

## **The Assembled Church in Corinth**

By Alan Knox (aknox@sebts.edu)

### **I. Introduction and Background**

Andrew Chester - "The Pauline Communities" – *A Vision for the Church: Studies in Early Christian Ecclesiology* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Michael B. Thompson, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997):

Paul's vision for the communities that he wrote to can be summed up quite succinctly. He sees them as being a new creation in Christ, filled with the Spirit, possessing gifts of the Spirit and overflowing with the fruit of the Spirit, controlled above all by love; they are communities that should be pure and holy, mutually supportive and interdependent, completely united, transcending the oppositions and tensions between different groups within the community, and with every kind of barrier that would divide them in normal society broken down.

This brief summary may seem over-idealized; it may indeed seem somewhat grandiose and abstract, especially in the light of the occasional letter that Paul wrote to quite different communities, often on very specific and mundane issues... It is also to be said that theory and practice in any case often fail to coincide, and the way that a particular community lives can be very far removed from Paul's vision of what it should be. Paul himself is made painfully aware of this. Indeed, it is probably true to say that we have a semblance of Paul's vision for his communities, to a large extent, because of the problems that have arisen in a number of those communities and that Paul feels the need to counter. That is, Paul finds himself faced with what he considers false practice, or even a complete negation of his ideal of the Christian community, and hence has to urge those in these communities that he has founded to become what they know they should be, and not remain as they are. (105)

**As Chester points out, we have Paul's vision for the church because the churches that Paul wrote to were not living according to that vision.**

The church in Corinth is a good example of a church that failed to live according to that vision.

Margaret Mitchell (*Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*) suggests that Paul's purpose in writing to the church in Corinth was to reconcile the many factions that had formed. Why? Because division and factions were contrary to what he taught in all the churches.

#### **A. Division from one another**

1. In Chapters 1-3, they were dividing around certain leaders / apostles.
2. In Chapters 6-8, they were dividing around certain doctrines (strong/weak)
3. In Chapter 11, they were dividing on economics
4. In Chapters 12-14, they were dividing around spiritual gifts

## B. Division from other churches

Paul consistently reminds them that all churches practice the same things. This begins in the greeting while Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are not independent but, “to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” **(1 Corinthians 1:2)**

1. **(1 Corinthians 4:17)** That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.
2. **(1 Corinthians 7:17)** Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.
3. **(1 Corinthians 11:16)** If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.
4. **(1 Corinthians 14:33-34)** For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.

Paul expected consistent behavior and practices in all the churches.

## II. Paul's Corrections

Paul corrects the divisive attitudes and actions of the Corinthians believers.

### A. Identity

In spite of their problems, Paul continually recognizes them as the church, as separated from the world (i.e. holy) by God, as called by God, as brothers and sisters.

1. **(1 Corinthians 1:2)** To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints
2. **(1 Corinthians 1:4)** I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus
3. **(1 Corinthians 1:9)** God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
4. **(1 Corinthians 1:30)** He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Notice that this is all in the first chapter! Paul does not say that the Corinthians WILL BE the church if they do certain things right. They ARE the church. This becomes very important when we begin discussing the church meeting.

## B. Character and Practices

Paul expects children of God to display a certain character and do certain things, not in order to become God's children, but because they ARE ALREADY God's children.

In fact, Paul dedicates much of his letter to demonstrating that their character and practices are not aligned to their identity.

## C. Who is responsible for correcting these problems?

Paul addresses his letter to the church. He describes the problems to the church. He calls on the church to take action to correct the issues involved. While leaders (elders/pastors) can help the church understand their identity and their responsibilities as children of God, leaders cannot correct the church or obey for the church.

Once again, this becomes very important as we begin to think about the church meeting.

## III. The Question about Spiritual Gifts (Analysis)

Paul talks about the church gathering in 1 Corinthians 14. But, we must not separate these passages from their context. 1 Corinthians 14 is part of a longer section concerning spiritual gifts. This section begins in 1 Corinthians 12 with the phrase "Now concerning spiritual gifts...", and ends at 1 Corinthians 14:40, after which there is a change of subject. There are other linguistic connections throughout this section and especially between the beginnings of chapter 12 and the end of chapter 14.

