

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 43

Worship Issues #2

I Corinthians – Part Five

Chapters 12 - 14

I. BACKGROUND

As we continue to consider Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church on worship issues, set forth are several points already covered in more depth earlier.

1. Paul started the church at Corinth and stayed there its first 18 months.
2. Letters and messengers went back and forth between Paul and the Corinthians prior to the letter we are reading now ("1 Corinthians").
3. Paul was well aware of the problems and practices of the church.
4. Paul wrote anticipating that he would soon visit the church again in person. So, we may fairly assume that the core issues Paul wrote about were important enough that Paul needed to write them rather than wait for the upcoming visit.
5. The church had serious problems with divisions among the people. These divisions included a number who questioned Paul's authority and teaching.
6. A number of the people considered themselves "super-spiritual," believing Paul and much of his teaching were below their "advanced state" of spiritual growth.

The worship issues of Chapters 10 and 11 covered last week centered on the Lord's Supper, the propriety of men and women praying and prophesying with heads covered, and the need for the Corinthians to abstain from attending pagan feasts. Paul continues with issues of corporate worship in chapters 12 through 14 focusing on spiritual gifts.

II. SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND SPIRITUALITY

In chapters 12 through 14, Paul speaks with the Corinthians about spiritual gifts and what it means to be "spiritual." Paul does so in a typical reasoning pattern for him. Paul gives a general word about the issue (chapter 12), then provides a theological interlude with background explanation necessary (chapter 13) for the specific instructions Paul sets out in chapter 14.

For Paul, true spirituality within worship is NOT about who has which gift, and which gift might be better. True spirituality is about using the gifts God has given you to edify and help grow the church.

A. *The General Word (Chapter 12)*

Paul begins this section by comparing the life of the Corinthians pre-conversion with life afterwards. When the Corinthians were pagans, they were led astray to “mute idols” (12:2). Paul contrasts following idols that could never speak to following Christ who speaks through his Spirit. The Spirit of God leads us to speak, but the words from the Spirit are words for Christ, not against him.

No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit (12:3).

This is not Paul giving a “test” for whether or not one is saved. This is Paul stating that the Spirit speaks words glorifying Christ, as Jesus promised in John 14–16. Those who were Jews crying out in synagogue, “Jesus is anathema (cursed),” although arguably worshipping Yahweh just as the Christians, were not speaking by the Spirit of God.

Paul then moves from the Spirit who talks (as opposed to the mute pagan idols) to discuss how the Spirit speaks through gifts. Paul explains that there are different kinds of gifts, different kinds of service, and different kinds of working, but all are from the same Spirit. The point behind the gifts is the common good for the church.

Evidently, a number of the Corinthians were convinced that their spiritual gifts were for their own benefit, as opposed to the common good. We do not know the details, but it seems a safe assumption that these folks viewed the gifts as something that held personal importance. Paul saw the gifts given for the common good of the church, not for boastfulness or personal power grabs.

Paul details a number of spiritual gifts: messages of wisdom and knowledge, gifts of faith, healing, prophecy, distinguishing spirits, and speaking and interpreting different tongues (12:8-11). Paul

again emphasizes after this listing that the Spirit gives these gifts based upon the Spirit's determined choices.

Paul allegorizes these gifts to body parts. Paul explains that the body is made up of many different parts. A body cannot have only eyes or no one could hear. Without feet, how would one walk? Each Christian has certain gifts from God that are meant to edify the entire body. God has put these gifts in us just as God has designed our bodies. Should we then start thinking of one part being more important or special than another? No body part is more worthy of honor than another. The body is a united whole, not divided parts.

Paul concludes these general words explaining his allegory by telling the Corinthians that they are each a part of the body of Christ. Everyone has a gift for this body. This leaves the people either living with joy over God using them as God sees fit, trying to build up the church, or living in a self-glorifying delusion that destroys the integrity of both the church and God's work.

B. Theological Interlude – It's About Love! (Chapter 13)

Paul pauses before he gives specific instructions in Chapter 14 about how to use spiritual gifts in worship to give some theological instruction and background information necessary for fuller understanding of the coming teaching in 14. The instruction covers the nature of love and its importance within the church.

Paul wrote this section in a logical fashion within the context of the church and the abuse of spiritual gifts. However, this section, quite properly, has found a life of its own in church history. This passage is used in weddings, in sermons, in inspirational books, in counseling sessions, and in countless other settings. The passage contains eternal truths about the nature and effect of true Christian love that extend beyond the bounds of the context in which Paul wrote. Consistent with our study method, we will focus first on why Paul included it in his letter and then we will make proper application to our lives.

