

December 2

1 Corinthians 1-14

Hi. My name is Margie Alford and I'm the Connections worship leader. Welcome to the December 2nd project 4:4 accelerator.

Today we continue our reading in 1 Corinthians, chapters 1-14. I am very sure there are some questions about these chapters that neither I nor any other teacher will satisfactorily answer for you, but I am excited about all I am still learning from God's Word and I am confident one day, all of the questions we have will be answered.

The issues with which Paul is dealing in the next few chapters are issues relating to public worship. One thing is very certain about the Corinthian people - they were not a very disciplined group -- and that lack of discipline (which by the way characterized their whole culture) came into the church with them just like the weaknesses of our culture tend to creep into the church as excess baggage when we come to Christ.

The lack of discipline in matters of the flesh brought about the situation of sexual immorality we looked at in chapter 5. It produced the chaos that surrounded the communion feast about which we read today.

There are two issues that Paul wants to deal with here. 1) the appropriate way to celebrate the Lord's supper (communion) and 2) how our spiritual gifts are to be used.

Two facts will help us here: First the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a regular part of every worship service. The Eucharist (from the Greek word for giving thanks) was celebrated every time they came together.

Second, in the first century church they actually shared a full meal together just as Jesus and the disciples must have done on the night before He was betrayed. That explains Paul's concerns about gluttony and the neglect of the poor who could not bring a meal and therefore often went hungry.

Spiritual gifts: the gifts are given by the Holy Spirit to specific individuals for the express purpose of building up the church.

My gifts and your gifts are body directed and are therefore given to show not the superiority of any one part of the body over others, but quite the opposite to bind the body together in unity. In the undisciplined congregation at Corinth, the very gifts that God had given to bind the church together in a state of mutual dependence were in fact being used to drive it apart in jealousy and competition.

There are both similarities and differences in the specific gifts mentioned in the list given here and the ones found in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4.

The differences make us believe that the gifts mentioned by Paul in the three different passages are really just representative of a much longer list of "gifts" given by the Holy Spirit to individual believers for the purpose of building up of the body.

Bible scholars are divided on the question of whether the gift of speaking in tongues mentioned here is identical to the gift that was spoken of in Acts chapter 2 where apparently the apostles were speaking known languages that they themselves had never learned. In this passage, some have argued the gift is not the same.

What is clear is that the Corinthians were using the gift differently than the apostles had earlier, and that they were using the gift inappropriately. That is what Paul seeks to correct.

It is also clear that the undisciplined and immature Corinthians placed a high premium upon the gifts that seemed more spectacular and supernatural in character. That is clear from Paul's argument about the importance of every part of the body being important to the whole - no matter how visible or invisible it might be.

1 Corinthians 13-14

It is important to notice, as I am sure you did, that chapter 13 falls in the middle of Paul's teaching to the Corinthian believers about the proper use and function of spiritual gifts in the church. The passage on love fits very well and is exactly where Paul intended it to be because it puts his teaching about gifts into the proper place.

Agape love, the highest love, is the kind of love God has for us. It is measured in terms of sacrifice.

1 Corinthians 13 is speaking of Agape love. the kind of love that says, my commitment to you is so strong and so powerful that I will love you no matter what -- in spite of your shortcomings, your recurring failures or your obvious inadequacies. "In spite of" love is agape love and that is what more than anything else we need for one another.

The last few verses of this chapter about priorities and what really matters. All these spiritual gifts are wonderful and special but they fail in significance to love. The Corinthian Christians priorities were all out of whack.

Now we come to chapter 14. I believe that Paul's main point here is that yes, it is good to have and use spiritual gifts, but if we follow the way of love, we will use those gifts in a certain way and that way will be for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.

The bottom line issue in chapter 14 seems to be that of intelligibility. Paul is concerned that any tongues used in the context of public worship be interpreted so the body of Christ may be edified. If this is not done then the very nature of the gifts is being violated because they are being used to lift up the individual as opposed to building the body of Christ.

The last part of chapter 14 is extremely interesting to me because it gives us a wonderful "snapshot" of what first century church services were like. It is apparent that worship, in Paul's eyes at least, was not a spectator sport in which the faithful come to service and watch the pastor and a few others do their "things" while the ordinary worshipper sits passively in a pew. Far from it! In the apostolic church everyone participated in worship. No one dominated, but everyone contributed.

It is clear that Paul permitted the exercise of the gift of tongues -- as long as there was interpretation and as long as the exercise of this one spiritual gift was not allowed to dominate the service. Prophecy -- a direct message from God to this individual congregation was also both permitted and expected, but the prophetic messages were evaluated and judged by others in the congregation. Paul makes it very clear that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets." Paul is trying to eliminate chaos in the Corinthian worship.

Paul's instructions regarding the silence of women in public worship need to be read in light of what he has already said in chapter 11 where he assumes that some women will both pray and prophesy. What he is forbidding here seems to be the kind of speech or public questioning that would both disrupt the worship services and show disrespect for the husbands to whom these wives were meant to be in submission.

In that culture, the women did not speak in the service, it was the husband's role to speak for the family in that setting.

It seems to me the topic of women speaking in church is very similar to the topic of women wearing head coverings. Both behaviors had a significance in that culture which ran counter to the principle of submission. The application of submission might look different today, but the principle that Paul taught still remains.

In the early church the ministry was more dispersed among the congregation. Teaching, shepherding, prophecy and other gifts were distributed among the believers to be used in the services for the edification of all.

I love the visual picture that Paul paints of the church body needing all the parts. Maybe a challenge for you today is "what part are you playing in the local church"? Do you need to step out and serve the body? And if you are using your gifts and talents in the church -- remember, we all need each other, no part is more or less important than the others.

See you tomorrow everybody.