

Fighting Fire with Fire: Community Formation in 1 Corinthians 12-14

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The Crisis

Friction can be a good thing when it sharpens dull edges, but if allowed to progress unchecked, it can create excessive heat, eventually igniting a fire. We laugh at the joke that a church split over the colour of the carpet, but experience tells us that the smallest spark can ignite an explosive situation. Sometimes the fuel for the fire is clearly evident, for example, if there is immorality among church leadership. Other times, the problems are deeper, more subtle, and only over time do they appear. When we begin to look at the issues, we may find that most church problems can be traced back to deeper spiritual matters. Jesus prayed, 'Make them one, Father' (John 17:21). The question is, *how*? In congregations of

the 21st century where on any given Sunday diversity may include age, gender, social or economic status, cultural background, language and denominational heritage, what can draw us together rather than pull us apart? When certain individuals or groups call for rights, power or position, how can church leaders focus the church on its purpose for existence? Paul's experience with the Corinthian church can offer us some valuable and applicable lessons for developing the church as community.

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he was facing a community that was heating up because of unchecked friction between the members. The church had not yet caught fire, but all the ingredients were present for catastrophe. Some forestry services have learned an important lesson: sometimes it is necessary to prevent damaging fire by burning 'fire lines' or 'controlled burns'. This is exactly what Paul does in this letter. Paul assumes the position of a pastor trying to quell dissen-

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sion in a church that has lost its focus on the cross.

From Paul's perspective, the critical problem with the Corinthian Christians was that they failed to develop 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16). His primary concern is the *spiritual immaturity* of these believers. He writes in 3:1, 'I cannot address you as spiritual (*pneumatikois*) but as fleshly (*sarkinois*), as infants in Christ.' All the various problems facing this church that Paul addresses throughout the letter can be traced back to this critical issue. Significant in this letter is *how* Paul attempts to resolve the growing crisis in Corinth. It is noteworthy that Paul begins the first section of his letter with the message of the cross (1:18-2:16). In the foolishness and weakness of the cross lay hope for the Corinthians to experience the power and strength of a church united in Christ.

Paul devotes a significant amount of the letter to exhorting the Corinthians to act like the 'saints' God had called them to be (1:2). Although they had been purchased and freed from sin at a supremely high price, they were not living like redeemed people (6:19-20). They were still being adversely affected by their pagan environment. Internally, their lack of fellowship as a community showed in their lack of love for one another. Externally, they failed to distinguish themselves from their unbelieving neighbours by avoiding behaviour inconsistent with a holy ethic.

Paul attempts to create dissonance between their behaviour and the model provided by Christ on the cross (11:1). The power of his words should create friction between his interpretation of the cross and the present behaviours of

the Corinthians. If he is successful, this positive friction should put an end to any negative friction within the community. If he is unsuccessful, the disharmony within the community could eventually destroy the fellowship and ruin the church's witness to unbelievers; this 'church' would fail to be *ekklesia*, the ones 'called out' of the world to be united with Christ. The critical tension is not behind the text, between the members within the community, but within the text, between Paul's ideal of unity in Christ and the failure of the community to reach this ideal. If the Corinthians would conform their behaviour to Paul's ideal, then the problems with being community would have the necessary reference point for being resolved.

There are many passages in the letter that could illustrate this point. Perhaps one of the most revealing comes after Paul's call to imitate Christ in 11:1. This verse concludes a major section on the topic of eating food sacrificed to idols (8:1-10:33) and prepares for issues related to the community gathered for worship. The critical question in the letter is this: what does *imitating* Christ involve? What does it mean to have the *mind of Christ* in the pluralistic city of Corinth? The answer comes in the middle of a difficult and somewhat controversial section of the letter.

In chapters 12-14, Paul tackles what may lie at the heart of the Corinthians' self-understanding. At issue in these chapters are 'spiritual things' (*ta pneumatika*, 12:1). The Corinthians may have considered themselves to be mature (*teleos*, 1:6) believers because of certain gifts of the Spirit. Their use (and perhaps abuse)

of these gifts, however, only showed deeper problems. Paul's goal in chapters 12-14 is to free the Corinthians from their ignorance (*agnoien*) about being spiritual (*pneumatikos*; 12:1). Paul has already foreshadowed his argument earlier in the letter in 8:1-3 where he uses the key words 'knowledge' (*gnosis*) and 'love' (*agape*), which are also important terms in chapters 12 and 13. The ignorance of the Corinthians was already demonstrated in chapter 8 by their lack of love for the weaker members of the community. In chapters 12-14, Paul goes on to condemn their wrong interpretation of spirituality. Gifts of the Spirit can be wonderful tools for the church if put through the filter of the cross, but if used in self-service, they can become the fuel for a fiery demise.

Internal Combustion

Paul confronts the same underlying problems in chapters 11-14 as he does elsewhere in the letter. The more apparent problem is exhibited in the Corinthians' spiritual enthusiasm and individualism without regard for community most clearly seen in speaking in 'tongues' (*glossolalia*), resulting in the breakdown of 'fellowship' (*koinonia*). The deeper problem is simply a lack of love for others. They could show their spiritual maturity by enhancing their fellowship of love.

