

The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians

In the 1st Century, Corinth was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire; it was also one of the most wicked, and for the same reason: it was strategically located on the narrow Isthmus of Greece, between the mainland to the north and the Peloponnesian Peninsula to the south, on the Empire's major east-west trade routes, both overland and sea routes.

Through its two principal seaports flowed the riches of the Roman world. Travelers passed through constantly, ships came and went, caravans passed through, and money flowed into the city's treasury and the local economy.

In this wealthy setting, and with the constant flow of travelers, vice also flourished. Corinth was awash in the paganism and vice of both East and West; thus the church there was an island of righteousness in a sea of paganism, materialism, temptation and sin. And the members of that church were not immune to the temptations.

The dominant religion at Corinth was the worship of Aphrodite, goddess of love and fertility (you may safely translate that as "goddess of sex"); the Romans called her Venus, and the Canaanite/Middle Eastern pagans called her Ishtar or Astarte¹. Her worship was sexual; serving in the temple of Aphrodite there were 1,000 temple prostitutes. This was also the dominant pagan religion of Canaan, the one whose sin had so easily beset the children of Israel in the Promised Land.

Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth was written from Ephesus, on the coast of what is now western Turkey, near the end of his three years of ministry there. He was on the return leg of his second missionary journey.

The occasion for this letter was a report of trouble in Corinth, brought by a delegation from the Corinthian church; earlier in his journey, he had spent 18 months there. Paul took the occasion, not only to answer the questions which the delegation brought, but also to deal with other problems in the Corinthian church.

Incidentally, what we call Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth seems not to have been his first letter to that troubled church; for, in it, he refers to an earlier letter, of which we have no other record (5:9). This is troubling for some commentators. We know that Paul's letters were recognized as inspired Scripture during his lifetime, and were circulated among the

¹ The Roman name of this pagan goddess is simply the Latin noun *venus*, meaning physical beauty and desirability.

churches as such². Thus, it would seem to mean that God had inspired Paul to write a portion of Holy Scripture, but had then failed to preserve it.

In the one brief reference to the earlier letter Paul says that it instructed them not to “company with fornicators,” i.e. that they should not have unchaste, sexually promiscuous people as close friends³. Since in this letter Paul deals with sexual sin at some length, and revisits the subject in II Corinthians, the Church Fathers, when selecting the canon of Scripture, may have considered the earlier letter redundant and unnecessary. Some suggest that Paul had written the earlier letter, but had decided not to send it; others say that the content of the earlier letter was incorporated into this one.

All that we can say with certainty, however, is that he refers briefly to such an earlier letter, about which nothing else is known.

NOTE: Although Paul is almost universally thought of as the founder and father of the church at Corinth, he apparently didn't do the work alone. Eusebius, quoting Dionysius, 2nd Century Bishop of Corinth, tells us that Peter also had preached at Corinth and had contributed to the instruction and strengthening of the church there⁴. This is confirmed by Paul in 1:12, where he reveals that Appolos had also ministered there.

A. Author. Paul identifies himself as the author in the very first verse, and again in his closing salutation; he also refers to himself a total of seven times in the letter. Since the 1st Century, Paul's authorship has been abundantly--in fact, overwhelmingly--attested. It would be difficult to make a case for questioning it⁵.

B. Place and Date. The letter was written from Ephesus (I Corinthians 16:8-9), near the end of three years of Paul's ministry there, on his second missionary journey. It was probably written in the early Spring, prior to Pentecost, about 55 AD.

C. Theme. The theme of the letter is Christian life and conduct. Within this over-all theme, he deals with problems in the church there, including division into factions, sexual sin, marriage and divorce, food offered to idols, public worship, including proper dress, abuse of spiritual gifts, and a complete misunderstanding of the sacrament of Holy Communion (Eucharist).

D. Highlights. Highlights in I Corinthians include the following:

² II Peter 3:15-16.

³ Whatever the fate of that mysterious letter, by Paul's referring to it in this letter, we do have a concise expression of an excellent rule of life for Christians, one that he then proceeds to expand upon (5:9-13).

⁴ Eusebius: “Ecclesiastical History,” Book 2, Chapt 25, (7), p 63.

⁵ Unger, Merrill F. “Corinthians, First Epistle,” Authorship, p 221.

1. “Ye Come Behind in No Gifts.” (1:1-9)

Verses 1-9 of the first chapter are an unusually lengthy salutation by Paul, in which he identifies himself as an apostle; and in it he includes a companion named Sosthenes, as co-greeter⁶. Paul commends the Corinthians for their spirituality, in that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are freely manifested among them. He will, however, give them extensive correction in Chapters 12-14 concerning the proper functioning of those gifts.

2. The Error of Factions in the Church. (1:10-24)

The Christians at Corinth are developing into factions, centered on their favorite teachers. This should not be surprising, since this was characteristic of Athenian Greeks, and Corinth is only 50 miles from Athens. The Athenians liked nothing better than intellectual speculation, arguing and choosing which philosophers and ideas they would follow. It is natural for the Corinthians, but it is decidedly unhealthy for the Church. Some identify themselves as followers of Paul, some of Apollo (Apollos), some of Peter (Cephas) and some of Christ. Paul rebukes them with rhetorical questions: Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? The answer to these questions is obviously “no,” and the lesson is clear. This wrong attitude will be revisited as we make our way through the epistle.

NOTE: As we have already observed, when selecting highlights in the epistles of Paul it is often difficult to know where to interrupt him. This passage is a classic example of the problem.

3. The Central Focus: the Lord Himself. (1:25-31)

It is not an easy thing to get the eyes of new Christians off a teacher or preacher who is appealing, and who knows so much, when they know so little. With these Corinthian Greeks it will be particularly difficult because of their tradition of following favorite philosophers. On a related theme that is repeated throughout the epistles of Paul, he introduces the Corinthians to the bed rock fact that the most wise and learned among us are ignorant fools compared with God Himself. Not only this but, as we learn more about how God deals with us, we will learn that God delights in choosing to manifest his power and glory through those of us whom the world would reject as unworthy. No flesh--that is, no human ability or accomplishment--can glory and be proud in the presence of God Himself; in that blinding light all human imperfections are ignominiously revealed, and our human abilities

⁶ This Sosthenes may be the ruler of the synagogue at Corinth who was beaten before the judgment seat of Gallio by the unbelieving Jews during Paul's 1st missionary journey (Acts 18:17).

and accomplishments become shabby and shrink to nothingness in that Presence. Paul hammers this fundamental lesson home, here in the beginning of the epistle; and he will repeat it from time to time.

4. More on the Natural Man vs the Spiritual Man. (2:1-13)

Paul continues on the theme of the knowledge and abilities of man, compared with the knowledge, wisdom and power of God. He reminds the Corinthian believers that he did not declare to them complex theological doctrines; rather, he says, he declared unto them the simple good news of Christ, who was crucified to pay the debt for our sins. He also reminds them that, when he brought the gospel to them, he didn't persuade them by eloquence or vast knowledge; rather, he says, he delivered the good news of Jesus to them in demonstration of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's power. Thus, he says, their faith could rest in the demonstrated power of God, and not in human wisdom. He says that God has had a plan from the beginning--a plan for the redemption and unimaginable blessing of man; but, he says, this plan is hidden from unredeemed man, including human rulers ("the princes of this world"). Had they known it, he says, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. Yet God has revealed these things to us by the Holy Spirit, who makes them known to us spiritually.

5. The Natural Man Just Doesn't Get It--in Fact, He Can't. (2:14-16)

The unredeemed man, whom Paul calls "the natural man," has a problem which cannot be resolved with human ability or human effort. It is that the wonderful plan of God to redeem us, the unimaginable blessings that He wants to give us, and the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit available to us, are real; but it is as if all this glorious good news is being broadcast all around the World, but the natural man has no radio which can receive the frequency (if our analogy were television, we would call it "the channel") on which the good news is broadcast. Not only that, but what he sees and hears of it seems like foolishness to him. He cannot receive it, nor does he wish to. We, however, who have the precious Holy Spirit dwelling within us, can receive, experience, and understand the things of God's Spirit; in a very real sense, we live in a different world.

We can live in sweet, personal communion with the God of the Universe; to the natural man the God of the Universe is only an intellectual concept, and one which the natural man tends to dismiss as a foolish, irrational idea. For us the words of the old hymn, "In the Garden" are wonderful, fulfilling, precious reality. We really can walk with Him, talk with Him, and he tells us that we are his own; if we try to share this wonderful dimension of life with the natural man, he will probably reply, "Oh, really? And how long

have you been having these hallucinations?” Again paraphrasing the old hymn, the joys we share as we tarry there, the natural man has never known. And, sad to relate, this natural man may be a member of your church--he may even be your pastor.

The indwelling Spirit of God provides us with an invisible, internal radio, in fact a crystal set, which receives on only one frequency: the frequency of the Spirit of God. And what we receive in our human spirits, activated and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, is not at all foolish; rather, these things are the wonderful, deep things of God. We, Paul says, have the mind of Christ. *NOTE: What does it mean, that we “have the mind of Christ”? Most translators and commentators don’t attempt to explain; even the paraphrases tend to handle it with care, seeming to say as little as possible and hurry on. The extremely expansive Matthew Henry tends to overwhelm the reader with pages of brilliant insights and comparisons where most commentators would write one paragraph. He merely quotes it and moves on.*

In this passage Paul is probably referring to Is 40:13-14. Knowing this is not much help, however, for Is 40:13-14, and its context, compare the greatness, power and perfection of God, with the smallness, weakness, and imperfection of man, a difficult thing to put into adequate words. Does having the mind of Christ mean that we know and understand everything that Christ knows and understands? Of course not! Have you ever known, or even heard of anyone who did?

Then what can it mean? I am inclined to agree with Mrs. Siewert (The Amplified Bible) here, in that it means that our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and purposes tend to be the same as, or in harmony with, those of the risen Messiah, for we have the Holy Spirit within us.

6. An Essential Rule of Spiritual Life. (3:1-11)

When we are born anew in the Spirit, passing from spiritual death into the limitless wonders of spiritual life, we are inclined to focus on the one who led us to this great treasure. We may consider him to be our spiritual father and want to follow him. This is a perfectly natural reaction, but it can become unhealthy. As we have already seen, the Corinthian Christians were divided into factions, identifying themselves with favorite teachers. Paul now returns to this problem and explains the fundamental fact that none of these apostolic men and women of God has produced the new life in them; it is God alone who has performed these miracles of redemption, and only He should be glorified in it. To make his point, Paul uses the analogy of a vegetable garden or a crop. There may be many godly men and women

involved in bringing an unredeemed sinner into the family of God, he says; but only God can bring about the new birth. He sums it up masterfully: “I have planted [the seed of the plan of salvation], Apollos watered [the growing plant]; but God [alone] gave the increase [performed the miracle of redemptive new life].” And then he makes it clear that many of us may witness, teach or preach, and we will receive rewards for our contributions; but God alone can give new life, and to Him alone we give the glory for the miracle of the new life.

7. Gold, Silver, Wood, Hay and Stubble. (3:12-23)

Our lives should be a testimony of God’s redemption and our consequent new life. The foundation of the structure of our lives is Jesus the Messiah; and mere man cannot provide any other valid foundation for this spiritual reality⁷. What we build on this perfect foundation of Christ is up to us, and the finished result will be a monument to the way we have spent our lives. Those things done through the Spirit of God will be like gold and silver; those things done contrary to the leading of the Holy Spirit, no matter how good they may look, are as unsubstantial as wood, hay and stubble. In the final judgment, the temple of our lives will be subjected to the test of God’s holy fire; the wood, hay and stubble will burn to nothingness in his presence. But those things done with and through Him will be like gold and silver; they will not only survive the fire, but the fire will refine them. If they contain any impurities, they will be removed.

Our lives, our bodies, are the temples of God, and anyone who damages or defiles this temple with false teachings, sinful practices or other destructive means, will himself be destroyed by God⁸. This is a serious matter, indeed.

