

who may not be able to afford it. Otherwise the solemn moment when past and future come together in the present may bring judgment, not blessing.

Paul finishes by saying he will set the other things straight when he arrives. This is tantalizing for us; we wish we could listen in on some of his other instructions as well! But it is also a challenge. Paul has left some things unsaid, but we can be sure he would deal with each problem in the same way, and on the same basis, that he has used for the things he has written about so far. We need to think through other areas of church life and practice, as well as the ones he has dealt with here, with the same shrewd clarity and on the same theological principles.

1 CORINTHIANS 12.1-11

The Same Spirit at Work

¹Now: about things relating to the spirit's work, my brothers and sisters, I don't want you to remain ignorant. ²You know that when you were still pagans you were led off, carried away again and again, after speechless idols. ³So I want to make it clear to you that nobody who is speaking by God's spirit ever says 'Jesus be cursed!'; and nobody can say 'Jesus is Lord!'; except by the holy spirit.

⁴There are different types of spiritual gifts, but the same spirit; ⁵there are different types of service, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are different types of activity, but it is the same God who operates all of them in everyone. ⁷Each one is given the revealing of the spirit for the general good. ⁸One person is given a word of wisdom through the spirit; another, a word of knowledge by the same spirit; ⁹another, faith through the same spirit; another, gifts of healing by the one spirit; ¹⁰another, the working of mighty deeds; another, prophecy; another, the ability to distinguish spirits; another, various kinds of languages;

another, the interpretation of languages. ¹¹It is the one spirit, the same one, whose work produces all these things; and the spirit gives different gifts to each one in accordance with the spirit's own wishes.

One of the most exciting experiences of my teenage years was playing in an orchestra at school. I had learned the piano for a year or two, but you normally play that without other musicians joining in. Now I began the trombone. Of course, when you start an instrument you have to learn and practise by yourself. You make your mistakes, and try out scales, arpeggios, and small solo pieces, in private. But then, one day, you get to sit with forty or fifty others, and discover that though you're all playing different instruments, and most of you are playing different parts, it all fits together and – if everyone is doing what they should! – it makes a wonderful combined sound.

I quickly discovered that there are class distinctions within an orchestra. The strings consider themselves superior to all others; they are the senior section, they carry the tune in many classical works. Within the strings, the violins consider themselves superior; ask anyone who plays the viola or double bass. But within the wind section, too, there are distinctions. The flutes and oboes consider themselves superior to the brass, and within the brass the trumpets definitely regard themselves superior to the trombones. The only form of animal life lower than a trombone, it seemed to me then, was the tuba, the triangle and the timpani.

All this is normally meant in good fun, but it does create a strange hierarchy among musicians. Of course, there are hidden moments when everybody depends on instruments that are normally looked down on: you can't start Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* unless the trombones are on good

form, and you couldn't think of playing Dvořák's *New World Symphony* unless you had a first-class cor anglais player. Sooner or later, as you work your way through the repertoire, the instruments have to acknowledge that they all need each other if the music is to be complete.

The problem Paul now confronts in Corinth is that within the Christian orchestra (so to speak) there were some who considered themselves superior to others, and there was a danger as a result that the whole symphony might be played out of balance and even out of tune. Paul writes this section of the letter, in fact, almost as if it's a symphony in itself: chapter 12 is the opening movement, with an introduction (the present passage) leading to a great statement of the central tune (verses 12 and 13), which is then explored from several angles (verses 14-26) before the theme is restated (verses 27-31). Then there comes a second 'movement', a lyrical, gentle but very powerful section, the poem about love in chapter 13. This is so well known that people often forget it was originally written to be the centrepiece of a longer section. Finally in chapter 14 there comes the extensive 'third movement' where Paul takes the theory of chapter 12, seen in the light of chapter 13, and applies it to the real problem, which is the tension between those who possess and practise different 'spiritual gifts'.

For the moment, then, he is concerned to state some first principles. In terms of the illustration we've used so far, we could put it like this: yes, there are indeed different instruments, but all require the same musicianship; there are different styles of playing, but they're all following the same conductor; and there are different tones and volumes of playing, but it's the same composer who wrote the piece and whose music must come through in the performance.