In 12:2 Paul attributes their ignorance to their former lives as unbelieving Gentiles, led aimlessly about as in a pagan procession.¹ In a subtle way,

Paul reminds the Corinthians throughout chapters 12 and 14 that their behaviour modelled the unbelieving Gentiles around them and was inconsistent with living 'in Christ' (see 14:23). They needed clear direction in their community and a new definition of spirituality.

The modern reader must carefully discern Paul's method of argumentation in these chapters to find the clues to help resolve church division. Paul cautiously crafts his argument in these chapters lest he create too much friction and cause the Corinthians to *burn* his letter. In order to avoid this, he uses a rhetorical feature called *insinuation*. *Insinuation* is used in difficult situations when the audience may be hostile and the speaker must criticize something highly favoured by the audience. The author hides the subject matter behind something else at the beginning and later articulates it.² Paul here hides the problem of speaking in tongues behind the issues of spiritual gifts and unity in the Spirit. The more pressing issue for him is the Corinthians' faulty understanding and practice of community.

The unifying force in the community is the Holy Spirit who enables believers to confess, 'Jesus is Lord'. An indicator of being 'spiritual' is to recognize Jesus as Lord. Being 'unspiritual' is shown by 'cursing' Jesus. If the

1 Terence Paige, '1 Corinthians 12.2: A Pagan Pompe?' *JSNT* 44 (1991), pp. 57-65.

2 Joop F. M. Smit, 'Argument and Genre of 1 Corinthians 12-14', in *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 213, referring to Cicero, *De inventione* 1.15, 20-21; 1.17.23-24.

Holy Spirit is indeed present in this community, then any 'speaking' about Jesus must proclaim him as Lord (cf. John 16:13-15). The mature Christian community is made up of individual believers who are Christ-focused and Spirit-filled. It is significant theologically that Paul begins his discussion of spiritual gifts in the context of Christology, for in Christ lies the answer for both unity in the church and empowerment for service. At the foot of the cross sits the crucible where the Holy Spirit melts and moulds the community into conformity to the gospel and character of Christ. Without the cross, the gifts of the Spirit become rallying points for self-glorification. Without the Spirit, the power of the cross is not able to penetrate to the inner person where transformation takes place (see 2:14-16).

The real issue with this church from Paul's perspective is spiritual maturity, or better stated, maturity in the Spirit, and so he attempts in these chapters to define further what it means to be 'spiritual' (*pneumatikos*) by discussing 'spiritual gifts' (*charismata*). The word *charismata* basically denotes the manifestation of *charis* or 'grace'. This is a uniquely Pauline word, with half of all uses of the term occurring in 1 Corinthians.³ Paul gives three different lists of 'spiritual gifts' in this chapter (verses 8-10, 28, and 29-30). Three of the listed gifts appear at the centre of discussion and contention between Paul and the Corinthi-

ans: knowledge, tongues, and prophecy. The position of tongues as last in all the lists in this chapter (12:8-10, 28, 29, 30) suggests it lies at the core of Paul's problem with community.⁴ By putting tongues last and giving prophecy a more prominent place, Paul may be preparing his audience for his argument in chapter 14.⁵ A careful look at Paul's argument in chapter 14 will reveal his intent for this church.

In chapter 14, Paul compares tongues and prophecy. He uses the verb 'to speak' (*laleo*) 24 times in various forms in this chapter, which suggests that his problem with the Corinthians at this point lies with communication.⁶ Evidently, the Corinthians gloried in their ability to speak in tongues just as they boasted in their wisdom (*sophia*, chs. 1-4) and freedom or authority (*exousia*, chs. 5-10). They may have sought to speak in tongues because of the impressive nature of tongues and their eschatological orientation to understand 'mysteries' (14:2).⁷ Paul attempts to put the outwardly visible gifts of prophecy and tongues into the greater context of community edification and, by this, to offer the Corinthians an example of

3 Rom. 1:11; 5:15, 16; 6:23; 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:7; 7:7; 12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31; 2 Cor. 1:11; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6; 1 Pet. 4:10.

4 Archibald Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1914), p. 280.

5 Prophecy is the only consistent gift listed by Paul in all his lists of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:8-11, 28-30; 13:1-2; Rom. 12:6-8).

6 Verse 2 thrice, 3, 4, 5 twice, 6 twice, 9 twice, 11 twice, 13, 18, 19, 21, 23, 27, 28, 29, 34, 35, 39.

7 D. L. Baker, 'The Interpretation of 1 Cor. 12-14', *EVQ* 46 (1974), p. 230.

how love within the community overcomes personal preferences (14:18-19; see further 8:13).