NOTES:

a. Some commentators believe that, in this passage, the temple is a local congregation--i.e. the body of Christ, and not the individual Christian. The context, however, both here and in 6:12-20, seems to make it clear that the temple under discussion is the body of the individual believer, i.e. yours and mine.

b. In v 17, the Greek words rendered “defile” and “destroy” are forms of the same word, “phtheiro,” meaning “to corrupt or to destroy by corruption.” Thus, it seems, the means of destruction here is allowed to go

⁷Any religion, philosophy or movement that isn’t built on the foundation of Christ is false, and leads its followers into perpetual spiritual death.

⁸ I Corinthians 6:19.

on, as we defile ourselves (or are deceived and thus defiled) until the corruption destroys us.

8. Stewards of the Mysteries. (4:1-5)

Paul speaks of himself and the other Christian teachers (or leaders) as “stewards of the mysteries of God⁹.” By this he compares the apostolic office to a manager or trustee, given responsibility for overseeing his master’s vineyard, orchard, or flock of sheep. The master has entrusted the vineyard, orchard or flock to this steward, and holds him responsible, not only for their care and protection, but also for the fruit they produce. In the case of the church, Paul now speaks of being a faithful steward in terms of correct teaching and preaching, concerning the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

*NOTE: There are to be no secrets in the Church. The entirety of the New Testament teaches us this. Jesus has told us that the things we learn from God in the privacy of our prayer closets are not for us alone; rather, we are to shout them from the housetops. It is important to keep this in mind; any group that claims to have important spiritual knowledge, but it is kept secret, revealed only to its members, is wrong. This makes all secret societies wrong if they claim to possess important knowledge but deny it to everyone else. Always remember that there are **mysteries** in the Church--things that our finite minds cannot comprehend--such as the mystery of the Holy Trinity; but there should be **no secrets** concerning the Scriptures and their meaning.*

9. Many Teachers But Few Fathers. (4:6-16)

Although a believer may have, in his lifetime, many teachers and preachers to help him grow, that believer will have few who qualify as spiritual fathers, such as Paul and Apollos. It is to these apostolic fathers that God has assigned final responsibility for the teaching and nurturing of the believers; therefore He has also given them authority to correct when things are wrong. And the dividing into factions, with each following a favorite teacher, is a wrong to be corrected. This admonition to stop following favorites is sent, not to shame the Corinthians, but as a solemn warning to “be followers of me¹⁰.”

NOTE: In v 16, Paul’s admonition to be followers of him seems on its face to be a contradiction to all that he has written before--about the error of

⁹ The Greek word rendered "ministers" here suggests one who is an attendant in a synagogue, the man who keeps the scrolls of Scripture, and who takes the ones requested by individuals to be read aloud to the assembly and, after the reading, replaces them. See in this regard Lk 4:16-19.

¹⁰ Vine, W.E.: An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, “imitator,” p 248.

following men rather than following Christ. But here, as elsewhere, Paul is admonishing the Corinthians, not to follow him, but to follow his example, as they keep their eyes ultimately on Christ¹¹. The Greek noun rendered “followers” is “mimetes,” meaning “imitators.” This word appears many times in the New Testament, and always in a positive sense. Emulate his life--follow his example--he is saying, but, above all else, be followers of Jesus, the Captain of our salvation.

10. A Call for Excommunication. (Chapter 5)

There is a particularly serious case of sexual sin in the Corinthian church, and it is not being dealt with. A man is living with, or in some way carrying on an ongoing sexual relationship with, his father’s wife; and the Corinthian Christians are tolerating it¹². In fact, they seem proud of the situation, perhaps proud of their tolerance, their inclusiveness, their erroneous “judge not” attitude. This outrage, Paul writes to them, cannot be tolerated; he directs them to assemble and deliver the man “unto Satan for the destruction of his flesh” so that his spirit might be saved in the final judgment. “Flesh” here does not refer to his physical body; it refers to the fleshly, sinful nature with its carnal lusts which prompt his sinful behavior¹³. The woman, it seems, is not a Christian, for she is not mentioned in terms of correction; and II Corinthians 7:12 suggests that the man's father is still living.

Using the example of preparation for Passover, Paul compares the man’s sin to leaven (yeast). Tolerance of such sin, he reasons, may cause it to spread within the church, just as a tiny bit of yeast, added to pure dough, will multiply and spread through all of the dough. This sin must be judged, he says, and it must be dealt with. For more on our responsibility to judge see “To Judge or Not to Judge” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

NOTES:

a. In verse 9 Paul refers to a previous letter in which he told them not to be close friends with fornicators. As we have seen in the introduction to this study guide to I Cor, this letter has not survived as a separate document. The Church Fathers may have deemed it unnecessary in light of the two letters that we do have; or, its summarized content may have been included in this letter. The former explanation is the more likely, but the inescapable fact is that we do not know.

¹¹ Philippians 3:17f.

¹² See also in this regard Leviticus 18:8; Deut 22:30; II Cor 7:12.

¹³ Of course, if he continues in sexual sin he may be infected with a sexually transmitted disease which would afflict his physical body; but that is not the sense in which “flesh” {Greek, *sarx*} is used here.

b. Verse 1 addresses Jewish Christians, and vv 6-8 are pure Jewish metaphor. There must have been many Jews in the Corinthian church.

11. We Will Someday Judge Angels and the World. (6:1-8)

The first eight verses of Chapter 6 are devoted to a stinging rebuke of the Corinthians for failing to judge and correct problems within the church. He has found that, rather than dealing with conflicts within the church themselves, they are taking one another to court before pagan judges. In what might be thought of as a challenge to their thinking, Paul advises the Corinthians to choose as judges, not the elders, deacons or other prominent leaders, but rather the opposite; they are to appoint as judges those ordinary believers who hold no office. He seems to be making the point that one does not need to be exceptional to be able to judge such small matters as those the Corinthians are taking before pagan judges.

In the course of this rebuke Paul reveals two amazing things about the future: someday, in some way, we will judge the world; and, someday, in some way, we shall judge angels!

These two facts are mentioned nowhere else in Scripture; so what do we make of it?

It probably means that, during the thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth (the "Millennium"), some of us (Christians) will hold important positions or offices in his governmental structure; thus we, as a whole, will join Him in governing, including rendering judgments¹⁴.

Concerning our judging of angels, this seems to refer to being with Christ in the final judgment, concurring in, and overseeing, the final condemnation and punishment of Satan and his fallen angels¹⁵. I can think of no other future context in which believers will pass judgment on angels.

***NOTE:** Some Christians interpret this passage to mean that it is always wrong for a Christian to sue another Christian. However, the passage clearly speaks of two believers who are part of the same local congregation, thus both are in submission to the same Christian authorities within that congregation. A Christian leader in the Church at Corinth, however, would have no standing for judging a member of the Church at Ephesus, or at Antioch; thus he could not settle a dispute between a Corinthian Christian and an Ephesian Christian, or one in any other church.*

¹⁴ This may apply only to those of us who become martyrs; see Rev 20:1-6.

¹⁵ In every case in vv 2-5, the underlying Greek word for "judge" is a form of the Greek verb *krino*, meaning to render a legal decision. In v 2, "to judge," the underlying Greek word represents the noun *kriterion*, denoting a tribunal, or a panel of judges. In all cases, the basic meaning is the same.

Perhaps one with apostolic authority could settle disputes in any church which he had founded; this is implied in the letters of Paul to the various churches which he oversaw. But, whatever the case, two Christians under the authority of the same leaders should not take their dispute before non-Christian judges. I remember a case in California in which two very prominent Christians went to court over control of a large church and the Jewish judge rebuked them both, citing this passage of New Testament Scripture. As you can see, that Jewish judge made a lasting, and very positive, impression on me.

12. Practicing Sinners Will Not Inherit the Kingdom. (6:9-11)

With the Christian's responsibility for evaluating and judging made abundantly clear, Paul wants there to be no misunderstanding about another fundamental fact: habitual sinners will have no place in the Kingdom of God. And, in case the Corinthians are not clear on this point, he lists the most common categories of sinners, including fornicators, thieves, idol worshipers, drunkards, foulmouthed revilers, male prostitutes and sodomites. Reminding the Corinthians that they had once practiced those sins, but are now forgiven and clean, he declares that those who practice such sins in an ongoing way are automatically excluding themselves from the Kingdom of God¹⁶.

***NOTE:** One of the most destructive lies commonly heard today is that homosexuals are born that way, and they cannot change. This passage clearly gives the lie to this, for Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that they once practiced these sins themselves. Some of them were once sodomites, but now are free and they are no longer sodomites. Today, there is a growing multitude of former homosexuals who are no longer living in that sin, for they have been set free by the liberating and cleansing power of the Spirit of God¹⁷.*

13. The Body Is the Temple of the Holy Ghost. (6:12-20)

Those of us who have been redeemed and adopted into God's family belong to Him; we are, as Paul expresses it, not our own; and the believer's body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Good things, such as food and drink, are given to us as blessings; but we must be careful not to allow them to become so important to us that it is sinful. A folk proverb expresses the

¹⁶ Concerning habitual sin, particularly homosexual sin, Paul delivered a similarly blunt and emphatic warning to the church at Rome (Rom 1:21-32).

¹⁷ There are several Christian ministries that lead homosexuals out of that destructive lifestyle; these ministries are staffed by former homosexuals who have been themselves set free by the liberating power of Jesus.

principle: “Eat to live--don’t live to eat.” Our bodies are temples of God, and we should avoid all misuse or abuse of them. We are to flee from sexual sin as we would flee from a ravenous lion or a cloud of poison gas, for its attraction can be powerful and deceptive. If I join my body to a prostitute, I am actually joining the Temple of God to a prostitute--a terrible defiling of God’s Temple, for which the punishment is destruction¹⁸. We must, as Paul warns us, “flee fornication.”

NOTES:

a. Idolatry is almost always sexual. It was true of the fertility cults of Egypt, from which the Israelites fled, and it was also true of the pagans in Canaan. According to Merrill Unger, “Fertility cults nowhere controlled people more completely than in Canaan¹⁹.” In this setting, idolatry (paganism) cannot be separated from sexual sin.

b. Fornication, and its related sin of idolatry, are the only sins from which we are told to flee²⁰. We are not told to decline or eschew it; we are not even advised to avoid it. We are commanded here, in plain, simple words, to run from it--as if running for our lives. A positive example of this is Joseph, who literally fled from the seductive advances of Potiphar’s wife²¹.

14. To Marry or Not to Marry? (7:1-9)

Continuing on the theme of sexual sin and temptation, Paul states that he wishes that all men could be as he is--that is, single. Nevertheless, he says, to avoid temptation and sin, those who would be susceptible should marry. It is better, he says, “to marry than to burn.” And, he says, those who are married should not deprive a spouse of the pleasures of sexual love, for this makes him or her susceptible to temptation. A couple may choose to abstain for a certain period of fasting and prayer, but only by mutual consent. All of this is advice, he says, and not a directive.

NOTES:

a. Was Paul a confirmed bachelor, or a widower? Or was he, as some heretical theologians suggest, a celibate homosexual? The evidence combines to suggest that he was married earlier in his life, and widowed, because marriage was required for a voting member of the Sanhedrin, which he seems to have been (Acts 26:10). Also, he writes as one with experience in marriage.

¹⁸ I Corinthians 3:16-17.

¹⁹ Unger, Merrill F.: Unger’s Bible Dictionary, “Idolatry,” p 512.

²⁰ I Corinthians 10:14.

²¹ Genesis 39.

b. Was Paul opposed to marriage for Christians? Of course not! If Christians don't marry, we would become extinct, like the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearance ("Shakers"). One of the requirements for a man to be an elder or deacon in the church is to be "the husband of one wife." All three synoptic gospels tell us that Peter's mother-in-law was healed by Jesus²². Paul will tell us in Chapt 9 that others of the apostles were married, that Peter and the half-brothers of Jesus (James and Jude) were married, and their wives sometimes travelled with them²³.

We have the example of Aquila and Priscilla, Paul's close partners in ministry, who were probably more effective in ministry, as a couple, than they would have been as individuals. Also, in other epistles, he gives wise advice concerning marriage and child rearing. He will go on in this chapter to state the obvious: that those who are married must devote time, thought and energy to one another, while a single Christian can devote all of his time and energy to the things of God.

c. In v 5 most modern versions omit "fasting and"; they do the same with Matt 17:21 and Mk 9:29. Thus they divorce fasting from prayer, greatly weakening this combination of spiritual weapons which was introduced by Jesus as the key to success in spiritual warfare.

