

FIRST CORINTHIANS

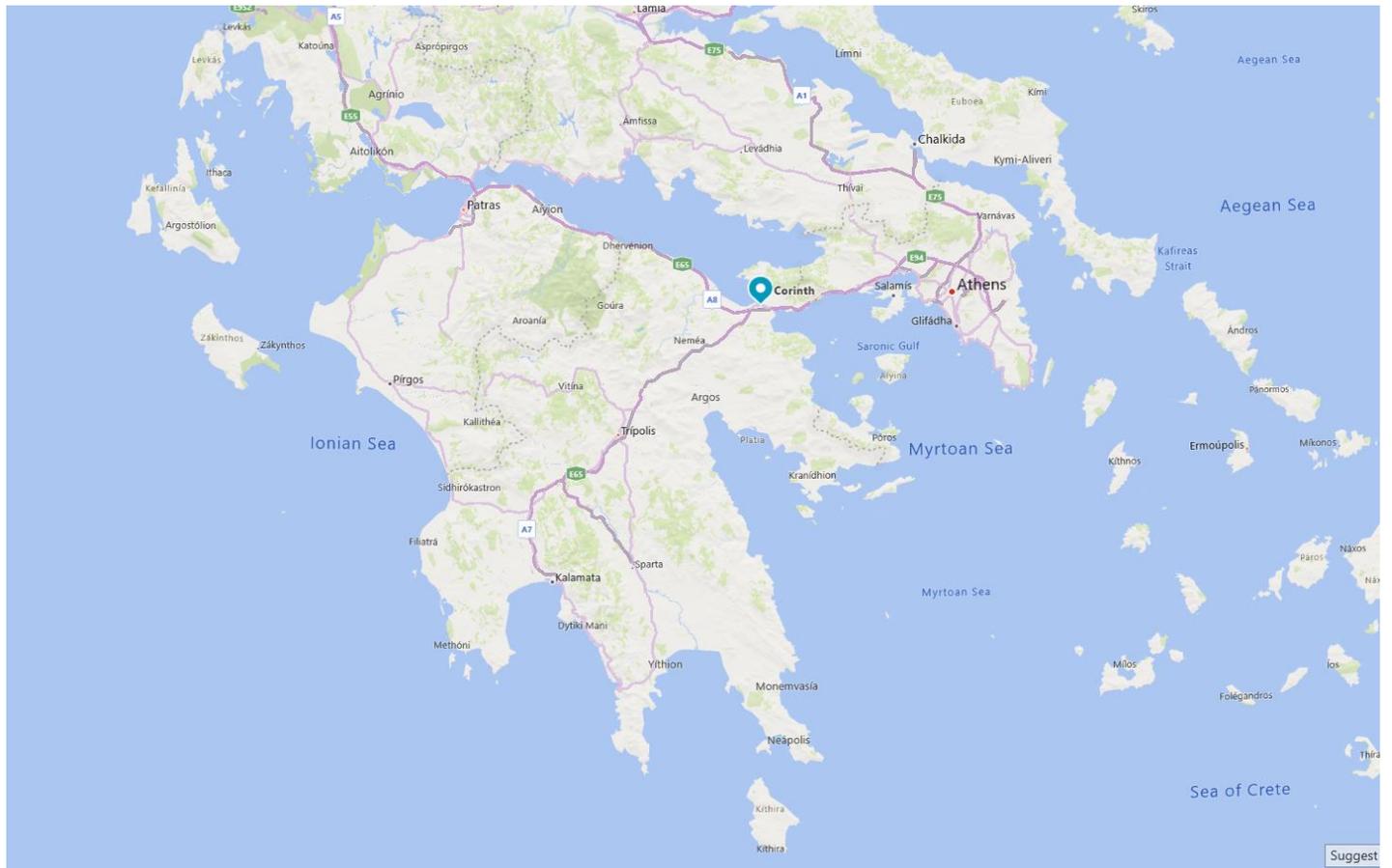
A COMMENTARY

PAUL IS IN EPHESUS



By Walter Cates 12/24/2021

MODERN DAY CORINTH GREECE



THE CORINTHIAN LETTERS

BACKGROUND

This commentary is not intended to be a deep analysis of Paul's mind or message to the Corinthian Church. It is meant to provide fuel for thought and meditation. Hopefully you will gain a new perspective of Paul's hopes for the Corinthian church.

