul himself tries to imitate: 'I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (10:33 - 11:1). In criticizing their behaviour at the community assemblies, he once more refers to the mystery of the cross. Jesus expressed the meaning of the cross for him when he celebrated his last supper. They should do the same, otherwise 'it is not really the Lord's supper' that they are eating (11:20).



It is by the test of love that their claim to have special knowledge is shown to be false. It is by the test of love that Paul condemns their approaching pagan courts to solve their community problems. He uses the same test to condemn their attitude to the blatant incest of one of their members. It is by the test of love that he assesses the married and the single state, and whether or not they should eat meat offered to idols. Even one's way of dressing is to be judged by the same criterion.

Paul has just demonstrated the catholic nature of the church: everyone has a different gift, and all are needed that the church may live and witness to the glory of the exalted Jesus. There is place for every expression of love in the community which is the body of the Messiah, and without love no gift can claim to be from his Spirit. It is this gift of love to which he now turns.



Paul's claim is that the Messiah sent him 'to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of the Messiah might not be emptied of its power'(1:17). When he was among the Corinthians the only thing that occupied his attention was 'Jesus the Messiah and him crucified'(2:2). The hymn to love to which we now turn is no exception, and we will not be able to understand or appreciate it unless as we reflect upon it we contemplate him who showed us what true love is when he gave his life for us on the cross.