Chapter 14 begins and ends with an appeal to keep on seeking love (14:1, 39). Paul gives love as the goal of 'spiritual gifts' in 12:31, and in 14:1 he applies this to the communication problems at Corinth. He shifts his attention in 14:1 from 'spiritual gifts' to 'spiritual matters'. The spiritual matter or gift of the Spirit that the Corinthians should pursue relative to love is the ability to prophesy. Paul emphasizes the gift of prophecy in this context as a better gift for the community because it edifies the gathered church. He states this as a thesis in verses 2 and 3, and summarizes it in verse 4: 'The one who speaks a tongue edifies one's self, but the one who prophesies edifies the church.' This is a significant assessment of tongues in the context of the letter because of Paul's insistence on placing the concerns of others over those of oneself. He recognizes tongues as a divine gift and does not attempt to hinder the Spirit by totally disregarding speaking in tongues, but by his numerous qualifications of it, especially the significant one given in verse 4, he basically assigns it an inferior position in the life of the gathered community.⁸ Tongues speaking can become useful to the community *only if it is interpreted*, which then makes it equivalent to

prophecy.

In the remainder of this chapter, Paul develops this thought through veiled logic: speaking in tongues fails the test of being intelligent and understandable, and thus also fails to edify the community (vv. 6-19), but prophecy meets this test (vv. 20-25). Therefore, prophecy should be the means of communication within the community (vv. 26-33a).

In the first step of his logic, Paul claims that speaking in tongues by itself serves no purpose in the community because such speaking does not build up the community. Communication that benefits the church comes by 'revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching' (v. 6). He could be implying here that tongues cannot be described with any of these words unless it is made intelligible. He uses several illustrations to demonstrate the unintelligibility of tongues (flute, harp, horn, voices or languages) and then applies these images to the community in verses 9 and 12. His basic point is that speaking in tongues fails the test of intelligibility and therefore has no value for the gathered community. He does give one exception to this principle: there must be someone to interpret the meaning of the tongues (v. 13).

He presses the unintelligibility theme in verses 14-17. The speaker in tongues loses control of the mind even though his or her spirit is praying.

⁸ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1979), p. 106. Perhaps the critical interpretive issue in the modern phenomenon of 'speaking in tongues' is the divine-human mix. We also need to allow that Paul may not blatantly condemn speaking

in tongues here as part of his rhetorical strategy. See Joop F. M. Smit, 'Argument and Genre of 1 Corinthians 12-14', in *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 211-30.

Likewise, others (literally, 'the one who fills the place of the *idiotes*'⁹) cannot understand the message. Paul then describes his personal use and evaluation of speaking in tongues in verses 18-19. His statement in verse 18 that he speaks in tongues more than any of the Corinthians is qualified by a strong adversative in verse 19: 'BUT in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.' Although he speaks in 'myriads' or ten thousand words in a tongue, he would rather speak five words that make sense and edify the community.

Paul then moves on to show how prophecy meets the test of intelligibility and edification. In verse 20, he makes a possible association between speaking in tongues and being immature (cf. 3:1-4). Because the Corinthians emphasized speaking in tongues, they were still immature in their thinking. Christian maturity is governed by love, not the display of certain spiritual gifts. Whenever any spiritual gift fails to lead people to Christ, it ceases being a gift of the Spirit who points to Christ and becomes a means to glorify the

self, something that will ultimately lead to division and destruction. Paul then begins to distance tongues from prophecy with a quotation from Isaiah 28:11-12 which stresses the nonsense of speaking in tongues for those who do not know its meaning. He gives the real danger with tongues in the community in verses 23-25: speaking in tongues fails to convict and lead to worship of God. Unbelievers will call tongues speakers mad or insane and be repelled from the message of the gospel (v. 23). Prophecy, on the other hand, confronts unbelievers with the power of God and leads to salvation (cf. 12:3). It is not that speaking in tongues is good or bad, but that if allowed to supersede its intent, it becomes only another human effort to be 'wise' and 'strong' (1:25).

In verses 26-33, Paul goes on to qualify the only positive use of tongues in the church. His logic is rather straightforward. For tongues to have any value in the church they must be interpreted. In other words, *tongues must become like prophecy and be intelligible to the community* in order that the community might be edified, convicted, or encouraged. For tongues, or any spiritual gift, to be useful for the church, it must draw attention to the cross of Christ and not be a jewel in the crown of self. If there is no interpreter, tongues should not be spoken. Speaking in tongues must involve more than one person, while prophecy has no such restriction (v. 31). Possibly one of Paul's most stinging rebukes of the tongue speakers comes in verse 33: 'For God is not one of disorder or confusion but of peace.' Prophecy contributes to God's purpose of love in the community, while uninterpreted *glos-*

9 The term can mean an amateur or non-specialist. It can refer to non-members who participate in sacrifices (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Second revision by William F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 370). It is difficult to determine whether Paul is referring to 'outsiders' who visit the community or those who are amateurs at speaking in tongues. More to the point is that whoever they were, they could not understand what the speakers in tongues meant.

solalia leads only to the breakdown of community and witness. Any 'spiritual gift', no matter how spectacular or even how needed within a church, can become a barrier to having the 'mind of Christ' if it is not first put through the filter of Christ's love (13:1-3).

Paul then shows in verses 34-36 that his discussion about tongues is meant to make some in the church uncomfortable. Apparently there was a group of women in the church who did not submit in love to the needs of the community and may have been exalting themselves by speaking out in the times of gathering. These unknown women were creating the same type of confusion evidenced by the tongues speakers, and Paul mentions them here as proof of his basic point.