Paul entered Corinth near the end of his second missionary journey (~50AD).

Corinth was a crossroad city in the Roman Empire, a major trade city. It was also a major pagan religious center. Every perversion of the one true God could be found in Corinth. All of this and the fact that it was the county seat or capitol of the Roman district of Achaia added to the desirability for establishing a church in Corinth. **But**, it also added to the temptation and stress on the young Church. Just as the Jews found it difficult accepting the Law of Grace over the law of Moses, the Gentiles found it difficult leaving their idols and false gods behind.

Achaia was situated at the southern end of what is now Greece. Most of Achaia was a large body of land connected to the continent by a very narrow isthmus. Corinth was situated on that isthmus. Crossing the isthmus would cut off 300 miles of travel in turbulent and stormy seas when going east from the Ionian Sea or west from Asia. This fact gave Paul the opportunity to spread the Gospel of Christ to the rest of the world via the travelers passing through.

Early in the growth of the Corinthian Christian church the Jews filed an official complaint against Paul and his followers to Gallio, the Roman governor of Achaia. Governor Gallio's official response was, since the Christian movement was a sect of Judaism, he the Governor (Rome) would not get involved in their internal disputes. This simple but **official** act placed an umbrella of protection over the infant church that lasted for several years. Although there was opposition from the Jews, the church was basically ignored and tolerated by the Roman government. This ruling by Gallio may have been a factor in Paul's decision to stay an extended length of time in Corinth. He and his Gospel of Christ enjoyed the protection of the Roman Empire for one and a half years in Corinth. I believe the true "thorn in his side", Jewish persecution of the Gospel of Christ, was removed while he taught in Corinth

It should be noted during what we believe was an eighteen month stay in Corinth Paul accepted no remunerations from the people for his teaching. He was a part time tent maker and a full time teacher.

First Corinthians was not truly the first letter to the Corinthians. In First Corinthians 5:9 Paul refers to a previous letter. Paul asserts that in the previous letter he had dealt with the issues of immorality. Sometime after writing the lost letter. Paul received a written report from Chloe's household and was visited by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus. The report and personal visit carried grim news of problems in Corinth.

The Corinthian Church was a fellowship in trauma.

Chloe's household had reported disputes about who was the true leader of the church. Was it Peter, Paul or Apollos (1:10-17). Church members were suing each other (6:1). There was discourse at the celebration of the Lord's Supper (11:17-22). And finally, and most disturbing, incest in the membership was being ignored by the Church leadership (5:1).

Stephanas and his associates had some questions, mostly on Church order. Paul responded in his letter to these specific questions; Christian marriage (7:1-16), food sacrificed to idols (8:1-13), Spiritual gifts (12:1-3) and relief money for the Jerusalem Church.

Paul goes on to cover many other topics in First Corinthians, the main themes are: Loyalties, Immorality, Freedom, Worship, Body of Christ, and Resurrection.

THE LETTER

Chapter one starts out in what has become Paul's standard opening. There is a, *from, to* and a *blessing*. He moves on to a thanksgiving prayer that cements the relationship of individual believers in Christ Jesus. Jesus is the focal point of the Church (Verses 1 – 9)

Many captioned Bibles put a split between Verse 17 and 18. However some continuity is lost in doing this. Let us take a different approach. First let's look at verse 10 as a stand-alone statement. Then group 11, 12 and 13 together. And then we will look at the message of verse 14 to 21.

Paul wastes no time getting to the first point of the letter. Quarrels over who was the spiritual leader of the Church were destroying the fellowship. Christ was and is the leader. Others are sent to make known the Gospel of Christ. Not the preacher but what he preached, should be revered.

