

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART 14

Clearly the Corinthian Christians were struggling over the meaning and the exercise of spiritual gifts among them. Paul made his points in answer carefully one by one. The obvious implication is that these were their areas of difficulty. To recall the key ideas in chapter 12, they were -

1. It is easy to be confused and misled - probably the Corinthians were. (12:1-3)
2. God does different things through different people - they were expecting all to be the same.(12:4-6)
3. Spiritual gifts are for the common good - they were seeing them as something special for themselves.(12:7-10)
4. God decides who has what gift - they were trying to decide for God. (12:11)

Paul's illustration of the body brings these ideas clearly into focus. A healthy body needs - teamwork - not a solo performance

- appreciation of the whole - not indifference to the rest
- mutual caring - not competition

Could it be that all these problems have a common cause? Chapter 13 seems at first sight like a digression - but Paul never wandered off the point. The real issue was a lack of love.

The most spectacular gifts, whether tongues, prophecy or the faith to move mountains, are pointless without love.(13:1,2) Even sacrificing our possessions or our lives without love has no value to God.(13:3) The Greeks had 4 words for love, a word each for 'friendship', 'parental love', 'married love' and 'God's love'. It is the last word which is used here. It takes the love of God to make the other 3 loves work.

The 16 terms Paul used to describe the love of God are interesting for two reasons. Firstly nearly half are positive and more than half are negative. We recognise the absence of love as well as its presence.(13:4-8) Paul's obvious intention was that we should put chapter 13 alongside chapter 12 and consider the effect of the absence or presence of love on our exercise of spiritual gifts. Love will cause us to want the best for others not ourselves, to value others and their contribution, and will want God to have His way rather than having our own.

The second interesting feature of this beautiful description of love is that something important is missing. In John 3:16 God showed His love for us by giving His Son to us. 'Giving' is the simplest definition of love. Spiritual gifts are God giving Himself through us to others for their benefit, forgetful of ourselves. This was what the hard headed businessmen of Corinth had overlooked. Love does not seek the best for me but for others through me.

Again Paul reminded us that spiritual gifts like prophecy, tongues and knowledge are temporary means to an end and will disappear once their purpose has been fulfilled. Love is for ever.(13:8-12) The chapter concludes with three little words - faith, hope and love. Faith is an attitude towards God, hope towards God's promises and love towards others. Love is the way in which both faith and hope show. Never think of spiritual gifts other than as an expression of God's love towards others.

Chapter 14 now takes up a discussion of three spiritual gifts, prophecy, tongues and interpretation in the light of the principles of chapter 12 and the essential ingredient of love in chapter 13.

14:1-4 Q.1 Once we have settled on the first place of love in the Christian life what should be our attitude to spiritual gifts? Which one did Paul suggest is of greatest importance? Why did he say this is better than to speak in tongues?

14:5-8 Q.2 What must always go with speaking in tongues if it is to be for the common good? Why again did Paul put prophecy above tongues in value? What illustration did he use to emphasise his point?

14:9-13 Q.3 What according to this section will be the effect of tongues without interpretation? How would this undermine the value of it as a spiritual gift? What kind of tongue is likely to be given by the Holy Spirit if someone does miraculously speak a language other than his own? What is the responsibility of the person who does speak in tongues? How in practice could he do this?

14:14-19 Q.4 What did Paul teach here about praying in tongues? What better suggestion did he have? What is the effect of tongues without interpretation? In what circumstances did Paul speak in tongues himself? How is his own example helpful in allowing us to sort out what this gift is for?

14:20-25 Q.5 Look up where the quotation in verse 21 comes from in Isa.28:11. What example was Isaiah using of how God seeks to overcome a communication problem? How does this illustration help us to understand the place of speaking in tongues? What on the other hand is the danger of the misuse of this gift?

14:26-33 Q.6 How did Paul put the principles of the earlier part of the chapter and of chapters 12 and 13 into the real life situation of a church service? What are the responsibilities of any one exercising a spiritual gift? What is the responsibility of each person listening? How in practice would you see this working out?

14:34-40 Q.7 What instruction did Paul give here to women in church? Are they being forbidden to contribute to a service?(11:1-16; I Tim.2:9-15) How did Paul sum up his teaching in these last three chapters on the topic of gifts?