So, Paul's primary teaching about the church meeting falls in a section of Scripture where he is answering questions or dealing with issues concerning spiritual gifts.

### A. Corinthians 1-11

Before we begin analyzing 1 Corinthians 12-14, we should realize that this letter is a whole discourse. We should place the section within the letter, and also look for information within 1 Corinthians 1-11 that may lead up to this section:

1. **(1 Corinthians 1:4-8)** Paul is grateful that the grace of God has enriched the believers in Corinth such that they do not lack any spiritual gift.
2. **(1 Corinthians 8:1)** All of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (Key concepts that bridge the entire letter – also found in 1 Cor 12-14)
3. **(1 Corinthians 11:1-16)** Men and women prophesying. Since we learn later that prophesy is for the purpose of edifying the church, the setting seems to be a church meeting.
4. **(1 Corinthians 11:17-34)** Problems when the Corinthians are sharing the common meal (Lord's Supper) together. In this passage in particular we see that carrying out certain activities is not the point of meeting together.

## **B. Corinthians 12-14**

Meaning is found primarily in paragraphs. Paragraphs are made up of sentences which offer propositions, illustrations, arguments, etc. But, the author's meaning is found at the paragraph level. Thus, we should analyze our passage paragraph by paragraph.

There are 14 paragraphs in 1 Corinthians 12-14:

### **Paragraph 1: (12:1-3) (3 sentences)**

Introduction: Although once they were guided by idols that could not speak, now they are guided by the Holy Spirit who leads them to proclaim "Jesus is Lord."

### **Paragraph 2: (12:4-11) (17 sentences)**

Despite the many different ways that God gifts, serves, and empowers, all of the gifts are given for the same reason: for the mutual benefit of the church.

### **Paragraph 3: (12:12-26) (21 sentences)**

Though our gifts are different, we are all part of the same body, and we need one another, especially those whose gifts seem less significant.

### **Paragraph 4: (12:27-30) (9 sentences)**

We are not part of just any group. We are part of God's group – Christ's body – and God decides how to place us in his group.

### **Paragraph 5: (12:31-13:3) (5 sentences)**

Exercising our spiritual gifts is not as important as demonstrating love to one another.

### **Paragraph 6: (13:4-8a) (16 sentences)**

Love causes us to give preference to others, always.

### **Paragraph 7: (13:8b-10) (6 sentences)**

Spiritual gifts will one day cease to be necessary.

### **Paragraph 8: (13:11-12) (8 sentences)**

Today we are like immature children, but we are growing toward a mature state.

### **Paragraph 9: (13:13) (2 sentences)**

Even in that mature state – when faith and hope are not necessary – we will still love one another.

### **Paragraph 10: (14:1-5) (11 sentences)**

We demonstrate love in the use of our spiritual gifts when we use them primarily to build up others, especially when the church is assembled together.

**Paragraph 11: (14:6-14) (13 sentences)**

If I exercise a spiritual gift (such as tongues) in way that you do not understand, then I am not building up the church.

**Paragraph 12: (14:15-19) (9 sentences)**

When the church is meeting together, it is more important that the church is built up than for someone to exercise their spiritual gifts, even someone who is very spiritual.

**Paragraph 13: (14:20-25) (11 sentences)**

While there is a purpose for those gifts that do not build up the church, that purpose is not carried out when the church is assembled.

**Paragraph 14: (14:26-40) (27 sentences)**

So, whenever the church is gathered together, everything that we do together should be done for the purpose of building up the church.

Once we understand Paul's argument and progression, we also need to determine why he wrote this passage. Obviously, he was answering a question or dealing with an issue concerning spiritual gifts, but could there have been another reason for 1 Corinthians 12-14?

The linguistic concept of prominence can help us to determine Paul's focus. By examining grammatical and syntactical structures, rhetoric, repetition, and other linguistic devices, we can attempt to discern what was most important to Paul.