Either Apollos or Peter had baptized a large number of the fellowship and that was erroneously being presented as cause to elevate one leader over another. Paul rebukes that claim, and states, he was not sent to baptize but to reveal the Gospel of Salvation through Christ. Paul purposefully downplays the importance of baptism. Believers in Corinth, (and even in the Church today) had evolved a false belief that the baptism of water brought about an immunity to the repercussions of sin. The baptism of water was and is only an outward sign, something the *person being baptized* does to show their commitment to Christ's Gospel. Baptism of the Spirit is something Jesus does when he sees a heart truly committed to His Gospel. Apollos himself, although preaching boldly on salvation through Christ and water baptism, had never heard of the baptism of the Spirit. Then he met Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus. They took him home and *explained to him the way of God more adequately* (Acts 18:26).

It seems that the Corinth fellowship had gotten side tracked by the origin of their water baptism. They were centering their worship on the act of baptism rather than on the gospel of Christ.

If your mind and soul are not opened by the Spirit you will not get the message of the cross. It will seem like foolishness. All the wisdom and knowledge of this earth will not reveal God to us and bring salvation, only the Spirit.

Paul closes these thoughts with a quote from Jeremiah, I think, just to see if the Jews in the audience were paying attention.

Chapter 2 can be summarized as, "Not by Paul but by the Holy Spirit." In the first 5 verses it is the Holy Spirit who changes lives. Therefore, their faith was not because of Paul's influence but that of the Power of the Holy Spirit. Paul's speaking was powerful and elegant, but he was crediting his speaking power to the Holy Spirit.

In verses 2:6-10 Paul states that God is ready to reveal things no man has ever seen, heard or perceived. If you believe the Word then the Spirit will reveal. In these words Paul once again refutes any power on his part but, credits the Holy Spirit with the gifts of the Spirit.

We know that our own thoughts are a mystery to others unless we reveal them. So to, are the thoughts of God. God, manifested as the Holy Spirit reveals the mystery of His wisdom. But, the Holy Spirit only speaks to those who have believed and therefore are open to Him. In verse 15 Paul makes a profound statement about real, tangible, interactions with the Holy Spirit.

Once again Paul closes a topic with a wake up aimed at the Jews. Read Isaiah 40:13.

The Church and its local leadership is the subject of chapter 3.

The primary theme here is the ecclesia (Church) is not maturing. The primary cause is the local leadership. Worldly pride has pushed love, faith and hope aside. Pride in their perceived individual spirituality has set them at odds with one another. Christ and not the leaders should be the focal point of their hope, love and faith. Pride is not a gift of the Spirit. There must have been some perceived differences in the messages taught by Apollo and Peter to the Church founded by Paul. These perceived differences became points of pride.

Once a foundation is laid the structure is defined. The one who lays the foundation has perfect knowledge of what the structure will be. No other structure will be correctly supported by that foundation. If the building crew does not follow the plan of the foundation layer the building will not endure. Paul was speaking to a specific Church in a specific time and culture. In this case Paul laid the foundation for the Corinthian Church and others followed him and built upon that foundation. Some used good building material some did not. Regardless of intent if the structure is modified to where it no longer fits the foundation it will fail.

Does the liberalization of the twenty first century Church force it off its foundation?

A play on words in verses 16 and 17, the Church is God's temple, the Church is all those in the fellowship. Each person is a stone in the structure. Is your stone properly cut? Is your stone carrying its proper load? Paul issues a grave warning about liberalization of the "temple" in verse 17. Then Paul inserts a little more of the Old Testament, read Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11.

An interesting note: In the original Greek text verses 21B, 22 and 23 are all one thought. The following is a direct word for word translation:

^{21B}*For all is yours* ²²*whether by Paul, Apollos or Cephas or the universe or life or death or now or future* ²³*you are Christ's and Christ is God's.*

What is a true Apostle? What is the nature of a true Apostle? These are the prime questions addressed in chapter 4.

All the leaders of the Church should be viewed as servants of Christ. No leader should be worshiped or deified or a focus of worship.

The mysteries of God, that is the mind of God, have been revealed to the Apostle and therefore the apostle must prove to be faithful. This is manifest in his deeds and actions.

Paul is not seeking approval from man or culture. Nor does he seek personal satisfaction. His clear conscience does not testify to his innocence only the judgement of the Lord can do that. When Paul speaks of the judgement of the Lord (that is judgement of saved Christians) he is speaking about an evaluation of all the good in our lives. Verse 6 rationalization; "***Now these things I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your benefit***". After all, as saved, justified Christians, all our sins are forgotten.