Verse 37 begins the conclusion to Paul's argument. A conclusion in letters of this time served as an author's last opportunity to convince the readers to accept his or hers views, often giving the good and the bad alternatives.¹⁰ Paul likewise states the two alternatives in his discussion in verse 39 by way of two infinitive clauses: seek the gift of prophesying, and use the gift of speaking in tongues in the right way. The bottom line is that all things should be done decently and in order (v. 40). The potential for division existed if the Corinthians accepted tongues speaking without qualification. Thus, Paul has subtly side-lined tongues speaking and left the better choice to be love in community.

Adding Fuel to the Fire

A question often asked of these chapters is, why does Paul deal with tongues speaking only in this letter and only with this church? This question is probably impossible to answer with certainty, but understanding the religious and cultural environment of these early believers gives us more of an appreciation for their struggles towards Christian maturity. Their internal problems had external influences. If Christ was not their example, then what or who was?

The tongues speaking by the Corinthians has interesting parallels in the Hellenistic world of the first century, which may have influenced this practice by some in the church. One possible source for this practice may have been the Platonic view of prophecy. Plato distinguished two types of prophecy, the first being *mantic* prophecy, seen in divine possession and inspiration where the prophet serves as the mouthpiece for the divine. The mantic goes into a trance and becomes the passive instrument of the divine. The second type of prophecy is *interpretation*, where skill is acquired through practice, and the prophet remains in control of him or herself.¹¹ Losing one's mind is part of the process of divination. Cicero (c. 43 B. C.) described this as a soul in frenzy without any reason.¹² Plutarch (c. 60-127 A.D.) wrote that the soul of the mantis expels sense or mind.¹³

Noteworthy similarities can also be

10 Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.1.28-30; 6.1.9-13.

11 Plato, *Tim.* 71E-72B; *Phdr.* 244A-B.

12 Philo, *Quis Her.* 1.2.4.

13 Plutarch, *De def. or.* 432C.

seen between the Corinthians and the Hellenistic Jew, Philo. Philo was a Platonist who viewed prophecy in a way similar to Plato. He distinguished four types of ecstasy: frantic delirium, excessive consternation, tranquillity of the mind, and divinely inspired enthusiasm. The last type is the best for a person to have and involves the inspiration of God.¹⁴ It is also characteristic of the prophets in the scriptures of whom Moses is the chief example.¹⁵ One of Philo's goals was to experience prophetic ecstasy, according to the model of Moses, that came by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ When the mind is 'agitated and drawn into a frenzy by heavenly love', it can enter into prophetic ecstasy, leave the body, and discern the things of God.¹⁷ Speech in this state stumbles about vainly, 'being unable by common expressions to give a clear representation and understanding of the peculiar properties of the subjects with which it was dealing.'¹⁸ The mindless state of the Corinthians' speaking in tongues, as Paul describes it in 14:14-15, is similar to Philo's understanding of ecstatic prophecy.¹⁹

Two nearby practices that may also have influenced the Corinthian believers were the Oracle at Delphi and the worship of Dionysus. One of the most famous places of prophetic activity in the Greco-Roman world was the Oracle at Delphi located less than 50 kilometres from Corinth. A priestess, known as the Pythia, was the medium of revelation at Delphi.²⁰ There is some debate as to what happened with the priestess, but apparently she descended into a pit and sat upon a tripod whereupon she entered into a trance or some form of ecstasy. Tatian wrote, 'Some woman by drinking water gets into a frenzy, and loses her senses by the fumes of frankincense, and you say that she has the gift of prophecy.'²¹ The prophetess would speak 'strange words' that she did not understand and that needed the interpretation of a priest who would then reveal the message to the inquirer.²²

Connected with the activity at Delphi was the worship of Apollo. Apollo was an important deity in Corinth since a temple to him was located next to the Lechaem Road, the main road through Corinth. Apollo was the god of prophecy and one of the most important gods in Greek epic. As the son of Zeus, Apollo interpreted the signs of his father.²³ He was the god of healing

14 Philo, *Quis Her.* 249.

15 Philo, *Quis Her.* 260-63.

16 Philo, *Leg. All.* III.100-4; *Mig.* 34-35; *Quod Deus* 1-3; *Gig.* 47.

17 Philo, *Quis Her.* 69-70.

18 Philo, *Quis Her.* 72, from *The Works of Philo*, trans. by C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

19 For links between Philo and the Corinthians at this point, see Birger A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians; A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and Its Relation to Gnosticism* (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), pp. 45-46.

20 Euripides, *Ion* 42, 91, 321.

21 Tatian, *Or. ad Graec.* 19, trans. by Molly Whittaker (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1982).

22 Plutarch, *Mor.* 406. For a different interpretation of the evidence, see F. J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), pp. 10, 217-18.

23 Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1985), p. 111.

and the father of Asclepius (another god of healing), as well as the god of purification and cryptic oracles. Often disease was viewed as pollution that needed to be purified. Purification came through prescribed action made known through super-human knowledge gained from oracles. Indirect and veiled revelation belonged especially to Apollo who was called *Loxias* or *Oblique*.

