

## 1 Cor 11:17-34

The theme of acceptable worship continues. The Apostle, having praised the Corinthian church for their orderliness (2-16) now rebukes them for their disorder around the Lord's Table. The pattern of that time seemed to be that the Lord's Supper formed part of a fellowship meal that the church family shared in. So people met to both eat together and to remember the death of the Lord Jesus.

At the heart of the Lord's Supper was an expression of Christian unity. Christ first gathered his disciples together knowing of their imminent failure yet showing them, by the signs of bread and wine, that he was about to lay his life down for all of them. The scandal of Corinth was their expression of this event led to superiority and humiliation.

V20 *So when you come together it's not the Lord's Supper you eat.* The Lord's Supper is not a ceremony we privately partake of. It takes place at a table for a reason. It is a sign of our unity. We share a common indebtedness to Jesus Christ. It looks for a response of thanksgiving expressed in generosity towards those sitting around the table with me.

23-26 Paul emphasises that this pattern of remembrance was given by divine revelation. To eat the bread is to be confronted with the unique love of Christ. In the face of betrayal and abandonment he meets us with sacrificial love. To drink the wine is to share in the fruit of suffering: We share in the new covenant with its full forgiveness, Spirit's internal ministry and personal knowledge of the Father.

27-34 How we treat one another is a serious business. Some at Corinth are weak and ill and some have even died on account of their behaviour towards other members of the church family. We are urged to examine ourselves before we eat of the bread and drink from the cup. The area of scrutiny ought to be our relationships with one another.

- Do you think privately or corporately when you share in the Lord's Supper?
- How should the sacrificial love of Christ shape our attitudes and relationships with one another?
- How could we better reflect that what shapes our lives is not the status of this world but the grace of the Lord Jesus?

## 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

The issue of spiritual gifts was a source of tension between the Apostle and his church. They believed they have encountered spiritual power that he didn't tell them about. This is the reason he began the letter by asserting: *For in him you have been enriched in every way - with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge - God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift... (1:5-7)*

It is no surprise that in a church struggling with various divisions that this chapter aims to promote unity. And over an issue that has regularly divided Christians the value of God's word is once again underlined.

He begins by underlining the presence of the Spirit in the lives of all who call Jesus their Lord. We are neither to write people off nor to big ourselves up on the basis of our 'contribution' to the life of the church. (3)

V7 sets out the main lessons the passage teaches:

- *Now to each person....* Every Christian receives a gift of God's grace to enable them to serve in some way.

- These gifts are described as *'the manifestation of the Spirit'* Their purpose is to in some way reveal the presence and reality of the Holy Spirit. There is no implication that some gifts do this more effectively than others.
- These things are given *for the common good*. Gifts are not given to promote a sense of personal fulfilment but rather for the benefit of other people.

There are a number of similar lists of spiritual gifts in the NT. None of these lists seems to be exhaustive. They all include what we would regard as natural and supernatural endowments.

Commenting on the gift of *distinguishing between spirits*, Don Carson has written: "Spectacular displays often attest the power of the spirit world; they do not in themselves attest the power of the Holy Spirit. Moses discovered that Egyptian magicians could duplicate many of the miracles God enabled him to do; and Jesus warned that there would arise people who would perform miracles and cast out demons in his name, even though they would never be recognised by Christ as his own. (Matt 7:21-23). There is ever a need to distinguish demonic forces from the Holy Spirit." (Showing the Spirit by D.A. CARSON)

- Gifts are given to enable us to serve one another. Are we engaged in this activity?
- Do we need to change the way we look at others whose contribution is different from ours. Can we thank God for all the various ways we can serve one another?
- These are gifts of the Holy Spirit. Are we relying on his ministry to enable our service?

### 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

The Bible pictures the local church as a body. Like the human body it has many parts which perform a variety of functions but taken together they constitute one 'body'. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit who assigns us our place and who brings us together in this way. (12-14)

Inferiority is a hindrance to serving in Gods church. (15-20)

*If the foot should say 'Because I am not a hand....And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body...'(15,16)*

This is directed at those who are comparing themselves unfavourably to others. Clearly feet lack the sophistication of hands and ears seem less significant than eyes. But the issue is not competitive - who is the most important. (see Jesus teaching in Luke 22:24-27) What matters is not our sense of personal significance but whether the church functions as Christ's body in the world. And for that to happen we need the 'feet' and 'ears' to play their part.

Superiority in the life of the church is utterly inappropriate.

