

in the specifics of tongues and prophecy, but try and be attentive to the broad ideas and the picture of life together that Paul is painting for the Corinthians and for us.

Rather than focusing on particular gifts, ask yourself questions like:

What was missing in the exercise of the gifts?

What was Paul emphasizing in the proper exercise of gifts?

The presenting problem in the Corinthian church was a few particular gifts. But the solution Paul offers is not restricted to those particular gifts. Paul presents some foundational thinking about gifted ministry in the community, drawing on the particular problem in Corinth. Can you list some of the essentials of Paul's foundational thinking (without getting too caught up with the particulars of either prophecy or tongues):

Thinking about the passage:

What do you think would change in the community in Corinth if they began to take to heart what Paul is saying in this section? What would be different the next time they gathered together if they really "got" what Paul wanted them to understand?

Because we are not at the identical place in life and growth (and struggle) as the Corinthian church, we might not need the identical word Paul offered them. But what Paul wrote to them does bring a beneficial word to us as well. Of what Paul writes here, what do you think we as a community of faith (and you, as an individual) should take to heart? Make that a matter of conversation with the Lord.

DAY FIVE

Reading for today: Ephesians 4:1-16

Insights and aids:

There are other places in Paul's letters where he speaks about giftedness, the Spirit's work, and the life of the community of faith.

Let's compare a bit of what he wrote to the Ephesians with what we have seen in his letter to the Corinthians.

As he begins chapter 4, Paul affirms one of the essentials we have already seen in the letter to the Corinthians—there is one body, and we all belong to that one body.

When Paul refers to "gifts" in Ephesians (4:8-11) he seems to be viewing it a little differently than in Corinthians. In Ephesians, he has in view gifted individuals given to the church rather than the gifted individuals who make up the church. But Paul doesn't end there; he presses on and we begin to see the giftedness of those who make up the church.

Those who are "given" to the body (apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors and teachers) are given to aid and equip the rest of the community of faith so that together, all those who make up the body, can function together as they are designed by God to function. That is, much like we have seen in Corinthians, every member has a Spirit-given part to play and there are no superfluous or unneeded members of the body. Although Paul doesn't use the exact same language in Ephesians as he does in Corinthians, the ideas are almost exactly the same.

The body is to build up itself—individual members are to be engaged in the business of building up one another—as each individual gives himself or herself to living in relationship with others in love in the way that God intended. Each person in the community of faith is designed by God to serve and connect with others in particular expressions of grace that result in the growth and maturity of the body. No one is superfluous; no one can grow on his or her own. Each individual member has a part to play, empowered by God, for the good of the others.

Thinking about the passage:

Where do you see overlap in the way that Paul writes to the Ephesians, and what we have seen in his words to the Corinthians? What is common in what he writes about the life of the community of faith?

Of the things he has written about, where do you think our community of faith most needs growth?

Spend time talking to the Lord of the church about our community. Ask Him to clarify more and more what He wants for us. Explore with Him your part in all of that. And spend time celebrating His goodness in making us one body in Christ.

We do not take communion exactly like they did in Corinth, but what Paul writes to the Corinthians about how they are to receive communion with an awareness of their being "the one body of Christ" has genuine value for our understanding of our participation in the Lord's Supper. And even if we don't experience the gifts of the Spirit exactly as they were being experienced in Corinth, what Paul has to say about how gifts can and should be exercised has genuine value for our understanding of the "gifted" life of the church.

July 10, 2011

Weekly
Reflections on
the Scriptures

DAY ONE

Reading for today: 1 Corinthians 12:27-14:1

Insights and aids:

We have spent a few weeks exploring and thinking through Paul's wonderful and rich chapter on love—1 Corinthians 13. As you have reflected on this chapter, hopefully you have not lost sight of the context in which Paul offered these thoughts.

Paul has been addressing a problem in Corinth—they were not exercising spiritual gifts as well as they might have. They were giving themselves to a rich life in the Spirit, but only experiencing a portion of what the Spirit wanted for them.

Because of the way they were privileging certain gifts over others, they were making much of the reality of the Spirit's gifting while overlooking the reason for the Spirit's gifting. 1 Corinthians 13 falls in the middle of Paul's discussion of spiritual giftedness and the gifted life of the church and clarifies something about *how* gifts are to be exercised in the community of faith—they are to be exercised in love.

The Corinthians over-emphasized the fact of giftedness and under-appreciated the way gifts should be utilized. Some Christians, noting the problems that arose in Corinth, allow the pendulum to swing the other way and end up over-emphasizing the way gifts should be utilized and under-appreciating the fact that every Christian is gifted. Paul would not have wanted believers to live at either extreme.

Thinking about the passage:

What are the “bookends” that bracket Paul’s discussion of love? As you read his thoughts in context, what leads into and leads out of Paul’s discussion of love?

If gifts were being inappropriately utilized in Corinth, some might think that the right thing to do would be to avoid them. What is Paul’s approach to the misuse of certain gifts? How do you understand what he wants for the Corinthians (and, for you)?

