

Snowflakes and Ice Cubes

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Introduction: You've probably heard of the *Stepford Wives*. It's a novel set in the fictional town of Stepford, Connecticut. When new people arrive in town they soon notice that all the wives are overly submissive, impossibly beautiful women who kept perfectly ordered houses and families. Women who had once been talented, lively, and independent had somehow become mindless, docile zombies. They all looked alike, thought alike, and acted alike. The plot of the novel revolves around one woman who was new to the community figuring out that the wives were being replaced by androids/robots. (Wikipedia article on *Stepford Wives*)

I guess that if the *Stepford Wives* has a point it's that it's better to be imperfect and be yourself than to fit someone else's definition of "perfect" and become a robot. Nobody wants to become a robot. That's why we feel violated when others try to squeeze us into their mold. You sometimes hear people talk about their work environment in these terms: "I feel like a cog in a wheel . . . I don't feel I can be myself." A certain degree of conformity has its place in an ordered society, but there is an unhealthy type of conformity that can be dehumanizing and stifling.

If there is any context where people should have the freedom to "be themselves" it is the church. By God's design we have differences when it comes to gifts, burdens, ministry styles, and strengths (in general). God doesn't want us to be Stepford Christians. He wants us to have great unity (deeper than we can imagine); but unity does not mean uniformity.

I think we all know this on one level . . . but on another level, we sometimes think that we should all be alike. Actually we think others should be more like us; and when they're not it bothers us. A person goes to a conference or hears a teacher or understands an area of doctrine, and it's so good and helpful that s/he is convinced that **everybody** should become equally excited about that same conference, teacher, or doctrine. Or somebody has a deep burden for some type of ministry – either inside or outside the walls of the church – and thinks that **everybody** should have that same burden. And if they don't, they just aren't as committed to God as they should be.

This subtle mindset of uniformity can have opposite negative effects. On the one hand, this mindset can lead to pride and the attitude, "Everybody should be more like me. I may not be perfect, but I guarantee that if people were more like me, we wouldn't have so many problems. If everybody had my standards, my convictions, and my gifts everything would be better." Nobody would come out and say that, but that's the impression you get sometimes. That's pride. On the other hand, this mindset can lead to inferiority. Some people live their entire lives thinking, "If I were just like her, I'd be a good Christian. But even though I try, I never quite measure up." That's a sense of inferiority.

These dynamics were at work in the church at Corinth. There were some who basically said, "If you don't have the gift of tongues, you're really a second-class Christian." Speaking in tongues was a litmus test for spirituality. That's pride – thinking that everybody should have the gift I have. This, of course, led to inferiority on the part of others and the desire to forbid speaking in tongues altogether. In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul gives an extended explanation of spiritual gifts in general and tongues in particular.

Today we are going to examine 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and consider the reality that God has built incredible diversity into the body of Christ. Therefore, we should celebrate the fact that we're not all just alike.

The same Spirit gives a variety of gifts to different people for the common good. In 12:1 Paul uses an expression he's already used several times in 1 Corinthians:

12:1 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

"Now concerning" denotes yet another topic about which the Corinthians had asked – spiritual gifts (see also 7:1, 25, 8:1, 16:1). The term is literally "spirituals" (not the common word for spiritual gifts – *charisma* found later in the chapter) and could also be translated "spiritual things" or "spiritual people." But as the passage continues, it's obvious that Paul is talking about spiritual gifts. We'll develop the concept of spiritual gifts over the next several weeks, but for now it's enough to say that spiritual gifts are God-given abilities to be used for the common good. Your spiritual gift(s) are those abilities that God has given you and that God wants you to use for the benefit of others in the body of Christ. [Paul used the term "gifts" more broadly as well (see 7:7 – the gift of being single or married), but he narrows down to this understanding of God-given abilities in these chapters.]

In a kind but forceful way Paul tells the Corinthians that he does not want them to be unaware/ignorant about spiritual gifts any more. The clear implication is that they had serious gaps in their knowledge. But before he addresses spiritual gifts, Paul first tells them that ***the most foundational thing that the Holy Spirit does*** in the life of a believer is convince him/her of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul contrasts their experience in pagan idolatry with their experience in Christ.

2 You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led.

Paul reminds them that there was a time in their past when they were "led astray" to idolatry. This may have happened in a variety of different ways – through family, through a pressing need, through curiosity. In any case, they found themselves worshipping mute idols, idols that couldn't offer a single bit of advice. This reminder that in the past they were deceived and idolatrous should have made them more teachable and more receptive to what Paul was writing.