A second source of prophetic activity in Corinth possibly known to the Christians there was the cult of Dionysus. A wooden image of Dionysus covered with gold was seen in the Agora (marketplace) of Corinth by Pausanias who lived in the second century A.D.²⁴ Dionysus was the god of fertility, animal maleness, wine, drama, and ecstasy. He was believed to be present in raw animal flesh, the wine goblet, theatre performance, and ecstasy. Images show Dionysus always surrounded by frenzied male and female worshippers. The Dionysus cult was known for its ritual ecstasy. The worshippers often danced to music until in a frenzied state when they believed they became filled with the god and the god could speak and act through them.

These examples show some curious similarities with what Paul writes about in his letter. For example, the Corinthians' speaking in tongues is similar to Plato's first category of ecstatic prophecy. To counter this, Paul urges them to seek the gift of prophecy which uses the mind (14:14). Like the oracles at Delphi, tongues must be interpreted to have any mean-

ing for others (v. 13). It is not beyond possibility that some of the women in the fellowship had visited the oracle and had been inspired by the prophetesses there. These women may have been a major cause of dissension in the church (vv. 34-36).²⁵ Could Paul have had in mind the mindless worship of Dionysus when he refers to tongues speaking? It is impossible to tell, but the similarities between the Corinthians and these cults are striking.²⁶

Although Paul's letter is not explicit, we are still left with the possibility that the Corinthians' speaking activities had been influenced to some degree by their Hellenistic environment. Philo or Platonism, the Oracle of Delphi, the Dionysiac cult, or any combination of these could have provided examples of prophetic inspiration to the Corinthians, not to exclude the possibility that some of the Corinthians may have even practised such prophetic activity before joining the church.²⁷ The assumption behind Paul's claim in 14:23 is that if outsiders visited the church and saw such activity, they would associate the Corinthians with the frenzy of the *manic* prophets of the time. Paul's aim

²⁵ This is the thesis of Antoinette Clark Wire in *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

²⁶ See also Terrance Callan, 'Prophecy and Ecstasy in Greco-Roman Religion and in 1 Corinthians', *NovT* 27 (1985), pp. 125-40; Christopher Forbes, 'Early Christian Inspired Speech and Hellenistic Popular Religion', *NovT* 28 (1986), pp. 257-70.

²⁷ See further H. W. House, 'Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth', *BSac* 140 (1983), pp. 134-50.

is to point the Corinthians to the superior goal of 'having the mind of Christ' and not modelling the world around them. When we do not look to the cross for our example, then someone or something will take the place, and everything else, even things that appear 'religious' or 'spiritual,' fails the test and will ultimately lead to the breakdown of community. God in his wisdom and power provides the answer in a way that calls us to reverse course and sometimes run against the influences of the world around us.

The Essential Paradigm Shift

In his concern for community formation, Paul offers the Corinthians a different perspective and a new paradigm that positively influences relationships within the community. Wilhelm Wuellner comments that Paul attempts to create a new social order by 'transformation of the multiplicity of different social and ethnic/cultural value systems into a unity'.²⁸

Paul attempts to set up a protective boundary of love and holiness around the Corinthian church. The 'mind of Christ' sets the boundary and defines the church as the people of God. Simply stated, to have the mind of Christ involves imitating him by living a life of love in response to the movement of the Holy Spirit in one's life. In chapters 5-7 Paul attempts to distinguish those

'inside' from those 'outside' the church.²⁹ In chapters 8-14 he moves on to define what should happen *inside* the community, yet without disregarding the community's relationship with those outside the church (14:23-25).

Paul uses the tools at hand to bring about this vital paradigm shift. He basically has three ways to do this: 1) the persuasive power of his words, 2) the Corinthians' own desire for spiritual maturity, and 3) his relationship with the Corinthians as their spiritual 'father' (4:14-21). Paul uses his position of power to challenge the Corinthians to accept his interpretation of spiritual maturity; he uses their desire for spirituality to shame them for their inappropriate behaviour relative to imitating Christ; and he carefully crafts his arguments throughout the letter to accomplish this paradigm shift. He reverses common perceptions of power, gender, and social status, thus creating a community governed by eternal criteria and not the limitations of creation or culture. Believers bound in fellowship to Christ can become a unified community where the typical positions of shame—being poor, female, or a slave—are put on a par with positions of honour—being rich, male, or free. The same is true concerning the more public gifts of tongues and prophecy.

Speaking in tongues represented a position of power and honour for the

28 Wilhelm Wuellner, 'Paul as Pastor: The Function of Rhetorical Questions in First Corinthians', in *Apôtre Paul: personnalité, style et conception du ministère*, ed. A. Vanhoye, 49-77; BETL 73 (Leuven: Leuven University, 1986) p. 73.

29 For Paul's symbolic universe and description of 'insider' 'outsider' language, see Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul in Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), pp. 21-55, especially p. 31ff.