Do not be hesitant to “earnestly desire spiritual gifts.” Whether for yourself individually or for our fellowship, ask the Lord to freely and sovereignly bestow any and all the gifts that are needed for the carrying out of His plans for us.

DAY TWO

Reading for today: 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

Insights and aids:

Paul has already noted that there are “various kinds of tongues” (12:10). The reference to “tongues” is to languages. Believers were being moved by the Spirit to speak in a language that they apparently did not understand. We witness this kind of phenomenon a number of times in the book of Acts (Acts 2:1-4; 10:44-48; 19:1-8). Some hold the view that what we see in Acts is identical to what Paul writes about in Corinthians; others see two different kinds of tongues. Granted that Paul refers to “various kinds of tongues,” it may not matter greatly about whether we can resolve this particular issue.

What Paul does say about tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 should, however, form some kind of foundation for our understanding of this particular gift. He is, obviously, speaking about something that the Corinthians were well aware of—even if we are not. He does make a few specific statements that help clarify his understanding of this particular gift:

Tongues speech is primarily addressed to God (12:2). Thus, it is fundamentally a worship kind of experience. (Notice what Paul says in 14:14-17 that confirms this idea.)

Tongues speech can build up the individual (12:4). This is not a bad thing; there is an appropriate way to build oneself up in life in Christ (for example, see Jude 20).

If we see just these two things, it might help us guard against two extreme reactions that are sometimes found in churches: Those

who insist that everyone should speak in tongues are held in check by the recognition that tongues speech is worship (and no one would insist that everyone worship the same way) and those who insist that tongues speech is worthless are held in check by the recognition that this gift might be of real benefit to the tongue-speaker.

Thinking about the passage:

From what Paul says here about tongues speech, what can you surmise might have been some of the trouble in Corinth surrounding this particular gift?

Whether or not tongues speech has been part of your spiritual experience, what do you think you need to hear from the Spirit through Paul about this particular phenomenon?

DAY THREE

Reading for today: 1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Insights and aids:

If you look back on Paul’s discussion of meat sacrificed to idols it is clear that Paul “particularizes” his instructions for the situation the Corinthians find themselves in. Their pagan setting shapes how he speaks about the meat they might buy in the market or the way they partake when in the company of others. Although the Corinthian believers have the right to eat whatever they want, Paul helps them understand that in certain settings and at certain times such freedoms are to be curtailed in loving regard for others. And that thinking also shapes Paul’s discussion of gifts.

Apparently, in the community of faith in Corinth, tongues and prophecy were two gifts that were given real prominence. Thus, Paul has to address the exercise of these two gifts in particular. It isn’t that they are the only ones that matter; they are just the “presenting problem” for the Corinthians.

When he addresses their use, he has in mind the exercise of these gifts in the gathering of the community of faith. He is not talking about what happens when some believer is out witnessing; he is not addressing how the gift of healing (for example) might be of benefit in the proclamation of the Gospel. Like his comments about the Lord’s supper in chapter 11, Paul is addressing the issue of what happens when the community is gathered together.

With that in mind, we can more easily make sense of Paul’s affirmation of the “greater” nature of the gift of prophecy. Paul is affirming that in the context of the community, when they are gathered together for worship, a gift like prophecy which can

and does minister to others more effectively than the personal experience of worship that characterizes tongues speech is of great benefit. Simply put, gifts that benefit the others who are gathered are the gifts that are most to be prized when the church gathers.

Paul readily admits that the one who speaks in a tongue may well be worshipping and is rightly giving thanks to God (14:16-17). But unless there is interpretation so that others can “get in on” that expression of worship, the tongues speech does not benefit those around. To others, the expression of worship is unintelligible and, therefore, of almost no benefit.

Although you might not have experienced the particulars that Paul is talking about in this passage, the general idea can still be taken to heart: When the church gathers, what we do “in the Spirit” will be most in line with the Spirit’s wishes if we do what we do for the benefit of others. It is not that we worship *for others* (any more than we take communion *for others*). But if we are worshipping together, our awareness of the others who are worshipping with us is, indeed, part of what God wants for us.

Thinking about the passage:

There is a sense of “personal benefit” whenever we come for worship; that is not entirely wrong. But what caution would Paul offer us when we come to a corporate worship gathering?

Talk to the Lord about how you think about your involvement in our corporate worship times. What do you understand your part to be when we gather? How do you see your participation in worship with others?

DAY FOUR

Reading for today: 1 Corinthians 14:1-18

Insights and aids:

As we have noted, some of the practices of the Corinthian church are foreign to our experience. We don’t struggle with meat sacrificed to pagan gods as they did (and as Paul wrote about in chapter 8); but we can learn about our life together from what Paul wrote. We don’t take communion in the same manner that they did (as Paul addressed in chapter 11); but we can learn about our experience of life as one redeemed people from what Paul wrote about. And we might not experience the move of the Spirit in particular manifestations identical to what was happening in Corinth (as Paul writes about in chapters 12 through 14); but we can learn about what it means to be a gifted body, relating well to one another, from what he writes about. With that kind of perspective, read back through 14:1-18. Do not get too caught up