

The Enthusiasts, the Eggheads, the Pray-ers, and the Chickenfriers
by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 02060611
Romans 8:12-17 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 13:4-7
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The church in Corinth had many problems, the most glaring of which was that people separated themselves into different groups. It is important in any congregation to celebrate diversity, with out becoming cliquish or promoting a particular group. This season of Pentecost is a perfect time to share thoughts received from Jim Glasse¹ about gifts given by the Spirit of God to Christians.

By looking at Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, we get an idea of just how confused early life in the church was. For us in Elon in 2006, life is just as confusing and just as scary. We are not sure who is right and who is wrong. We hear news of world situations and are terrified. We don't know whom to believe in government anymore. There are so many twists and turns, we don't know where we are. This is a gift from God. The conflict shaking through which we are going will shake us loose from things that have bound us too tightly for too long. It is to free us for new life and new hope.

I don't know where your world is falling apart, but here is how mine is. When I was thinking about going into the ministry, we were very clear about the difference between clergy and laity. It was the preacher's job to preach and it was the layman's job to lay. Someone started talking about the priesthood of all believers and the ministry of the laity. Others believed it and caused trouble. The lay people didn't lay any more!

I have a good middle class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant non-identity. I never learned who I was. Rather, I learned who I wasn't. That gave me the feeling I knew who I was. I knew I was Christian because wasn't a Jew. We told stories about them to make very clear who they were, and we weren't like that. Then, I knew I was Protestant and not Catholic, and we told stories about them to make clear what they were like, and I wasn't like that! I knew I was a boy, because I was not a girl, and we told stories about them. I knew I was American, because I was not a foreigner, and we told stories about them. I knew I was White, because I was not Black, and we told stories about them.

We had stories about everybody but us. Why not? Because we're just human beings. There's nothing special about us. That's beautiful, as long as *they* act like they're supposed to.

The whole world is divided into two kinds of people, us and them. All of a sudden, *they* don't act like they're supposed to, and the world is upset. Kids won't stay in their place, women get pushy, and gay people want rights. I begin to wonder, Who am I? What am I worth?

This leads back to something Paul said in the twelfth chapter of Romans: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."²

How do I do that? How do I think of myself honestly, openly, soberly, and not think of myself more highly than I ought, nor more lowly than I ought? How do I discover the gift God has assigned to me? What means of service shall be mine? I know what comes to me in the gospel: salvation and grace. But, each of us is given a gift with which to respond. How do I know what my gift is?

For too long, I purchased my identity at the price of someone else's identity, worth, or integrity. It was by putting someone else down that I could feel like somebody good. This is the problem of spiritual snake-handling.

There is a group of Christians we call snake handlers. They know that if you handle a poisonous rattlesnake and don't get bitten, you're a Christian. If you are bitten, you didn't have enough faith. We know that is superstition. We would never handle snakes like that. But, you know, they don't call themselves "snake-handlers," they call themselves "Christians." They got their practice from reading the Bible. They discovered a way they could at any time know who was a Christian and who wasn't.

We've spent a lot of time making fun of those people, but everyone who calls him- or herself Christian is really a snake handler at heart. I have never met a person in church who couldn't tell they were Christian and who wasn't. Those folks we call snakehandlers used real snakes. We use spiritual snakes: those things we throw at each other and yell, "OK, handle that!"

Now, reading First Corinthians Chapter Thirteen, Glasse discovered four groups of spiritual snake handlers in the church at Corinth. They are called "enthusiasts," "eggheads," "pray-ers," and "chickenfriers." Paul doesn't call

¹James D. Glasse: *The Art of Spiritual Snake Handling and Other Sermons*

²Romans 12:3

them that, Glasse does.

First, there are the Enthusiasts. These are the Tongues-speakers. They said “everyone here is a Christian, but the most important thing is enthusiasm. You have to have enthusiasm, or you aren’t a real Christian. That’s what the word means: ‘enthusiasm’: *en-theos*: you’ve got to have God in you. When you’ve got God, sometimes you can’t even understand what you’re saying. If everybody could just understand that and get going that way, what a church we’d have!”

While they’re making their speech, the eggheads are over in another corner. They’re saying, “This is very interesting– the place of emotion in religion. We haven’t decided what its place is yet, but what is really important is that we understand the faith: its historical development and its theological formation, so we can make sensible statements and so people can really understand.”

Then, there are the Pray-ers. They’re over in the other corner– on their knees. They’re saying, “It is important to be enthusiastic about things and it’s also important to study, but you and I know the church moves forward on its knees. It’s the spiritual things that make a difference. Spiritual people are the ones who understand what is really important. Of course *we* people are the first class Christians.”

Then, there are the chickenfriers. They’re saying, “I’m just not the kind of person who gets worked up about things. I’m always there at church school and I’m always listening to the preacher– I don’t always understand her, but I’m always there. Every evening I pray. I haven’t moved any mountains lately, but I keep at it. But, by golly, when there is something going on down at the church, some chicken to be fried or other work to be done, I’m there doing it. Folks like me are there, and where would the church be without people like us?”

It was to a church where people were in groups talking to each other like that, that Paul wrote these words: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels (the enthusiasts) but have not love, I am noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge (the eggheads), and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains (the pray-ers) but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned (the chickenfriers) but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

In Corinth, when Paul came the first time, no one had ever heard the gospel before. There weren’t different versions or interpretations or denominations. Different people responded, and they became a motley group. They responded with their own identities to the gospel. But, something happened. They became isolated clumps of people. It was by subtle spiritual snake-handling by which the people began to set themselves off according to their gifts.

So, Paul wrote this letter, and in the twelfth chapter he wrote, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”³ “What have you been doing? You have been taking your special gift and holding it up there as something that everybody is supposed to live by. You are an unbelievably great collection of people with different skills, abilities, sensitivities, stupidities, errors, tragedies, joys, and sorrows. What a rich exciting mix that is!”

If people could only see things the way I see them, we wouldn’t have any difficulty! But they can’t. They may want to, but they can’t because they are not me. People always see things differently. “Let’s put our heads together” and there is still this much difference. “Walk a mile in my shoes.” I’ll go barefoot! “You can stand nose to nose for days and days and still not see eye to eye.” We are left ultimately with our uniqueness, this funny way we see the world. Isn’t that marvelous? You can tell me something about the world I can never see. How rich we are when we can share our diversities, and how poor we are when we hide them.

One thing stands out in this letter of Paul: love. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.”⁴

Let’s help each other exercise our individual gifts. By the grace of God, I am who I am. That is my identity. That is what straightens me up. I hope I don’t waste that gift by trying to prove that I’m better than someone else. That’s all I hope I can say when it comes to the end, that I haven’t squandered the gift God has given to me.

³1 Corinthians 12:4-6:

⁴1 Corinthians 13:4