Corinthians and a possible cause for boasting. Because of the interest in ecstatic speech in the vicinity of Corinth, some of the Corinthians may have been drawn to this *charisma* out of a desire to be *spiritual*, but by doing this, they created religious stratification between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Paul turns this around and challenges them to give more honour to the hidden gifts which are just as important to community life as the more visible gifts. The more 'honourable' gifts of tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, and even martyrdom count as nothing without love (13:1-3). When the Holy Spirit begins to grow a person *in Christ*, the result will be humility and consideration for others (Phil. 2:1-11; Gal. 5:23).

The new paradigm is given in chapter 13. Love is the greatest manifestation of being *in Christ* and the most honourable gift to seek. Paul makes a significant comparison in this chapter between his behaviour and that of the Corinthians. First, in 13:1-3 he puts himself in the position of honour by his willingness to allow love to take precedence over all the 'honourable' gifts that the Corinthians may have cherished. Carl R. Holladay points out the similarities between chapters 13 and 9, and suggests that Paul uses the first person singular in chapter 13 to offer himself as an example of love. In chapter 9, 'Paul adduces himself as the concrete paradigm of voluntary, responsible self-restraint for the self-indulgent Corinthians'. He then uses this same apostolic paradigm in chapter 13 in the context of community worship to show the blameworthiness of the behaviour of the Corinthians.

Holladay argues that behind 13:1-3

can be discerned Paul's own self-presentation. Of the seven attributes of the rhetorical 'I' given in the passage, all of the them can be attributed to Paul: Paul spoke in 'tongues' (14:18), functioned as a prophet (2:2-16; 7:40; 14:6; Gal. 1:15-16), knew mysteries (1 Cor. 2:1, 7), had knowledge, especially of the ways of God (2:12, 16), could perform miracles (2 Cor. 12:12; Rom. 15:19; cf. Acts 14:3; 16: 16-24; 19:11; 28:3-6), gave up himself for Christ (2 Cor. 4:7-15).³⁰ Paul's way, as demonstrated through his lifestyle and described in his letter, is the better way because it reflects Christ (11:1).

Then, in 13:4-8a, Paul subtly criticizes the Corinthians' defective spirituality. According to James G. Sigountos, Paul's description of what love is *not* matches the behavioural problems in Corinth. The word 'jealous' recalls the party strife mentioned in 3:3. The phrase 'is not puffed up' speaks to the spiritual pride of the Corinthians evident behind Paul's rhetoric in many places in the letter (4:6, 19, 19; 5:2; 8:1). Then, 'does not seek the things of itself' recalls how some of the Corinthians sought their own good and overlooked the weaker members of the body (10:24, 33).

The other attributes of love also describe the attitudes and actions of the Corinthians without using specific words from earlier in the letter. The words Paul uses are rare or are used

30 Carl R. Holladay, '1 Corinthians 13: Paul as Apostolic Paradigm', in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, eds. David L. Balch, Everette Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), p. 84.

only here in the New Testament, but they address the broader contextual issues in the letter. The word 'be conceited' evokes images of rhetorical boasting which Paul attacks indirectly in 2:1. The word 'shameful' has the connotation of acting indecently in a sexual way, part of the problem in chapters 5-7. The word 'provoked' may refer back to the fractures in the community characterized by strife and jealousy in chapters 1-4. The phrase 'counts the bad' speaks to the problem of revenge in lawsuits discussed in 6:1-8. Finally, 'rejoices in the unrighteous' as last of the negative statements and in emphatic position addresses the general disregard for personal and community holiness evident in chapters 5-11.³¹

Love is the ultimate paradigm for relationships within community and will also be the mark of the age to come (13:10-12). Paul wants the Corinthians to apply this eschatological ethic in their present community since they had been redeemed and freed from the powers of this world (1:30; 6:19-20). They were not to live according to an ethic found in this world or this age but an ethic characteristic of the age to come. The source and goal of their spiritual gifts ought to be the Crucified One. The real test of spiritual gifts is whether they cohere with the message of the cross. The Corinthians, however, remained entrenched to worldly para-

digms as 'fleshly' (*sarkinoi*) people (3:1-3) and failed to see the eschatological significance of existence in Christ.

Ben Witherington comments that love in Christ is the one attribute that bridges present reality to the eschatological reality.³² Paul contends that love outlasts prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (13:8) since it is the characteristic of the 'perfect' or 'mature' (*teleioi*). Love is the indicator of the new existence in Christ inaugurated by his death and resurrection. The 'gifts' of the Spirit cannot violate or take the place of love as the highest attribute of being in Christ without doing violence to the church. This was the danger facing the Corinthians. Their individualism and lack of love created unhealthy friction in the church and a barrier to unbelievers. Their display of gifts led not to faith but to alienation and further unbelief (14:21-22). They gave permanence to the temporal and neglected love, the true mark of the eschaton.

A Return to the Cross

How do you nurture community when certain individuals or groups seem to hold more power or persuasion than others, making unity in purpose and practice only a theory for church board meetings? Friction within a group is natural and can be a positive force for change or to shake members from com-

31 James G. Sigountos, 'The Genre of 1 Corinthians', *NTS* 40 (1994), pp. 255-59; Robertson and Plummer write that Paul aims his rhetoric at the 'special faults of the Corinthians' (*1 Corinthians*, p. 292, quoted by Sigountos, p. 256, n. 54).