Again and again throughout all of Paul's messages he stresses that Christian love, peace and power come from the Holy Spirit and not the Apostle.

Is the teacher nothing more than a tool of the Lord? Yes! The Apostle is used by God to reach mankind and bring it to Him. Paul has detected a condition of Apostle Worship in Corinth. In verses 9-13 Paul is minimizing the glory of the apostle and elevating the stature of the fellowship. After all it is the *fellowship* that God wants. The Apostle is just the tool that helps build it. Verses 9 through 13 are Paul's statement of how he approaches his God given task as an Apostle.

Paul closes this section with a clear statement of fact of his relationship to the Corinthians and their relationship to him. Regardless of who or how many come after him, he will always be the one who brought them to Christ and he will always be their Christian Father. As such he should be the model they seek to imitate for the Christian image. Unable to return in the near future he is sending his trusted companion, Timothy, to guide and offer support. Be aware, the school master will return and he can bring the rod of discipline or the love of a gentle spirit.

As we move into chapter 5, I believe a definition is in order. Throughout New Testament we run across the term ‘the flesh’. This does not refer to the body or skin or muscle. This is translated from the Greek word *sarx*. This is the *sinful state of human beings* and is often presented as a power in **opposition** to the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 5 deals with immoral behavior. There are two basic messages here. First and foremost, it should not be tolerated within the fellowship. Second, there is guidance on judging within the fellowship. We often hear ‘Judge not lest you be judged’. This is true within interpersonal relationships. But within the fellowship there are boundaries that should not be crossed. The fellowship is defined by affirmations and prohibitions. Any violation of these definitions will weaken and possibly destroy the fellowship. People who cross these boundaries must be judged and disciplined as offenders. Seventeen years after Paul wrote this letter Matthew quoted Christ on how Christians should handle disagreements. This same process applies to violations of the fellowship trusts. Read Matthew 18:15-20.

Throw off your old ways of the world that corrupt your sanctification. Become pure in action and deeds. Remember our Savior died that you would be cleansed. Get rid of the corrupting practices of the carnal world that has infiltrated the fellowship. Return to the Godly conduct of Christian Fellowship.

Contemplate your modern day fellowship. Where has the carnal world invaded your fellowship?

Paul finishes this section of the letter with, use some common sense. You cannot exist in the world without exposure to people of the world. BUT, within the Fellowship of Christ there is no space for degenerates. Have nothing to do with them. You should attempt correction, if unsuccessful, expel them from the fellowship and then they will be under God’s judgement.

In chapter 6 Paul goes deeper into the interrelationships within the fellowship. Disputes among the Godly should stay within the Godly. He poses the question, should the ungodly judge the Godly. Paul again references the Old Testament (Deut. 17, 19, 21, 22 and 24). He cleverly asserts that the least of those within the Church is by far, more qualified, to judge within the fellowship than the unbelievers.

Now, again, Paul instructs on sexual immorality. This is a difficult problem with the Corinthian Church. As a body the Church in Corinth struggles with outside influences. At the same time misconceptions about baptism, what is forgiven and what is not have been misunderstood. Then there are all the local cults, gods and goddesses that until their conversion the Gentiles in the Corinth Church were reverently worshiping. Many of the pagan beliefs promote behavior that the one true God rejects. It seems too much for the weakened faith within the Church of Corinth.

Theologians have long debated Paul’s motivation for his position on the subjects covered in chapter 7. Some say Paul expected Jesus to return very soon. But at the time of the writing of first Corinthians Paul was 12 to 13 years beyond his conversion. I don’t think he held to that belief any longer.

Others think the reason for Paul’s stand on the issues of chapter 7 may have been the political climate. The Christian church no longer was thought of a splinter of Judaism. The Christian Church’s refusal to bow to the Roman emperor or the Roman and Greek gods had brought severe persecution on the Church. To attempt to build a family under such threat would be an undertaking of great stress.

Verses 1 to 6 would have been very progressive ideas in the first century. To publically state that a wife has any authority over a husband would have been shocking. Note, in verse 6 Paul states this is not a command, he is merely stating his stand on the issues.

