**10th February 2019**

**1 Corinthians 14**

Valentine’s day this week. Will you be treating your loved one? Or will you make a stand against the commercialization of love? Any gesture in our current climate is likely to be misread.

Tony Campolo[[1]](#endnote-1) tells a story of a man who went to a counsellor for advice about the state of his marriage. ‘I seem to have fallen out of love with my wife’ he said. The counsellor said that there is a fine connection between acting in a loving way and feelings of love. The counsellor suggested to the man that he started to act as if he was in love with his wife and he would soon start to experience feelings of love again. Do loving things and you will have loving feelings.

So, the man took his advice. He usually left work sweaty and dirty so instead he had a shower and changed his shirt. On the way home he stopped and bought some flowers for his wife. He usually went in the back door got a beer out slumped in front of the Tv and waited for his dinner. But because he wanted to do what a lover would do he went to the front door, rang the doorbell and waited for his wife to answer. When she did, he held out the flowers and said ‘For you my dearest. I love you!’.

She burst into tears. She said ‘I’ve had a terrible day. Our son fell and I had to take him to hospital. No sooner had I got home than I got a phone call from your mother who said she is coming to visit at the weekend. I tried to do the washing and the washing machine has broken and their water all over the kitchen floor. And now you have come home drunk!’

Our actions can often be misinterpreted.

The modern phenomenon of identity politics pits different social groups against one another, black vs white, female vs male, transgender vs feminist, rich vs poor, remainers vs leavers. It encourages judgement and prejudice against those who are allegedly powerful - a white, straight man is deemed "privileged" though he may have experienced many power limiting experiences in his life. It provokes its followers to see antagonism within every social interaction.

Identity politics is increasingly powerful, having taken over much of the media, academia and political discourse. Google employee James Damore [lost his job](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-google-diversity/google-fires-employee-behind-anti-diversity-memo-idUSKBN1AO088) for citing evidence that there are biological differences between men and women regarding technology. If "perpetuating gender stereotypes" can get you sacked, could it be that the identity politics brigade have the privilege and power at present, not any particular social demographic? Presumably [discussing this Bible passage today about who is spiritual and who isn’t and the role of gender in the church and who has power in worship](https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-MeToo-and-the-Church-Egalitarian-vs-Complementarian-Natalie-Collins-Phil-Moore)  wouldn’t go down so well in such an environment.

Identity politics is often described as pseudo-religious. Facts, or an open-minded search for truth, seems less important than the ideology. Postmodern identity politics views its world through a pre-defined prism.

A pessimist might think that identity politics could lead our society to take up arms against one another, as social groups see themselves as separate from others and are encouraged to fight for dominance.

We have been looking at Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians last month and this and we have found during that time that this letter is written to a church where different social groups are fighting for dominance.

A few weeks ago, we looked at how there were groups that liked a different leader and a different style.

There is a division between rich and poor – in chapter 11 where Paul discusses the lord’s supper, communion, and how the rich get there first and eat all the food and leave nothing for the poor. Paul says this is divisive and those who eat the bread and drink the cup do so in an unworthy manner and sin against the Lord. They cannot discern the body of Christ. In other words, they don’t understand what the gospel is about and what church should really be – all equal at the foot of the cross.

My last church was a former Presbyterian church and they used these verses to justify kicking the children out so they could have a peaceful moment to share communion. The children couldn’t ‘discern’ the body of Christ they piously argued. Yeah right! I think it was a pre-defined interpretation of this passage.

There is a struggle between those who will eat the food sacrificed to idols and those who out of conscience won’t in chapters 8 and 10 – and Paul discusses the freedom of belief but also being careful not to upset or cause any one to stumble. More about that later.

In chapters 5-6 Paul scolds the Corinthians for putting up with sexual immorality and tolerating behavior that even the pagans would condemn, such as incest and sex with prostitutes. He makes a division between those who live righteously (right living) and those who act unrighteously. More on that later.

In chapters 11 and 14 the issue of gender, men versus women, come to the fore. More on that in a moment.

