

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
1 Corinthians

VII. 1 Corinthians 12:1-13:40
Glossolalia: Spiritual Experience and Social Order

In the last portion of his letter, Paul had been concerned with what was happening at the assembly, probably in a private home, where Christians came together for worship. A combination of theological convictions and practices reflecting social standing was causing difficulty. Paul now turns to another set of interrelated issues having to do with worship, particularly the practice of glossolalia or ecstatic “speaking in tongues.” His treatment of the issue is quite similar to the approach he used in discussing the question of sacrificial meat in chapters 8-10. That is, Paul considers both of the factions that have emerged on this issue, finds ways of affirming a fundamental value that each holds, while he tries to point them to an even more fundamental value that both share, a value that can help them overcome their differences and modulate their practices.

Paul begins with a broad view of the “gifts and graces” that his community exhibits. He celebrates the abundance and diversity of such spiritual endowments, while noting that there are clear limits that everyone would recognize (12:3). All, however, have one source, the Spirit, and serve one end, the benefit of the community (12:4-7). To press that point, Paul deploys a metaphor well known in ancient political discourse, the comparison of the social unit to a “body” (12:12-26), a metaphor that is still very much with us (“body politic”). Paul’s use of the metaphor differs from many contemporary uses in its stress on the mutuality of the body’s parts. Contemporary politicians usually emphasized the hierarchical relationship among those parts. Paul, in fact, makes just the opposite, and somewhat humorous point, that the “inferior” bodily parts get the most attention (12:14). Paul, however, concludes this stage of his reflection with a hierarchical note: there is a hierarchy of “gifts” and the ones at the top are those that benefit the community.

Chapter 13 offers a digression analogous to chapter 9, where Paul had spoken of himself as an example of the selflessness that he advocated. Here he

offers a beautiful paean to the virtue that should underlie whatever the Corinthians do, the virtue of love. Most modern Christians know of this passage from its use in weddings, but its function here is more basic and its implications more broadly social.

In chapter 14 Paul returns to the issue of “speaking in tongues,” applying some of the general principles he had articulated in chapters 12 and 13. It is fine to have such wonderful displays of spiritual empowerment, but it is not as valuable as a gift that builds the community (14:1-5). Paul himself can speak in tongues more than any of his addressees (14:19), but such an exercise focuses on the self (14:4), not on the community. What builds up the community is not what is hidden and obscure, but what is rational and clear (14:6-12). Prayer must be not only with the mysterious language of the heart, but also with the language of the “mind” (Greek: *nous*; 14:14-15). Interestingly enough, it must be speech that an outsider can understand (14:16, 23-24).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Are there spiritual practices or behaviors that cause difficulty within your community? Are they related to social standing within the community? How does your community deal with them?

2. Is Paul’s image of the Church as a “body” meaningful in our individualistic age?

3. Paul strikes a balance between the personal/emotional dimension of religious life and the communal/rational. Are there similar balances to be struck in contemporary Christianity?

For further study:

Carl R. Holladay, "1 Corinthians 13: Paul as Apostolic Paradigm," in David Balch, et al., eds., *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Abraham Malherbe Festschrift* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 80-98