Paul clearly states the articles of verses 10 and 11 are the will of God and there were no room for deviance.

The articles of conduct in verses 12 to 16 are not clearly defined in the scripture. Paul makes it clear that these statements are his interpretation of the will of God. You were what you were when called by God. The Corinthians had evolved an idea that becoming a Christian meant that a change in status as well as a spiritual condition was required. In verses 17 through 24 Paul refutes that idea.

Guidance is offered on how to get through the coming time of severe persecution in verses 25 through 42 of chapter 7. Paul is warning against adding to the stress of life in Corinth. The Tora was the primary guide for relations between Jewish men and women in the first century. Making the transition from strict adherence to the law to a life in grace was confusing for the Jew and a mystery to the Gentiles. Paul feels he must clarify these issues.

In chapter 8 Paul deals with one problem, meat sacrificed to idols or false gods. This issue was complicated by the uncertainty of the source of meat in the public markets. It was the custom of the priests in pagan temples to sell unused meat from sacrificial ceremonies to public markets. This meat was then mixed in and you never knew what you were getting.

Paul's stand on sacrificial meat was simple. Since the idols and pagan gods did not exist, the meat sacrificed to them was not affected in any way. Therefore it was not offensive to the one true God.

However, Paul states that if you believe in your heart it is tainted then you shouldn't eat it. Also if the one you are with has that belief, you should refrain in order as not to shake the other's faith.

Very important point. For the first time in scripture there is a recognition that there are different levels of Christian maturity. And, it's ok. This goes far beyond the eating of meat sacrificed to idols and is the basis of our freedom in Christ. Every single Christian develops their own Faith Doctrine. A faith doctrine is a living, growing 'ever maturing' personal belief system developed through the work of the Holy Spirit. I believe that in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit we gain wisdom at a level and rate we can understand and put into practice. A true Christian's faith doctrine is at any point in time true, proven by an understanding of scripture, for that person, at that time, in their spiritual walk. So, for now, can we say—a new recipient of the Holy Spirit, will have a faith doctrine which may be much different from the 40 year veteran of the walk in grace. Also blindly accepting the doctrine of someone else when it goes against your own Spirit driven conscience (doctrine) opposes your freedom in Christ Jesus. By accepting someone else's doctrine when it goes against your conscience you are moving away from grace toward law.

Paul, by not eating the meat in question is not violating his personal faith doctrine. But if by him eating the meat causes someone who believes it is tainted to eat it, then they both have sinned.

In the first 18 verses of chapter 9 Paul is not speaking the world. He is speaking to the Corinthians to whom he brought the salvation of Jesus Christ.

There are those who wish to dwell in the house that Paul built in Corinth. They want to be paid to live there. They must discredit Paul in order to do so. In an attempt to discredit him they claim, he is not an Apostle. Paul says his actions, teaching and miracles have testified to his Apostleship. Furthermore he has not received any payment and therefore he has no debt. The only debt is that which is owed him.

Freedom in Christ is defined and demonstrated in verses 19 to 23. The character of a Christian is not decreed by external or cultural definitions. Therefore, we have the freedom to alter those behaviors in our interactions to suite the environment we must function in. We do this without compromising our relationship with Christ. But, we must be very careful not to deviate to the point of violation of clear teachings of the Word of God or our own personal faith doctrine.

We must continually seek the council of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 24 to 27 Paul uses a sports metaphor to illustrate the need for dedication and discipline in our lives and Christian endeavors.

Be aware all followers of Christ, during the exodus all God's people were under the protection of God. God provided Moses to lead them and he remained with them in a cloud and flame. He guided them through danger, but they faltered.

Chapter 10 verses 1 to 13 is a reminder for the Jews and an indoctrination for the Gentiles.

Paul reviews a time when God's chosen were blessed with freedom from slavery. He provided them with a cultural and spiritual leader, Moses. Then He dwelled with them and guided them day and night. But they did not realize the value of these gifts from God. They sinned, rebelled and turned their back on God. They rejected God's word and the leader he sent to them. Many perished in plague and catastrophe. None reached the land of promise.

