

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

Continuing his discussion of problems in the affairs of the church, Paul turned from our attitude to those of a different culture to the relationship between the sexes, and the roles of men and women within the church. Each problem can be solved by drawing on the grace of God,(1:1-9) and there is a common solution to both situations in terms of the value we put on another person, rather than insisting on our own way. The first verse of this chapter,(11:1) provides a link between the two topics. "Being an imitator" of Paul, and therefore of Jesus, was about attitude rather than actions. Jesus identified, cared and understood those who struggled and were needy as no-one else has in all of history. Paul did the same because Jesus lived in him. So can we.

The first half of chapter eleven has been bitterly disputed in many churches to the point of division. The message has been lost in an argument about status and rules. Let us work our way through carefully asking 'why?' rather than just 'what?'

Paul congratulated the Corinthian Christians on their determination to maintain the traditions he established while with them,(11:2) but there is a 'but'. Their practice of a pattern had become rigid without an understanding of its purpose. Their first area of confusion was over headship. God is the head of Christ, who is the head of man, who is the head of woman.(11:3) Is this an order of rank as in the army with God as the general and woman as the private? 'Headship' or 'leadership' in Jesus' terms is about lowering ourselves to serve, not domination.(Lk.22:25-27) Jesus demonstrated His headship towards us when He left heaven and became a servant who died for us.(Phil.2:5-9) So men are to be prepared to die for women and thus demonstrate their headship. With this kind of headship there is no competition!

The second question is about covering the head, or not, while praying or prophesying. Clearly both men and women were welcome to contribute to a service in this way. The issue was about how they did it. Paul's concern was that they should not be a cause of disgrace while they spoke of God. Disgrace before God has to do with the heart rather than the outside so God's concern would not be with what covered the head. Disgrace before the world may come because of outward things which are a symbol of the attitude of the heart. In Corinth in the time of Paul, prostitutes had their heads shaved to identify them. Christian women with their heads shaved or even trying to attract attention to themselves by the way they wore their hair would undoubtedly cause confusion if they were trying to communicate the gospel at the same time. A head covering, like laying on of hands, would be a picture of submission to God. A man with a head covering might be mistaken for a woman. Why give the wrong message by our outward appearance when we are seeking to share God's good news? So how do we apply this today? Ask ourselves what message our outward appearance is giving while we communicate the gospel. The answer will almost certainly be different in different cultures.(11:4-7)

The third principle Paul was wanting to emphasise was that of God's original purpose in creating man and woman. His plan was partnership and interdependence, not independence of God or each other.(11:9-12) This is in direct contrast to the modern message of 'do your own thing; be your own person.' Paul then applied this idea to hair style again.(11:13-16) Our purpose as Christians is to draw attention to Christ not to ourselves. The statement about men with long hair casts an interesting insight into the practice of taking a Nazirite vow,(Num.6) God's covenant with Samson,(Judg.13) and even probably John the Baptist.

Paul moved now to the rather disorderly behaviour of some in the communion service which had turned into a wild party for some and a hungry time for others. It would appear that in New Testament times communion was often more part of normal family life than became usual in later years. However instead of being a fellowship meal which united, it had become yet another cause of division. Paul's answer in the light of God's grace was again to see this as an opportunity to think of and provide for the needs of others rather than ourselves.(11:17-22) He took time to give a reminder of Jesus' instructions about communion as an opportunity for thanksgiving for His death for us and His life in us. As well as a personal reminder it is also a picture for others of the meaning of the gospel.(11:23-26) But as such it will be a hindrance rather than a help to others if our hearts are not right with God. This is one of the few times in the New Testament when we are encouraged to take a hard look at ourselves. Self-examination is only helpful with a clear vision in mind of the Lord Jesus. Neglecting this opportunity puts our spiritual condition and that of others who watch us very much at risk.(11:27-34)

Chapter 12 looks now at another aspect of meeting together, that of spiritual gifts.

12:1-3 Q.1 What dangers are there in considering spiritual gifts? What is the key test of whether any so-called gift is genuine? How in practice could we go about checking this?(I Jn.4:1-6; Gal.5:22,23) What should we do if we are doubtful about whether a claimed spiritual gift is the real thing?

12:4-7 Q.2 Will all spiritual Christians have the same spiritual gift? How should we respond to teaching that insists that we should all have the same gift? What is the purpose of a spiritual gift?(I Pet.4:10-12) Consider in practice how applying this purpose will help us sort out what is genuine and what is not?

12:8-11 Q.3 What nine gifts are described here? Use other places in the Bible to define exactly what each of these gifts is about. Who decides which Christian receives which gift? What question should be raised in our minds by teaching which insists that we can choose our gift?

12:12-21 Q.4 What illustration did Paul use on this occasion to describe the local church? How did he apply this illustration to show the inappropriateness of all having the same gift? What explanation does verse 13 provide of the meaning of being baptised in the Spirit?

12:22-27 Q.5 What answer did Paul now provide to those who thought that their gift was more important than someone else's? How does this illustration again apply the principle of being 'all things to all men' which we have seen used since chapter 9?

12:28-31 Q.6 What tasks has God given to the various members of the body of Christ, the church? Again consider what does each term mean in Biblical terms? Can you see any particular significance in the order of tasks listed here? What could possibly be better than to have a spiritual gift? What was the problem in this church which led Paul to ask this question?