

# GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

August 16, 2015



# Discussion Guide

## The Comparison Trap

### Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

### Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Are you a person who sizes people up or do you simply take them as they are? Can you elaborate?

### Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read 1 Corinthians 12.1-26 slowly and aloud. Seek to imagine that these are God's words to you and to Union Center Christian Church. If you can, imagine them being spoken to the congregation as a whole with you present in that congregation.
- The Corinthians had fallen into the trap of comparing themselves with one another. What was the nature of this comparing? What practical effects did it have within the congregation?
- What did Paul have to say about this practice of comparison?
- In what ways do Christians still compare themselves with other Christians? What effects does this comparison have within congregations?
- In what ways, if any, are you drawn to compare yourself with other believers? What effect does this have upon you?

- Our comparison is often rooted in our diversity, but Paul states that our diversity derives from God's nature, a practical outworking of his presence among us. What impact, if any, does this have upon our temptation to compare ourselves with others?
- Paul states that the path out of comparison involves the intentional practice of mutual concern (verse 25). What might this look like? How might this end the practice of comparison?
- Read 1 Corinthians 12.1-26 once more, seeking to imagine that these are God's words to you and to Union Center. Spend time pondering these words and sharing what you heard God say. Take these and cherish them as God's words to you and use them as a springboard to prayer as a group.

### Context and Background

#### *Spiritual Gifts*

The term "spiritual gifts" is a modern phrase used to refer to the outworking of God's Holy Spirit dwelling within the lives of believers. The New Testament authors never use the term "spiritual gifts," but rather use the terms pneumatika or spiritual things (1 Corinthians 12.1; 14.1) and charismata or grace things (1 Corinthians 12.28; Romans 12.6). The emphasis of these words should remind us that what we refer to as "spiritual gifts" are actually manifestations of God's Spirit within us and not something separate from God's person; that is, spiritual gifts are nothing less than God himself showing up in our lives.

The idea of God's Spirit manifesting himself in the lives of God's people is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Moses' ability to lead was a manifestation of God's Spirit in his life (Numbers 11.25, 29). The Judges led Israel only because God's Spirit resided upon them (e.g. Othniel, Judges 3.10). The Old Testament prophets spoke God's words only because God's Spirit had come upon them (Isaiah 42.1; Joel 2.28-29). The vast difference between these Old Testament manifestations of God's Spirit and those of the New Testament is their permanency. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit could come and go, as can be seen in the life of King Saul (1 Samuel 10.10; 18.12). This coming of the Spirit upon the lives of God's people seems to have been for the

accomplishment of specific activities. However, with Pentecost, God gives his Spirit in an ever-present way to his people in such a manner that the Holy Spirit takes up permanent residence within a believer (Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 6.19-20). Because the Spirit of God is present within the lives of Jesus' followers, their lives begin to manifest the actions and attributes of God (Romans 12.6-8; Galatians 5.22-26; 1 Corinthians 12.4-11, 28-30; Ephesians 4.7-12). The purpose of this ongoing manifestation of the Spirit is for the good of all God's people, not just individuals (1 Corinthians 12. 7) so that they all might be edified and mature together to experience God's life (Ephesians 4.15).

## The Text

### 1 Corinthians 12.1-14: *Same kind of different*

Paul planted the church in Corinth (Acts 18) during what is often referred to as his second missionary journey (around 49-52 AD). After Paul left, the church in Corinth began to splinter over issues of leadership, theology, life and worship practices. Paul wrote to the church in an attempt to bring unity to the congregation. His words are often tinged with rebuke and irony because the Corinthians believed they were mature and complete (1 Corinthians 1.7; 4.8) and yet they were behaving as immature followers of Jesus (1 Corinthians 3.1-3).

Perhaps the primary fault line within the Corinthian congregation involved the practice of worship, something Paul addressed at length (1 Corinthians 8-14). While several issues were at play within this larger discussion—the role of women, the Lord's Supper, food sacrificed to idols, the role of freedom—the biggest issue seemed to be the presence of spiritual gifts and the tension they created between unity and diversity within the congregation. Clearly, the congregation celebrated the possession and use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1.7) but they disagreed over the “right” or “better” gifts to possess, creating something of a hierarchy of gifts which led to divisions within the congregation. At the root of the issue involving gifts was the presence of comparison. The Corinthians were comparing themselves, and the gifts they possessed, to other believers in order to determine their spiritual greatness (or lack thereof!).