15. When a Spouse Is Not a Believer. (7:10-17)

Some new Christians will be married, and with spouses who are not believers. In this situation, Paul writes, there are three possibilities:

- a. A Christian wife who does not wish to remain married to an unbeliever may divorce him; however, she is not free to remarry, except to the man she divorced. The same applies to a Christian man who has an unbelieving wife.
- b. A Christian may be married to an unbeliever who loves him or her, and is happy to have a Christian spouse. In this case the marriage should continue, and the believing spouse may be the means of bringing her (or his) spouse to the Lord.
- c. A believer may be married to an unbeliever who does not love him or her, who is not pleased to go on living with the believing spouse, and wants to leave the marriage. In this case the couple should separate, and the believer is free to remarry; for God's plan for marriage is that the couple should live in harmony and peace--not in constant conflict.

NOTES:

²² Matthew 8:14-15; Mk 1:29-31; Lk 4:38-39.

²³ I Corinthians 9:1-5.

a. Verse 12 can appear to say that what follows is merely Paul's opinion, and not guidance from God Himself. This is probably the wrong understanding of his meaning. Rather, he probably means that Jesus, in his earthly ministry, did not deal with these situations, so Paul is clearing up some sticky points. This is not conclusive evidence, but is a reasonable possibility. Everything else that we know about inspiration of Scripture argues for this latter meaning; and, he is certain enough that he is speaking the words of God that he commands these rules be observed in all churches (v 17).

b. An abusive husband who is verbally abusive with his wife, who demeans her, tells her that she is unsatisfactory, is not pleased to dwell with her; he just enjoys using her as a verbal punching bag. Consistent verbal abuse usually leads to physical abuse. I have come to call this constructive desertion. When he consistently breaks his vow to "love and honor" her, he has emotionally, mentally and verbally (or physically) left the marriage; in such a case, the abused wife, it seems to me, is free to divorce him and remarry, based upon vv 13 and 15. And, of course, the same is true if the sexes are reversed in terms of which is the abuser.

c. In this passage Paul reveals an important thing: that a believing mother has a sanctifying influence over an unbelieving spouse or child. And, in the case of children, it seems that mothers have a particularly effective spiritual influence over their children. Her influence and prayers of intercession do not save them; however, it seems that they set her children apart for eventual salvation (i.e. her prayers "sanctify" them).

16. Food Offered to Idols and the Example We Set. (Chapter 8)

Because we are redeemed and knowledgeable concerning such things, we could, if we wished to, dine at a table in a pagan temple, eating meat that has been offered to idols, and not be harmed. However, if we should do such a thing and be seen by a new believer, who as yet has much to learn about such things, that new believer might think that it is also permissible to enter into any and all of the wicked things done in pagan temples. It could be then, should he then return to the sinful things of paganism, it would be because of the bad example we set. Thus, Paul writes, we must not let our liberty become a stumbling block to a weak and vulnerable believer. To do so would be a sin against Christ.

NOTE: Paul returns briefly to the subject of food offered to idols in Chapt 10:18-33, where he again makes the point that we are free to eat whatever is sold in the marketplace, without questions as to its origins. Likewise, when

we are guests, we should eat whatever is set before us, not worrying about its origins.

However, he says, it is wrong to make a habit of eating and drinking things that have been offered to idols. In his typical, rather complex and repetitious way, he reminds us to be careful of the impact of what we eat and drink, on others who may not understand, and thus could be misled. Using himself as an example, he says that all things are lawful for him, but all things are not expedient or edifying; and, at all times, we must think of the impact on others concerning what we eat or drink.

17. Celibacy, Financial Support and the Apostolic Ministry. (9:1-18)

Someone must have been criticizing Paul and Barnabas, and questioning their apostleship and their motives, for Chapter 9 opens with an emotional burst of self-defense. Paul opens with defense of his credentials as an apostle. And then he asks if he and Barnabas are not entitled to food and drink. Then, for reasons not clear, he defends his and Barnabas' right to travel with wives if they should want to. In defending this right he reveals something otherwise unknown: that James and Jude, the brothers of Jesus, are married. We already know that Peter has a wife for there is the record of her mother's being healed by Jesus in the synoptic gospels²⁴. He then, at some length, expounds on the principle that the workman is worthy of his hire, reminding the Corinthians that in the Hebrew Temple, those who minister there are fed from the foods remaining from sacrifices and offerings. However, he adds, he has supported himself, working at his trade as a tentmaker, and has cost them nothing²⁵.

18. "All Things to All Men." (9:19-23)

There follows now a passage often misunderstood. It is about identifying with the lost and their situation in order to connect with their thinking and effectively communicate the gospel. Paul says that in preaching to the Jew (legalist) he became as a Jew, to the Gentile he became as a gentile, and to the weak he became as one who is weak. He summarizes by saying that he is made all things to all men, in order that he might win some lost people to the Lord. To the casual reader this can sound like he is endorsing pretense in reaching out to the unredeemed. Some Christians think that in order to reach the lost, they must join them in their sinful behavior; but that is **not** what he is saying. In v 22, where he summarizes, he says that he "is **made**" all things to all men. It is not his false pretense or clever deception, or

²⁴ Matthew 8:14-15; Mk 1:29-31; Lk 5:38-39.

²⁵ Acts 18:3; I Cor 4:12; I Thes 2:9; II Thes 3:8.

joining sinners in their sin, that enables him to communicate effectively; it is the work of the Holy Spirit that enables him to identify with, and reach, lost people in various situations.

NOTE: Most modern versions lack this clarification; they read “I have become all things...” in v 22, which can be misleading. The Greek word rendered “am made” is “ginomai,” meaning “that which is made” or “to become”; in either case it denotes a genuine transformation, and not a pretense.

19. Don't Become a Castaway. (9:24-27)

Chapter 9 closes with the fact that life is a distance event--not a sprint--and that we should live it with deliberation, knowing what is at stake, and running in such a way that in the end we will have successfully lived our lives as Christians²⁶. To contrast the right way to live, Paul expresses the opposite way of living with the metaphor of a boxer, trying to fight while blindfolded (“as one that beateth the air”). He closes with the admonition to discipline ourselves. He says that he does this, keeping his body fit and under control, for after preaching to others, he does not want to fail in the Christian life and “become a castaway.”

NOTE: The word “castaway” in v 27 is worthy of some thought. The underlying Greek word is “adokimos,” an adjective (although here, in English, it sounds like a noun). It is the negative form of “dokimos,” “approved or accepted”; thus, in the negative [the “a” at the beginning of the word converts it into a negative], it becomes, “disapproved or rejected--a thing discarded as unacceptable.” In Rom 1:28, and elsewhere, the same Greek word is rendered “reprobate.”

20. The Deadly Danger of Idolatry. (10:1-11)

Continuing with the thoughts about avoiding becoming a castaway (a thing that you and I definitely do not want to become), Paul recites some of the extreme examples of falling away by the Israelites in the Exodus, some of them bringing about their death. The sins that so easily beset the children of Israel in the Exodus are the same sins which surround and tempt the Corinthians now; and he warns them that the consequences of submitting to such sins are just as serious for them as they were for the rebellious Israelites.

NOTE: In this passage Paul reveals something wonderful; and he drops it almost casually, as in passing, and we must not miss it. In v 4 he reveals that the rock in the desert, from which water supernaturally flowed to

²⁶ Hebrews 12:1-3.

sustain life during the Exodus, was a type, or symbol of the Messiah, out of Whom flows a limitless supply of living water today, to bring spiritual life and sustain it for all who ask²⁷.

21. A Precious Promise Concerning Temptation. (10:12-14)

Continuing with the illustration of the disasters which befell the children of Israel because they succumbed to the temptations surrounding them in the Exodus, Paul warns the church at Corinth not to be over confident. The same things, he says, can happen to them. And then, in one truth-packed verse, verse 13, he reveals two extremely important, and related, facts:

- a. Such temptations to sin are not unusual; in fact, they are common to mankind--an unavoidable part of the human experience.
- b. With each temptation, God will provide a way to escape it. The decision, as to whether or not we will take that way of escape, is always ours; we must choose to escape or to submit. But there will always be a way of escape.

With this in mind, he says, we should flee from all idolatry, just as we flee from fornication, for sexual sin it is an inseparable part of idolatry²⁸.

NOTE: A paraphrase of this passage, commonly used but inaccurate and misleading, goes something like, "Well, things are bad, but the Lord won't lay on me more than I can bear." It is not the Lord who lays on us the trials and temptations; He is the one Who protects us from trials and temptations that are more than we can bear; and He is the one Who provides the means of escape.

22. The Uniting of the Church in Holy Communion. (10:15-17)

In the following three verses Paul reminds us that in sharing the broken bread and the wine of holy communion, it unites us with other believers, wherever they might be. Following the example of Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed, he says that the wine in the cup is the spiritual representation of the shed blood of Christ, and the broken bread is the spiritual representation of the broken body of Christ. When we partake of these elements, he says, we are identifying with other believers; together, we are the Body of Christ.

23. Divine Order: Who Is In Charge here? (11:1-3)

In Chapter 11 we plunge into the prickly matter of divine order. Paul opens with an appeal to the Corinthians to follow his example, even as he follows the example of Jesus. With that generality as a starting point, he

²⁷ Exodus 17:1-7; Nu 20:1-11. See also in this regard John 4:10, 7:37; and Rev 22:1.

²⁸ I Corinthians 6:18.

introduces a matter over which Christians disagree even today. The general arrangement concerning authority is simple: God is the ultimate authority; Christ is in submission to God; the man is in submission to the authority of Christ; and the woman, in a general sense, is in submission to her husband. This brief passage is such a bitter pill to some women that they simply reject the teachings of Paul as if they are not Holy Scripture. Others dismiss the principle of male authority as something customary in the 1st Century, but no longer relevant today. Nevertheless, here it is; so what do we make of it?

It helps to remember that in God's creation there is always order: the Sun rises and sets; the Moon rises and sets; the seasons follow one another in a predictable order; tides rise and ebb in a predictable order, etc. In a family, someone must be in a position of final authority, or there is chaos, confusion and insecurity. It seems to have been God's plan from the beginning that the father, who has total responsibility for the well being of the family must, therefore, necessarily have final authority for carrying out that responsibility. God's plan for the family, then, seems to be a loving father, protecting and providing for his wife and children, with his wife as full partner in decisions and the rearing of the children, with Jesus as the family's leader and role model, and with YHWH as the ultimate authority. Today our culture has strayed far from this divine plan and, with the increasing breakdown of the family structure, there has come nothing but destructive behavior, heartache and tragedy. This topic will reappear as we make our way through Paul's epistles.

NOTES:

a. Extremes are almost always wrong. A domineering, overbearing, husband who treats his wife with disrespect, as an inferior whom he commands, is wrong; A rebellious, adversarial wife, who opposes her husband frequently and openly in family decisions, is also wrong. God is the author of peace--not confusion and strife.

b. Today the great tragedy unfolding before our eyes is that Western Civilization, which had as its foundation the Word of God, and as its basic unit the Christian family, is committing slow suicide by abandoning the authority of that Word, including God's plan for the family. God's divine order is progressively being replaced by God-less chaos and destruction.

23. Appropriate Attire and Hair Length. (11:4-16)

Hebrew men in ancient times cut their hair from time to time with a razor, and trimmed their beards; their hair was usually no longer than shoulder length. They shaved their heads at times as part of a vow; and only Nazarites never cut their hair or beards. Young Hebrew boys, girls and

women, did not have their hair cut. A woman with short hair or shaved head was disgraced, as if she were a prostitute.

Here Paul establishes rules for appropriate attire in church meetings. The women, especially when praying or prophesying, must wear a head covering--a shawl or veil. This head covering symbolizes the fact that she is under authority, not a rebel defying the authority of her husband and the leaders in the church, and that she is humble before God. For the man the opposite is true: he must have his head uncovered. And, lest this authority be misunderstood, and taken to mean that the man and woman are like master and slave, he goes on to say that the woman is not complete without the man, and the man is not complete without the woman.

