

Doctrinal Summary of Love: A More Excellent Way

In 1 Corinthians 12:31 the Apostle Paul addresses the jealous pursuit of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church by informing the Corinthians that there is a better way to benefit the body of Christ than spiritual gifts.

“But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.”

The words “earnestly desire” are translated from the Koine Greek word ζηλοῦτε (“zae-lou-teh”) which more literally means, “you all really are performing the continuous type of action to pursue something for the purpose of acquisition from a mental attitude of uncompromising commitment toward obtaining what is being pursued.” It identifies the reality that the Corinthian believers were zealously pursuing something so that they could have it for themselves. This pursuit was a consistent and repetitious pursuit that the Corinthian believers pursued relentlessly. The thing they were pursuing were types of spiritual gifts that they believed were greater than other spiritual gifts.

The word “greater” is translated from the Koine Greek word μείζονα (“mei-zon-ah”) which more literally means, “greater or superior in its characteristics, being tools or instruments used to accomplish something.” It describes something as being greater than something else or superior to something else. By its very nature it draws a conclusion from a comparison between two or more things which have been compared in their characteristics, materials, benefits, or value with the result that one of those things is determined to be better than the other(s). This determination can be real or perceived as well as objective or subjective. Here, the Corinthian believers were comparing spiritual gifts that some had in the body of Christ with those that they had. Consequently, they perceived some spiritual gifts as better or superior to others and began to pursue those gifts instead of utilizing the gifts that God had assigned them.

The word “gifts” is translated from the Koine Greek word χάρισμα (“cha-ris-mah-tah”) which more literally means, “necessary provision(s) graciously provided by another who has taken responsibility for the recipients’ needs, being tools or instruments used to accomplish something.” It is predominately used in Corinthians to describe the spiritual provisions God has supplied to each believer in order for them to fulfill their individual role in the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-7). But can refer to anything God has provided to believers by means of His grace responding to their personal needs. Since these spiritual provisions are designed to provide each believer with what he needs to fulfill his role in the body of Christ they are dispensed by God in a special composition and package of gifts that are unique to each believer. Some gifts, just as some roles in the body of Christ, have more impact than other gifts (cf. 1 Cor. 12:6). Because of this the Corinthian believers became caught in the trap of seeking spiritual gifts that seemed to be superior to the ones they had. Yet, Paul says there is a more excellent way to edify the body of Christ than to jealously pursue different spiritual gifts than those which God had dispensed.

The words “more excellent” are translated from the Koine Greek words καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν (kath hu-per-bo-laen”) which more literally mean, “according to the norms and standards of an overabundance of extraordinary quality or character, based on response.” This overabundantly more extraordinary way of edifying and serving the body of Christ is shown by Paul in the very next portion of his epistle. It is specifically the operation of each believer in unconditional love in all that they do in the body of Christ.