*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you! And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you.'* (21)

This has particular significance to parts of the Corinthian church who on the basis of their spiritual gifting imagine themselves superior to others. Paul challenges their outlook. It is the parts that seem weaker that are actually indispensable. Who are the indispensable members of the church? Probably not those who sit on the platform. Jesus described his kingdom in upside down terms. The last are the first and the greatest are found 'serving at

tables' as it were. He is among us as one who serves. That ought to set the tone for the way we operate in the church.

To summarise:

We are in this together and the parts of the body ought to have equal concern for one another. (25,26)

The church is a body and every one of us has a part to play. But we don't all have the same part and we are not to expect everyone to function in the same way. (27-30)

- Is there a need within the life of the church that is not being met? Could you fill that gap?
- Are you aware of someone who might be described as 'weaker' but who plays a key role in the life of the church? Could you encourage them?
- Are we not only sharing in the struggles of those who are suffering but able to rejoice with those who are honoured?

### 1 Cor 13:1-13

The position of chapter 13 is significant. In a section of his letter when Paul is addressing the issue of spiritual gifts he underlines the crucial importance of love. However we may be called to serve God if we don't do it out of genuine concern for people, it is of no effect. This is the point that is emphasised in the first three verses. Love can't be omitted from Christian ministry. Without it, vast theological knowledge, powerful meetings and supernatural acts of service amount to nothing.

In the next section (4-7) he defines love. It's possible to read this in a slightly sentimental manner as if it was written with the marriage service in mind. But why does he choose to describe love by telling us what it is not? *It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud....* These are words we have already come across in the letter. (3:3 *jealousy and quarrelling*; 3:20 *boasting*; 4:18 *arrogant*; 5:2 *pride*; 6:8 *you cheat and do wrong*. Not to mention the *self seeking way* they frequent the idol temples with no thought what their behaviour is doing to anyone else 10:24). This is not a passage that anyone in the church at Corinth is going to have read at their wedding. This is a mirror held up to them all to reveal the absence of Christian love in their lives.

In the final section (8-13) the apostle commends the enduring quality of love. Paul has a high view of prophecy but it will cease. He himself speaks in tongues but they will be stilled. It's not difficult to find knowledge and its communication a great thrill. But the day is coming when teachers and scholars will become redundant. Completeness will have arrived. (10). This 'moment' will accompany the return of Christ. And whilst the second coming will relegate much, love will continue to be the characteristic of the world to come. The implication is clear- invest heavily in it.

- Let the mirror of God's word expose those areas of your life that are 'unlovely'. Be specific. We won't all struggle with everything on Paul's list but all of us will be found out in some area.
- Ask God to enable you to serve others out of a genuine concern for their well being.
- Keep the return of Christ in mind and let it prompt you to behave with patience and kindness towards others.

### 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

So far these chapters (12-14) have addressed spiritual gifts in general. Now two, prophecy and tongues are given extended treatment. The aim is to locate them in their proper place in the life of God's people. And more specifically the apostle wants to help the church adopt a more spiritually mature attitude to tongue speaking. It should though become clear from the chapter that Paul is not against tongue speaking. *(5) I would like every one of you to speak in tongues. (18) I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.*

#### Edification (1-19)

Edification is what should happen when Christians come to church. Edification is the process where our lives are encouraged and built up through the word of God being spoken and taught. It follows that for edification to take place intelligible words must be spoken. Prophecy seems to be Paul's word to describe the communication of God's word in a form that people can hear and understand. *(3) ...the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves but the one who prophesies edifies the church.*

His conclusion comes in v19. *In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words than ten thousand words in a tongue.* Tongue speaking, for those gifted in this way (12:30) belongs in the private realm. When the church meets together intelligibility is to be the order of the day.

#### Evangelism (20-25)

Back in chapter 3 Corinth was addressed as mere infants in Christ, here Paul challenges them to stop thinking like children (20) My attitudes and thinking need the corrective of chapter 13. Love prompts me to consider the needs of others and to defer my desires for their sake. The 'others' in this section are described as enquirers or unbelievers who come into their meetings. (23)

In v21 he quotes from Isaiah and adds the statement *'tongues then are a sign not for believers but unbelievers'* (22) When God exiled Israel and spoke to them through the harsh and unintelligible sounds of their Babylonian conquerors it was a sign of his judgment. If God determines judgment for anyone part of that process will include an inability to understand what he is saying. This though is not what ought to be happening when enquirers come to church. It follows that church ought to be a place where understanding and application are to the fore.