Verses 14 and 15 are a challenge to the understanding, and are matters of controversy. How does “nature itself” tell us that it is shameful for a man to have long hair²⁹? And, how long is “long”? Among the Hebrews, it was customary for men to have relatively short hair, and for women to have long, flowing, uncut hair. Since a man with long, flowing hair would resemble a woman, confusing the natural order of the two sexes, in this sense it would be a violation of the natural order, and an obvious impropriety. Hair length should be such that a man would not be mistaken for a woman, or a woman mistaken for a man. Flowing, beautiful hair is proper for a woman; but for a man to take pride in long, flowing hair would be an effeminate thing and, thus, shameful.

But how can a woman’s hair be a covering for her? A clue to the meaning of this is the Greek word rendered “covering.” It is *peribolaion*, the basic meaning of which is “something thrown around,” as one would throw a scarf or shawl around the neck or shoulders (the Greek prefix, *peri*, means “around”). Perhaps it means that, if she has no veil, shawl or other head cover, she might gather her long hair and throw it over her head as an acceptable substitute. Apparently expecting some objections to all of this, Paul closes the discussion by saying that, if some of them disagree, such is the custom in all of his other churches.

NOTES:

a. For much of my life, it was considered to be decidedly improper for a woman to go to church without wearing a hat, which she kept on during the service. Likewise, it was extremely improper--in fact unthinkable--for a

²⁹ This matter of being shown by “nature itself” that long, flowing hair is shameful for a man is not explained. Most commentators and paraphrases hurry past it. Matthew Henry (1662-1714) suggested that, since it has been a custom in all civilized nations to maintain a distinction between men and women in terms of dress and hair length, the custom must have arisen from unrecorded divine nature.

man to wear a hat during the service (or indoors anywhere); it came off as he entered the building. Marine Corps uniform regulations require that a Marine “uncover” (remove his cap) as he enters a building, unless he is under arms (i.e. armed with a weapon because his duty requires it). However, even when on duty and armed, a Marine uncovers as he enters a military chapel or a civilian church. These rules of propriety seem to have had their origin in this chapter.

b. Verse 10 is difficult to understand. The Greek word rendered “power,” which the woman should have on her head, is “exousia.” It does mean power, but its primary meaning is authority, as in the authority of leaders in the church. It seems then, since authority is the subject under discussion here, that we can read this to say that her head covering is a symbol of her submission to authorities, and her humility before God.

But what do we do with the words, “because of the angels”? Some commentators, understandably, pass by them without comment. Others say that this is a reference to evil spirits, and that the head covering protects the woman, denying them the right to attack her because she is in submission and therefore protected by divine authority. Others believe that the reference is to angels of God, who are present to watch over the church gathering. In this sense, the meaning would be that, by being covered, the woman does not offend the sense of perfect order in which the angels, and all of the Kingdom of Heaven, exist. I lean toward this latter meaning; but perhaps both are correct.

Adam Clarke, the great commentator of the 18th Century, presents all of the interpretations of the scholars, both contemporary and those who had gone before him, and concluded, “The reader has now before him everything that is likely to cast light upon this difficult subject, and he must adopt what he judges to be best, or else think for himself.” And, with this conclusion, he moves on. So shall we.

24. The Origin and Meaning of Holy Communion. (11:17-26)

Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their terrible misunderstanding, and consequential misuse, of the sacrament of holy communion. Not only are there divisions among them (he has already dealt with that, but it is still on his mind), but they have turned the eucharist into an offence before God and something dangerous in terms of their health. He says that they may be having a supper, but it is definitely not the Lord’s supper, for He seems to be no part of it. Some are taking all of the bread that they can eat, while others don’t even get a small piece in remembrance of Him and his broken body. In the same way, he says, some are drinking so much of the wine that they

are drunk, while others don't even get a sip to honor the shed blood of Lord. Making it clear that he is not pleased with them, he then sets out to explain the way it should be done.

Paul tells them that on that momentous night in which Jesus was betrayed He took bread, gave thanks for it, broke it, and told the apostles to eat portions of it, remembering that it represents his body which will be tortured and broken for them. And, Jesus said, they are to eat it remembering Him. In like manner, Jesus took the cup of wine after they had eaten the bread, and He said that the wine represents his shed blood, with which He will seal the New Covenant between God and man. Like the bread, He tells them, when they drink it they should think of Him and remember his sacrificial death. Whenever they gather to take the broken bread and wine of communion they will be proclaiming the atoning death of the Messiah; and they should continue to do this until He returns in the Second Advent.

NOTE: In v 23, Paul says an extremely interesting thing. He says that the instruction that he is passing along concerning communion is information that he "received of the Lord." He doesn't say that he knows that these things are true because he learned them from the apostles who were there on the night in which He was betrayed; no, he says that he received this truth from the Lord. It appears to me that Jesus, seeing the gross error of the Corinthians, came personally to Paul and instructed him concerning the origin and meaning of communion, so that he could correct the Corinthians and, in so doing, instruct the entire the Church, even unto this present day³⁰.

25. Their Error Has Serious Consequences. (11:27-34)

Having explained the origin and meaning of communion, Paul then returns to the errors of the Corinthians. And, it seems, the consequences of their errors are quite serious. When a believer takes the element of bread and wine unworthily, i.e. in an unworthy manner, with a wrong attitude, treating the elements as if they were nothing but ordinary bread and wine, he is profaning, dishonoring, and sinning against the holy body and blood of the Lord. Those who fail to see that the broken bread represents the Lord's broken body bring damnation upon themselves; they are guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Jesus³¹. What could be more serious? Before approaching the table of the Lord, then, we should pause to examine

³⁰ Mrs. Siewert, in her Amplified Bible, adds "Himself" after "Lord" in v 23 and further adds, in parentheses, in case we miss the point, "It was given to me personally."

³¹ The New International Version (NIV) omits the last five words in v 29, removing the key to understanding the last six verses of Chapt 11 and this extremely important fact of Christian life. Most of the other modern versions include these five vital words, as does the AV (KJV).

ourselves, especially our attitudes. For this reason, liturgies for Holy Communion include this pausing, and the Prayer of General Confession, to be sure that we are prepared to partake rightly of the body and blood. Because the Corinthians have not been discerning the presence of the Lord's broken body, Paul says, many of them are sick and cannot be healed; and some have died before their time.

NOTES:

a. It appears, from the last six verses of Chapt 11, that there can be healing virtue in the broken bread. Because it is by the stripes (the physical beating, torture and grievous injury) that Jesus endured for us, health and healing are a part of our Christian inheritance. Thus, although there are other provisions for our healing in the New Testament, the healing virtue in the taking of the broken bread is another³². If we approach the broken bread (and I cannot over-emphasize here the importance of the word "broken") with gratitude and faith, we should leave the Lord's table healthier than we were before.

*b. I have learned that many Protestant Christians abstain from taking communion, for fear of sinning against the body and blood of Jesus. Knowing that they are unworthy, rather than take a chance of suffering damnation, they simply abstain, and miss a great blessing. And they do this because they (or someone who has taught them) failed to see the difference between an adjective and an adverb in v 27. Does the verse say that we eat and drink damnation to ourselves if we take the elements when we are unworthy? **No!** It says that we are in this danger if we take the elements "**unworthily,**" i.e., **in an unworthy manner.***

*It is important to pause here and realize that **no one is worthy** of the body and blood of Jesus! If we were worthy of his body and blood we would have no need of a Savior. The correct way to approach the table of the Lord is in realizing that we are **not** worthy of this unspeakable gift; and then we are to partake of the elements with reverence and profound gratitude, remembering his sacrifice for us and his amazing grace.*

c. It seems that you and I are the beneficiaries of the gross error of the Corinthians, for in Paul's correcting them of their gross error, we now have perfect knowledge of the truth concerning the origin and meaning of Holy Communion, and guidance for its proper performance. The same is true concerning their misuse of the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit and their conduct within the Church, as we are about to see in Chapt 12-14.

³² Isaiah 53:5; I Pet 2:24.

* * * * *

Introduction to Gifts and Ministries. The next three chapters of I Corinthians, Chapters 12, 13 and 14, constitute a trilogy. These three chapters all deal with the vital and, at times, controversial matter of the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, their proper place in the life of the Church, and the proper manner of their manifestation.

1. Chapter 12 enumerates the nine supernatural gifts and explains why the Holy Spirit uses individual believers in different ways.

2. Chapter 13 tells us that we must manifest these gifts in love, and puts them in their proper perspective.

3. And Chapter 14 gives us guidance for the proper manner of the operation of these gifts, and differentiates between these supernatural gifts, and ministries within the Church. For this reason these three chapters should be studied together; it is my opinion that no one of them can be properly understood except within the context of the other two.

Because of the importance of these three chapters, and because they are so often misunderstood, we will proceed slowly and carefully, and there will be many explanatory notes. For the same reason, you will see many words and phrases in bold face, for emphasis; these are key words and phrases which must not be overlooked.

It is also helpful to realize that in these chapters Paul deals with three different, but interrelated topics:

1. The nine supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit;
2. Ministries within the church; and,
3. Natural abilities.

It is particularly important to remember the difference between **supernatural gifts** and **ministries**. A ministry is a position or job to be carried out within the structure of the church; the gifts are the weapons or tools needed to perform the work and carry out that ministry.

Keep this difference in mind; otherwise there are passages that will be difficult and confusing.

And please remember that I am not attempting to make doctrinal statements in any of this; I am merely dealing, objectively, with what is plainly written in these passages. The way that the reader interprets these things is entirely a matter between himself and God.

* * * * *

26. Concerning Spiritual Gifts. (12:1-7)

Having dealt with the errors of the Corinthians in Holy Communion, Paul turns to the proper use of the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Correction is needed here also, and they need teaching. Paul opens with a dictum concerning the Holy Spirit; it is a fundamental fact of Christian life, and it is found nowhere else in Scripture. No one, he says, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, can call Jesus accursed; likewise, he says, no one can truly declare that Jesus is his Lord unless he is under the power and influence of the Holy Spirit.

There are different gifts, he says, but all are the work of the same Spirit. Likewise, there are different offices and functions in the Church; but all serve the same Lord. There are different ways of functioning in the Church, but it is the same God Who inspires and empowers all of them. Beneath all of these things, he says, is the presence and power of the same Spirit of God. And no one is overlooked or left out in this way; no, the manifestations of the Spirit are available to **all** believers ("every man"), not just for apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. And the manifestations of the Holy Spirit are for the common good ("to profit withal").

NOTES:

*a. There is a great deal of confusion concerning spiritual gifts; and opinions concerning them, and their proper place in the life of the Church, differ greatly. This is due in part to the fact that the English word "gift(s)" is used elsewhere to mean a ministry or natural ability. Here again, it is the underlying Greek that makes the difference. Also, as is often the case, the opening verse is the key here to understanding the passage. In verse 1, the Greek word rendered "spiritual gifts" (note that the word "gifts" is in italics, meaning that it was added by the translators) is enormously revealing. This significant word is "pneumatikos," and it means things **supernaturally** inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit.*

*W. E. Vine wrote, concerning "pneumatikos," that it "always connotes the idea of invisibility and power. It does not occur in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament), nor in the [Greek] gospels; it is, in fact, **an after-Pentecost word** (emphasis mine)³³." This evidence is particularly compelling in that it does not come from a Pentecostal scholar; in fact, it is quite the opposite. Professor Vine believed strongly that the supernatural was withdrawn from*

³³ Vine, W.E.: An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, "Spiritual," A. Adjective, p 64.

the Church after the 1st Century. It thus carries the added strength of the testimony of a hostile witness in a court of law.

Mrs. Frances Siewert, who also was not a Pentecostal scholar, in her Amplified Bible, amplifies "pneumatikos" in I Cor 12:1 with "(the special endowments of supernatural energy)."

*Paul is not writing here of offices and duties within the Church, nor is he writing about natural abilities and talents; he is writing about **miracles**. Keep this in mind, and Chapters 12, 13, and 14 will make sense.*

With this as a starting point, Paul enumerates the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, provided to the Church; there are nine of them.