Two paragraphs stand out as prominent in this passage:

1. **Paragraph 9** stands out because of the rhetorical devices that Paul used. Thus, Paul was emphasizing the importance of love in the exercise of spiritual gifts.
2. **Paragraph 14** stands out because of the grammatical and syntactical structures. Thus, Paul was also emphasizing the use of spiritual gifts whenever the church assembled.

Since Paragraph 14 is prominent, let's consider it in more detail:

Whenever the church comes together... whatever is done should be done for edification.

1. 2-3 people speak in tongues if there is interpretation, otherwise they should be silent.
2. 2-3 people prophesy, while others weight what they say.
  - a. Prophecy
    - i. If one person is prophesying and another stands to speak, the first is to be silent.
    - ii. Everyone is able to prophesy in a manner that allows everyone to grow.
    - iii. The prophets are in control of their gift, because God does not cause confusion.

b. Weighing Prophecy

- i. Women should not weigh prophesy, but should remain silent during that time of the meeting.
- ii. God does not speak only to the prophets.
- iii. True prophets should recognize the truth of what Paul writes here.

Whether prophecy or speaking in tongues (with interpretation) (or the exercise of any other spiritual gift) everything should be done decently and in order (as described above).

**Why would Paul only focus on tongues and prophecy in this section?**

**It is a paradigm:**

1. “Tongues” represents any gift that is not immediately understandable and thus is not edifying to the church.
2. “Prophecy” represents any gift that is immediately understandable and thus is edifying to the church.

How do you think Paul would treat interpreted tongues?

Where would “teaching” fall in this paradigm? So, which instructions should we follow for teaching?

These are the types of questions that we need to consider as we “synthesize” the information into a New Testament theology.

**IV. The Church Assembled (Synthesis)**

In this section, I’m going to make some general remarks concerning the assembling of the church according to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Much of this will come from the passage that we just analyzed (1 Corinthians 12-14), but in order to determine a theology of the book, we must consider the entire book. To do a complete study, we would need to analyze each section – paragraph by paragraph – and consider the purpose of each section and paragraph and how each one relates to the entire letter.

1. **When the church in Corinth came together, they ate together.** Eating was not considered a separate part of their meeting; instead, they considered it “The Lord’s Supper.” Paul encouraged this thinking as long as there were no factions. Paul exhorted them to treat one another as equals in the way that they ate together. (1 Corinthians 11:17-33)
2. **Men and women both took part in the church meeting.** Paul encouraged men and women to pray and prophesy. He also recognized the importance of the spiritual gifts of all believers. Certainly, there were limitations, as with all aspects of the church meeting. (1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 1 Corinthians 12)

3. **There was no distinction between different kinds of church meetings.** Paul gives his instructions in the context of “whenever you come together.” This does not mean that the church in Corinth did not meet at different times for specific activities (service, prayer, etc.), but Paul would expect the same principles to guide each type of meeting. (1 Corinthians 14:26)
4. **The purpose for the church assembling is mutual edification.** Whenever the church in Corinth came together, he expected them to work together in order to build up one another. When the church is meeting, the spiritual giftedness of an individual is not as important as the edification of the church. (1 Corinthians 14:1-26)
5. **The precise nature of the spiritual gift is not as important as the manner in which it is exercised and the intended result.** Paul does not define the various spiritual gifts, and he never gives us the same list twice. We do not decide if our speech is encouraging or instructing or both. (1 Corinthians 12)
6. **Several people should speak during the church meeting, and everyone is responsible for discerning what is said.** This makes more sense when we understand that the main form of teaching during this time was discussion, not lecture. But, Paul’s vision included multiple people speaking in order to build up the church, while other have the opportunity to consider and question what is said, again in order to build up the church. (1 Corinthians 14:26-40)
7. **Love is more important than anything else.** We must never forget this. If we are not demonstrating love for one another (especially for those who seem less significant or less gifted or less anything), then we are not meeting as the church as Paul envisioned. (1 Corinthians 13)

When placing this passage within the context of the whole letter, it may be beneficial to consider how we as the church can demonstrate certain key ideas while the church is meeting. For example:

1. I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10)
2. I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people... but now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of ... not even to eat with such a one. (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)
3. I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be served. (1 Corinthians 10:33)