

The Doctrines of the Spirit & the Church

Credo: Truths that Shape a Christian Life Sermon 6

1 Corinthians 12:1-26

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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. **4** Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; **5** and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; **6** and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. **7** To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. **8** For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, **9** to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, **10** to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. **11** All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. **12** For 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 Christ. **13** For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. **14** For the body does not consist of one member but of many. **15** If the foot should 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. **16** And if the ear should 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. **17** If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? **18** But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. **19** If all were a single member, where would the body be? **20** As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. **21** 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.” **22** On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23** and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, **24** which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, **25** that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. **26** If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:1-26, ESV)

Today we conclude our sermon series, *Credo: Truths That Shape a Christian Life*. We’ve said from the outset that everyone believes in something. And, that like a latticework shaping a wisteria vine as it grows along with it, so too what we believe shapes the quality and contours of our lives. Using the early

Christian Creeds as guides, we've moved along the Christian latticework noting several truths, or doctrines, essential to a Christian life: The Doctrine of God, of the Son, of humanity, of the Cross, and of Final Things. Today we conclude by looking at two doctrines in terms of how they interrelate: the doctrines of the Spirit and the Church.

The final section of the Creed articulates belief in both the Holy Spirit and the Church, as the Apostles' Creed states:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic church, the communion of saints...

To be a Christian is to believe in the Holy Spirit, and the Church. What I want to show you in this sermon is why these two beliefs are stated next to each other, and why they interrelate. To anticipate where we are heading, the main question we will finally be asking is:

How does the Holy Spirit build the bonds of a more beautiful community, the church?

But first some background on these doctrines. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, and therefore takes us into the all-important Christian belief that God is one being, existing as three persons. This is a fathomless mystery, but let me remind us why it is so comforting. The Trinity reveals to us not only how God relates to God, but how God relates to us. God the Father is almighty, sovereign, and dwells in unapproachable holiness. God the Son, however, comes to us in flesh to save us, and helps us know who God is. God the Holy Spirit is the person of the Godhead who makes the presence of God real in our lives and hearts, right here in the present.

The Trinity also tells us something about ourselves. Recall that in our sermon on The Doctrine of Humanity we saw that humans are created in the image of God. Therefore, a window into God's nature often reveals something about our nature. As the Trinity, God Himself is a society. God is inherently in-relationship, eternally not-alone. Therefore, creatures made in his image should wonder if they, too, are inherently social beings.

Indeed, this is why the story unfolding in Scripture is relentlessly communal. It was not good that the first man, Adam, was alone. And Adam and Eve's first family only pointed forward to the larger family, the family of God. First Israel in the Old Testament, then the Church in the New Testament—a community including not only the Jewish people, but people from every tribe and every tongue.

The point is this:

We bear the image of a relational God, and therefore we are social creatures; we are not ourselves by ourselves. God’s vision for authentic humanity, therefore, culminates in a person not only reunited with God, but with the people of God, the church.

I want to spend the rest of the sermon addressing how the Holy Spirit works to build and bond this new community, the Church, and why this is relevant for us personally, and corporately. It’s probably safe to say that the Holy Spirit is the more under-studied person of the Trinity. We can be a little intimidated, or confused, about the Spirit. But we shouldn’t be; the Spirit is fully God, just as Jesus is. And the work of the Spirit is as immense as it is varied, ranging from aiding God the Father in Creation, to awakening the human heart to faith in Jesus, to empowering the Church with gifts. One aspect of the Spirit’s work that often goes unnoticed, is what I would call the *relational work of the Spirit*.

The Spirit not only works to awaken an individual’s heart to their relationship with God, but also works to build a believer’s relationship to other believers. Or, put another way, the Spirit builds the bonds of the church community. The Bible refers to this latter relational work of the Spirit as “the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” As Paul concludes his Second Letter to the Corinthians, he writes: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, **and the communion of the Holy Spirit** be with all of you” (2 Corinthians 13:13/14, NRSV).¹ Another translation words it: “... **the fellowship that is ours in the Holy Spirit** be with you all! (2 Corinthians 13:13/14, J. B. Phillips). Paul uses this same term elsewhere, writing to the Philippians, “If there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit...” (Philippians 2:1).

Apparently, there is a type of fellowship that is made possible only *by the Holy Spirit*. This means that while there are countless expressions of community in our world, there must be something utterly unique to that community that is bound together by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

So how exactly does the Spirit build the bonds of this unique community?

