

Providence Church (CREC)
The Second Sunday After the Epiphany
January 17th, 2010 45th sermon (AI Preached last week)
Sermon: Becoming Like what You Worship, Part I
Text: I Corinthians 12:1-3
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Text: I Corinthians 12:1-3 -Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. 2 You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. 3 Therefore 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.

Prayer: Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Sermon: People of God, we begin this morning a series of sermons on I Corinthians 12-14, which will take us through Epiphany and through the Lenten Season. Epiphany is about the unveiling of the Messianic mission. As Christ becomes known to the world, the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and God. The Spirit of God is beginning to pour gifts upon the Church. As the Christ child received gifts from the magi, in turn, the Church receives gifts from the Spirit. When these gifts are used properly, in humility, the world comes to see the majesty of the God/Man.

These gifts are most clearly expressed in the Church. As Paul writes in Ephesians four, “through the Church the manifold wisdom of God is made known to rulers and authorities in the heavenly places,” which means that the wisdom of the Church in this New Creation is the manifestation of the wisdom of God.¹ The gifts of God are being poured out in abundance to the New Covenant Church. It is in the Church that the gospel is most clearly expressed and seen.

¹ “The term “heavenlies” refers to all creation. Lordship implies the “heavenification” of the world. See my sermons on Ephesians at wordmp3.com.

It is no wonder that Paul spends these three chapters clarifying and encouraging the Church to use these gifts accordingly, so that the world would see the gospel clearly manifested.

Paul begins chapter 12 answering this question concerning the right use of gifts; gifts are good things, but when improperly used, they can be a curse. But before we delve into these three verses, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of this letter, so we are more grounded in the intent of the author.

Let me begin by asking a question: **Have you ever desired to be a part of the apostolic Church?** Imagine the glories of knowing people who actually met Jesus; seeing signs and wonders; if you lived in the first century Church then you would know what a real church would look like, right? In our own day we hear about churches saying, “We just want to be like the primitive Church.” But the apostles would be utterly perplexed at this statement. **Why would you want to be an infant again?** Now it is not as if the 21st century Church has grown up into full maturity since those days. In fact, the twenty-first century Church in many ways is no different than the first century church. Is there division in our churches today, is there a lack of biblical wisdom, is there sexual immorality, are there marital problems, do people abuse their liberties, is there idolatry in the Church today? The answer to all these questions is a resounding “Yes.” We still have a lot of growing up to do! We may not be infants anymore, but we may only be toddlers. To treat the early church as a perfect model is to think falsely of the maturity of that first century body. It is true that our cultures are very different, after all 2,000 years change a lot of things, but principally our sins remain the same.

What Paul does as he writes this letter is to give the Corinthian Church a strong dose of reality.²

This is a Church founded by Paul, but when he leaves, the church begins to crumble theologically and morally. This letter is Paul's list of problems and his solutions to them.

Fundamentally: "The source of all their problems is their pride... They are obsessed with status; fascinated with public displays of wisdom and power; a pompous group of Christians. The most disastrous result is their division; their sectarianism."³ This attitude in the Church was largely the attitude of the city. Corinth was known for its prosperity, love for the imperial games, entertainment, and they were especially fond of their clever rhetoric. The Church was influenced by the city around it, instead of the city being influenced by the Church.

What kind of message does Paul bring to this culture that cherishes victory at all costs, who is prideful and celebrity-driven? "He brings a message of a crucified Messiah who is the Lord of the world."⁴ New Testament commentator Anthony Thiselton writes:

Paul's gospel of a humiliated and crucified Christ was an affront to the people who cherished success and who loved winners.⁵

In the first 11 chapters, Paul answers several questions from the Corinthian Church, and in chapter 12, he now addresses the topic of spiritual principles and gifts. He begins in verse one by addressing a different set of questions from previous chapters. This is clear when he writes: "now concerning spiritual things." As if to say, now concerning the other question you posed. Paul is

² Rich Lusk offers some helpful introductory comments on I Corinthians. See <http://www.trinity-pres.net/>

³ Lusk's introduction to I Corinthians.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in Lusk. See Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians; a Commentary on the Greek Text*.

acting pastorally as he carefully considers and answers these questions from the Corinthian Church.

He now turns his attention to spiritual things. Some translations use the phrase “spiritual *gifts*.” These translations are assuming that Paul is dealing with the charismatic gifts, but in verse one Paul uses a different word than the word that is typically associated with the charismatic gifts.⁶ This indicates for us that in these first three verses Paul is concerned about those things which pertain to the Spirit of God. He is laying a foundation to discuss all these issues. He will later deal with the charismatic gifts, but in these first three verses he focuses on whether certain manifestations are of the Spirit of God or not.

Paul’s concern in addressing this topic is that the Christian in the Church of Corinth is not ignorant of those things which come from the Spirit. The Apostle John expresses the same concern when he calls us to test every spirit to see if they are from God.⁷ It is essential that you grasp this principle. Paul’s supreme desire is to not leave these Christians in the dark, but rather to bring clarity in each of these matters.

In verse two he reminds them of their former way of life: When you were Gentiles/pagans, you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.⁸ It is a necessary contrast to make, because it reminds them that they are no longer to live in the way of ignorance they lived before. In the

⁶ Instead of using *χαρισμάτων* in verse 1, Paul uses the word “*πνευματικῶν*,” which indicates he does not have “charismatic gifts in mind, but rather the “things pertaining to the Spirit.”

