

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

As Paul continued to deal with problems in the activities of the church, he turned from the role of women and how to conduct communion to an area which was causing far bigger problems, that of spiritual gifts. The next three chapters are devoted to this issue because he was so concerned that the Corinthians should settle the confusion which obviously existed among them. Like so many of the problems already discussed Paul recognised that any misunderstanding of the gifts of the Spirit could cause deep division and hurt. In chapter 12 he dealt with general principles concerning gifts; in chapter 13 with the key to solving all such problems, and in chapter 14 with one gift by way of example. It is important to keep the whole section in mind when thinking of any one isolated verse.

First Paul acknowledged that spiritual gifts can easily be an area of confusion and that we can readily be led astray on these questions.(12:1,2) The best test of what is the real thing is to ask whether whatever is said or done points us to Jesus as the Lord of our lives.(12:3) The same Spirit can manifest Himself in many different gifts, ways of serving others, and consequences. God will not do the same thing in each person.(12:4-6) But whatever He does He will do for the benefit of the whole group.(12:7) If we only get something out of an activity ourselves it is certainly not a spiritual gift.

Next Paul listed nine gifts but this is not a complete list because Romans 12 includes others.(Rom.12:8-10) These are simply some examples of ways God may use one person to help others. Each of the gifts he listed here needs to be understood in the way the Bible defines it, otherwise we will cause confusion. For example, wisdom and knowledge relate in chapters 1 and 2 to Christ and the cross, not our futures. Healing in the Bible can be of spirit, soul, body, of relationships, a nation or the land. The greatest importance is given to healing the spirit, and so our relationship with God. Prophecy in the Old Testament was largely about the past and the present with only occasional reference to the future. It was about Christ. 'Distinguishing spirits', we have already seen in this chapter, was simply the process of sorting out what was of the Spirit of God and what was not. Tongues and interpretation will be discussed more in chapter 14, but the first description of speaking in tongues in Acts 2:1-11 makes it clear that the languages being spoken were the languages of the hearers. Thus it was for the benefit of the crowd not of those doing it. Paul ended this section with a clear warning that who has which particular spiritual gift is God's business and that He, not we, will decide how He will use each Christian at any time. He will probably choose to use us quite differently in different circumstances according to need.(12:11)

To illustrate how all this should work out Paul used a simple illustration for the rest of the chapter, that of the church as the body of Christ. His first point was that the body has many different parts which belong to the one body.(12:12) Baptism by the Spirit describes that process by which the Holy Spirit takes people of any race or class, puts them into the body, and Himself into them.(12:13) Each separate part of the body is vitally important; so it is in Christ's body. But each body part only works when joined to the rest of the body. Imagine what would happen if we were all eyes or ears!(12:14-21) Our hidden body parts, which may be ignored if we only look at the obvious parts, may actually be our most vital parts. Consider your heart or liver for example. (12:22,23) The same could be said of the church. Without much unnoticed work behind the scenes a great deal of what we do would fall down. It is vital that we look after the whole church as we do our whole bodies.(12:24,25) A pain in the big toe is a pain for the whole person.(12:26) Remember whose body you belong to!(12:27)

The chapter concludes with a new list, somewhat different from the last one of the various roles into which God has put His people.(12:28) Again consider what had to come first if the gospel was to be heard and the church established. God obviously did not intend everyone to be an apostle or any one of the other offices. It would be like a body consisting entirely of arms, an octopus! (12:29,30) Aim to be as useful as possible to the greatest number but never forget the underlying principle which is the theme of the next chapter.(12:31)

Chapter 13 is one of the best known chapters in the whole Bible but it is easy to forget its context and therefore the very reason Paul put it in at this point in his letter.

13:1-3 Q.1 What five activities that Christians might do are described in this section? What warning did Paul give about all of them? Why do we make the mistake he was talking about? Give examples of how this may have happened in your own life. What is meant by 'tongues of men and of angels'? In what languages did angels speak in the Bible? What clue does verse 2 give as to the meaning of prophecy? Why is love so important?

13:4-7 Q.2 There are sixteen statements here about love. Put each one into your own words and give everyday examples. What aspects of life and relationships do they talk about? Half are positive and half are negative; why is this? Is it possible for us to treat one another like this? What therefore is the secret of making this chapter work?(I Jn.4:7-12) Is this a complete description of love? What is missing?(Jn.3:16)

13:8-12 Q.3 How did Paul apply his explanation of love to the problems the Corinthians were having about spiritual gifts? Why is an emphasis on prophecy, tongues and knowledge only so inadequate as a way of demonstrating the Christian faith? What will happen to all of these things eventually?

13:13 Q.4 What is the link in our Christian experience between faith, hope and love? How does one lead on to another?(Col.1:4-6; I Thess.1:3) If among a group of people we find a lack of love what can we do to change the situation? What was missing in the Ephesian church when John wrote to them many years later?(Rev.2:1-7)