To address this question, I want to use the Church in Corinth as a test case, for that is one of the earliest Christians communities and the Holy Spirit was an important topic in Paul’s two letters to them. What I’ll do is move us through a few parts of the letter of First Corinthians, noting three ways the Spirit builds

the bonds of community: We'll consider the Spirit and the fellowship of the Wound; a new Affection; and a mutual Dependence.

I. The Spirit and the Fellowship of the Wound

1. The Wound

As a pastor, I've often gotten to know people whose lives had been deeply transformed through some type of support group—be it grief share, divorce care, or some form of a twelve-step program. The reason people bond so closely in these groups is that, first, they are joined together by a shared wound. And sharing your wound requires being vulnerable, and being vulnerable is a prerequisite to any type of real fellowship. True community requires being vulnerable; being vulnerable is about letting people see your weaknesses.

When the Holy Spirit awakens faith in someone, He does so by revealing to them their need for being saved; and you don't need saving unless you have some real problem, some wound. We can see this at work as Paul reminds the Corinthians of when they first came to faith.

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. **2** For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified ... **4** and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in **demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5** so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1–2, 4–5)

Notice the two points Paul is making here: First, that the faith of the Corinthians was in "Jesus Christ Crucified." This means they had come to believe that God's Son died for them because they needed to be saved. In short, they had a wound. Second, notice the role of the Holy Spirit: their faith was not a response to Paul's rhetorical gifts, but a response to a "demonstration of the Spirit and of power," meaning, it was faith awakened by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the first step the Spirit takes in forming a community, is to form individuals who have been awakened to their own wound—their own need of a savior.

How does this foster bonds of community? It works in a similar fashion to the support groups. Nothing walls off community like pride and ego. We cannot really know each other if we are relating to each other's mask; we need to relate to the real self.

The Spirit creates a community, not of the perfect, but of the wounded who are being saved.

2. The Healer

But it is not only the wound at work; the Spirit reveals the Healer. Thus, each individual Christian has learned to see themselves as one who is being saved, helped, and guided by Christ. The Spirit then opens our eyes to see others in this same light—as the wounded being saved by Christ.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book on Christian community, *Life Together*, he talks of a community bound not by emotional love, but spiritual love. The key to this love is seeing the other not directly, but only through the mediation of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual love ... comes from Jesus Christ; it serves him alone. It knows that it has no direct access to other persons. Christ stands between me and others. I do not know in advance what love of others means.... Contrary to all my own opinions and convictions, Jesus Christ will tell me what love for my brothers and sisters really looks like.... Therefore, spiritual love will prove successful insofar as it commends Christ to the Other in all that is says and does.²

How is Jesus healing and transforming you? Here is a litmus test to see if you are in any relationships that are Spirit-built: Is there someone in your life, in this church, with whom you often ask, "how is Jesus at work in your life, healing and transforming?" Or are there people in this church to whom you've shared your wound—what Jesus is saving you out of?

The Spirit's first move in building community is to build bonds around a shared wound and a shared experience with the Healer, Jesus Christ. And therefore, the Spirit orients us to relate to one another through the person and saving work of Jesus Christ.

II. The Spirit and the Fellowship of New Affections

A second way the Spirit creates fellowship is by creating in the believers a new capacity for understanding and enjoying things—I call this a *new affection*. Following along in First Corinthians, Paul writes of the difference between spiritual people and natural people when it comes to perceiving and enjoying the things of God:

12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. **13** And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. **14** The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:12–14).

According to Paul, the Spirit grants Christians a new and deeper ability to grasp the things of God, to grasp truth. Paul is not here talking about God increasing your IQ. No, something more deep and subtle is at work. Paul is talking about a new *sense* or ability to *taste* what is true. How the Spirit awakens this new sense, and how it builds new bonds of community, can be hard to understand. Let me offer this analogy to help.

Suppose there was a group of five people who all loved the color orange. They decided to form a community around loving orange. One day someone brought them a real orange, right from a tree. They all immediately liked it because of its color—orange! They began enjoying fellowship by talking about its pretty color. Then two members of the five started talking about how good an orange tastes. But the other members had never tasted an orange, so found what they said unintelligible. But the two who not only enjoyed the sight, but also the taste of the orange, began to bond deeper by talking about how wonderful it tasted on a hot summer day. Here's is how I've seen this at work in real people:

I've been in groups of academics who know the Bible better than most people will ever understand it. However, their fellowship together around their common interest, even love of ancient literature, is altogether different from what I see in other circumstances. I also know of people who cannot even read, but because their hearts are alive with faith, when the Bible is read to them, they relate in tears and joy. What is the difference—the Holy Spirit has awakened a new sense in their heart, and they don't merely know, but they taste and enjoy the Word of God as True.

