

Take-Aways for Small Group Leaders

Literary Context

Chapters 12-14 present the gospel's response to another question posed to Paul by the Corinthian congregation – this time on the topic of “spiritual gifts” (charismata). Notably, Paul offers this response as a continuation of the general theme of worship he began to develop in Chapter 11. The following very briefly summarizes these three chapters:

Chapter 12 – Spiritual gifts and their function within the church

Chapter 13 – Love (agape) as the only proper basis for the use of such spiritual gifts

Chapter 14 – Specific application of the teaching concerning prophecy and speaking in tongues

Greco-Roman Context

The “old-self” religious world of the Corinthian congregation was largely that of the Greco-Roman mystery religions. Those settings regarded spiritual experiences as an approval of the worship offered by the person receiving the experience. In other words, spiritual gifts were understood within those pagan religious cults as badges of honor. The context of Chapters 12-14 clearly indicates that within the Corinthian congregation some were continuing to lift up such experiences in this way, thereby elevating themselves above those who did not receive such experiences. The greatest badge of honor, they seem to be arguing, was the gift of tongues.

Corinthian Context

The “old-self” social world of the Corinthian congregation was unique among Roman colonies. Instead of Rome's typical practice of populating its colonies primarily with army veterans, Rome populated Corinth with freed slaves (*libertini*). This population then lived and worked in the city known as “the master of two harbors,” a geographic strength that allowed trade and travel from all over the Empire and beyond to define the city's economic life. This means that, unlike most everywhere else in the Roman world, social status was up for grabs in Corinth. One commentator describes the situation this way: “In Corinth, perhaps more than anywhere else, social ascent was the goal, boasting and self-display the means, personal power and glory the reward” (Dr. Timothy B. Savage).

Corinthian culture became known during this time for its “crass materialism” and “moral decadence.” Understandably, then, Paul's letters to the Corinthians necessarily reflect the gospel's critique of the extent to which the “religious ethos [of Corinthian church members] permit[ed] an involvement in the church which [did] not entail significant social and moral realignment” (Dr. John M.G. Barclay). It is as a part of this critique carried throughout these letters that Paul redefines how one's personal and social identity should be understood and lived out in Christ.

Rhetorical Context

In this passage, Paul employs as an analogy for the church the commonly-used image in classical rhetoric of the human body. In the ancient world, this image of the human body, with its inherent superior and inferior parts, was often used to persuade members of society's lower classes to live within the limitations of their class and not to upset the social order (i.e., the body). In Paul's usual way, though, he takes this common image and reshapes it in order to proclaim the gospel's new reality. Paul accomplishes this by speaking specifically of “the body of Christ,” a body in which all members are particularly gifted by God and equally essential to the proper functioning of the corporate body. In Christ's body, individuality is different from individualism. Individuality is for our common purpose, not for any one member's personal fulfillment. The unity of God creates the body of Christ to be a unity of individuals through the work of the Spirit (“The LORD is our God; the LORD is one.” – Deut. 6:4 (ESV)).

Analyze the Text Explanation

(3) Richard Hays explains that “Prophecy in Paul's time is not the same thing as composing and preaching a sermon; prophecy is also a spiritual gift (12:10, 28), exercised spontaneously under the inspiration of the Spirit and tested by the discernment of the community (14:29-32).”

SUMMARY AND REVIEW:

1. Take 5-10 minutes to discuss the sermon.
2. What is “the main thing,” and how do we keep it “the main thing?”

INTRO TO THE TEXT:

The Corinthians continue to struggle in their transformation away from their “old-self” values and way of seeing the world (and each other). In this instance, some seek recognition as first-class members of the congregation based on their perceived first-class spiritual gifts. Others, perhaps negatively, question the existence or value of their own gifts. Using the image of “the body of Christ,” Paul responds to the congregation’s question concerning spiritual gifts by insisting that all members are particularly gifted by God for the common good and are thus each equally essential to the proper functioning of Christ’s body in the world today.

READ: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

ANALYZE THE TEXT:

1. What are the differences between what Paul writes in verses 14-19 and what Paul writes in verses 20-26? Why do these differences matter?
2. Verse 18 makes the point that a person’s gifts and accompanying role within the body of Christ are according to God’s choice. How does this principle of divine selection impact Paul’s argument?
3. V. 31 shows that love will govern the way we use our spiritual gifts. But what are these “greater gifts”? Read 14:1-5. What does prophesy practically look like among the body of believers? (see Take-away section)

A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER:

Paul employs the image of “the body of Christ” to bring together the two themes of variety and unity (vv. 12-13). He directs his first point (vv. 14-19) at those who perceive themselves to be inferior members of the community. Even within a unified body, a necessary variety of parts must exist. Paul then aims his second point (vv. 20-26) at those who

perceive themselves to be superior members of the community. It is the other side of the same coin. That is, this necessary variety of parts must still exist as a unified body.

Together these verses make the point that, by God’s design, *members of the body are interdependent, meaning that no one part takes priority over another.* All are necessary. If any part were not to fulfill its intended role, the whole body would suffer from its absence.

Paul then again brings together these two themes of variety and unity, this time through the idea of individuality (v. 27). *Individuality is different from individualism. Individuality is for the common purpose, not for personal fulfillment.*

Paul applies this teaching using as his examples gifts for establishing, edifying, and nurturing a Christian community (arguably stated in that order) (vv. 28-30). Finally, Paul begins his transition into a longer discussion concerning love – the only proper way to exercise one’s gifts for the common good (v. 31). Here Paul encourages the Corinthians to continue their pursuit for greater gifts, but now with the knowledge that such gifts are those used to serve the well-being of the body of Christ and its members.

APPLY:

1. On the night of his arrest, Jesus prayed that his disciples throughout the ages “may all be one” (John 17:21). What message would be demonstrated to the world by a congregation radically displaying the mutual respect and concern taught in this passage?
2. How does this passage speak to your own experience of transforming away from your “old-self” values and way of seeing the world (and others)? How can your small group support you through prayer and accountability?
3. How do you understand your own spiritual gifting? How do you use your gifts for building up the body of Christ and its members?

MEMORIZE

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many . . . As it is, there are many members, yet one body (1 Cor. 12:14, 20).