3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

It's hard to say exactly why Paul felt it necessary to mention that the Spirit of God never prompts a person to say, "Jesus is accursed." Some have suggested that the Corinthians had heard such a proclamation in the context of their former pagan worship. Paul assures them that the Spirit of God ***never*** prompts a person to make that proclamation. On the other hand, if someone proclaims, "Jesus is Lord," it is ***always*** at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Paul isn't merely talking about mouthing the words, "Jesus is Lord" – something that anybody can do. Paul is saying that whenever a person comes to the conviction that Jesus is Lord, it is always the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. "Jesus is Lord" is the foundational confession of a believer.

This means that every single one of us here today who has the conviction that Jesus is Lord has experienced this foundational work of the Holy Spirit. We didn't come to faith on our own; the Holy Spirit Himself has brought us to this place. When we think about our diversity of spiritual gifts and the different ways that the Holy Spirit works in our midst, we should remember that the most foundational thing that the Holy Spirit has done in our lives is the same: we all confess "Jesus is Lord" by the Holy Spirit.

With that foundation, Paul stresses in verses 4, 5, and 6 that the same God exhibits great variety in the way He works.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.

Notice the Trinitarian nature of Paul's argument here. He speaks of "the same Spirit" (v. 4), "the same Lord" (v. 5), and "the same God" (v. 6). Paul isn't teaching directly about the Trinity – one God in three persons – but His understanding of the Trinity so infused his theology that it naturally surfaces in this context. The implication is that just as there is "variety and sameness" within the Godhead, there is variety and sameness among believers. [I don't know if you noticed, but back up in verse 3 Paul spoke of the *Spirit* of *God* prompting us to confess *Jesus* as Lord.]

Paul is arguing that the *same* God works in a *variety* of ways in different people. In verse 4 Paul writes that "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit." Paul will give numerous examples in verses 8-10 of the variety of gifts that the same Spirit gives. There are several lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament; none of them are intended to be comprehensive. They are representative of the variety of gifts that God gives.

In verse 5 Paul writes that "there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord." A "ministry" is a specific type of service, a specific way to serve God. Paul spoke of his service as "an apostle to the Gentiles" as his ministry (Rom 11:13). Paul spoke of the collection for the poor in Jerusalem as a ministry (2 Corinthians 8:4). Paul told Timothy, "Fulfill your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:5). Even though all believers serve the same Lord/master, there are a variety of ministries or ways to serve. As I look at this church I see how we serve in vastly different ways: some like to serve behind the scenes and some do well up front; some are drawn toward teaching and others toward meeting tangible/physical needs; etc. I remember one person telling me, "I really like working with needy people – people whose lives are falling apart." Not all of us are built that way. But we all have the *same* Lord.

In verse 6 Paul writes that "there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons." The term translated "effects" has the same root as the word "works" ("the same God who *works* all things in all persons"). The sense is that the workings of God vary from person to person; God does not do the same things in and through every single person. God may work through one person primarily to lead people to faith in Christ; God may work in another person to mentor/train that person who has already come to Christ; God may use another person to encourage others to persevere. God effects different things through different people.

D.A. Carson points out that "The Triune God loves diversity – so much so . . . that when he

sends a snowstorm he makes each flake different. We manufacture ice cubes.” (*Showing the Spirit*, p. 32). Nowhere is this more evident than in the body of Christ. Next week when we consider the rest of the chapter, we’ll see how Paul says that two believers can be as different as an eye and an ear. Thinking that all Christians should have the same gifts and the same ministries and the same works is like thinking that eyes and ears should perform the same function in the human body! The Triune God is the One who has intentionally built variety/diversity into the body of Christ.

Verse 7 adds a couple of critical elements to our understanding of spiritual gifts.

7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

First, if you are a believer, you have one or more spiritual gift. We learn here that “each one” (each believer) is given the manifestation of the Spirit (i.e., gifts, ministries, and effects). Spiritual gifts are not reserved for only a few super-spiritual Christians. Every believer is given the manifestation of the Spirit. You are a steward of the gift(s) you’ve been given (1 Peter 4).

Second, the Spirit manifests Himself in your life for the common good – for the good of the broader body of Christ. This doesn’t mean that your spiritual gifts are of *no* benefit to you; it simply means that your gifts should ultimately benefit others (see Ephesians 4:11-13). The imagery later in the chapter emphasizes that the ear would be in big trouble without the eye; so too we as believers need what the Spirit is manifesting in the lives of other believers. There is no reason to feel inferior because you don’t have the same gifts as someone else; you should rather be thankful that God has given someone near you those gifts for your benefit.

Beginning in verse 8 Paul gives examples of how the Spirit is manifested differently in different believers. I’ll make a few brief comments about each gift.