Once again mankind has been favored by God. Again God has found favor with his chosen. Fortunately, this time God has opened his grace to ALL mankind. God sent his son who sacrificed himself to the sins of all. Then Jesus gave Paul the word and the task to take it to the people. In these verses Paul is cautioning the Corinthians, and all mankind, don't repeat the mistakes and sins of the past. Honor the word (Gospel) and the one who brings it.

Next Paul is again warning against idolatry (verses 14 to 22). He starts with a review of the Lord's Supper. He states that anything offered to a false god is offered to nothing. However, Paul brings up a new point. The false gods do not exist and cannot be a threat to Christians. But, the devil and demons do exist. There were many cults in Corinth that worshiped the devil and a horde of demons. This worship was (and is) a very viable threat.

This next section (verses 23 to 28) can be rather confusing and has been over complicated by some writers. The teaching point here is the freedom we have in Christ.

First Paul uses a meal with a non-Christian as an object lesson, He did this because it was easily understood in the culture of the time. The main thrust of this section is, in life you will have to interact with non-believers and that is ok. If a non-believer invites you to an activity as a vehicle of friendship or business it is ok. This activity could be a meal, a conversation or a celebration. But if that becomes ungodly you must decline. Here we must rely on discernment and the Holy Spirit to guide us on a righteous path.

Second, Paul stresses the importance of freedom in Christ with-in the fellowship. Yes differences in interpretation of the Lord's word are acceptable when the scripture is not clear or concise. But we should never try to force our interpretations upon others. We need to respect where they are in their Christian growth and they must respect ours.

Oh, Woe is me, here we are at the first 16 verses of chapter 11.

First let me make this statement.

Freedom in Christ is bound by the culture we live in. By this I mean our Christian Fellowship culture. Not our political or geographical culture. We must be very careful and not liberalize our Fellowship culture to the point that we change or dilute the Word of God.

Chauvinists and Feminists have argued the points of verse 1 to 16 for years. AND THE ARGUMENT IS NOT RELEVANT. PERIOD...

Paul was addressing the fellowship culture of his time. Freedom in Christ means WE must determine OUR fellowship culture. This gives US a tremendous amount of power. We can liberalize to point of obscuring the Word of God. Or we can also become so legalistic we destroy our freedom in Christ. Yes, life in the prevailing culture was tough, even back then. Tradition ≠ Law ≠ Doctrine ≠ truth in Grace.

In the next 17 verses Paul expresses his disgust over the degradation of the sacrament of the Last Supper within the Corinthian Church. All are equal in the fellowship. No activity in fellowship should set a preference of one member over another, especially the sacrament of the Last Supper. The Last Supper, or Communion is a solemn sacrament to be equally shared by all. It is for spiritual sustenance. Eat your meal for physical sustenance at home or see to it that all in attendance share equally. Keep the sacraments sanctified.

In verses 28 to 32 Paul asserts that an improper attitude toward the Last Supper has brought down wrath on some of the offenders. I don't know if it was a threat or a promise in verse 34, but Paul says he will have more to say about this when he visits them.

The first section of chapter 12 deals with the Spiritual gifts from God the Holy Spirit. Spiritual gifts are not given to you to enhance your Life. They were given to you to enhance the life of the fellowship. Your spiritual gifts are but one of the stones that make up the foundation of the fellowship of Christ. Spiritual gifts result in work as a gift from God to be a blessing to the fellowship and a glorification of God's love for mankind. In verses 4 through 10 Paul gives a short list of Spiritual gifts just as talking points. There many more gifts. You will note in verse 10 Paul speaks twice about the gift of Tongues. The original Greek word Paul uses is $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\omega\nu$ which translates as 'a foreign language'. He is not speaking of a spiritual communication in this verse.

Paul closes this section with a reminder. All spiritual gifts come from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit decides what gifts are given and to whom they are given. We cannot take a class and learn the gift of our choice. I do not believe that we can choose a gift and develop proficiency in that gift. There are a number of modern churches that believe you can pick your gifts and they offer training classes to teach those gifts. I will not argue that point. You will have to read the scripture and discern that issue for yourself.