The illustration doesn't work completely here, because

nothing in human experience corresponds precisely to Paul's picture of God. But in verses 4, 5 and 6 Paul does something striking at exactly that level. At the very moment when he's wanting to say that the various gifts that different Christians are all to be seen within a unity, the unity which is God himself, he expresses that unity in three closely related ways: Spirit, Lord and God. Paul doesn't get into abstract philosophical language here about how these three relate to each other, but from this point there is a straight line into the explorations of the Trinity that later theologians would undertake.

That is the main thing Paul wants to say here, but the way he leads in to it is a little more complicated. To begin with, the word he uses in verse 1, which is sometimes translated 'spiritual gifts', doesn't really mean that; it's just 'spiritual things'. Paul changes it for the word 'gifts', which is usually understood as 'spiritual gifts, gifts from God through the working of the spirit', in verse 4, but to begin with he seems to be responding to questions they have raised which they have expressed in terms simply of 'spiritual things'. (When we get to verses 27-31, we will look in more detail at the particular gifts he mentions.)

In the light of the way this word is used elsewhere in the letter, we should probably understand that some at least in Corinth, in line with their other tendencies, were regarding people who possessed some of the 'gifts' as more 'spiritual' than the others - a danger which recurs in the church from time to time. Paul faces a problem which the modern Western world faces a lot: the confusion in people's minds between something that's *spiritual* and something that's *Christian*. In our world (my world, and that of many of my readers) that's been starved of 'spirituality', it's easy to suppose that anything which seems to be in touch with something 'spiritual' or

'supernatural' must be from God. In a world (that of the Corinthians) where people were sometimes labelled 'spiritual' to set them apart from ordinary mortals, experience of the sort of gifts that the spirit gives to different Christians could lead people to suppose that those who received them were thereby promoted to a class above all other Christians. Paul's answer to them is also an answer to us.

He reminds them (verse 2) that in their pagan life ('when you were **Gentiles**', he says, literally; this reminds us that Paul saw Christians as 'neither Jew nor Greek', but a new entity altogether) their worship of speechless idols sometimes carried them away into ecstasy. Nothing particularly 'Christian' about 'spiritual experience', then! After all, the point of being in touch with the things of the spirit is not in order to have exciting experiences but so that you will be loyal to Jesus, the risen Lord.

That's why he sets out a test: supposing somebody were to say, either because this was the conclusion they'd come to or because they were carried along by some spirit or other, that 'Jesus is cursed'; such a person couldn't be inspired by the true spirit of the true God. This is puzzling, since, perhaps not surprisingly, we don't know of anyone who actually said this in the early church. It may be that some, in Corinth or elsewhere, were wanting to go beyond Jesus into new forms of spiritual experience, or, perhaps through Jewish influence, regarded him as cursed because of his crucifixion (see Galatians 3.13).

Instead, Paul declares, nobody can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the **holy spirit**. This is a very important statement. 'Jesus is Lord' is one of the most basic statements of Christian faith (see Romans 10.9; Philipians 2.11). This means that every Christian has already said it; every Christian, therefore, according to Paul, has already been brought to this point by the holy spirit. This fits with what Paul says elsewhere, that the

spirit works through the preaching of the **gospel** to bring people to faith and **baptism** (see e.g. 1 Thessalonians 1.5; 2.13).

In addition, anyone who said 'Jesus is Lord' in Paul's world, especially in a Roman colony like Corinth, would know that part of what this meant was 'and Caesar isn't'. As the church in subsequent centuries would discover, those who pursue their own spirituality for the sake of the experience may well be able to create a safe sphere in which they can have an exciting time without engaging with the real world. (This may have been another reason why some might have wanted to say 'A curse on Jesus': a century later than this, people were burnt at the stake for refusing to say that.)

But those who name Jesus as Lord, experiencing the power of God's holy spirit in doing so, are thereby brought into the social and political battlefield. The Corinthians were in danger of looking at spirituality as an area of personal growth and experience. Paul wants them to see it as the place where the one true God, known in the three ways he outlines in verses 4-6, equips people to advance his **kingdom** in the face of the principalities and powers of the world.