32 Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 272.

placency. Any growing group will experience friction as part of the maturing process. If the friction, however, is not filtered by love, the human tendency for self-glorification will contaminate the fellowship, leading to a breakdown of community.

Paul begins his letter with the kerygma of Christ crucified because this message serves as the filter of love for the church in Corinth (1:18-2:16). All the crises facing these Christians have the common denominator of a failure to live by the model of the cross. Paul's purpose in writing this letter is to urge these believers to 'grow up' in Christ (3:1-2). The choice is clear. The Corinthians should have been ashamed of their boasting in certain gifts of the Spirit, especially speaking in tongues, which were not bringing unity but destruction to the community. Anything that causes division in the church or causes certain people to be overlooked would be considered shameful by Paul and contrary to the message of the cross.

Shame results in two ways. The first occurs on the experiential level in the Corinthian church. When individuals are exalted within or excluded from the Body of Christ because their spirituality is deemed either superior (because of tongues speaking) or unnecessary (because their gifts are less visible than others), their isolation brings disharmony to the community where everyone should have a vital role to play as the 'body of Christ'. Second, shame results before God as people find themselves resourced by their own power or according to cultural norms, thus isolating themselves from the divine plan of conformity to the likeness of Christ. Paul expects the

Corinthians to change how they relate to one another. His letter is all about change and conformity to his pattern of life (4:16; 11:1), not because there is anything special in himself, but because he represents the One who brings honour to all by bringing unity in the community. As steward of the divine mystery (2:1, 7; 4:1), Paul has in mind a model for the Corinthians that could influence social and religious standards within the community.

What God had done for them *in Christ* should have impacted how they lived as community. God revealed his wisdom, power, and love in the mystery of the Christ-event, for it is on the cross that true love is defined. Christ becomes for believers their righteousness, holiness, and redemption (1:30), objectively making relationship with God possible. The Holy Spirit makes this a reality subjectively in a person's life and teaches him or her the mind of Christ (2:10-16), resulting in a life of love (Gal. 5:22). Love is how one who is 'in Christ' ought to live. Whatever the reports Paul may have received from or about this church, his basic answer to them is love, a love lived out in tangible ways and that brings honour to all whom it contacts. This love will also confront cultural practices that succumb to the dishonouring force of self-glorification, whether that be taking fellow Christians to court (dishonouring a brother, 6:1-11), sexual immorality with temple prostitutes (dishonouring our own body, 6:12-20), or even speaking in 'tongues' like the emissaries of the gods (dishonouring the whole community, ch. 14). This church had overlooked the fundamental attribute of the mystery of Christ—the self-giving love seen in the divine

paradox of the cross. The most significant 'gracing' (*charis*) of God for Paul is communion with Christ. The Spirit will give other 'gracings' (*charismata*), but these serve only to help the community live out communion in Christ and thus conform to the mind of Christ.

Even though the Corinthians had been graced by the Spirit, they were fractured and functioning like an unhealthy body. Love is the one thing that can create unity within the God-ordained diversity in the church. The Corinthians may have wanted to be 'spiritual' but had been going about it in the wrong way. Because they lacked love in their community, they were 'nothing', as Paul (the 'I') calls himself in 13:1-3. Not all the Corinthians may have had problems with tongues and prophecy (ch. 14), but Paul's solution for the church is community-wide and requires all of them to love. The gifts given to them by the Spirit (12:7) would remain useless for the community unless accompanied by love. Ernst Käsemann comments, 'The test of a genuine charisma lies not in the fact that something supernatural occurs but in the use which is made of it. No spiritual endowment has value, rights or privilege on its own account. It is validated only by the service it renders.'³³

Paul summarises the issues very clearly at the end of the letter: 'Let everything that concerns you be marked with love' (16:14). Krister Stendahl remarks that love is concern

for the church. Any virtue apart from love threatens the well-being of the church.³⁴ Love keeps faith and hope 'from deteriorating into little lapel buttons which we flaunt to proclaim our own cleverness, our own commitment, or our own capacity to believe and trust. In reality, love means actually to be what one is together with one's brothers and sisters to the benefit of the building up of the church.'³⁵ Love and community go together.

Spiritual gifts wrestled into the service of self more often than not will ultimately lead to a breakdown of love within the community. By definition and intention, spiritual gifts must be self-giving in the model of the cross. All gifts of the Spirit, even Paul's favourite gift of proclamation, can be surrendered to the abuse of selfish motives. Paul was familiar enough with self-exalting preachers who proclaimed Christ out of envy and rivalry and not out of hearts of love (Philp. 1:15-17).

Fanning the Flame in Our Churches Today

What makes reading and interpreting 1 Corinthians so relevant for contemporary Christians is that human nature and experience have not changed much. Like the believers in Corinth, we find ourselves in communities struggling to be the church of Christ in a world filled with superficial love. In societies of litigation, rampant

33 Ernst Käsemann, 'Ministry and Community in the New Testament', in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 67.

34 Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 58.

