

## **Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)**

### ***First Letter to the Corinthians***

**Readings: *1 Corinthians 11:17-14:40***

#### ***Reflections:***

- Regarding body unity and fellowship – problem with fellowship: This passage gives a window into the dysfunction of the Corinthian churches. We must remember the “church” or the “gathering of new kingdom citizens” met in homes. Here they shared the Lord’s Supper, a full meal to remember Jesus. Some have pointed out that it was the Lord’s Supper, not the Lord’s snack (just a small bite of bread and sip of juice like we do today). Poorer people came to find a meal while others would come early and eat all the food and get drunk. They were so self-centered and divided that apparently the meal to celebrate our unity in Christ had become a place to party, gorge and get drunk and all of this at the expense of those who were legitimately hungry and in need of a meal.
- Supper as reminder of unity: His passage in Corinthians was likely one of the earliest memorized statements of the early Christ-followers dating back to the first five or ten years of the church. It captures a basic teaching that was passed through the community and predated any of Paul’s writings. “The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘this is my body, which is for you, do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup saying, ‘this cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” This passage most likely repeated by memory at their home gatherings as they had their meal together. Within this passage we see close parallels to the biographies of Jesus. We also see the clear theological understanding of Jesus’ sacrificial death and a new covenant being formed in him, doing away with the old covenant of the Torah.
- Eating with view to unity: Paul challenges them to guard against sinning relationally through their self-centered approach to community. He warns them to do the hard work of self-examination so that God doesn’t have to correct them or discipline them. Interestingly Paul points to sickness in the church as a form of judgment from God. This isn’t always the case as we know Timothy was sick and Paul simply encourages him to take some wine for medicinal purposes (1 Timothy 5:23).

- Regarding spiritual gifts – source of gifts: Paul now moves into an issue that has caused great confusion and division in the church because of a failure to understand the fundamental nature of how God changes people from the inside out. At the very core of this transformation is God’s presence, his Spirit, filling our lives and then opening up communion and communication with God so that we can experience his love and can live intimately in partnership with him as we love other people. Paul begins by saying that it all starts with the Spirit. The Spirit’s role is to enable us to fully grasp and embrace the Lordship of Jesus. Jesus and the Spirit are fully aligned and this can never change.
- Despite variety, same source: Paul points out that regardless of the different ways God speaks (most of the gifts are around God speaking – see Joel 2:28,29) or works through people, this is all comes from God’s Spirit in us.
- Body has many members: Paul points out again how all are equally included and valued within God’s new community. There is no class or race distinction. The Spirit makes us all one before God. Paul uses the human body as an image of fundamental unity with incredible diversity.
- Body is diverse: Paul elaborates on how God wants us all to fully own each other and celebrate our diversity of gifting rather than get frustrated with each other’s weaknesses or short-comings.
- Every member important: Paul then points out that when it comes to our human bodies we are more careful and protective of our weak parts. In the same way, when we encounter a weakness in someone else, we should not attack it or expose it but rather protect it and treat it with special care and honor. Those natural strengths we possess we treat with no special honor. Paul wants to embed the image of preferring those who are weak and treating those who are strong with no special honor. Jesus’ kingdom is an upside-down kingdom where the strong serve the weak and the rich give to the poor. Mutual love means that we look to care for and protect those who are vulnerable or failing, rather than attacking and rejecting them for their weaknesses and short-comings.
- Church needs diversity: Paul now outlines how the gifts flow out of those called into leadership. This is not an exhaustive list but rather an illustration. We see that the first leadership role is apostle and then prophets (Luke 11:49; Ephesians 2:20, Revelation 18:20). These are the two key leadership roles of the early church. The apostles were appointed by Jesus himself and the other leadership roles flowed out of this role including prophets. Ephesians 4:11 lists apostles, prophets, evangelists as well as pastors and teachers as the key leadership roles of the church. These servant leaders are called to build up the community by helping people discover how God wants to work in and through them as they grow to maturity in Christ. The last gift on Paul’s list here is the gift of tongues. The Corinthians were obsessed with this gift and so in this section Paul over and over again wants to reaffirm that it is the least of all the gifts. Paul wants to point them towards the great gifts, particularly the gift of loving each other.

