

THE LETTERS OF ST. PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART IV

THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE CHURCH AND THE RESURRECTION

I. Chapters 12 through 14 of First Corinthians gives guidance regarding the unity of the Church in the Spirit and in love, and the understanding of special gifts in this context.

A. The context seems to be a disputes, and possibly a question put to St. Paul, of the value of different gifts, especially the gift of speaking in tongues.

1. St. Paul's response emphasizes that all special gifts should be focused on the unity of the church in the Holy Spirit and that the central gift is love.

2. There is a strong emphasis here, more than any other letter, on the unity of the Church. The term used, here and elsewhere for the church (ecclesia) implies in secular Greek an assembly of citizens for a public purpose. St. Paul elevates this notion to a gathering of all the family of God for the purpose of sanctification.

3. St. Paul also begins to emphasize the workings of the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God. In the Old Testament, the notion of the Spirit was a strong one, reflecting the creative and sanctifying force of God. See, e.g., Gen. 1:1; Num. 11:29; Judges 3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25; Ez. 8:1, 36:26, 27:1-14; Joel 3:1 Here, St. Paul describes the Holy Spirit as a force, but also as a person, giving gifts and guiding people to faith.

- Here, as elsewhere, St. Paul refers to God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit as cooperating to unite the church. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:1-11, 12:12-13, 24.

4. St. Paul emphasizes two gifts in particular, prophesy and speaking in tongues. He considers both gifts to be legitimate, but the former to be much more important.

- Prophecy appears to be a special insight into the mysteries of the kingdom of God, a special insight into a person's life, or perhaps even a sort of vision, as in private revelation. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II q. 171, especially art. 3. It seems to be common enough for people to be speaking with that prophesy in a regular

basis. See also Rom. 12:6; 1 Thess. 5:20. It could be that, in the early days of the Church, God gave this gift often to get the Church off to a good start. Or it could be that prophesy simply refers to an inspired insight that Christians can more commonly have through the Holy Spirit.

- Of old Moses had wished that all the people prophesy, and the prophet Joel foretold a day in which that wish would be fulfilled. See Num. 11:29, Joel 3:1. St. Peter identified Pentecost as that day, and by extension all Christians as sharing in that vision. See Acts 2:16-21. The idea is, in part, that all Christians are called to share in the Spirit, especially through what are called the gifts of the Holy Spirit. See Catechism 767-68, 1831.

- The gift of speaking in tongues appears to have been the ability to speak or pray in a language unknown to the speaker and likely to the congregation. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II q. 176. This gift appears to have faded from the church after the first centuries but has apparently been given on at some occasions in recent decades. St. Paul considers this gift to be legitimate, but more as a spur to the faith of those who do not have or have lost it than for building up the community of faith.

5. Overall, chapter 12 speaks of the general principle of the unity of the church and chapter 13 of the supreme and universal gift of love, with hope and charity. Chapter 14 then applies these principles to the use of special gifts.

B. Chapter 12 develops the idea of the unity of the Church through the image of the body, saying that the Church is the body of Christ,

1. The first 3 verses give the controlling principle that the Spirit must guide all in the Church.

- He points out that any use of a gift to break from doctrine or piety (in saying "Jesus be anathama") is proof positive that the speaker has not the Spirit. It is an application of the principle that by their fruits, prophets will be known. See Matt. 5:15-20, 12:33-37.

- Likewise, he affirms that all who have faith have been guided by the Spirit to be strong enough to say, "Jesus is Lord." The Holy Spirit is thus the guiding principle for everything.

2. Then, with a Trinitarian emphasis, St. Paul says three times that all gifts are from God, referring to the Spirit, the Lord (implied Jesus), and God.

- When St. Paul is invoking the Trinity, he usually refers to the Father simply as God, to the Son as the Lord or the Lord Jesus, and then to the Holy Spirit, but in a fashion that implies equality. See, e.g., Rom. 8:14-16; 2 Cor. 3:1-6; Eph. 4:1-4. He is trying to avoid the implication that they are all the same because they are all God.