35 Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, p. 59.

immorality, and glorification of the rich and famous, what paradigm do we follow? We live in an age where the spectacular grabs the news headlines. The church succumbs to this glorification of ego and the pursuit of the latest. How do we balance the need to be relevant and contemporary in message and method and not neglect the greater matters of spirituality? In days of 'purpose-driven' ministries, what power drives the church forward? Pastoral burnout is a hot topic among denominational leaders and theological educators. Could misplaced priorities among both clergy and laity be contributing to this problem? It would not be easy for any minister to be pastor to a church like the one in first-century Corinth.

These issues can be engaged in several ways. Theologically, the Corinthians became focused on the Spirit and spirituality rather than Christ and relationship. They considered themselves 'spiritual' (*pneumatikos*) and proved this by their demonstration of actions that could be construed by some as divinely inspired, one of these being speaking in tongues. Their focus on spirituality actually lacked the one divine resource that could build up the community—love. Paul's evaluation of them in chapter 14 seriously calls into question their efforts to be spiritual.

A spirituality that is not focused on Christ lacks the force that can unify individual believers into a community full of vitality and mission. The Spirit cannot do his work in us when our love for God and others is not pure, when we pursue spirituality for any other motive except the love that God has planted in our hearts. Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit will lead to him, speak about

him, and remind them of his teaching (John 14:26; 16:13-15). The Holy Spirit is the divine, drawing force compelling us to faith in Christ. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:10-16, the Spirit teaches us 'the mind of Christ'. Another way to say this is that Holy Spirit helps us make every thought captive to Christ until our thinking becomes his thinking, our perception of others becomes like his perception of others, and our love becomes self-giving like his love. The true greatness of the Christian faith is that God's love poured out in our hearts by the Spirit (Rom. 5:5) indeed transforms us into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) and enables us to fulfil our destiny in this world of being the holy people of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

In many ways, the problems in Corinth give us warning of what not to do as the church. Their disorderly worship, neglect of the quieter, 'weaker' members, lack of fellowship, and all the other issues can be boiled down to the root cause of sin. When the ways of the world become our standard and not the mind of Christ, we will find ourselves in the same danger as the Corinthians and ancient Israel, as Paul describes in chapter 10. Even though Israel looked spiritual from the outside by their baptism into Moses, eating of spiritual food and drink, and having the very presence of God with them, they yielded to temptation and participated in the evil practices of their idolatrous and immoral neighbours. Paul calls the Corinthians back to the fundamental of relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ, symbolized in the community meal of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:14-20). To eat of the bread and drink of the wine is to acknowledge the supremacy and sovereignty of Christ in our lives and

the exclusion of any other 'lord'.

This is so fundamental to true spirituality and to why Paul sees the deeper problem in this church to be spiritual immaturity (3:1-3). Any human enterprise, even the well-intentioned programs of the church, will hinder the divine gracing of the Spirit unless Jesus Christ is acknowledged as Lord both by verbal confession and through lives of self-giving service. The gifts of the Spirit are only means to an end and not the end itself. God gives these gifts as the channels for his love to flow through us to others. If we stop this love by hoarding it to ourselves or by stopping it because of our desire for self-glorification, we will not grow into mature Christians. The end result of God's gift of his love should be that he is exalted, not us. The cross as paradigm is not about human power and wisdom, but divine grace and love.

Fellowship with Christ should lead to a church characterized by love for all members with particular care given to those who are easily overlooked, less visible, or neglected. To be united with Christ means to have the same mind as he (2:16), first and foremost portrayed by sacrificial love for others (Philp. 2:1-11). A verse revealing of Paul's understanding of the divine mystery is Galatians 2:20: 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live now in the flesh, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself in my behalf.' Here Paul states that union with Christ through identifying with Christ in 'death' is a result of the prior love of Christ shown on the cross. This union for Paul is not nebulous but experiential and rooted in community. Love as the way of the mystery of God

in Christ impacts community and is the necessary component for the body of Christ to thrive in wholeness and unity.

Love should be the supreme way Christians relate to one another in the church. It is the greatest evidence of spiritual maturity, and without it, a person remains a mere 'babe in Christ', prone to fall into temptation and sin. Paul wants the Corinthians to realize that they had been washed from the corruptions of sin and were to be different from their unbelieving neighbours (6:19-20). As Joop Smit notes, since the Corinthians continued to speak in tongues like pagan worshippers, Paul is led to believe that nothing had changed when they became believers in Jesus Christ.³⁶

Paul attempts to resocialize the Corinthians in light of the new reality in Christ. He tries to create a new community by placing the boundary of love around the church and by enhancing fellowship within the church. Although they could not leave the world (5:10), their community boundary could be clarified. Vincent L. Wimbush comments, 'The world was affirmed by Paul as the *sphere* of Christian existence... but the world was rejected by him as a *source* of value and identity.'³⁷ Their standard for behaviour should be the love Christ modelled on the cross. This standard has not changed since then. Love should still be the primary characteristic of all mature Christians.

36 Joop F. M. Smit, 'Tongues and Prophecy: Deciphering 1 Cor 14:22', *Biblica* 75 (1994), p. 188.

37 Vincent L. Wimbush, 'The Ascetic Impulse in Ancient Christianity', *TToday* 50 (1993), p. 427.

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