***b.** Concerning the supernatural gifts and ministries of the Spirit, Bible-believing Christians, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, are divided into two schools of thought. Some believe that these miraculous gifts and ministries (and all miracles) were withdrawn from the Church with the death of John, the last of the original apostles, or simply after the 1st Century. The others, usually called Pentecostals or Charismatics, believe that these supernatural weapons of our warfare are a permanent, gracious provision for the Church, and that they will continue to be available to us until the return of Christ makes them unnecessary³⁴.*

No matter which of these two positions one holds, all should agree that these spiritual gifts and ministries did occur in the 1st Century Church, and thus they require our understanding.

27. The Nine Supernatural Gifts of the Spirit. (12:8-11)

In the following four verses Paul identifies the nine supernatural gifts and tells us how they are distributed within the Church. They are:

1. the word of wisdom;
2. the word of knowledge;
3. faith;
4. the gifts of healing;
5. the working of miracles;
6. prophecy;
7. the discerning of spirits;
8. diverse tongues;
9. interpretation of tongues.

The passage ends with the way in which the gifts are distributed among the believers. The Holy Spirit distributes the operation of the gifts among the believers as He sees fit ("as He will").

³⁴ See in this regard II Cor 10:3-4.

But what does this mean? Let us begin with what it cannot mean: it cannot mean that each believer “has” one gift as a permanent endowment. If that were so, someone who “has” the gift of healing could heal anyone, at any time. Likewise, someone who “has” the gift of working of miracles could go around performing miracles at will. Yet the Scriptures plainly deny this interpretation. What, then, does it mean? It seems to mean that the Holy Spirit, Who is always with us, sees a need and selects the believer through whom the gift is manifested at that moment. In a gathering of believers, or in personal ministry, one may be selected (by the Spirit) to speak a word of wisdom, another to speak in tongues and still another to interpret the message in tongues. At the next meeting, or on another occasion of ministry, entirely different individuals may be selected to manifest the same gifts--or entirely different gifts. For me, this seems to be the only reasonable meaning, especially in that the Greek word here rendered “dividing” is *diaireo*, and its basic meaning is “to distribute³⁵.”

Thus it seems that we can summarize (and clarify) this matter of “possessing” gifts as follows: no one “has” any of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, in that he has the permanent ability to perform them at will; rather, the Holy Spirit can manifest any or all of them at one time or another, through any willing believer. With this in mind, look again at verses 6 and 7.

NOTES:

*a. There is no such thing in the Bible as the “gift of knowledge”; this gift is clearly identified as “the word of knowledge.” No one has all of the knowledge of God. A word of knowledge appears to be a tiny fragment of God’s knowledge, supernaturally revealed through a believer, to meet the need of the moment. The Greek word rendered “word” here, and in “the word of wisdom” below, is *logos*; in this context, it refers to discourse, speech or instruction³⁶. Examples of this are seen in the dealing of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:18), and Peter, in his dealing with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).*

b. Likewise, there is no such thing as the “gift of wisdom”; again, the gift is “the word of wisdom.” As is the case with knowledge, no one has all of the wisdom of God; a “word” of wisdom is a tiny fragment of God’s wisdom,

³⁵ See in this regard Hebr 2:4.

³⁶ Vine, W.E: Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, “Word,” Volume IV, p 229. As we have seen, in the opening of John’s Gospel, “*Logos*” was used by the apostle to represent Christ; but in those opening verses of John 1, the context is cosmic revelation--not practical instruction. Here, the word is used in the same sense as when we would say, “I would like to have a word with you.”

momentarily revealed to a believer to meet the need of the moment. Although not clearly written as such, examples seem to be found in Peter and John before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:5-13), and in Stephen's responses to the synagogue of the Libertines (Acts 6:9-10). My favorite examples are seen in the way Jesus responded to his enemies, just when they thought they had him where anything He said would be wrong; each time, it seems to me, He blew them out of the water with a word of wisdom. When one speaks a word of wisdom, he may not realize that he is doing anything remarkable; yet his words will have God's desired effect on the hearer.

c. Everyone is given a measure of faith, apparently to meet individual needs. To make the choice to surrender to Jesus as Messiah and Redeemer requires faith; therefore, we must all have that "measure of faith"³⁷. But here we are clearly dealing with supernatural manifestations in the Church. Thus it seems that a gift of faith is the momentary surge of faith required to operate in one of the other gifts, or to do anything else requiring faith beyond the "measure" that all people are given. Like the word of knowledge and the word of wisdom, this gift is momentary; there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that anyone is permanently endowed with miracle-working faith. Even Elijah, who performed such mighty miracles in defeating the Baal priests on Mount Carmel, was next seen hiding in a cave for fear of Jezebel.

d. Notice that in healing, the word is gifts (plural). Like the first three gifts, it appears that we are again referring to fragmentary portions of God's healing power; thus, it seems, each act of healing is a single gift that can be performed only with the momentary anointing of the Spirit³⁸. Who is it, after all, who receives the gift? It is the sick or crippled person who receives the healing--not the one who prays. If healing were a permanent endowment, so that a believer with this gift could heal anyone at any time, then we can't explain why Paul, who has been used of God to heal many, would be unable to heal his friend Trophimus, whom he left behind in Miletus, too sick to travel³⁹.

e. The meaning of the working of miracles is both obvious and obscure. When Paul struck Elymas the sorcerer blind for a season (Acts 13), that was obviously a miracle; but some healings appear to be creative miracles. When withered limbs that have never been functional suddenly have

³⁷ Romans 12:3.

³⁸ "Healing" is again pluralized in 12:30:

³⁹ II Timothy 4:20.

perfectly normal nerve and muscle function, complete blood supply, and muscle mass that had never existed before, that seems to be a miracle. We saw this in the case of the man healed by Peter and John at the Gate Beautiful (Acts 3). Also, it seems that casting out an evil spirit is a miracle, as well as the healing of cripples, as in the revival at Samaria (Acts 8:6-7). We shall return to this ambiguity, in "A Final Thought Concerning Spiritual Gifts" below, for it seems to involve a fundamental principle in the matter of spiritual gifts.

*f. The gift of prophecy is often misunderstood. Prophecy is simply speaking an inspired message from God to the Church. Well, we might think, that could sound like a Sunday morning sermon; but remember--here we are dealing with the supernatural. Although preachers, teachers, translators, and commentators today often substitute "preach, preacher, and preaching" for "prophecy, prophet, and prophesying," this is intellectually dishonest, for the Greek verbs for "prophecy" and "preach" (and their noun forms) are different words, with entirely different meanings. The Greek word rendered "prophecy" in the New Testament is "propheteuo," meaning to set forth (orally or in writing) the mind and counsel of God--in other words a message from God. The word rendered "preach" is "kerusso," meaning simply to proclaim (as in proclaiming the gospel message). Although we often associate the word "prophecy" with predictions of the future, in the biblical sense this is wrong. A supernatural word of prophecy **may**, or **may not**, include information about the future⁴⁰.*

*It is **extremely** important to remember that such prophetic messages cannot add to, or take away from, the Bible. God makes this abundantly clear at the end of his divine Book of Revelation; it is his final teaching point, followed only by the promise of Christ that He will come soon, and John's closing benediction⁴¹.*

*It is also **extremely** important to remember that each such prophetic utterance is to be judged by others present, as to whether or not it is a valid message from the Lord. We will see this in Chapt 14. For this reason, personal prophecy, for only one person or a very small group, outside of a church meeting, is dangerous; for it is almost never judged. And by what standard is each prophecy to be judged? By the Bible--the unchanging, written Word of God. What other standard could there be? By*

⁴⁰ To my knowledge, the only place in the NT where prophecy is, in effect, defined, is in I Cor 14:3. There, we are told of the three functions (results) of prophecy, therefore defining its limits; it is to edify, exhort, or comfort the hearer. The full meaning of this will be explained when we deal with that passage.

⁴¹ Revelation 22:18-21.

implication, it seems that this requirement for judging prophecy applies also to a message in tongues with interpretation; but this is not stated in the text of Chapt 14.

g. There is no such thing as a “gift of discernment.” The gift here is the “discerning of spirits”; and it seems to refer to a supernatural ability to recognize and identify evil spirits, and to recognize the work of evil spirits in motivating another’s actions. Here again, the underlying Greek is helpful; the Greek noun rendered “discerning” here is “diakrisis,” meaning a distinguishing, a clear discrimination, judging whether spirits are evil or of God⁴².” We seem to see an example of this in Peter’s dealing with Simon the Sorcerer during the great revival in Samaria (Acts 8:20-23) It may also be the momentary ability to recognize right and wrong motivation in human spirits, and to recognize the presence of unseen angelic spirits.

h. The gift of tongues is the momentary, supernatural, ability to speak in a language one has never learned. This one is restricted to gatherings of Christians in meetings, for it is coupled with the final gift, the interpretation of tongues. As we shall see in Chapt 14, a manifestation of the gift of tongues must be followed by a manifestation of the interpretation of tongues; otherwise, it doesn’t help or enlighten anyone but, instead, creates confusion. A related supernatural phenomenon is praise and worship in tongues, which is what drew the crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2:4-6), and which Paul will explain in Chapt 14. A related phenomenon is prayer in tongues/prayer in the Spirit, which we shall also see in Chapt 14.

“Tongues of Ecstasy.” A common error in teaching and preaching about speaking or praying in tongues is to add words to what the Holy Spirit has inspired, and that Paul, under that inspiration, has carefully and precisely written. Those who believe that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit “are not for our day,” and that they were withdrawn from the Church by the end of the 1st Century, often make a common and misleading error. This error is to speak or write of “tongues of ecstasy.”

Use of this utterly unscriptural and misleading expression implies that the believer who speaks a message, or prays, in tongues is in some sort of trance-like, “out of this world,” ecstatic state; and this false usage is loaded with negative connotations.

Why do I declare that this misleading expression is unscriptural? I declare this because it does not appear in the Greek manuscripts--neither in the Textus Receptus, nor in the Westcott-Hort family of manuscripts. It

⁴² Vine, W.E.: An Expository of New Testament Words, *Discern*, etc; B. Noun, Vol 1, p 315.

simply isn't there. In fact, the word "ecstasy" appears nowhere in the Bible. The same is true of its adjective form, "ecstatic." In Dr. Strong's "Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible," which lists every word in the Bible, these words simply do not appear. In fact, with the exception of the title we have given to the book, Ecclesiastes, there is no word in the Bible beginning with the letters "ec"⁴³.

i. The gift of interpretation of tongues is the momentary ability to understand and speak forth, to the other believers present, the message which has just been spoken in an unknown tongue. These two gifts must operate together; and, as we shall see in Chapt 14, if a believer receives an anointing to speak a message in tongues, and there is no one present who is able to speak the interpretation, the message in tongues should not be spoken⁴⁴.

* * * * *

A Final Thought Concerning Spiritual Gifts. In a way, the nine spiritual gifts are like the rainbow--the colors in the visible light spectrum. It is easy to recognize the colors of the rainbow, but it may be impossible to tell where one stops and the next one begins; one color phases into its neighbor. This can be true of the gifts of the Spirit. When Jesus touched the hand of Peter's mother-in-law and the fever "left her," (the Greek, *aphiemi*, means "to depart--to go away") is an example. Was it a healing, or a miracle of deliverance from a spirit of infirmity⁴⁵? Likewise, the woman bent over, "whom Satan hath bound, lo these eighteen years"; was she healed, or was it a miracle of deliverance⁴⁶? And, when the ruler of the synagogue rebuked Jesus for healing (delivering) the crippled woman, the reply of Jesus appears to be a word of wisdom, for it silenced his critics and put them to shame. It can be difficult to differentiate between a prophetic utterance, and a word of wisdom.

The important thing in all of this, however, is that the Spirit acts supernaturally and a need is met; it really doesn't matter very much what we call it.

⁴³ "Eccleastes" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title for Solomon's book, *Quoheleth*.

⁴⁴ For what it may be worth, I know of no instance in Acts or the epistles where a message is spoken in tongues and interpreted. Nevertheless, these gifts are clearly enunciated here, and in Chapt 14.

⁴⁵ Matthew 8:15; Mk 1:31; Lk 4:39.

⁴⁶ Luke 13:10-17.