Paul introduces this chapter on love as the "most excellent way" in which to exercise spiritual gifts. Love will take all gifts and make them "greater" than they could be otherwise (12:31). Without love

as the foundational motivation in their use, the persons with the gifts gain nothing, even **become** nothing

Paul's word for love here is *agape* (αγαπη). The word itself denotes a love that finds its center – its motivation – in the well-being of others. Rather than try to synthesize Paul's verse, each phrasing is so striking, it is well worth standing here on its own:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. (13:1-13)

Time has offered a number of different interpretations to what Paul means when writing about “now” and “then” and what is the coming “perfection.” Some have taught that the perfection was the final scripture in its fullness. Such teaching seems out of line with Paul's thought. There is nothing to indicate that Paul was contemplating a fuller scripture around the corner from what already existed.

The much more probable explanation is that Paul is talking about Jesus' return which he thought was imminent. That return will bring fuller vision and understanding. Jesus' return will also change the very nature of faith and hope. Our faith is in his return; our hope is also. Once the return occurs, faith and hope are fulfilled, but love will march on for eternity. In a very real sense, then, this love is the greatest of all Christian virtues.

With this exposition on love, Paul puts all the fussing and self aggrandizement of the Corinthians into a shameful context. We are not supposed to be about personal pride, power, prestige, or position. We should be about building others in God's kingdom.

C. *Specific Instruction (Chapter 14)*

Having set out unselfish "love" as the true motivation, Paul returns to the issue of the church's use of spiritual gifts. Paul writes that we are to eagerly desire spiritual gifts, but when doing so, "follow the way of love" (14:1). What did that mean for the gifts that the Corinthians were abusing?

Paul explains tongues – the gift that seems to have become a snag to the Corinthian church. Paul says that speaking in a tongue that no one can understand might be personally edifying, but would do nothing for the church at large. We remember the context that Paul believes these gifts in corporate worship are for the body at large. We are to exercise them in loving concern for others. So, Paul rightfully notes in this context that he would rather say five words in a church assembly that people could learn from and understand than 10,000 words in an unknown tongue (14:19).

Paul is not discounting the gift of tongues for a personal interface with God. But in the context of the church meeting, no one is to speak in tongues unless there is an interpreter. For example, if the tongue is a human language (one might have a word in Latin or Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic, for example), then as long as an interpreter is present, that word can build up the church. Without an interpreter, however, tongues are out of order (14:27-28).

Paul adds the point that visitors would think an uninterpreted tongue is quite an oddity should they hear it in church.¹ The net effect, then, not only fails to edify those present, but even threatens to wrongly push away those who need to hear the truth about God. If the church were to proclaim Christ rather than an incomprehensible muttering, then the visitor might actually come to faith as opposed to thinking the Corinthians were “out of their mind” (14:23).²

In addition to tongues, Paul sets out additional instructions about orderly worship. The Corinthians did not have a “pulpit” minister or pastor. They would have different speakers and preachers at different services. There was clearly a lot of room for disorder, especially when one considers the divisions in the church and the competing “schools of thought.”

Paul sets out orderly instructions of how that church was to conduct their services. Two or three prophets were to speak one at a time while others weighed what was said. Prophecies and words of knowledge were to be delivered in an orderly way “for God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (14:33).

Inserted into this chapter are two verses (14:34-35) that state women are to keep silent in the church and ask questions of their husbands at home. A word about this is important. First, Gordon Fee, in the highly esteemed *New International Commentary on the New Testament, The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, sets forward good arguments that question whether this portion of the letter is authentic. We assume it is and examine it accordingly.

That women were allowed to speak in church in a positive sense is clear from I Corinthians 11:5 where Paul states that they were to pray and prophesy with their heads covered. 14:34-35 is in the context of orderly worship, which leads one to a reasonable

¹ In 14:22, Paul speaks of tongues as a “sign” for unbelievers. Paul uses “sign” in a negative sense. It is not a good sign bringing unbelievers to Christ; rather, it is a bad sign that functions to the disadvantage of believers. Both the Isaiah passage Paul quoted in verse 21 and the following verse 23 show the context of “sign” as not helping an unbeliever.

² Paul speaks of “everybody prophesying.” “Everybody” in Greek does not mean each and everyone. Rather, it references all of a group or everyone at issue. Here, it would mean “everyone who was prophesying,” not “everyone who was prophesying.” This prophesying would expose an unbeliever’s sins (“laid bare”) and prompt him/her to exclaim, “God is really among you!” Prophecy should work no differently today.

conclusion that in the Corinthian services, some women were disrupting things with questions and other outbursts. Paul tells these women to be silent. This orderly conduct Paul notes is kept throughout all churches.

In short, Paul wants all the members of the church to use the Spirit's gifts in love to glorify Christ as they encourage and help each other and witness to the unsaved.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Find Your Gifts.
2. Use Your Gifts for God.
3. Build Up Those in Church.
4. Put Love in All You Do.