We all know that people are drawn together by shared interest. Our world forms *affinity groups*. As the Spirit awakens in us a new taste for the truths of God, it then builds new bonds between those who, together, have tasted and seen that the Lord is Good.

III. The Spirit and the Fellowship of Mutual-Dependence

A third way the Spirit builds the bonds of community is through the bonds of a mutual-dependence.³

Paul explains this through the metaphor of the human body in 1 Corinthians 12:

For 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 Christ.... **15** If the foot should 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. **16** And if the ear should 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.... **21** 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." **22** But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, **25** that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another (1 Corinthians 12: 14-16, 21, 22, 25).

It's important to notice what types of giftedness Paul is talking about in this chapter. He is not talking about natural gifts (although I am sure he saw how valuable they were). Rather, Paul is talking about the giftings given by the Spirit. Before the section I just read, Paul says, "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4). Paul understands that each member of the church—the Body of Christ—is uniquely gifted by the Spirit to help build up the larger body. This means that every member is essential to the body, while at the same time no member is sufficient by themselves.

The gifts the Spirit generates are many, and they aim at uniting and building up the church community. Paul's lists of gifts include healing, prophecy, an ability to peer into the heart of a matter, encouragement, administration, teaching and preaching. Why wouldn't the Spirit just give each individual Christian all the gifts and let them use the gifts on themselves? This way, you could stay home on Sunday, preach the sermon to yourself, teach Sunday school to yourself, do the administration for your own church, heal your sore throat, and speak in tongues and interpret what you just said to yourself. But the Spirit doesn't do this. Why? Because the Spirit has so arranged the body so that we don't go it alone. You cannot become a whole and healthy Christian without the Spirit-empowered body of Christ.

I've been the rector at Falls Church for eight months or so, but I first came here ten years ago as a summer seminarian. In one way or another, I've been a part of this church family for a decade. Let me tell you something I've both observed and experienced. The church is like a pot of soup, filled with all different types of people or ingredients. If you throw yourself into this soup for a couple of years, you will be changed. And you will be changed because the Holy Spirit is working through the people here,

but you can't know that unless you get *into* the soup. If you jump in and hang around for a few years, you'll spend some time with a small group, and you'll become known, learn the Word, and be encouraged. You'll go on a mission trip one summer and see love at work in people here that touches you. You'll spend some time with the healing ministry or someone from it, and you'll find a deep part of your being touched by the healing power of Jesus Christ; you'll find that dozens of saints with the gifts of administration make church events happen; and you'll encounter preachers and teachers who, under the guidance of the Spirit, share Scripture with you. And, after a few years, you will be different; you will be more like Christ.

But none of this will happen, if you remain a lone ranger. Why? Because the Spirit has willed that each individual member be dependent on the larger body. The Spirit's power is here—and it is mediated through the many. The Spirit builds the bonds of a unique community around a shared wound and experiences of the Healer, a shared affection for God's truth, and a shared dependence on each other for life in Christ. Let me conclude by suggesting two reasons why the Relational work of the Holy Spirit to build and bond the church matters:

1. You are formed by something

The first reason is because we are not ourselves by ourselves. We are all formed and being formed by some community: family of origin, our culture, the Western university you went to, the South American culture you come from—some community is shaping the way you see the world. When God saves us and begins to transform us, He does so by bringing us into a new web-of relationships, a new community.

It is only immersed in this Spirit-shaped web of relationships that we can really become the new person God is calling us to be.

2. Our love is our witness

Second, how we love each other is our greatest witness to the world. Jesus says in John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." It will be the love of this community—our love for one another—that will give everything else we say or do its integrity.

It will be this Spirit-fostered love for one another that beckons the weary world to come to Christ.

So indeed, we saw with our brothers and sisters across time and across the world:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic church, the communion of saints...
(Apostles Creed)

As I conclude, take a moment to invite the Holy Spirit to be at work in our community, building the bonds of a loving family of God.

Endnotes

1. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:13/14, NIV)
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 43, 44.
3. E.g., Teams: sports teams will often grow the closest when the players realize they need the unique gifts of each person. The right fielder on the baseball team can catch well, but he can't throw 90mph, so he's thankful for the pitcher; and the pitcher can throw a great curveball but can't hit much, so he's glad for the first baseman who's a real slugger.