

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS – PART 15

We have come now to the most contentious chapter in this book, chapter 14, but it does not need to be difficult or confusing as long as we look at it in context, and step by step. The wider context is Corinth, a city driven by money, immorality and idolatry, all of which could so easily creep into the Christian church. Paul was writing to a church which was struggling because of the powerful and pervasive influence of the society in which it was located. His letter deals with a long list of problems for which the grace of God was the only answer, first in forgiveness and then in rebuilding according to God's plan. Chapters 11-14 are no exception as Paul addressed some of the problems of church meetings. First he tackled the issues of the role of women and the true meaning of communion, seeing ourselves beside Jesus and then recognising the difference He would make in us.(11) Next he looked at spiritual gifts as a whole and established general principles – God intends variety, for the good of others, decided by Him, all being important and necessary for the health of the body of Christ.(12) Before moving to specifics he paused to remind them how a self serving attitude to gifts would be contrary to love and therefore to God.(13) Finally he was ready to examine three gifts, prophecy, tongues and interpretation, which were presumably the ones over which the Corinthians were having particular difficulty.

Love must come first. Desiring gifts so as to be used by God to help others is fine. The greatest help of these three gifts will come from the gift of prophecy because it is clearly understood by all and builds them up. Speaking in a tongue which only God understands may seem a great experience but it helps no-one.(14:1-4) Paul was happy for the Corinthians to speak in tongues providing there was value to it, because otherwise it would not be an expression of love. The common good would only result if someone else understood either the original language, as in Acts 2:5-11, or when the message was translated into the major language, which in Corinth was Greek. In those days, and until very recently, the bugle was used to give signals during a battle. If there was no understanding of the notes played, only confusion would result.(14:5-8) The many languages in the world, since the punishment given at the tower of Babel,(Gen.11) make communication between us hard enough. Why make it harder by adding a language no-one understands? If we are preaching the gospel of Christ let us make sure by providing interpretation that no-one present is left out. That would be an expression of the love of God.(14:9-13)

If we were to pray to God in a language we did not understand, our minds would not comprehend, and so no benefit to us or others could come from our prayer because we would not be sharing in the mind and purpose of God. Prayer and singing should both be with full understanding so that others can join in and so be included and blessed through the experience. Paul himself spoke in many languages including Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and perhaps at times miraculously in other languages when need arose, but exciting though this was he only wanted to be understood as God's messenger.(14:14-19)

Stop and think about the impact of your activity in church on the outsider, you say as Christians you want to reach. Being able miraculously to break through the language barrier to give understanding to an unbeliever will certainly make him sit up and take notice but if everyone is babbling away without him being able to understand, he will think you are crazy and be turned off. Paul quoted from Isa.28:11 where God promised the Israelites that even speaking to their enemies in their own language would not work if their hearts were hard. Tongues that were understood could get through to the unbeliever but they were not for the entertainment of believers. The priority however should be prophecy, God's message readily understood by all, believer and unbeliever. That is the common good.(14:20-25)

The next section gives the clearest description in the New Testament of what actually happened when a church met together for worship. It appears that normally more than one person contributed to the teaching, some by Old Testament readings, some by insight into the New Testament teaching which was not yet written down. If the use of another language other than the common one was involved it must be interpreted for the rest or not used at all. Clearly then anyone wanting to speak in tongues had to know before he started what language he was going to use and that someone else there could interpret that language into Greek, the language of most of those in Corinth. Paul was very firm about only one person speaking at a time while the rest listened, checking carefully with the Bible and the Holy Spirit that what was being said was true. Again the emphasis was on prophecy, God communicating through men. God is not in chaos.(14:26-33)

Women were told to be silent. They have already been permitted to pray and prophesy in chapter 11. Elsewhere they have been told not to dominate men but to be quiet. 'Quiet' means 'calm' not silent.(I Tim.2:1-15) Presumably therefore the problem in Corinth was chatter among the women, adding to the confusion when more than one person was trying to talk at once in the service.(14:34-36) Paul closed this section by underlining his key points – keep God in charge; prophecy is vital; tongues are permitted, but only for the common good.(14:37-40)

Chapter 15 moves to one vital aspect of the Christian message. Did Jesus rise from the dead? What difference does this make to us?

15:1-11 Q.1 What is the heart of the Christian message? List the people or groups who saw Jesus after His resurrection. How would the testimony of so many, most of whom were still alive, settle the issue for that generation? Who was the last to see Him? Why did he regard himself as being so privileged?

15:12-19 Q.2 If the resurrection were not true what difference would it make to our standing before God, our expectation of the future and to our preaching?

15:20-28 Q.3 How can Christ be compared to Adam? Why is Christ described as the 'first fruits'? How had this been foreshadowed in the Old Testament feasts?(Lev:23:10) Who or what are to be the rest of the harvest? What future event does Christ's resurrection guarantee?

15:29-50 Q.4 What difference does the resurrection of Christ make to our view of the dead, our attitude in the face of persecution and our behaviour in an immoral world like Corinth? What glimpse does Christ's resurrection give us into the future of our bodies? How therefore should we regard the body we have now?

15:51-58 Q.5 How in the light of the resurrection of Christ should we respond to the threatening events of the world around us? How should we regard death?