Paul addressed the presence of comparison by stating he wanted the believers in Corinth to be

informed about how spiritual gifts truly worked, because it was possible to be uninformed and confused when one brought their cultural grid and used it to understand the movement of God. The use of culture to understand God's work could actually backfire leading to insane statements like “Jesus be cursed.” What the Corinthians needed to understand was that there were many kinds of gifts but that behind each one was the same God. Paul made this statement three times in three different ways. With each statement, he mentions a separate member of the Godhead: Spirit, Jesus, and Father. Paul's point is hard to miss. The diversity of spiritual gifts was rooted in the nature of God as God himself experienced diversity. However, God, though diverse, also experiences unity. God lives in the tension of unity and diversity. Because this is God's life, Paul noted that God intentionally moved among his people with spiritual gifts so that they too experienced diversity and unity. They were different and yet because they all possessed they same God, they were united. They were same but different. Or perhaps, they were the same kind of different. Paul used the metaphor of the body to illustrate his point.

### 1 Corinthians 12.15-26: *The comparison trap*

Because the Corinthians were unified and diverse, sharing the life of God, the presence of comparison should have been a moot point. It was not. The Corinthians compared the outer manifestations of the God who made them one and used these comparisons to shift between feelings of self-condemnation and self-righteousness. Some compared the way God worked in them with how God worked in others and determined that they had no place in the body. This is a statement that is stronger than just they did not belong. It is a statement that indicates they questioned (have determined?) whether God was working in them at all. Others in the congregation compared the outworkings of God in them with the outworkings of God in others and decided that they were better than others; that is, they decided they belonged to God and others did not! All of this occurred because the Corinthians were comparing themselves with one another. In their comparing, they were comparing their insides (the presence or absence of the Spirit) with the outsides (the manifestation of the Spirit) of others. The result was disastrous.

Paul noted that the differences were real but God-intended. These differences in the manifestations of the Spirit did not negate the presence of the Spirit. Rather, it underscored the unity as each person was needed and important. Even the parts deemed not important were necessary and those weak parts were protected. Rather than simply telling the Corinthians to “cut it out!”, Paul provides a path forward out of the trap of comparison in which they had fallen. He holds up the life of the God-head as the path forward, the very life which was leading to the tension of diversity and unity. The Corinthians were to have a mutual concern for one another, honoring unity and seeking to experience what the other members were experiencing. In so doing, they were taking up the life and practice of the Trinity, a life which was able to maintain unity among diversity.

### **Real life with Blake:**

I want to be somebody. We all do. But, when I am with other people, I wonder if that is possible. I begin to look around at others and I see them and all the wonderful ways God is working through them. I see people who are able to demonstrate incredible patience. Others have amazing faith. Still others can pray in ways I never knew was possible. I look around and I see people who can do things I cannot do and I begin to wonder if I can really be somebody. I wonder because I don't look like anyone else. I don't act like anyone else. I don't think like anyone else. This feeling is especially strong when I get around other pastors. Maybe you haven't noticed, but I don't fit the typical pastor profile. As I recognize how different I am, a small thought begins to form deep within me. It typically begins something like, “All these people are so great. . .” and in a few moments it is followed by “and I am nothing, worthless and ineffective because I am not like them.” I make this huge leap to judging myself as worthless (an inside judgment) all because of what I see other people doing (an outside judgment). I walk away dejected and usually detached from others. After all, I am not as good as they are. I am coming to realize that I am different and that is OK. In fact, it is more than OK. It is intended. I am not like anyone else because diversity comes from God. God is Father, Son, and Spirit. he invented diversity. He lives it, but he does so in

unity with himself and he wants me to experience that same unity. He wants me to know that I am a unique creation in whom he dwells and delights, as is everyone else who follows after Christ. If I want to experience that unity, I have to stop comparing myself to others and start seeking to live with them the way that God lives with himself. I have to stop looking at myself and start looking at others. I must look at them not to see how they are different or better, but how I might share in their life, how I might celebrate their life, and somehow, perhaps slowly at first, the divine dance of the Trinity begins to be my dance with others.

### **Real life with you:**

We all want to be great, but it seems almost impossible. The problem isn't that you can't be great. We see great people all around us. The problem is we are nothing like them. We seem to think that because we are not like others, they are great and we are not. This is simply not true. Our greatness is not measured in the things we practice but in the presence of God within us. The God who lives within us is diverse. He lives in diversity and he gives us this gift of diversity when he gives us himself. But he also gives us the gift of unity in our diversity, if we would but take up his life. When we cease our activity of comparison and replace it with mutual concern, seeking to share the life of those around us, we enter into the divine dance in which our diversity becomes unity. This may seem awkward or foreign at first, but we can practice it by approaching one another with a simple prayer, “Give me grace to honor this person.” This week, see if you can approach others and offer this prayer before, during, and after you engage with them. You might consider journaling what this experience is like for you and what, if any, attitudes begin to change in you.



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