* * * * *

28. The Church and Its Ministries, Compared with the Human Body.
(12:12-26)

The rest of Chapter 12 compares the Church, in which different people have different functions (ministries), with the human body. As the body has different parts, e.g. hands, eyes, legs, ears, etc, so the Body of Christ, the Church, is made up of people with different functions or ministries. Paul also makes the point, emphatically, that if the body were made only of ears, or only of eyes, or were nothing but arms, there is an obvious problem: it won't work. Likewise the Church: if everyone is a preacher, or teacher, or administrator, it won't function properly (if at all). He also emphasizes the fact that no one ministry or function in the Church is more necessary than the others; for the Church (universal or local) to function effectively, all ministries must be present and operating, including that of the janitor. And, he points out, since we are all necessary parts of the Church (local or universal), when one suffers we all suffer; and when one is honored we are all honored.

***NOTE.** Verse 13 is a concise summary of this principle of the Church's being complete in our diversity; yet this verse is often misunderstood. Some take this verse to mean that all who are redeemed and born into the family of God are thus baptized in or with the Holy Spirit. But we must consider the identity of the Baptizer in this verse, and the result.*

1. Baptizer. *The baptizer here is clearly the Holy Spirit⁴⁷; but, as we have seen in all four gospels, the Baptizer in or with the Holy Spirit is Jesus, and He is **the only One** Who performs this baptism of power.*

2. Result. *The result here is that we are baptized "into one body," i.e. the Church, and are caused to "drink into one Spirit," i.e. the Holy Spirit. This seems surely to refer to our salvation, our redemption, in which we are introduced by the Spirit into the family of God, and in the process become indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Remember that Jesus, on the great day of the feast, cried out that any who are spiritually thirsty may come to him "and drink" of the Holy Spirit⁴⁸.*

On the other hand, in the baptism by Jesus in the Holy Spirit, the result is power, the better to serve Him⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ Galatians 3:26-27.

⁴⁸ John 7:37.

⁴⁹ Acts 1:8.

*What, then, could v 13 be saying? It seems that it is saying clearly that we are all baptized **by** the Holy Spirit, **into** the Body of Christ, through the work and agency of the Holy Spirit, drinking in that Spirit. We are all baptized into this one Body, where we are all to function as different, but equally necessary, parts.*

For more on the differences in these baptisms see “Four New Testament Baptisms” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

29. A Sampling of Gifts and Ministries. (12:27-30)

In the closing verses of Chapter 12 we are introduced to the mixing of references to gifts and ministries, and the mixing of references to the supernatural and to the natural. Verse 28 makes it clear that it is the Spirit of God who decides which ministry each of us will perform, and illustrates the fact that some of them involve the supernatural and some don't, i.e. speaking of prophets, healers, teachers and helpers. In passages like this, where Paul speaks of supernatural and natural gifts and ministries in the same statement, we must proceed carefully. Continuing on the principle that the Church can't function if everyone has the same ministry, Paul asks rhetorical questions. Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all interpreters of tongues? And the answer to all of his questions is, of course “No.”

And then, in the last verse, Paul combines a commandment with a caveat. We are commanded to covet (desire, seek, pray for) the best gifts, and to covet them earnestly (zealously). And then he introduces a balancing principle: it is that we should--in fact must--seek and operate in these gifts and ministries, both natural and supernatural, with love--the agape love of God. We will treat this last verse separately, next.

NOTE: *Lists of ministries occur in three places: here, in Rom 12:6-8, and in Eph 4:11. It is important to note that none of these lists is the same as either of the others. It is also important to note that each list includes both ministries that involve supernatural gifts, and those ministries which do not. How can we interpret this? It seems to me to say two things: that some ministries do not require or involve supernatural gifts of the Spirit; and, that there may be an unlimited number of possibilities for ministries or functions in the Church. Unlike the nine supernatural gifts, carefully enumerated in 12:8-10, there is no “complete” list of ministries in the Bible.*

30. The Best Gifts and the More Excellent Way. (12:31)

The last verse in Chapter 12 is one of the most commonly misunderstood verses in the Bible. Let us examine it separately and carefully.

First, what is meant by “the best” gifts? Regrettably, Paul doesn’t explain; but permit me to tell you what it **absolutely cannot** mean. It **cannot** mean that some of the gifts of the Spirit are better than others; and I know this because **everything** done by the Spirit of God is **perfect**! Was God on top of his game when He created prophecy, but was having a bad day when He created tongues, and didn’t do a very good job? **No!**--a thousand times **no!** There can be plenty wrong with us, in the way we behave and in the way gifts of the Spirit are manifested through us; but the gifts themselves are **perfect**. And to take the position, as many do, that some gifts are better than others, is, in my opinion, blasphemy⁵⁰.

Next, note carefully here that the love of God is **not a gift** of the Holy Spirit; nor is it a ministry in the Church. Love is the “more excellent **way**.” What, then, could it mean? It seems to say that love is not just excellent, but “more” excellent, because that, without the agape love of God, the gifts and ministries cannot be fully effective (if effective at all). To understand love’s being a “way,” rather than a gift or ministry, it helps to consider the underlying Greek. The word rendered “gifts” here is *charismata*, meaning gracious gifts performed by the Holy Spirit; whereas the word rendered “way” is *hodos*, meaning a pathway or a road to be followed. This, as we shall see in the next chapter, is the way of love--i.e. the way in which the gifts and ministries are to be sought and carried out. Just imagine for a moment what it would be like (and regrettably, sometimes is) if a preacher or teacher functions with pride, arrogance or greed; it can be not only ineffective, it can be terribly destructive! This is Paul’s point.

With that, I hope, settled, what then **does** it mean? It seems to me, considering the context, that it most likely means that, since we all have a ministry--a function to perform in the Church, we should earnestly covet and pray for the gifts that **best enable** us to fulfill that ministry. Thus, those that are best to carry out your ministry may not be the best ones to carry out mine.

What, then? For obvious examples, a prophet should certainly covet to prophesy; and one with a ministry of healing should earnestly desire gifts of healing; a counselor should earnestly desire the word of wisdom; etcetera.

⁵⁰ I have often heard Christians say that “tongues is the least of the gifts” because it is listed last. But it isn’t listed last; it is listed next-to-last. And, even if it were listed last, to say such things is, in my opinion, blasphemous. In Chapt 13 “faith, hope and love” are cited as remaining after the gifts cease to be, and love, the last listed, is “the greatest” of the three. **Everything** that God does is **perfect**.

We have now devoted a great deal of time to just one verse; but verse 31 deserves it, seems to require it, and it perfectly leads us, without a pause, into the study of Chapter 13.

31. The Essential Nature of (Agape) Love. (13:1-3)

Chapter 13 is often called “the love chapter,” for it defines the love of God and declares its paramount, central, and indispensable, position in the life of the individual Christian and in the Church; but it is much more than that, for Chapter 13 also gives us a rather mysterious peek into the future. The first three verses make it emphatically clear that the ministries in the Church and gifts of the Spirit must be performed and manifested in charity (love).

In this chapter, and elsewhere in I Corinthians, the Greek word rendered “charity” in the AV (KJV), and as “love” in modern versions, is *agape*, and it is the unique, unconditional, love of God--in fact it is his very Essence⁵¹. This is the form of love that only those indwelt by the Holy Spirit can have and exercise. Only redeemed believers, with the indwelling Holy Spirit, can love in this way⁵².

The first three verses of Chapter 13 state emphatically that no matter what miraculous gifts God may manifest through us, or what acts of sacrifice we may perform, if these things are not done in love, we are ineffective, we are nothing, and these things we do will profit us nothing.

NOTES:

a. Verse 1 strongly suggests that, in addition to the thousands of languages and dialects spoken among men, there are angelic languages; and, it seems, utterances in tongues may sometimes be spoken in these languages⁵³.

b. Be careful to note that, in these negative illustrations of gifts and service that are done wrongly, it is the individual involved who is “a [hollow] sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal”; it is the individual who “is nothing,” and who is not profited; in each case there is nothing derogatory said about the gift(s); they are the perfect work of the Spirit of God. Yet careless readers, and teachers who are anxious to avoid the supernatural, tend to take the bad attitudes and behavior in each case to discredit the gift. This, I cannot emphasize too strongly, is careless reading or intellectual dishonesty; and it is dangerously close to blasphemy. Nowhere here (or

⁵¹ See in this regard I John 4:8, where this foundational fact of life is fully expressed in three words.

⁵² Merrill Unger (Unger's Bible Dictionary) has written, "Its absence invalidates all claim to the Christian name."

⁵³ There are more than 30 different dialects spoken by the Mayan people of Central America, alone.

anywhere else in the Bible) is it said that the gifts are "nothing"; it is the unloving person who is "nothing."

It is extremely important to see and understand this distinction.

c. Why is "charity" used here in the AV (KJV), in place of "love"? This word was probably chosen by the translators of the Authorized Version because it was commonly used in this way in England 400 years ago. But the answer can't be that simple, because the Greek noun "agape" is rendered "charity" in 12 of the 27 epistles, once in Revelation 2:19, and nowhere else in the New Testament. We can't ask the translators why they did this because they are long dead; but I suspect that it was rendered "charity" because of the word's strong implication of unselfishness and selflessness⁵⁴.

32. The Nature of the (Agape) Love of God. (13:4-7) **(Where appropriate, use Frances Siewert's amplification here, and perhaps more from Unger)**

The next four verses define and describe the agape love of God. Love is patient, kind, is not envious, does not seek attention or promote itself, and it is not boastful or vainglorious. It does not behave badly, does not seek its own benefit or insist on having its own way, and it does not dwell on the evil done to it or seek revenge⁵⁵. Love rejoices in truth, not deception or a lie. It endures all things, lives in hope, and believes the best about others. All of these virtues are included in, and constitute the very nature of, the wonderful *agape* love of God.

NOTE: When I was a new Christian, first carefully studying the Word, I was reading these characteristics expected of a believer and thinking that I could live up to each one, until I got to the end of v 5 where "thinketh no evil" stopped me in my mental tracks! How, I wondered, could I live the rest of my life, without having a wrong thought? Here, again, the underlying Greek is helpful. The Greek verb is "logizomai," and it means "to reckon, or keep account." Thus, in its negative form, it means that we don't keep a mental record of wrongs or evil things done to us, dwelling on them. We forgive, learn, and move on with life.

33. A Peek into the Future. (13:8-13)

The remaining verses of Chapter 13 put the supernatural empowerment of the Church into its proper perspective--that is, against the time of Christ's return. Comparing what is available to the Church now, with the perfection

⁵⁴ Of course "agape" also means much more than that. For more on the meaning of "agape," and the other three Greek words for "love" (only two of which are used in the New Testament), see "The Four Loves" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

⁵⁵ In v 5, the virtue, "seeketh not her own," is expressed in an interesting way in Ephesians 5:21.

that is to come, Paul uses the analogy of childish behavior, which is appropriate for children, but should be left behind when we grow up. Today, he points out, we see such supernatural things only in part, and that incomplete fragment we see only dimly. But, he says, when “that which is perfect” returns, we will see all things clearly, and we will see that what we have experienced only a smattering of the unimaginable wonders of the Kingdom to come.

The chapter is concluded with an interesting summary: that there are things which shall remain, when gifts, ministries, and other things are passed away: these are faith, hope and charity (*agape* love). And the greatest of these, Paul declares, is that supernatural love of God.

NOTE: There are differences of opinion concerning the identity of “that which is perfect” in v 10. Those who believe that the supernatural was withdrawn from the Church by the end of the 1st Century, and that the gifts of the Spirit, like all miracles, are not available to the Church today, usually believe that the reference is to the Bible. Their position is that, once the Bible was completed, we have all that we need, and the supernatural gifts and ministries are no longer available to the Church.

Those who believe that the supernatural gifts are weapons of our warfare, to empower us to overcome Satan’s kingdom and carry the gospel message to all the World, point out problems with the above position. Excluding all evidence to the contrary outside of this passage, and considering only these six verses, they point out that we will someday see “that which is perfect” “face to face”; and a book has no face. Likewise, they point out, in that day we will know (that which is perfect) “as I am known”; and the obvious fact is that we can know the Bible, but it cannot know us⁵⁶.