1 CORINTHIANS 12.12-20

Many Members, One Body

¹²Let me explain. Just as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is the Messiah. ¹³For we all were baptized into one body, by one spirit - whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free - and we were all given one spirit to drink.

¹⁴For the body, indeed, is not one member, but many. ¹⁵If the foot were to say, 'Because I'm not a hand, I'm not part of the body,' that wouldn't make it any less a part of the body, would it? ¹⁶And if the ear were to say, 'Because I'm not an eye, I'm not part of the body,' that wouldn't make it any less a part

of the body, would it? ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were the sense of hearing, what would happen to the sense of smell? ¹⁸But as it is, God has organized the members, placing each one individually in the body according to his wishes. ¹⁹If all the parts were one member, where would the body be? ²⁰So the result is this: there are many members, but one body.

Paul uses one of his most spectacular and famous illustrations in this and the following passage. It would be gilding the lily to introduce it by another one of our own, so we may as well jump straight to the point.

But the point isn't precisely what many people think when they read what he says about the foot and the hand, the ear and the eye. Many people have supposed that the main thing he's saying is simply that all Christians have gifts which they must contribute to the overall life of the church, and particularly that no Christian must look down on another because they don't share the same particular gifts. More positively, it has been assumed that he is simply painting a picture of the church as a place where every member has something important to contribute. This is true as far as it goes. Paul would have been shocked, possibly even amused in a sad sort of way, at the idea which has prevailed in much official Christianity, that 'ministry', or 'Christian work or service', is something engaged in only by those who are in full-time paid church employment. The phrase 'every-member ministry' would have rung bells with him. In fact, the word 'member', which we often use without thinking where it's come from, owes its place in Christian thinking and speaking not least to this present passage, where the word means 'limb' or 'organ'. The word started out as part of a metaphor – a single body, many 'members' – and has become flattened out into a more general word, 'people who belong'.

All of this is true as far as it goes. But what Paul is saying goes much further. There are three things here in particular.

For a start, he isn't simply choosing this as one 'illustration' at random. (In our last passage, I used the illustration of the orchestra like that – simply as an example of a sphere of life where everybody does something different and it's all supposed to work together.) When he talks about a human being, a human body, he is writing as a Jewish thinker for whom, with Genesis 1 and 2 in the background (and we know from elsewhere in the letter that he had them very much in mind), the question of God creating a new, true humanity in and through the *Messiah*, Jesus, was all-important. In chapter 15 verse 27 he will quote from Psalm 8, the passage in which God declares that human beings are put in authority over the world, and he will declare that this has now happened in Jesus the *Messiah*. So for him to choose the image of a human body to express what those who belong to the *Messiah* have now become, and how they are to live, is deep with significance. The church is to be the place where, together, we learn how to be God's genuinely human beings, worshipping God and serving him by reflecting his image in the world.

Second, it is significant that he doesn't speak of the church as the body of *Jesus*, but of *the Messiah*. In some Jewish ways of thinking about Israel's king, we find the belief that the king, and particularly God's ultimate king, the *Messiah*, would represent Israel, would sum them up in himself, so that what was true of him would be true of them. (Think of David representing Israel when he fought with Goliath on Israel's behalf in 1 Samuel 17.) Already in this letter Paul has several times hinted at what he makes clear in other writings, that those who belong to Jesus as *Messiah*, those in whom the *holy spirit* lives, are the true people of God, the renewed Israel. He has already declared that the people who came out of Egypt at the

Exodus are 'our fathers' (10.1). He has reminded the Corinthians that they used to be pagans, but now are not any more (12.2). He has even spoken of ethnic Israel as 'Israel according to the flesh' (10.18), hinting at a contrast with a different 'Israel', the one the Corinthians themselves now belong to.

How is he best to express this? Well, the great renewal which God has accomplished in the Messiah was achieved when Jesus was put to death in his 'flesh' – his corruptible, mortal body, that was capable of dying and did indeed die – and brought to new life in his **resurrection** 'body', with the dead flesh transformed by God's act of dramatic new creation. Paul will return to this in chapter 15. So here, speaking of Christians as part of 'the Messiah's body', Paul has chosen a way of addressing their particular problems (how to exercise spiritual gifts) while showing where the foundations of his thought about them lie. The most basic thing about the church is its identity as God's true people, defined over against both paganism and non-Christian Judaism.