- Love is the greatest gift: Paul notes that there are two kinds of gifts. One was the gift of being able to supernaturally speak in human language (see Acts 2:6). The other was the ability to speak in a language of angels of heaven. This second language would need someone to spiritually interpret because no one knows this language. Paul walks through tongues, prophecy, discernment, spiritual knowledge, giving to the poor and even martyrdom and clearly states that if a person isn't moved and motivated by love, none of these matters.
- The qualities of love: This description of love is parallel to Paul's description in Galatians 5:22. Paul points to the relentless nature of true love to believe the best and to do all it can to protect relationship. This is the essence of God's love for us.
- Love will outlast gifts: Paul now points out the power and endurance of love. Love doesn't fail. It will overcome. It will also be the one enduring attribute of our relationship with God. At this point we have these different ways to connect with God. One day there will be no need for these gifts because we will all be one with God and these gifts will then pass away. Our identity or security should not be in any particular gift, role or ability we have. We should be fully secure in God's love for us. Paul also notes that in this life we only know in part. This is vitally important to understand. No one has the corner on truth. No one can say that he or she stands for ultimate truth. We must all take a humble, learners posture realizing we can learn about God from anyone, even our enemies. In the history of political or religious violence, the greatest atrocities are committed by people who believe they stand on the side of ultimate truth and therefore anyone who opposes them are opposing ultimate truth and therefore have forfeited their rights as a person. Paul fundamentally rejects that deception and states clearly that in this life we only know in part and therefore we must walk humbly looking to love everyone equally. Our ultimate goal and destination is to fully know God even as we are fully known (see 1 Corinthians 2:2; Ephesians 1:17; Philippians 3:8-10). Faith (complete trust), hope (confident expectation), and love (complete attachment) is the essence of our relationship with God. The greatest of these three is love, being fully bonded with and embraced by God.
- Prophecy versus tongues: Paul now argues for believers to pursue hearing God speak through prophecy rather than simply focusing on the ecstatic experience of speaking in a heavenly language. The ultimate goal is relationship, not just experience. Paul makes it clear that God wants to cultivate loving relationship that encourages, strengthens and comforts. This is God's heart and purpose.
- Tongues need interpretation: For this reason Paul directs them to take any tongue that is spoken and ensure that it is translated so that it becomes relational. The goal is communication and connection.
- Tongues cannot edify: Paul points out that the mind must be engaged for there to be agreement with our will. We see here the importance for Paul between connecting an experience of hearing God speak and the mind being actively engaged. As we will see in

Ephesians and Romans, to be changed from the inside out requires that our minds are renewed as we learn new mental habits based on what God has said to us and his deep love for us. This is why simply having a spiritual experience doesn't create lasting change on its own. Our experience of God must ultimately guide us into an emotional, mental, behavioral and relational transformation.

- Tongues are sign: This is an interesting passage. Tongues are a sign for unbelievers where prophecy is for believers? The second part is easy to understand but is the first true? We should note that Paul uses the word "sign" to indicate that tongues somehow reveal God to unbelievers. This would be true in the events of Acts 2 where unbelievers heard God being praised in their own language. It may also have been viewed as a sign within Corinth as an expression of a divine activity, something supernatural taking place that might draw interest or attention.
- Prophecy teaches: We see here that the prophetic work of the Spirit is to reveal the matters of the heart. Paul states, "If an unbeliever or someone comes in while everyone is prophesying, then they are convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all (this is better understood as discerned) and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" This statement helps us grasp the essential nature of prophecy and the work of God to speak into our hearts. This work of revealing the secrets of our hearts enables people to truly experience God's specific love for them, that he knows them by name. This is one of the most powerful and tangible expressions of his love for us.
- Orderly use of gifts: Here is one of the rare places music is mentioned in the New Testament. It is listed among activities that might have happened in a home gathering in the first church. Paul simply teaches that meetings should be well organized. As Bruce Cavey says, "The answer to organized religion is not disorganized religion but rather organized irreligion." Again as we work through this passage we see the primary importance on maintaining good relationships where everyone feels valued.
- Women not to lead: Some scholars have pointed out that there is textual evidence to suggest that this section may not be original with Paul but rather a scribe's note in the margin that was worked into the text over the years. The reason given for women's silence is the Law and this hardly would be an argument Paul would have based on his understanding outlined in Galatians. In any case, the point here is remaining culturally sensitive. No Christian movement over the centuries has maintained that women can't speak in any meetings or small groups or bible studies of the Church. This would be ridiculous in light of the fact that Jesus taught women and made them disciples and that women are listed among the apostles and therefore were clearly leaders. Also throughout the centuries some of the most powerful leaders and teachers have been women. This note in Paul should be viewed as an encouragement towards cultural sensitivity and not using freedom in Christ to be unnecessarily offensive.

- Directions are Lord's commands: Paul calls all those who are spiritually mature to review his teaching on the gifts of the Spirit and to affirm it. We should be eager to prophecy, not forbid tongues, and to seek to be organized well in how we care for each other and allow God to speak through us! Organized irreligion!