34. The Purpose of Prophecy and Private Tongues. (14:1-4)

The opening verse of Chapter 14, the third and final book of the Corinthian Trilogy, summarizes the matter of gifts and love. Having been thoroughly informed concerning gifts and ministries, and the necessity that they be manifested in love, verse one puts it all together: we are to follow after love, **and** desire spiritual gifts. It is not either-or; rather, **both** that we are directed to seek after. Most utterances in tongues, it seems, are to be directed to God in private prayer and worship; but prophecy is to be spoken

⁵⁶ Francis Siewert, author/translator of The Amplified Bible, in her amplification of “I am known,” adds in parentheses, “by God.” Charles Ryrie, author of the Ryrie Study Bible, a prominent and respected dispensationalist, treats the statement as “but then shall I know, even as also I am known by God.”

to others, and the result is that the others are edified⁵⁷. When speaking or praying to God, or worshipping Him in tongues privately, the believer himself is edified⁵⁸. When prophesying, he edifies the church.

NOTE: Chapter 14 is extremely rich in terms of vital instruction, and the understanding of oft-misunderstood matters. It can be heavy going at times, and we will take our time and not rush through it. Chapter 14 is one of the most important chapters in the Bible in terms of practical instruction.

35. The Vocal Gifts: They Are Vital, but Get It Right. (14:5-13)

The Corinthians, as Paul noted in his salutation, “come behind in no gifts”; they are zealous for gifts of the Spirit, but badly in need of instruction concerning them. This is the reason for Chapters 12-14. Verse 3 is the only place, to my knowledge, where the intended purpose of prophecy is spelled out. We might even think of it as the definition of biblical prophecy. It is intended for “edification, exhortation and comfort.” If someone purports to speak a word of prophecy, and it has an effect not included in verse 3, it should be judged false.

A great deal of the trouble has to do with utterances in tongues, and it is important to keep in mind that, when Paul makes negative comparisons of tongues with prophecy, the implication is clear that he speaks of public utterances in tongues without interpretation. This is clear from his reminders that the non-Christians will not understand, and think the Corinthians are babbling nonsense, or are insane; verses 5 and 6, for example, make this clear. Paul expresses the desire that all would speak public messages in tongues--but **only** if there is interpretation, so that the church may be edified. Thus, it seems, in terms of edifying the church, a message in tongues with interpretation can have the same desirable effect as prophecy.

In verse 10 Paul states that there are many languages spoken in different parts of the World, and all have meaning, no matter how strange they may sound to our American ears; but they have meaning only for those who speak and understand them, unless they are interpreted⁵⁹.

36. Introducing Praying and Singing in the Spirit. (14:14-21)

⁵⁷ Edify means to build up, to make stronger and more complete. It is derived from Latin, *aedificium*, meaning “a building or edifice.” (which is, obviously, derived from *aedificium*). The word suggests an ongoing construction project.

⁵⁸ See in this regard Jude 20-21.

⁵⁹ There are indeed many different languages. There are more than 40 different languages spoken among the Maya Indians in Central America alone.

At this point, Paul introduces God's provision for perfect prayer and praise, in the form of prayer and singing in tongues (in the Spirit). It seems that there have been indirect, oblique and cryptic references to prayer in tongues before, but here Paul spells it out for the Corinthians⁶⁰. Clearly speaking of prayer in an unknown tongue, Paul makes a vital distinction in this regard: he says that in this kind of prayer the words originate from the Spirit, bypassing the mind--the understanding. This should, almost always be done in private devotions, unless followed by interpretation. He uses the examples of public prayer in the Spirit, including giving thanks before a meal. He says that the prayer in tongues before the meal will be fine; however, he says, if it is not then interpreted, others, who do not understand what is said in the prayer, will not be able to enter into it and say "Amen" when it is finished. He says that the prayer of thanksgiving is right on target when prayed in tongues; but, he says, such prayer (by clear implication) will not be understood by others gathered there, nor will it edify them.

Paul's conclusion to all this is really wonderful, and it is stated in just one verse (verse 15). He asks, rhetorically, how, then can he sort all this out? How can he sort out all of this concerning praying and singing with his understanding (i.e. **not** in unknown tongues), and praying and singing in the Spirit (i.e. **in** unknown tongues)? His conclusion is that he will pray and sing both ways. His prayer life, and his private worship and praise, are not complete unless he is praying, singing and worshiping with his understanding **and** in the Spirit. And, hoping not to belabor the obvious, praying, praising and singing in the Spirit are almost always appropriate **only** in private devotions, unless interpreted.

The passage is ended with a quotation from Isaiah⁶¹. And, this quotation, which seems to be only a passing reference to a prophecy, greatly enriches the meaning of this provision of God for his people. In four verses Isaiah reveals that there can be, in praying and praising in the Spirit, a rest and refreshing; and, he prophesied, this provision is intended to be for all of God's people; however, some will not accept it, and thus will miss this blessing.

NOTES:

a. Some, who are uncomfortable with the matter of utterances in tongues, will point out that Paul said that he would rather speak five words with his

⁶⁰ Earlier passages which seem to be speaking of prayer in tongues include Is 28:9-12; Zeph 3:9; Rom 8:26-27; and I Cor 14:2.

⁶¹ Isaiah 28:9-12.

understanding than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. This is true; but it is only part of the truth, which, therefore, makes it untrue. Such denigration of the miracle of tongues ignores the fact that he opens that statement with, "Yet in the church...", and ignores the clear implication that he is speaking of tongues in public without interpretation. The entirety of Chaps 12-14 reveals that the Corinthians were given to outbursts of tongues during church meetings, with no order or interpretation, creating confusion.

b. Some commentators do not interpret Is 28:9-12 as having anything to do with I Corinthians, or even with the New Testament; they generally interpret it as referring to fierce enemies speaking foreign tongues, threatening to conquer the Old Testament Israelites. The old Living Bible paraphrase treats the passage this way, as does its later incarnation, the New Living Translation. Yet Paul quotes it here, squarely in the context of his New Testament teaching concerning utterances in tongues, and he knew the Old Testament prophecies much better than we do; and, we must remember, he wrote this under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. In a very real sense, it is God, not Paul, Who quotes from Is 28 here, relating it to the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit, and not the languages of pagans threatening the children of Israel. And He is the ultimate authority on his Word.

*c. Perhaps the most remarkable manifestation known to me, of speaking in an unknown tongue, was experienced by one of the core group of our Bible study guide project, Dick Lidgard. At one point in his Air Force career, Dick was stationed in the Philippines and, while there, he learned to speak functional Tagalog, the language of the Philippine people. He attended a Philippine church near his base and, during a regular Sunday service, he listened to the sermon in English. The pastor preached in **perfect, unaccented English**; at least, that is what Dick thought.*

*When, after the service ended, Dick congratulated the pastor on the sermon, and on his perfect mastery of English, he was stunned to learn that the pastor spoke **no English at all!** The pastor had preached in Tagalog, his native tongue--the only language he knew--and the rest of the people in the Church had heard the sermon in their native tongue, Tagalog. I know of no other way to express this miracle except that Dick had "**heard in tongues**"!*

*Could this be the explanation for what is written in Acts 2:1-11? I think not; for Acts 2:4 says clearly that those 120 Spirit-baptized Christians "began to **speak** with other tongues...."*

For some reason, the Holy Spirit had performed a remarkable miracle. Perhaps He wanted Dick to hear this particular message from the pastor; after all, our God cares to take note of the death of every sparrow, and He numbers every hair in our heads. Would He have bothered to convert the Tagalog, in which the pastor was preaching, into perfect English, so that Dick would not miss any of the pastor's sermon? I can think of no other explanation.

d. A Personal Testimony. *As a rule, it is unwise for the author of a study guide such as this, to use personal experiences as illustrations. Our beliefs (doctrines) cannot be based upon experiences; they must be based upon the inspired Word of God. And yet, experiences can clarify and confirm our beliefs, so long as they do not contradict, add to or take away from, the written Word of God. Like Peter and John before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:20), it would be wrong for me to fail to speak of the things I have seen and heard--things that glorify God.*

In Haiti one night I was in a prayer and praise meeting of Haitian preachers, seated next to a Haitian woman who spoke English. At one point, those present stood up and began to praise and worship the Lord simultaneously. To my left, only a few feet away, a young Haitian preacher, with his hands lifted to the Lord in worship, was offering praise in perfect English. It was beautiful! His expressions sounded like Scripture, and he was speaking with absolutely no accent. He spoke without Haitian accent, French accent, New York accent or South Louisiana accent. It was the only time I have ever heard perfect, accent-less English spoken. I pointed the young man out to the woman next to me, and asked her "What is that?" She looked at the young man and said, dismissively, "Oh, they are all just praying in tongues." Amazed, I listened until the people all ceased their praise. I walked over to the young preacher and asked him, in English, if he spoke English. The young Haitian preacher did not reply; instead, he was embarrassed and uncomfortable, because he had not understood what I had asked him. I then spoke to the young man's pastor, in French, if the young preacher spoke English (I had not yet learned enough Creole, but most Haitians understand French). His pastor looked at the young preacher and replied, "Him? Oh, no (emphatically); he has never been to school a day in his life." What could this mean? Is it possible to speak in tongues in English? Why not, if it is a language one has never learned? I have no other explanation.

I was so happy that the Lord had allowed me to witness this miracle that night, as I lay on my cot, on the roof of the home where I was staying, I

thanked and praised Him until I went to sleep. It was such a memorable event that I even remember that it was a Tuesday.

I know enough of other languages, that I have heard similar supernatural praise and worship in French, Spanish and Latin. None of those people had learned the languages in which they were speaking or praying.

Living for the Lord is exciting! As the late Leer Corporation executive and missionary, George Otis, put it, being a Christian is “high adventure.”

37. Bringing Order to Corinthian Chaos. (14:26-33)

In what seems to be the only place in the New Testament with a description of a 1st Century Church meeting, Paul issues some rules. Continuing to emphasize the guiding principle of edifying with the gifts, he says that any and all may participate. One, he says may have a psalm to share; another may have a teaching point to share; another may have a message in tongues. Another may have an interpretation of a message in tongues; and another may have some other revelation from the Spirit to share.

And then he gets specific, laying down some rules. If there are messages in tongues, let there be only two, or at most three, one at a time, and let them be interpreted. If there is no one to interpret, these people should remain silent and communicate only with God. The rule for those with prophecies to share is the same: two or three, and they must be judged. He emphasizes that one with a message to speak must restrain himself until it is his turn. He says that any or all of the people may contribute, but only one at a time, so that all may learn and all be comforted. Having already implied that the believers have control of themselves, and can withhold a message, he states it clearly: the spirit of the prophet is subject to, and under the control of, the prophet. He finishes the instruction with a basic fact and guiding principle: God is the Author of peace--not confusion.

NOTES:

*a. There has been much teaching in recent times to the effect that each of us “gets” one gift. If this were valid, all Christians would “have” the same one--the gift of prophecy; for verse 31 clearly states “...for **all** may prophesy....” If we all “have” the gift of prophecy, the problem is obvious: the Church would be stripped of all the other gifts and ministries.*

b. Many churches and Bible teachers conduct “Discover Your Gift” sessions, weekends and retreats. They usually begin with the filling out of a questionnaire, to point out individual preferences and abilities; it is essentially what would otherwise be called a psychological inventory, or an aptitude test. This entire concept, it seems to me, is wrong, and for two

reasons: (1) It is entirely humanistic, excluding the spiritual; and (2) It assumes that everyone “has” only one gift. This is not only unscriptural, as we have just seen, but it can do great harm. I have never forgotten a young girl, an excited Christian, who came regularly to a Bible study where I taught. She went off to one of those “Discover Your Gift” weekends and came back the next week excited about her discovery. “I have discovered my gift,” she told me. I congratulated her, and asked which gift she had discovered to be hers. “Listening,” she replied with delight, “I am a sympathetic listener.” It was sad--even tragic; because, uncorrected, that beautiful Christian girl, in love with Jesus, would never covet to prophesy, or teach, or pray for the sick, or seek to be a helper in her church. We should all strive to be sympathetic listeners; but it would be tragic if that were all that we ever do as members of the Body of Christ.

Such sessions would be much more useful if they were conducted as “Discover Your Ministry” events; that would be really useful, and could do no harm⁶².

c. It cannot be over-emphasized that, when the Holy Spirit is operating in Christians, the Christians are at all times in control of themselves; the Holy Spirit will not take over a person and force him to do something foolish. If such a thing were possible, then we would not be instructed to keep silent if there is no interpreter; or, if a message is proper, for the believer to wait for his turn. Think on this.