- He then enumerates several special gifts, i.e. wisdom, expression of knowledge, faith, healing, mighty deed, prophesy, discernment of spirits, the gift of tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Listing the gift of faith among these special gifts is curious, given the fact that he later says that this virtue is given to all. It appears that this gift means something more than ordinary faith. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II q. 5, art. 4. It is associated later in Corinthians with miracles, see 1 Cor. 13:2, and in Romans with prophesy, which may mean the development or deepening of faith. See Rom. 12:3-8.

3. St. Paul then describes the famous image of the Church as the Body of Christ. See also Rom. 2:4-5; Eph. 2:16, Col. 3:15.

- The image of a body was common in the classical world, used by the likes of Seneca and other Stoics, Livy and Plato. However, they meant more a sense of a community as a corporate body, formed by a common idea or goal. Here, St. Paul takes the image to a new level, describing the Church as a body that joins heaven and earth through Jesus. And, without the condescension many philosophers had towards seemingly lesser callings, St. Paul emphasizes the need and interdependence of the whole body, eschewing any privileged place.

- Pope Pius XII, the Vatican II Council, and the Catechism, all emphasize that the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. The term mystical tries to avoid several errors: (1) the notion that the Church is merely a moral body, like a corporation or a community guided by a common interest or ideas; (2) the notion that the Church is so united that the individuals have no more freedom than the parts of a physical body; or (3) the attempt to explain away the image in merely worldly terms. See Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* (1943); Vatican II Council *Lumen Gentium* 7; Catechism 787-95.

- The main emphasis here is that people should not seek the seemingly more important gifts, but rather seek the Spirit to carry out their rightful roles. He does list offices, starting with apostles and prophets. Prophecy seems, not only to be a gift, but also a certain position. It may be that, in addition to the ability to receive inspirations on a regular basis, there were some people who regularly received particularly great gifts. See Didache ch. 11, 13 (circa 120).

C. Chapter 13 then gives the controlling principle of the gifts, the virtue of love, along with faith and hope.

1. The term for love, agape, was fairly rare in Greek before Christians took it up. When used in Greek, it generally meant a sort of fellowship. The New Testament does not so much define love, as shows Jesus as the perfect example, bringing forth the goodness God wishes through self-sacrifice. See, e.g., John 3:16, 13:34-35.

2. St. Paul first points out that all speech, knowledge, and sacrifices are worthless without love.

3. Then St. Paul proceeds with signs of love, both what will not be present (rudeness, self-interest, temper, jealousy) and what will be present (patience, kindness, belief, hope, endurance.) Likewise, in Galatians, St. Paul lists fruits of the Holy Spirit as, among other things, ways of knowing whether one's life is in the Spirit. See Gal. 5:22-23.

- The list can be considered an examination of conscience. The Galatians are challenged to fulfill these conditions.

- The verbs at the end "bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things", which are in Greek *stegia*, *elpizia*, and *upomenia*, have a connotation of a building. They can mean roofing, securing a wall, and laying a foundation. Thus, the image goes back to the Church and each person as a temple.

4. St. Paul then describes such things as prophecy, tongues and religious knowledge as a partial knowledge that will be fulfilled in the sight of God.

- He describes them as seeing indistinctly, as in a mirror. At that time, mirrors were usually metal that only partially reflected an image. When we come face to face with God, all such partial knowledge will be irrelevant, for the full knowledge will be there. They are as childish concepts compared to full knowledge. Thus, boasting about greater or lesser knowledge here is like small children boasting of their knowledge or talents in the midst of intelligent adults.

- St. Paul does not describe good deeds as only temporary. The idea may be that the results of our good deeds on earth will go with us into heaven. See Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 39.

5. St. Paul lists what we now call the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity, as the gifts that will last.