Third, Paul must have known that many non-Christian and non-Jewish writers had already used the metaphor of the 'body' as a way of talking about social, civic and political life. There were political theorists in his own day who could speak in that way of the state, or the empire, or the cosmos, as a single body, perhaps with the emperor as its head, but certainly with the different citizens all having their own parts to play. Here and elsewhere Paul is marking out an identity for the Christians as a new and different sort of community, owing allegiance to a new and different 'Lord' (see verse 3). What this means in practice Paul hints at at various points in his letters. Here, though his surface-level meaning is to do with the danger of one Christian looking down on another, he is concerned to speak about this problem within the echo-chamber

of his whole view of the Christian family as the true humanity, the true Israel, the true world empire.

The most striking thing in this remarkable passage is the way he introduces it in verse 12. We might have expected him to say 'as the body is one and has many members . . . so also is *the church*', or at least 'so also is *the body of the Messiah*'. He doesn't. He simply says 'so also is *the Messiah*'.

We have to tread carefully here. Some have said that God, or Jesus, 'has no hands but our hands' with which to work in the world today; that (thank God) is not true. Others have supposed that what he means is that when the fleshly body of Jesus died on the cross, what rose on Easter day was not that same body, but simply and solely the church, the community of the faithful. Dozens of passages in Paul make it clear that that's not what he means, not least chapter 15 of the present letter. No: what he means here by 'the Messiah', as in Galatians 3.16 and elsewhere, is 'the Messiah as the one who represents his people, in whom his people are summed up'.

But how do people come to belong to this community of the Messiah-and-his-people? Here, as elsewhere (e.g. Romans 6.2-11; Galatians 3.27), Paul sees **baptism** itself as the means of entering the family. Sometimes people have taken his phrase 'baptized in one spirit' to refer to a special experience of being filled or equipped with the spirit, at some time after one has come to belong to the Messiah's people (through the ordinary baptism in water). The only thing to be said for this is that sometimes in Acts the phrase seems to be used for this second stage of initiation, but this doesn't seem to be how Paul is using it here.

Paul is precisely not talking about a special experience in which some Christians join a superior class, leaving other Christians behind. That was the danger he was anxious to avoid. He had stressed earlier on, in verse 3, that nobody could

say 'Jesus is Lord' (the basic baptismal confession) except by the holy spirit. His point here is expressed in two parallel ways: Paul, as ever, is happy to mix his metaphors! First, the spirit is at work to introduce people into the Messiah's family in the first place ('by one spirit we were all baptized into one body'); second, the same spirit is at work to sustain Christians day by day in that membership ('we were all given the one spirit to drink'). Plunged in the spirit to begin with, drinking from the spirit day by day: that is how Paul sees all Christians alike. And, again as in Galatians 3, he insists that this experience cuts clean across the great social divisions of his day, Jew and Greek, slave and free. If we can get straight on this we will be ready for the more explicitly practical points he now wants to make.

1 CORINTHIANS 12.21-26

The Responsibilities of Each Member

²¹The eye can't say to the hand, 'I don't need you'; and, again, the head can't say to the foot, 'I don't need you.' ²²No: the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, ²³and we give much greater honour to the parts of the body we reckon more dishonourable, so that the parts we hide in shame have a far greater dignity ²⁴which our more presentable parts don't need. In fact, God has organized the body; he has given greater honour to the lesser part, ²⁵so that there won't be any division in the body, but that all the members may have the same concern for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. If one member is exalted, all the members celebrate along with it.

Two weeks ago, I woke up in the night with sharp and throbbing toothache. Nobody who has ever had that experience will need to be reminded just how all-consuming such pain can

suddenly become. I took some painkilling tablets but they didn't help. I walked round and round the house hoping that by exercising other parts of the body the tooth would settle down. I tried to read an exciting book to take my mind off it, but of course I couldn't even think about what the book was saying. When, finally, the painkillers took effect and I went back to sleep, it was as though my whole body, not just the wretched tooth, had given an enormous sign of relief.