38. Must Women Keep Silent in Church? (14:34-38)

Of all the human writers of books of the Bible, Paul is by far the most unpopular among women; in fact, in this way, he is in a class all his own. This results, primarily, from what he has written in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and in the next two verses here. He says that women should keep silent in the church, that they are to be under the authority of their husbands; and, he says, this principle has its foundation in the law⁶³. He goes on to say that if the women want to ask questions, they should ask them of their husbands at home. Seeming to be a little testy about the matter, he asserts his teaching authority, bestowed upon him (as an apostle and founder of their church) by God.

NOTE: *We shall see more on this in his letters to Timothy and Titus, and to the churches at Ephesus and Colossae; and, as always, we cannot have the*

⁶² Even if conducted as “Discovery Your Ministry” events, care should be taken not to imply that we are limited to only one ministry. For example, think of the multiple ministries performed by Peter, Paul and others in the early church.

⁶³ Genesis 3:16.

*full understanding of these two verses without considering all that the Bible has to say on the subject. Here, however, we must pause to see one clear thing: these two verses **cannot** mean that it is never right for a woman to speak in the church, for we have already seen that a woman must have a head covering when she prays or prophesies before the church⁶⁴. Also we have the examples of Priscilla who, with her husband Aquila, instructed Apollos at Ephesus (Acts 18:24-26), and the four virgin daughters of Philip the evangelist, “which did prophesy” (Acts 21:9). And, in Titus 2:3-4, in the standards for the behavior of elderly women, we find the injunction that they must be “teachers of good things,” in instructing the young women in the church⁶⁵.*

39. The Grand Summation. (14:39-40)

The great trilogy of Chapters 12, 13 and 14 closes with a grand summation; just so there can be no mistaking the heart of his teaching here, Paul summarizes. Believers are to covet to prophesy, and there shall be no forbidding of speaking in tongues; and he closes by saying “Let all things be done decently and in order.”

NOTE: *In some Christian circles there is so much emphasis on “decently and in order,” that they forget that the verse also says, “Let all things be done.”*

And thus ends what I have come to call, “The I Corinthians Trilogy.”

* * * * *

40. A Summary of the Gospel Message and the Resurrection. (15:1-11)

Having dealt with the difficult matters of spiritual gifts and ministries, church meetings and women, Paul summarizes the gospel message, and the resurrection, which is its cornerstone. He reminds the Corinthians that the risen Jesus was seen by Peter (Cephas), and by James, then by all of the original apostles, and last of all by Paul; and, he says, the risen Lord was on one occasion, seen by more than 500 people. Calling himself the “least of the apostles” because he had persecuted the Church, he nevertheless declares his apostleship, as the gracious work of God.

NOTES:

⁶⁴ I Corinthians 11:4-16.

⁶⁵ In Titus 2:3 the Greek rendered “teachers of good things” is a single word, *kalodidaskalos*, meaning “a teacher of what is good.” Vine, R.E.: Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, “Teacher,” 2, p 112.

a. Actually, according to Matthew, Mark and John, the first to see the risen Lord were the women. According to Mark and John, the first to see Him was Mary Magdalene; Matthew says that Mary Magdalene was accompanied by “the other Mary,” who was almost certainly Mary, mother of James the Less and Joses.⁶⁶ Because of the context there is no contradiction here; for, here, Paul is speaking only of the apostles who first saw Him.

b. Verse 6 is the only biblical record of the resurrected Lord’s being seen by more than 500 people at one time; and here, it is not explained. Extra-Biblical ancient literature may have the answer, and it concerns Pontius Pilate. The Bible is silent concerning Pilate after the crucifixion; outside the Bible, however, ancient literature is rich with information about Pilate’s later life. Most of it is not to be taken seriously. The most reliable extra-scriptural ancient sources concerning him and his wife are Josephus, “Antiquities of the Jews”; Eusebius, “Ecclesiastical History”; and the Roman historians, Tacitus and Seutonius. In perusing these accounts I found a fascinating possible explanation of the crowd of 500-plus which saw the resurrected Jesus. For a summary of what is known, and what is probable, about Pilate’s later life, including the crowd of 500-plus, see “What Became of Pontius Pilate?” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

41. The Essential Nature of the Resurrection. (15:12-23)

It seems that there are some in the Corinthian church who are denying the resurrection of Jesus, and Paul deals with this dangerous heresy. If there is no resurrection from the dead, he says, then Jesus did not rise from the dead. Pointing out what is, to us, the obvious, he states that this would mean that he and all others who preach salvation are false witnesses, and those to whom they preach are given false hope. Worse still, he says, those who have believed on Jesus and then died with a false hope of salvation, are perished (eternally doomed). He then proclaims the gospel message anew, that Christ is the first-fruits from the dead (the first so resurrected). Summarizing the history of mankind in a few words, he says that as through one man (Adam) all die, so through one man (Christ) came the resurrection of the dead. For, as in Adam death came, so in Christ shall all be made alive. And there is an order for all this: first Christ is resurrected, after that all those who belong to him when He returns.

42. The Final Order of Things. (15: 24-29)

⁶⁶ Mark 15:40.

When the end comes, Christ will deliver the completed kingdom up to the Father, having conquered all enemies, and the last enemy will be death. And, when all things have been conquered by Christ, He will then submit Himself and his kingdom to the Father. Then all things will have been restored to God's original plan and He will be all in all.

Meanwhile, there is still one problem concerning the resurrection of the dead: there are those in the Corinthian church who not only deny the resurrection, but baptize people as surrogates for the dead. If there is no resurrection from the dead, he asks rhetorically, then why are these people engaging in the unscriptural practice of baptizing for the dead? His question is rhetorical, he doesn't expect an answer; and the subject does not reappear in the Bible.

*NOTE: Verse 29 is the subject of much discussion among Christians and, although it was a common practice among the pagans, baptism for the dead is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible. The fact that something as important as a purpose in baptism, is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, suggests that it is not very important. Paul seems to be saying that it is a silly thing to do, especially since those doing this did not believe in life after death. Making it very clear that he is speaking of something that Christians do **not** do, he uses "they" to refer to those engaged in this error, and not "we."*

Eleusis, a city just north of Corinth, was the site of the Eleusinian Mystery Religion, which centered upon the worship of Demeter, Greek goddess of the harvest. Those initiated into the mysteries of Eleusis, they believed, would have life after death. This cult practiced baptism for the dead, and this may have been the source of the practice by some in the Corinthian church.

Mormons practice baptism for the dead, and they cite verse 29 as their basis for this. Because this false doctrine is important to them, they have the world's largest genealogical data base.

43. If There Is No Resurrection, Why Do I Suffer So? (15:30-34)

As a closing thought on our hope of resurrection after death, Paul compares the idea that there is no resurrection with his own life. If there is no hope of a future resurrection and new life, he asks (again rhetorically) why does he live his own life, daily in danger? If there is no resurrection, he asks, why does he face death daily? If the dead do not rise, why did I fight with beasts at Ephesus? If there is no resurrection, he says, why should I suffer so?" My rule of life should be to find as much pleasure as I

can in this life--to “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die⁶⁷.” But this approach to life, with evil companions, leads only to corrupt morals and self-destructive behavior. Then he calls them to awake to truth and righteousness, for some of them have no true knowledge of God, and this is to their shame.

NOTE: *There is no other reference in Scripture of Paul’s having fought with wild animals anywhere (unless we count the viper on Malta, as he traveled toward Rome--and there was only one of them.), nor does he mention it in his list of hardships in II Cor 11:23-28. He may be referring to the madness of the mob at Ephesus that wanted to kill him in the amphitheater (Acts 19:27-41).*

44. The Resurrection Body. (15:35-50)

We see, elsewhere in Scripture, glimpses of the sort of body we will have after the resurrection of the dead at the Second Coming of Christ. We get these glimpses, especially in the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus; however, the following discourse by Paul is the only place where it is clearly spelled out. Using the same analogy that Jesus used in speaking of his soon-to-come death, Paul speaks of the planting of a seed, which perishes so that the new life that it contains can appear⁶⁸. Although he is a bit cryptic, he makes the point that our resurrection bodies will be flesh--not vapor but flesh--yet flesh of a different kind. Our bodies will not only be different, but perfect it seems, never sick, always young and never tired. Our bodies will be sown (buried) natural and corruptible, but the new body that will be raised at the last trumpet call will be spiritual and incorruptible.

NOTES:

a. As Paul says, the basic types of muscle tissue of different kinds of animals are different; in fact, a high school biology student can usually identify them under a microscope. In our mortal human bodies there are also different kinds of muscle tissue. Skeletal or voluntary muscle is that which moves us, and we control what it does. Smooth, or involuntary, muscle causes the blood vessels and the digestive, urinary and similar systems to function; it functions without our control. The most interesting however, in terms of this study, is cardiac muscle--the muscle that makes the heart pump--and it is unique in that, as long as we are healthy, it never gets tired. It seems likely that our resurrection bodies will be equipped entirely with muscle that never gets tired.

⁶⁷ Isaiah 22:13.

⁶⁸ John 12:23-24.

b. Verses 45-49 deserve special attention. In a mind-boggling condensation of truth concerning sin, redemption, death and resurrection, Paul summarizes by saying that Jesus began as a spirit, but became a man; Adam (mankind) began as a man, but becomes a spirit. This is the skeleton on which God's wonderful redemptive plan for man is built.

45. When the Last Trumpet Sounds. (15:51-58)

Finally, Paul lets us in on a mystery. When the Lord comes back to call the dead from the grave, some of us will still be alive. There is no mystery to this; but what follows is a wonderful revelation. Those of us who are still alive will not die at his return; but we shall be miraculously changed. This change, he says, will take place instantaneously--in the twinkling of an eye--so fast that we will not realize that it is happening until it has happened! Simultaneously, the mortal remains of the dead shall rise as they, too, receive resurrection bodies⁶⁹. At that moment the prophecy of Hosea and will be fulfilled, for death can no longer have power to hurt us, and the grave shall no longer have (temporary) victory over us⁷⁰. Therefore, he concludes, because we can look forward to this final victory over death and the grave, we should press on in our work for the Kingdom, knowing that it cannot be in vain.

NOTES:

a. In the triumphant declaration of victory of the redeemed over death in verse 55, the Greek word rendered "grave" is hades. This is the only place in the New Testament where hades is not rendered "hell." It seems that, because this passage presents the final, ultimate, victory over death, hades is rendered "grave."

b. This passage is really the final elaboration on the subject of death and the grave, and it helps us to understand what Jesus said about it, both before and after his death and resurrection, and what Paul wrote about it in I Thes 4:13-18. It paints a complete picture when combined with all that has been written before. And yet, one question should occur to us as we think about it: what about those mortal remains that have been destroyed, during, or after, death? What about those killed in catastrophic accidents, in war, and in fire, where there may be little or nothing left of the mortal body to rise from the grave? In fact, for many such destroyed or un-recovered remains, there is no grave; some remains are deliberately destroyed in cremation,

⁶⁹ See also in this regard Matthew 24:29-41; Phil 3:20-21; I Thes 4:13-18.

⁷⁰ See also in this regard Hos 13:14.

and the ashes deliberately scattered; and many lie at the bottom of the sea⁷¹. What of them?

In classical physics there is the law of conservation of matter. Even when physical remains are completely destroyed, by some outside force, or in the natural process of decomposition, the atoms of the remains continue to exist; and, it seems, God knows how to put them back together. And, wherever the remains may be, God knows where they are. Even if they are at the bottom of the sea, we are assured, on that resurrection day, the sea will give up her dead⁷².

* * * * *

Personal Matters and Benediction. Paul's first letter to Corinth ends with personal and administrative matters, greetings and salutations. Although a scribe has actually written the letter as Paul dictated it, Paul personalizes it by writing the very last part and signing it himself. He pronounces "anathema" (a curse) on any who come to Corinth and are hostile to the Lord; and he announces "maranatha" (our Lord will come) and pronounces a final benediction on the Corinthian church.

⁷¹ If you are interested in the matter of cremation, see "Cremation from a Christian Point of View" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

⁷² Revelation 20:13.