The high point of all this is v24,25. God's word has the ability to disclose to people their sin and to communicate to them that their hearts are known to God. It leads them to that place where they become worshippers of God recognising that 'God is really among you!'

- Look for an opportunity to speak God's word into someone's life when the 'church' next meets
- Pray for those with responsibility to teach and preach God's word to be good communicators so that people will be strengthened, encouraged and comforted.
- Pray for those who attend our services but are not yet Christians. Pray that the word of God would lay bare the secrets of their hearts and they would know that God really is among us.

#### 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

What should you 'feel' when you meet together with God's people? There is a good argument to be made for 'peace'. There ought to be a relational peace as people who

previously disliked one another learn to accept and love one another. Church life though ought also to be peaceful in the sense of being well ordered. Here is how that comes about.

Everything must be done so that the church may be built up (26)

*When you come together .....* (26) Back in chapter 11 Paul used this phrase to challenge the church about its behaviour at the Lords Supper. The sad fact was they didn't come together but choose instead to serve their own particular appetites. (11:20,21)

Whilst trying to recreate the form of New Testament worship is probably a mistake the big lesson of v26 is that none of us are spectators. All of us have something to contribute. As we understand ourselves as 'the body of Christ' our concern ought to be to do one another good. Chapter 13 has emphasised the priority of sacrificial love in this process.

Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. (40)

The ministry of God's word is to be regulated whether it comes by way of tongue speaker or prophet. (27-30). And whilst this has a more spontaneous feel than we are used to this is not about people being 'taken over' in some way. *The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets.* (32)

Verses 29-35 deal with the controversial area of prophecy and the relationship between men and women in church. This is a difficult section over which there is much debate.

NT prophets seem to occupy a less authoritative role than apostles. Their prophecies are to be *weighed carefully*. (29) This seems to be the context in which women (wives?) are forbidden to speak. Clearly chapter 11 acknowledges that women can pray and prophesy. The best suggestion seems to be that wives are not permitted to adjudicate on their husband's prophecies.

The section ends with Paul emphasising the superior authority of the apostle (he speaks the *Lord's commands* 37) over the prophet.

- As we gather together (all together or in home groups) ask God to enable you to contribute in some way to the progress of others?
- Let's make sure we are ordered by the Apostles commands not our personal preferences.
- These structures do not sit well with our culture. Recommit to doing things God's way and pray that people would be impressed by the peace and order of our church family.

## **1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

In a number of ways this letter reveals the tensions between Corinth and the Apostle Paul. The trouble with being at odds with their church planter is it never remains a minor personal issue. The opening verses show the problem goes beyond Paul to his gospel. This chapter is an appeal to stand firm on the word he preached to them. As such it comes across the centuries to us challenging us to check our foundations.

What becomes clear is Paul's gospel is not Paul's gospel. What he preached was what he had 'received'. And what he received was confirmed by the (OT) Scriptures. The gospel is the news of what Jesus Christ achieved 2000 years ago. There he died for our sins, was buried and was raised on third day according to the Scriptures. We need to make sure this is what we are continuing to 'hold firmly' to. (2)

Pauls main emphasis is on Christ having 'appeared' following his resurrection. The resurrection is not some mysterious spiritual event. The corpse that was placed in the

tomb was resurrected and appeared to many people over an extended period of time. The body of the risen Jesus ate and drank, was heard to speak and could be touched. It was though not subject to the usual restriction of time and place. To a church where some people imagined that they had already shared in the resurrection (1 Cor 4:8) Paul underlines for them the enormity of this event and the fact that it is still future.

The section ends with Paul reminding them of his apostolic credentials. Despite his past rebellion God graciously revealed the Risen Christ to him. (8). This merciful act has had a powerful effect on this man. *By the grace of God I am what I am and his grace to me was not without effect. No I worked harder than all of them.* (10) There is a challenge here for the church. The letter began: *I always thank my God for you because of the grace given you in Christ Jesus...* (1:5) What effect is that grace having in their lives?

- Often the Apostle Paul is presented in dark terms. (makes Jesus simple gospel complicated, doesn't like women....) But to depart from Paul is to depart from his gospel. What's our attitude like to this man?
- Are we clear about what the gospel is and what it means to hold firmly to it?
- What effect has God's grace had on our lives? Does it produce hard work?

### 1 Corinthians 15: 12-34

If Christ has not been raised from the dead. (12-19)

It is the resurrection, pointing forward to the life of the world to come that gives hope and significance to the Christian life. This section lists the implications of a gospel without a resurrection. Your faith is futile, the dead are lost and you are to be pitied.