This obvious example shows what Paul meant when he said that 'if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it'. It isn't difficult to think of examples of his other point, about one member being 'exalted' - the word literally means 'glorified', but within his continuing picture he presumably thinks of a part of the body experiencing pleasure instead of pain. The ear enjoys music, but it seems as though our whole self is caught up in it. The face enjoys warm sunshine, but it seems to penetrate through the entire body. And so on.

Paul's eagerness that the Corinthians should understand how every single member in the Christian family matters as much as every other one is leading him to lay deep foundations for the practical application of all this in chapter 14. And in doing so he has taken the metaphor of the body, which was well known in the ancient world as a picture for civic society, and has made it do quite a new sort of job. This is a typical example of Paul picking up an idea current in his society and making it dance to a different tune.

In some famous examples where Roman orators declared that the whole society was like a human body, the point they were making, as well as the interdependence of the 'body politic' as we say, was that the different jobs involved a difference of *status*. Some, quite simply, were more important than others: more high-profile, more honourable, carrying more dignity, more valuable to the common good. Others, by

1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-26 The Responsibilities of Each Member

contrast, were dishonourable, fit for people of a lower sort, more dispensable. (This attitude, of course, was sadly not confined to pagan Romans; it has recurred throughout history. Every generation needs to hear 1 Corinthians afresh.)

Here, by contrast, Paul undermines any actual or potential boasting in the church by insisting that every single member of the body is just as indispensable as any other. Never let one part say to another, 'I don't need you!' In fact, when Paul does agree that some parts of the body are less presentable than others – that there are some parts (the sexual organs, obviously) that we cover up and are ashamed to expose in public – he turns the argument around and insists that these parts are thereby given a greater honour.

What does he mean by this? Perhaps he is thinking of the way in which, in a great imperial household, the person with the greatest honour is the person who is normally protected from view. The emperor himself does not come out and appear to everyone walking past on the street. Only the minor officials do that. From this point of view, the 'shame' which covers up certain parts of the body should not imply that we wish we did not possess such things. It should imply, rather, that these things are far too important for every passer-by to glance at.

Perhaps also, underneath this argument, is Paul's deeply Jewish sense, already evidenced in 11:2-11, that the male/female distinction, marked of course by the sexual organs, is one of the creator's most important signs in our human nature, in which male and female together reflect God's image (Genesis 1:26-28, despite the strange passage in 11:7 of the present letter). Some philosophies despised the body, and the sexual organs in particular, as dirty, shabby, and potentially or actually evil. Paul, by contrast, celebrates them as God-given. This is what enables him, as he makes his own use of the common picture, to insist on equality between different

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-31a Gifts and Ministries

functions, leaving no room for social, cultural or 'spiritual' elitism or snobbery within the church. The examples he uses in verses 21-22, leading to the point about the parts of the body of which we are ashamed, are actually rather strange. In what sense is the head or the foot, or the eye or the hand, 'weaker' than its fellow-member? Paul seems to be echoing here the language of the 'weak and the strong' from chapter 8, and anticipating his practical conclusions about the way in which different members of the church regard themselves and one another.

Paul clearly has the life of the local congregation in mind. He wants every Christian in Corinth to value every other Christian, and to care for him or her, just like the hand comes to bandage the injured foot, or the foot hurries to take the injured head to hospital. That remains enormously important in every Christian fellowship, congregation and church the world over. But we in our age have been given, through instant electronic communication, a far more detailed picture of the worldwide church than any previous generation has ever had; and shall we restrict our sense of being members of the Messiah's body simply to the people we see every week? Should we not also rejoice with, or grieve with, all Christians around the globe who celebrate or suffer?

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-31a
Gifts and Ministries

²⁷Now you together are the Messiah's body; and individually you are members of it. ²⁸In the church, God has placed apostles first, then prophets, then teachers, then powerful deeds, then gifts of healing, helpful deeds, organizational gifts, different types of languages. ²⁹Not everyone is an apostle, are they? Not everyone is a prophet! Not everyone is a teacher! Not everyone

does powerful deeds!³⁰ Not everyone has gifts of healing! Not everyone speaks with tongues! Not everyone interprets!³¹ You should be eager for the better kinds of gifts.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, in his autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda*, tells how he served as secretary to the committee that was drawing up, during the 1940s, the constitution for the newly united Church of South India. The chairman raised the question: what shall we do about canons, deans, archdeacons and the like? 'I paused,' said Newbigin, 'with my pen ready to write down the decision of the committee. Nobody said anything for a while; then a single voice said "Abolish them." Since nobody challenged this proposal, I wrote down the one word: Abolished.'