⁷ 1 John 4:1

⁸ See Ephesians 2:2 for a similar contrast.

past they were swayed by a blind impulse, which carried them away⁹ like the blind following the blind; they were carried away to idols that were incapable of speech.¹⁰ Paul is directing their attention to Psalm 115, where the Psalmist writes:

4 Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. 5 They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. 6 They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. 7 They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. 8 Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.¹¹

This is the fundamental problem of the Corinthian Christians. How can they worship as God desires in the unity of the Spirit, if they are so easily being led astray to mute idols? The problem with worshipping idols that have mouths, but no ability to speak (v. 5) and eyes, but are blind (v. 5) and ears, but are deaf (v. 6) and noses, but do not smell (v. 6) and hands, but cannot handle, and feet, but cannot walk, the problem is that you become just like these idols. As Douglas Wilson has simply stated, “you become like what you worship.”¹²

There is no unity in the pantheon of false gods. Why? Because they cannot communicate or see one another. But there is, however, unity in the confession of Jesus as Lord. And the apostle draws our attention to these two contradictory claims in verse three. “Therefore 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.” Remember that the context of these chapters is

⁹ Charles Hodge, I Corinthians. *The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, 215

¹⁰ Anthony Thiselton’s literal rendering of ἄφωνα in verse two is quite helpful; another proof that literal translations are always best before being interpreted.

¹¹ All quotations, unless noted otherwise are from the English Standard Version. On-line version <http://www.crossway.org/home/esv>

¹² Sermon entitled: Pomosexuality, <http://www.dougwils.com/>

worship in the Church. Who in the context of worship would say such a thing? If you are led by mute idols do you become like them and begin to speak contrary to the message of Christ even to the point of blasphemy? Yes, even to the point of blasphemy. After all, apostasy begins with the blasphemy of worship, which is directly blasphemy against Christ. But Paul is not citing this example randomly. The religious Jews of the day are declaring in their synagogues: “May Jesus and the Christians be accursed!”¹³ --But not only the Jews of the day, but also the Gentiles. The Gentile rulers of the day tested whether anyone was a Christian or not. In fact, Pliny the Younger is said to have ordered Christians to curse Christ. Pliny writes that many came to him denying that they are or ever were Christians. He wrote a letter where he details the following account:

In my presence they called upon the gods, and burnt incense, and poured a libation of wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought in amongst the statutes of the gods. Moreover, they cursed Christ; and it is said that those who are true Christians cannot be in any way forced to do any of these things...others said that they had been Christians, but had not ceased to be; they all paid honor to your image and the image of the gods, and cursed Christ.”¹⁴

Paul’s point to these baptized Corinthian Christians is that apostasy is a reality. It is contrary to the work of the Spirit to continue to walk after the Old Man. But rather the way to live in the Church, in the presence of the assembly is to be led by the Spirit of God. When led by the Spirit, one can declare in freedom: Jesus is Lord. What Paul is alluding to before he focuses on the different gifts granted by the Spirit is that “to confess Jesus as Lord involves the whole self in an

¹³ See *The Great Commentary of Cornelius a Lapide on I Corinthians*, pg. 303. Published in 1908.

¹⁴ This letter has been debated as to its veracity, however, majority scholarship sees it as authentic: <http://www.tektonics.org/jesusexist/pliny.html>

attitude of trust, obedience, commitment, loyalty, and reverence to Jesus as the Lord.”¹⁵ Even the pressures to renounce and blaspheme Christ are not sufficient to undo the work of the Spirit in the lives of the saints.

How are we to live?

For us in 21st century America, the temptation to blaspheme Christ is minimal, since we are not pressured to renounce our faith. But there are other temptations we face, which cause us to minimize our faith. Paul’s concern in these three chapters centers on the unity of the body. We often hear the expression: “If mamma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.” There is nothing more pleasing to our Lord than to know that the adopted children of his bride, the Church are united. When we disregard the unity of the body, when we live the life of spiritual adultery, when we use our gifts for our own advantages, and not for the sake of the body, we are in one sense cursing the worship that our Lord Jesus desires in his Church.

Second, the implied meaning of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is that you should become like Christ. If some are becoming like mute idols, you are called to “behold the glory of the Lord (which we do in worship), to be changed into His image, from glory to glory. We become increasingly like what we worship (v. 18). Because we worship Jesus Christ, the true and final man, we are growing...into our full humanity.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Quoted in Thiselton, I Corinthians.

¹⁶ Douglas Wilson, Pomosexuality.

Finally, notice that though Paul is filled with conviction in his warnings, he does not forget who these people are. In chapter 1:2 he calls them “saints” and in chapter 12:1 he calls them “brother.” Paul does not for one second deny their baptisms, their status as Christians in covenant with God, even though he is well aware of their sins. This is a lesson for us this morning. It is not uncommon to hear Christians assuring another Christian that a fellow church member is probably not a Christian. In the Church of Christ there will always be those who are not as mature and who are struggling with particular sins, just like these Christians in the Church of Corinth and unless someone renounces Christ as Lord, or spits on their baptismal commitments, or blasphemes the grace of God, we must always treat one another with the grace and assurance that Paul extends to those in Corinth. We are one body of sinners brought into covenant by the mercy of God. So let us live as justified sinners extending the grace of God to one another as God in His mercy extended His grace toward us. In the Name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.