- He says that all three will last. The question is how faith and hope remain in heaven when they are based upon what is unseen and unfulfilled, and in heaven there will be the sight of God and fulfillment of all desire. See Heb. 11:1; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II q. 18, art. 2. It may be, however, that the saints in heaven are continually increasing in happiness and in the vision of God, and therefore, always placing faith and hope in something greater.

D. Chapter 14 then applies these principles to the use of "charismatic gifts," i.e. gifts given to some Christians but not all. See Catechism 799-801, 951. The emphasis is especially on prophesy and speaking in tongues

1. St. Paul first emphasizes the importance of these charisms building up the people of God. See also Rom. 12:3-8; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4; 1 Pet. 4:10-11 (emphasizing the special gifts as given for the sake of building up the people of God.) Prophesy does so, revealing mysteries for the sake of salvation.

- One aspect here is that prophesy is clear enough to be understood, in contrast to the vague oracles of the Greeks.

- He goes back to the battle analogy, with prophesy like instruction or a bugle guiding people and giving them courage. He also uses again the building analogy, with all of the gifts for the good of the building, not just to look good in themselves.

2. In verses 13 to 19, St. Paul indicates that speaking in tongues is more or a private prayer than worthy of a church, for it is not a discernable prayer that people can assent to.

- St. Paul does indicate that he prays in tongues, but in private.

3. Verses 20 to 25 then gives reasons why God may inspire speaking in tongues. He goes back to the prophesy of Isaiah

that God would teach His stubborn and disobedient people with a people of unknown languages (i.e. foreigners who would invade) to bring the people back to Him. See Is. 28:9-13; see also Duet. 28:49.

- St. Paul then says that speaking in tongues is a sign for unbelievers, not instruction for believers. The statement is paradoxical, given the fact that St. Paul then follows in it by saying that one should not speak in tongues when outsiders (presumably unbelievers) are present lest they be scandalized and confused. It could be that tongues are a sign for those who have lapsed from the faith, as opposed to newcomers. Or it could be that the claim that tongues are a sign for unbelievers is a statement St. Paul is quoting in order to refute.

- Verses 26 through 28 then give the general principle that any speaking in tongues or any other gift should be given in a charitable fashion and comprehensible to others. There is no notion here of a mystery cult comprehensible only to the select few.

4. Verses 29 through 40 then give some general rules of order. Among other things, St. Paul instructs the people that they should let each other speak and discern what is from God. Any true prophet should be subject to "the prophets' control." It is not clear who these general prophets are. It could be that they are designated for the purpose of discernment.

- The reference to women not speaking is interesting, given St. Paul's earlier description of women offering prayers and prophesy. The reference is probably: (1) to a situation in which some or many women would interrupt the speaker of prophesy or other instruction to ask questions; or (2) to the specific office of discerning which prophecies are from God. If the former interpretation is correct, it is simply an instruction that people should be allowed to finish their speech before others interrupt. If the latter interpretation is correct, those with the office of discernment were probably clerics, who would all be men.

II. In chapter 15, St. Paul deals with people who argued that there is no resurrection of the dead.

A. The chances are that they were not arguing against the immortality of the soul, but rather in Platonic form, arguing that at death the soul is liberating and is blessed if it never again has a body.

B. St. Paul first recounts again what he has received, this time about the Resurrection. The introduction is similar to that of chapter 11, regarding the Eucharist. Jesus likewise connected the two principles in John 6

- St. Paul emphasizes that the resurrection was in accordance with Scripture. The Scripture here would have been the Hebrew Scriptures, for except for a couple of St. Paul's own letters, none of the New Testament had yet been written.
- St. Paul describes appearances of Jesus to James, and to some 500 people, which the Gospels do not relate. Likewise, he leaves out some appearances, particularly those to Mary Magdalene and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It seems that there were a number of appearances. St. Paul emphasizes that the witnesses are mostly alive, giving credibility to their account.
- He also recounts the appearance of Jesus to himself as to one untimely born. The usual reference would be to a prematurely born baby. But here, Jesus appeared to St. Paul instead late in time.