That cheerful iconoclastic approach to 'offices' held by some within the ordained ministry of the church was a response to the needs of a new situation. The newly formed body saw no need to perpetuate the kinds of subtle distinctions that had gradually come to be taken for granted in the older churches which were joining together. And, though Paul clearly envisages the need for something we can call 'offices' within the church (see the 'bishops and deacons' in Philippians 1.1, for instance), he seems to go out of his way to avoid giving us the same list twice, just in case we should suppose that he had an actual hierarchy in mind – which is of course what this chapter is intending to rule out.

In verses 8-10 of the present chapter, which we didn't discuss at that point because we were saving it for now, he lists nine activities which the **spirit** enables within the church: words of wisdom, words of knowledge, **faith**, gifts of healing, working of power, prophecy, discerning of spirits, kinds of languages (or 'tongues'), the interpretation of tongues. Here, in verse 28, he lists eight: **apostles**, prophets, teachers, powerful

works, gifts of healing, helpers, organizers, different kinds of tongues. When he lists them again in verse 29, to ask rhetorically whether every member of the church fits any one of these categories, he goes through the list in the same order, but omits helpers and organizers and adds 'the interpretation of tongues' at the end.

The lists have some things, but by no means everything, in common with two other lists: Romans 12.6-8 and Ephesians 4.11. In the Romans passage Paul lists prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, presiding and showing mercy; of these, only prophecy overlaps with the lists in 1 Corinthians 12. In Ephesians, he lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers (it isn't quite clear whether these last two are different people or the same ones). Apostles, prophets and teachers overlap with 1 Corinthians 12.28 and 29, but again the lists diverge after that.

When we put all this raw material together, what do we get? A muddle, some might be tempted to imagine. No, Paul would say: the rich, diverse life of God's people. Obviously Paul has not felt under any constraint to say on every occasion the complete sum total of everything he could have said. Equally obviously, there are some fixed points, and we do well to ponder them as we think about how to apply his teaching in today's church. And one of the applications might well be that the church as a whole should be flexible, and not feel under an obligation to insist on exactly the same forms of ministry on all occasions and in all places.

The fixed points, though, should be clear. Paul considers as spiritual gifts *both* those gifts that mainstream churches have seen as central, not least those which involve teaching, building people up in the faith, *and* those gifts normally regarded as 'charismatic' – which is misleading, because Paul's point is that all these gifts, including 'helping' and 'administration', are

'charismatic', are gifts of the spirit. Already we begin to see his point about one category not looking down on another.

Since we know from 9.1 what Paul thinks makes someone an 'apostle' (seeing the risen Lord), it should be clear that the gift he describes as 'first', and which also appears in that position in Ephesians 4.11, is not just a 'charismatic experience', but a fact about the way certain people were called to the service of the Messiah. These are, in other words, gifts *through which God establishes and builds up his church*. From Paul's point of view, there were no second-generation apostles; the next generation would have to build on the foundation he had laid, not lay it afresh. But that the church remains 'apostolic' in the sense of 'founded on the preaching and teaching of the apostles' is a thoroughly Pauline insight.

If this is what these gifts were, they were not given for people to enjoy the experience of receiving or exercising them. Of course, there is an exhilaration, a delight, in being fully what God has called and equipped you to be. But the point is that the 'gift' is God's gift to the whole church *through* the individual who has received it. God, naturally, gives gifts to different people in such a way that the church will be bonded together in ways that God sees as appropriate.

After 'apostles' we find, in all the lists, 'prophecy'. This is distinguished from 'teaching', and there is no agreement on what Paul meant by it or whether it is still important today. Some have seen it in terms of the teaching of scripture, opening the Bible with special insight for a new generation. Others have suggested that it has to do with speaking 'words of the risen Jesus' to the church, enabling Jesus to communicate with his people in the power of the spirit. This shades off into a special 'spiritual gift' which has nothing to do with learning or biblical study, but which comes instead, like tongues and healing, into the category of 'non-natural' or 'supernatural'

workings. Perhaps, then, 'prophecy' is the activity through which particular words are given to particular individuals or groups by people speaking in church and claiming that the spirit is leading them to say such things, or that Jesus himself is speaking these words?

