

LIFE GROUP
BIBLE STUDIES

1 CORINTHIANS 12-14

A 1 Corinthians Series

The Greatest Thing

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CoroUniting
CHURCH COMMUNITY



INTRODUCTION

1 CORINTHIANS 12-14

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The Greatest Thing

This is the fourth in our series of Bible studies in 1 Corinthians, in which we have been looking at the way that the apostle Paul has been responding to a range of concerns and issues in the church at Corinth, which he had founded. And one of the problems that Paul needed to address amongst the Corinthian Christians was their tendency to elevate spiritual gifts above the fruit of the Spirit.

Consistent with their view that manifesting the gifts of the Spirit was the high-water mark of the Christian life, they regarded 'speaking in tongues' in particular as the most authentic sign of the presence and power of the Spirit. So Paul sets them right on this gift in the wider context of his teaching on spiritual gifts and the way of love in chapters 12-14.

Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14 surrounds the apostle's appeal to the Christians at Corinth to regard love as "the most excellent way" (verse 31b). Of course, love does not mean, as the Beatles once popularised in their song, that 'all we need is love'! Love is the key, but it doesn't end there. Paul teaches us that love is practical; love issues forth in active serving.

Not only is love expressed through spiritual gifts – love also controls the use of those gifts: in service to others, in our life together as the body of Christ, and in Christian worship. What Paul wants the Corinthians to understand is that it's not one or the other: spiritual gifts and love go hand in hand.

Each study opens with a brief summary of Paul's teaching in each of the sections covered in this series, followed by some questions and thoughts for reflection which those in life groups may wish to use as a framework for exploring Paul's teaching further, applying it to their own lives.



This chapter contains two main sections. In verses 1-11 Paul responds to a number of matters relating to those who were manifesting spiritual gifts in the church at Corinth. What is important, writes Paul, is not supernatural works or spectacular utterances in themselves, but their confession of Jesus as Lord (verse 3). He then goes on to identify different kinds of service in the church associated with nine supernatural gifts of the Spirit (verses 8-10), a diversity that refutes the exclusivism of those who championed speaking in tongues.

- The supernatural gifts listed in verses 8-10 are not exhaustive, but illustrative of God’s life amongst us. Are you aware of any of these gifts operating in your own life? How might you open yourself to being a channel for one or more of these gifts?
- Which of the gifts listed in verses 8-10 do you least understand? Discuss together those that puzzle you most and share your thoughts and experiences with one another in your group.
- Why do you think Paul closes this section on spiritual gifts with the words “just as he [ie. the Spirit] determines” in verse 11?

Paul’s concept of the body of Christ embraces diversity, developed in a humorous and entertaining way in verses 12-31. Paul asserts in verse 7 that each member of the church receives “a manifestation of the Spirit” *for the common good*. What is important is the health of the Corinthian church as a whole, and so the apostle affirms the unity of the church as the body of Christ, characterised by a rich diversity of parts (verse 20: “there are many parts but one body”). Everyone has a part to play, and the Spirit is at work in each member, represented by the sample of obviously supernatural gifts (like tongues and miracles), and what we may call ‘natural gifts’ (like administration and helping) with which the chapter closes (verses 28-30).

- Why do you think Paul highlights the weaker, less honourable and unpresentable, members of the body in his metaphor? What might this say to us for our life together at Coro?
- In verse 31 Paul encourages the Christians at Corinth to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” – what do you think he means by this, and how might this relate to his lists in verses 8-10 and 28-30?
- Love is the supreme fruit of the Spirit (see 13:13) – what is the difference between fruit and gifts, and why does Paul refer to love as “the most excellent way” (verse 31b)?



Chapter 13 is perhaps the most recognised chapter in the whole of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and his teaching on the supremacy of love is integral to his argument that love surpasses what are undoubtedly remarkable manifestations of the Spirit in the life of believers. Indeed, Paul teaches that without love the gifts of the Spirit have no value at all (verses 1-3). He continues by contrasting love with sinful behavior (verses 4-7), with spiritual gifts (verses 8-10), and with all that is imperfect (verses 10-12), before affirming love's eternal supremacy (verse 13).

- Paul opens this chapter by declaring what love is *not* (verses 1-3). Someone once said that our motives are all 'muddy waters'! Do we find it difficult discerning our own motives in Christian service?
- Read through verses 4-7 to yourselves, replacing the words 'love' and 'it' with your own name. How does that make you feel?
- In verse 5 Paul writes that love "keeps no record of wrongs" – whilst this might be true for God (see Isaiah 43:25 and Hebrews 8:12), it's not something we find easy! Can you suggest some steps that might help us to truly forgive those who have wronged us? Can we always forgive and *forget*? Does God (cf. Matthew 12:36)?
- Why does Paul infer that prophecies, tongues and knowledge are imperfect in verses 8-10? Why do some people believe that the gifts of the Spirit have now ceased?
- Paul writes that when we see the Lord face to face, "I shall fully know, even as I am fully known" (verse 12). What do you think this full knowledge (translated as 'understanding' in the RSV) might mean? How does it make you feel?
- Faith, hope and love represent a common triad in Paul's writings (see especially Romans 5:1-5, Galatians 5:5-6, and 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8). Why does he close chapter 13 by declaring that of the three love is supreme?



In 12:1 Paul tells the Corinthians not to be ignorant about spiritual gifts, and in chapter 14 he seeks to correct their excessive use of tongues-speaking. They were misusing the gift, especially in public worship. Before teaching about the public use of tongues, Paul has something to say about the nature and purpose of the gift, and this applies to both private and public use. The thrust of Paul's teaching is that this is a gift that doesn't take us over, as if we get into some trance-like state (see especially verses 6-17).

In summary, if 1 Corinthians 12 is essentially about *unity*, and chapter 13 about *love*, chapter 14 is basically about *order* (see verses 26-40 especially). The gifts of the Spirit are to enable the body of Christ to function as a unity. They are to be exercised always and only in love. And when the spoken gifts of tongues, interpretation – and prophecy – are uttered publicly, they are to be expressed in an orderly way. And notice too that though the Christians at Corinth were misusing the gift of speaking in tongues, they were not to relegate it to the category of 'take-it-or-leave-it' (verses 5, 18, 39). All the gifts of the Spirit have their place in the life of the church.

- In Paul's teaching in this chapter, what is the chief purpose of the gift of tongues when exercised (a) privately, and (b) publicly?
- In this chapter Paul identifies many different ways in which the Corinthians were misusing the gift of tongues – what are they, and what is Paul's remedy for each misuse?
- Consider verses 22-25 together. Why does Paul regard tongues as a sign for unbelievers, and prophecy a sign for believers? How did you react when you first heard someone in public worship (a) speaking in tongues, and (b) prophesying?
- In verse 26 Paul teaches that everyone has "a hymn, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation": how might this more informal worship be encouraged amongst us at Coro in order to build up the church?
- Paul is concerned in this chapter for order in the church. How might you reconcile the apparent contradiction between verses 34-36 and 11:5 regarding the role of women in the church? Does this have any relevance for us today?