C. Verses 15 to 28 then argue that Christ's resurrection is the center of our entire faith. There are several reasons for the necessity of belief in the Resurrection.

1. Because Jesus' disciples said they had seen the risen Christ, one cannot reject this belief without rejecting them, the earliest witnesses of the faith, as unreliable.
2. Jesus' own resurrection is the cause of our own. He draws us by His own risen life. If in fact, the body is not raised from the dead, then everything done in this world is meaningless, and those who have lived the faith in this world are wasting their efforts.
3. St. Paul also argues that, if Jesus in fact overcame the sin of Adam, then He would overcome the central punishment of that sin, i.e. death. The implication is that, without the resurrection, sin and death are finally triumphant in this world.
 - But instead, St. Paul presents the history of the world as a drama leading to the day when Jesus will present the world to His Father. Given that he speaks here of the Son as being subject to the Father, St. Paul is presumably referring to His human nature. Cf. Matt. 26:39, 42.

D. In verses 29 through 34, St. Paul argues that prayers for the dead and sacrifices would mean nothing without the resurrection.

1. It is not clear what St. Paul means by baptisms for the dead. It may have been an attempt to baptize the dead, which St. Paul presumably does not immediately condemn because he has other issues to deal with. It could have been prayers for the dead, asking God to release them from what we now call purgatory. It could be some people offered the merits of their own baptism for the dead as well.

2. St. Paul also argues that the sufferings of this life are meaningless if we are not going to be raised from the dead. If the resurrection is only of the soul, then these bodily sufferings are worthless and one may as well simply enjoy this life while maintaining an abstract faith.

E. Verses 35 through 49 then argue that the risen body is based upon this body, but vastly more glorious than it.

- He is probably arguing against those who wondered why someone would want forever the limited clumsy human body, favoring instead a "liberated" soul.

- He draws two analogies. One analogy is of the seed falling to the ground and then springing up into a tree. This analogy, similar to the one Jesus gave to the Greek pilgrims, emphasizes that this body is the basis, but not limitation to the glorified body. See John 12:20-26. The second analogy is that the current body is to the glorified one as the moon to the sun, with some similarities, but a vast difference. There may be an allusion to the images from Jesus' parable of the weeds and wheat and the words of Daniel and Wisdom that the just will shine like the stars. See Matt. 13:43; Wis. 3:7; Dan. 12:3

- St. Paul again refers to Jesus as the second Adam, bringing us from the condemnation to death of the first Adam to life with Him in the new creation.

F. In verses 50 through 58, St. Paul concludes with a glorious vision of the triumph over death.

1. It begins with a warning, as verses 33 and 34 had, that one's behavior is the basis for triumphing with Christ. Those who are attached to the flesh and blood and those who live corruptly are not preparing to enter that greater realm.

2. As in chapter 2, St. Paul speaks of a mystery, but one that is open to anyone who is open to God.

- He speaks of a trumpet blare that will announce the fulfillment of all things. There is a military imagery here of a

final, cataclysmic battle. See also Num. 10; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:15-16; Matt. 24:31. The Book of Revelation will take up this theme of seven trumpets regarding plagues visited upon earth. See Rev. 8-11.

3. There is a notion of taking on new clothing, which likely represents a new status, vastly greater than the old one of subjects under law, sin and death. In the new kingdom those ready will be promoted to the greater realm, and triumph over death will be celebrated.

- Reversing the negative prophesy of Hosea that the unregenerate kingdom would be swallowed up in death, St. Paul now prophesies of a great victory now.

- Anticipating themes that will be developed more in Romans, St. Paul speaks of the law bringing the sting of sin (for the inevitable violations of the law would increase sin), and sin bringing the sting of death, the punishment of sin.

- The conclusion is a celebration of victory through Jesus, but lest people believe that they can simply relax, St. Paul concludes by saying that we must be steadfast in the work of the Lord. Work and faith are in no way rivals.