There is a recurring theme in this chapter of living a life that will ultimately prove to have been *in vain*. (see v2 and v58) That concern emerges again in this section. (v14 ESV *And if Christ has not been raised our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.*) The apostle's fear is his church are being tempted to abandon his gospel for something that will ultimately prove to be no gospel at all.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead (20-28)

The scriptures direct us to a glorious future secured by Christ for us. We live in a world of hostile powers and authorities, some seen and some unseen but all of them ranged against God and his people. The resurrection of Christ signals his ultimate victory. The risen Christ reigns. He will destroy all dominion, authority and power. The last enemy to be destroyed will be death. He will then hand over the Kingdom to the Father. This is a great future that he has secured for us.

There is a challenge here for a church where people want to rule. (*Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign 4:8*) Our ultimate destiny is to live in loving submission to God as modelled by Christ. (28)

This future hope should shape present behaviour (29-34)

Why be baptised for the dead (no one seems sure how this was practised or for how long. Sufficient to say Paul is reporting it not commending it). Why live risky lives if the dead are not raised? It is hopeless people who live indulgent lives. It is though shocking when Christian people adopt the life style of this world.

- Are we confident of the fact of the resurrection and clear about its implications?
- The Christian life will not be in vain. Are we confident of this?
- Does our lifestyle match our profession?

## 1 Corinthians 15: 35 - 58

The words of the committal service include the line 'dust to dust, earth to earth, ashes to ashes' How is it possible to conceive a future for anything reduced to such insignificant proportions?

Lessons from nature.

*When you sow you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed..(37)*

This picture implies massive transformation but real continuity. My resurrection body will be truly wonderful in comparison with the present. But nevertheless there will be continuity. It will be *my* body. The transformation is described in v42,43. It will be imperishable rather than subject to death. It will be physically glorious, lacking any signs of weakness. It will be spiritual in the sense of being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

*God gives it a body as he has determined (38)*

God stands behind the resurrection. Just as he designs a vast array of earthly and heavenly bodies so he will appoint our resurrection bodies. And there will be an appropriateness about this body. It will be suited to its surroundings in the same way as a fish is suited to water and a bird to the air.

Lessons from the gospel.

Christ is the man from heaven and those who belong to him will share this destiny. (48) Paul concludes this section with the simplest description of the resurrection body. *And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man. (49)*

The Return of Christ. (50-57)

This transformation centres on the return of Christ in glory. *Listen I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep but we will all be changed. (51)* We may be familiar with the question of v55 as we stand round a grave of a friend or family member. Visually it looks as though death does have the last word. But there is a day coming when graves will open and reunion will take place. The Bible invites us to fix our faith on that event.

The Challenge (58)

We are urged to stand firm on the gospel. (v1-11) We are to give ourselves to the work of making Christ's victory known in the knowledge that such endeavour will not be in vain.

- In a day that mocks belief in what can't be seen, give thanks for the Bible's helpful insights into the world to come.
- Give thanks for Jesus Christ who rescues us and enables us to bear the image of the man from heaven.
- Is there some area of Christian service that we are only partially committed to? Know that you can give yourself fully to it.

## 1 Corinthians 16:1-24

The letter ends with some instructions on giving and a reference to certain people. It would be easy to read this as an anti-climax but that would be a mistake.

In his second letter Paul will devote 2 chapters (8&9) to the subject of giving. He is raising funds to send to the impoverished church in Jerusalem. For Paul Gentile people generously

sending financial help to their Jewish brothers and sisters is a wonderful example of the power and reality of the gospel.

Paul loves people, even people who at times oppose him and resist his teaching. He is not content to write letters or make fleeting visits. *I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. (7)* He loves these people and wants to spend time with them.

He looks out for and prepares the way for Timothy's visit to Corinth. And to a church that has argued over leaders *What I mean is this: one of you says, 'I follow Paul; another, 'I follow Apollos.. (1:12)* by informing them of Apollos's plan to come he makes clear they stand together in the gospel. There is no division. He refers to *the household of Stephanas...they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people*. He urges the church to submit to such people. The implication would seem to be that Corinth are little interested in submission.

Paul is keen to promote good relationships between all the churches. He passes on greetings from the churches in the province of Asia.

- Check your giving. Is it ordered and proportionate?
- Communication has never been easier. Do we love people and make plans to spend time with them?
- If Paul was writing to the church in Bessacarr who would he be telling us to submit to?