Verse 12 through the end of chapter 12 is an elaborate dissertation on unity and diversity within the fellowship. Paul uses the analogy of the human body to demonstrate that all of the parts are necessary. And, all the parts exist within the body only to support, nourish, protect and serve the body. No part is paramount or exclusive. The eyes will not survive without the sweat glands. The more diverse the body, the more functional it is. A body with ten feet and no hands would not function well.

Paul's dissertation pretty well explains our relationship to the fellowship, that is, the body. **All that being said, it must be made clear:** *We were not created to serve the Christian fellowship.* We were created to find fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit unites us in Christian fellowship to keep us focused on our true purpose on earth. We are to be in fellowship with God and take his word to the ends of the earth.

Chapter 13 is devoted to one concept. Without love nothing matters.

The whole point of our existence is to have a bond with God, our creator. Regardless of what our mind's eye sees, that bond cannot exist without LOVE in our heart. All of the points Paul makes on the topic of love are pretty clear. The exception may be verse 12. People in our time feel that they see clearly in a mirror. In the days of Paul, mirrors were made of highly polished bronze or brass. Imperfections of the surface always gave a close but distorted view or reflection.

From my "RANDOM THOUGHTS OF A LAYMAN"

When you pass from this world all of you that you will take is LOVE.

All your wealth, social position, skills and worldly treasures will be left behind. It would be a shame if so little of you was love that so little of you passed on into eternity.

Now we move on to chapter 14. Verses 1 to 25 of this chapter are a challenge to many Pentecostal churches.

First we need to explore the word tongue. In the original Greek Paul uses two completely different word which *we* have translated into one English word. This misinterpretation has cause major misunderstanding of the scripture throughout the English speaking world. In chapter 12 we dealt with tongues, the original Greek word Paul used is $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\omega\nu$ which translates as 'a foreign language'. In chapter 14 verses 2, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, and 19 the word translated as tongue or tongues is $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\eta$. This word means a **spiritual** language or the language of **angels**. Paul is clear that he believes speaking in spiritual tongues is the least of the Spiritual Gifts. He personally does not believe it should be spoken in fellowship. But, he falls short of calling a prohibition on the practice. He does suggest that it is most suitably practiced in solitude. In special cases it can be practiced among believers when a translator is present. He stipulates that there should be no non-believers present when it is spoken.

Throughout the first 25 verses of chapter 14 Paul makes it clear that in the fellowship worship gatherings, prophesy is the anchor of the service. Speaking in a spiritual tongue should be limited, and only if there are no non-believers present.

In verses 26 to 40 Paul lays out how a worship service should be conducted using all the parameters set forth in verses 1 to 25.

Paul starts the next section of his letter to the Corinthians with a very brief synopsis of the Gospel given him by Christ. In accordance with all scripture:

Christ who is God, in the form of a **man**, died for the sins of **man**. He was raised from the dead and was seen by many individuals and groups of believers including Paul himself.

There was confusion in the Corinthian Church. Some believed in the resurrection of the body some did not. Did you need to be baptized to be part of the resurrection? What about believers who died without baptism?

In verses 12 to 34 Paul offer a discussion on the resurrection of the dead. He starts with the resurrection of Christ and carries it through to the end time resurrections and the return of creation to the father.

On the surface verse 29 can be a bit puzzling. The Corinthians were confused about baptism, salvation and the resurrection of the dead. They had developed a practice of baptism for the dead. This was for the unbaptized believers that had gone to sleep. They worried about their salvation.

From verse 35 to the end of the chapter Paul offers a lengthy, poetic argument and description of the resurrected body. In short, it will be immortal, imperishable and will not be flesh and blood.

The final chapter of this letter is what I like to call the administrative and closing section. Paul starts with a call for support for the impoverished Church in Jerusalem. Along with the sufferings of persecution the Jerusalem area was in the midst of a famine. Next are Paul's travel plans and personal requests. He closes with a few final greeting, acknowledgements, and a blessing.

It is of utmost importance, when you read scripture, that you do not try to put the words, actions and people in the twenty first century. Take your mind and thoughts back to their time, the time of the writing. If you understand the times, culture, the writer and those being written to, you can find the deepest, truest meaning and understanding of God's word. Is it not true, all scripture is God's word? If it is not, to quote Paul then our faith is foolishness.