That kind of ministry undoubtedly happens, and Paul is comfortable with it. (According to Acts, he sometimes exercised it himself, for instance in 27.31-34.) But in the list in verse 8 it seems to be covered by 'words of wisdom' or 'words of knowledge', in which the speaker is suddenly able to say something, without previous ordinary-level knowledge of a person or situation, which nevertheless rings true and produces a sense of conviction. 'Prophecy' could then be a larger category of which these are subsets. Or it could, after all, be the special, God-given ability to understand what the Bible is saying and apply it to fresh hearers.

Paul will deal particularly with the relationship of prophecy and tongues in chapter 14. But we should note already that, though he has warned against an elitist approach to the whole question of 'gifts' and 'spiritual things', he can still urge them to 'be eager for the better gifts'. This too will be explained in chapter 14. And we should note, against those who from time to time make claims about this, that Paul assumes that none of these gifts are given to everybody. 'Do all speak in tongues?'; like the other questions, expects the answer 'No'. And, though Paul is always eager for God to do new things in the lives of people and communities, he sees no need to suggest that the 'not all' categories of verses 29 and 30 should be challenged, that everyone should, after all, be prophets, or teachers, or tongue-speakers, or whatever.

It is all summed up in verse 27. These words should be engrained on the mind and heart of all church members. They should be especially taken to heart by those who are called to

more high-profile office, or who have been given some special gift that, by thrusting them into the public eye, brings upon them the temptation to arrogance that was afflicting some in Corinth. 'You are the Messiah's body; individually, you're members of it.' That is the basis of all true understandings of the church, and of all humble service within it.

1 CORINTHIANS 12.31b—13.7

The Need for Love and the Character of Love

^{12.31b}Now I'm going to show you a better way, a much better way.

If I speak in human languages, or even in those of angels, but do not have love, then I've become a clanging gong or else a clashing cymbal.² And if I should have prophetic gifts, and know all mysteries, all knowledge, too; have faith, to move the mountains, but have no love – I'm nothing.³ If I give all my possessions to the poor, and, for pride's sake, my very body, but do not have love, it's useless.

⁴Love's great-hearted; love is kind, knows no jealousy, makes no fuss, is not puffed up,⁵ knows no shameless ways, doesn't force its rightful claim;⁶ doesn't rage or bear a grudge, doesn't cheer at others' harm, rejoices, rather, in the truth.
⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, Love hopes all things, endures all things.

When people say, as they sometimes do, that Paul must have been a very difficult person to have around – that he seems to have been awkward, cantankerous, argumentative, and generally an unpleasant character – this passage is one I often quote in reply.

It seems to me impossible to imagine that this passage could have been written in a very personal letter by the founder of a community, to that community, *unless he knew, and he knew that they knew, that this is the kind of person he himself was*. Of course, that doesn't mean that Paul lived up to this stunning picture of love every minute of every day. But that he had (unlike some of the teachers in Corinth) spent his life and energy being what he was and doing what he was for the sake of other people, copying and embodying the love that Jesus himself had shown in dying on the cross, I think we can be sure.

Chapter 13, as we noted at the beginning of chapter 12, doesn't stand by itself – despite the fact that, for many people, it is known mainly through being read at weddings, as though it was simply a detached poem. In the illustration I used earlier, it is like the slow movement of a symphony, whose first movement is chapter 12 and whose final movement is chapter 14 – the 'symphony' of Paul's teaching about the corporate worship of the church, and especially about the use of different gifts by different members of the worshipping congregation. They need to understand that they all belong together in the body of the Messiah, and Paul has now set that out at length in chapter 12. But that won't be any good if they simply try to put the lesson into practice in a grudging or shoulder-shrugging fashion. They need to pause, to move into a different key and rhythm, and deepen their understanding of the highest virtue, the greatest quality, the most Jesus-like characteristic you can imagine: love.