8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit;

These first two gifts are speaking gifts: word of wisdom and word of knowledge. It’s difficult to say the difference between these two gifts since “wisdom” and “knowledge” are so closely related in 1 Corinthians. Both were closely related to sound doctrine. If there is a difference between wisdom and knowledge, wisdom is the practical application of knowledge. Presumably the Corinthians understood the difference. But the idea is that the Spirit gives one person a word/message of knowledge for the benefit of another person. The Spirit impresses upon one person a timely message of knowledge/wisdom for the benefit of others in the congregation.

9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,

The gift of faith is different from “saving faith” which all believers possess. The gift of faith is “faith to perform some extraordinary work” (Carson) – an unusual ability to trust God for specific things. Perhaps you’ve been in a situation where almost everyone was disheartened and ready to give up, but someone said, “I believe that God will come through for us here.” It’s more than just optimism; God gives the gift of faith in order to show the rest of us how deeply God can be trusted.

Paul mentions “to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit.” Literally, Paul writes “*gifts of healings*” (both plurals as in v. 28). The implication is that different people were given the ability to heal different kinds of sicknesses. This would argue against the idea of “*the* gift of healing” that would be given to a person to heal every form of sickness in every circumstance.

10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.

The “effecting of miracles” is literally the “workings of miracles” (again, both plurals). This suggests that different people are given the ability to perform different kinds of miracles – whether healings, casting out demons, etc.

We’ll talk about prophecy extensively in chapter 14, but for now we can say that the person with the gift of prophecy brings a message from God to other people. Sometimes this message can be predictive (such as in Acts 11 when a prophet named Agabus stood up and indicated that there would be a famine over the whole world). Perhaps more commonly a word of prophecy involves a message from God to the congregation to address the spiritual need of the moment (that message typically involves the application of Scripture – not new revelation/truth).

A person with the gift of “distinguishing of spirits” is able to discern whether some manifestation or expression is of the Holy Spirit or of an evil spirit. Not every supernatural manifestation is of God; not everything that is couched in spiritual language honors Christ; not everyone who claims to represent Jesus Christ actually does. And so God in His goodness gives the gift of “distinguishing of spirits.”

Lastly Paul mentions tongues and interpretation of tongues. Since we’ll be devoting two entire messages to tongues and its practice in the church (chapter 14), I’ll hold off on an explanation now. Let me reiterate Paul’s basic point in giving this list of spiritual gifts: ***the same Spirit gives a variety of gifts to different people for the common good.*** When you see variety in the body of Christ when it comes to gifts and ministries and effects, you are seeing the design of God. Notice how Paul expresses this in verse 11:

11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

“One and the same Spirit” distributes different gifts to individuals for the common good. Next week we will look at the rest of chapter 12. We’ll talk about our interdependence in the body of Christ. But before we talk about interdependence, we need to be clear about what we’ve seen today: the diversity that exists within the body of Christ is by God’s design.

This means first of all that we need to avoid projecting our specific gifts, ministries, and effects on other people. I need to be mindful, for example, that not everybody in the body of Christ is a pastor teacher (as I am). To become ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America, one of the things you do is write a doctrinal position paper and defend it before a panel of pastors and church leaders. One of the things I had written in the first draft of my paper was a statement to the effect that every believer had the responsibility to study the Bible. One of the guys on my ordination panel asked me something like, “How do you reconcile your statement with the fact

that a large percentage of all believers who've ever lived have been illiterate and haven't owned a copy of the Bible?" You know what I told him? "HMMMMMMMM." I was projecting my gifting as a pastor teacher on everybody else. The Scriptures don't say that all believers should study the Bible independently on their own. Timothy, a young pastor, was commanded to study to show himself approved as someone who taught the Scriptures. Believers in general are commanded to meditate on Scripture, to let the word of Christ richly dwell within us, etc. I need to avoid projecting my gifting on other people.

I'm not implying that if you can't challenge others with your area of gifting and passion. I am saying that you shouldn't force them into your mold. I, for example, should challenge people to seek God through the Scriptures *without* communicating, "If you don't study the Bible the way I do, you don't measure up." Think about how you might tend to project your gifting and ministry passions on others. Think about how you might better respect the diversity that God has placed in the body of Christ.

The other implication has to do with the sense of inferiority that so many believers have. I grieve for people who continually compare themselves to others and always feel like they aren't gifted enough or committed enough. That is not the mind of Christ. There are no easy answers here, but let me encourage you to go into the presence of God and ask, "God, please give me the freedom to be myself. Show me the gifts, ministries, and effects that you want to manifest in and through me. Give me contentment in knowing that You have made me to be the person You want me to be."

One point of clarification: We should all be equally committed to our mission of "helping people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life." We aren't saying that commitment to our God-given mission is optional. We're saying that there will be great variety in the way that each of us is committed to that mission. This is by God's design. God Himself has built great diversity into the body of Christ.