Over the last few chapters he has been targeting those who think they are the spiritual ones and more valuable to the church than the ‘unspiritual ones’. Let’s start here.

Carole spoke a couple of weeks ago about the metaphor of the body that Paul uses in chapter 12 – how we all have different gifts, they all have a place and a role and we can’t do without any of them. Chapter 14 is more specific about what seems to be the heart of the problem in Corinth namely some were using the gift of tongues in public worship and causing chaos and division and setting themselves as more spiritual than the rest.

Over the last few decades there has been a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit and Spirit-given ministries. We should welcome this as a return to a biblical perspective. People don’t just want to think about God but are looking for an experience of God.

There is a huge growth industry in our society of people looking for a ‘spiritual experience’. By and large they are not looking for it through the mainstream churches but in alternative religions, paganism, new age therapies and occultism. Fascination with spiritual activity as an end in itself is in fact going back to our pagan roots. It is like a ‘lover’ who is more interested in sex than in the one loved. It is trying to manipulate the powers and spirits for your own ends and gratification, to give you power.

For true Christian spirituality Paul’s answer is given in terms of one’s attitude to Christ. All we do should be under the lordship and direction of Christ. Jesus is Lord of all our motivations. And all gifts should be exercised not for private and personal satisfaction alone but for the building up of the body so the church may be edified.

The contrast in this chapter 14 is between the person who builds up their own private spirituality and the person who, in public worship builds up the whole assembly. Paul has nothing against private spirituality. It’s a fine thing – we should be seeking to get closer to God and enriching our own private deeply personal awareness of God and his presence and love. It is not a sign of self-centred individualism but vital for our faith and life and relationships. But Paul is keen to urge the Corinthians, and us, to use our gifts and experiences for the building up of the corporate body of Christ, the church, so that together we can do the ministry God calls us to. We are stronger together than we are apart. When we come together the spirit gives gifts for us to share.

In chapter 12 Paul said the gift of the Holy Spirit (Greek word is pneumatikos) enables believers to realize and confess Jesus as Lord. Paul uses a different word (charisma) for the gifts of the Spirit. This word stresses that these gifts are gifts of grace and they are many and people have different gifts.

Paul’s primary emphasis in these passages is the unity out of which diversity may emerge. The problem of the Corinthian church is that they have lost sight of their original unity. They were emphasising one particular spiritual gift which Paul refers to in chapter 14, namely the gift of tongues.

The gift of tongues refers to spirit inspired utterances which neither the speaker nor the hearers can understand. It can often lead to an ecstatic experience.

I first came across tongues when I was attending a URC church in Nottingham. As an elder at the church I had a pastoral list of people to visit including a severely disabled old lady. She was a very prayerful lady who would spend long portions of the day just in prayer. One day she was very distressed and I asked her what the problem was. She told me how she had been unable to get to sleep because she had been in great pain. She had cried out to God to help her and as she kept on verbalising her prayer she realised she was talking all gibberish and this went on for some time. At the end of it she said she felt a deep peace, and felt closer to God and was able to go to sleep. Yet she still was troubled by it all. Was she going mad? It was then that it clicked and I opened my bible and shared with her 1 Corinthians 14 where Paul describes the gift of tongues. ‘Oh that sound like what happened to me’ she said, reassured. ‘So I’m not mad after all’. ‘No’ I said. ‘Just under the influence a little!’

Now you don’t have to be old or in pain to receive the gift of tongues. Paul encourages us to desire after all that the Spirit may gift us (verse 1). But there is a huge difference between desiring and demanding. How can you demand a gift?

Because this is often a very special experience, the people who receive it can often feel special. Whole churches have been set up where tongues speaking is a mark of being a ‘true’ Christian. Paul notes that it is the Spirit who gives gifts as the Spirit determines – not because we are more special than anyone else. Paul makes it clear that not all have the gift of tongues (12.30) but the gifts are useful if used for the building up of the body of Christ.

When at university I mixed with all sorts of Christians, some of whom spoke in tongues and regarded themselves as better than the rest. I too wanted to pray in tongues so that I could feel special. But God didn’t give me the gift. I had to wait a couple of years before I had my motives right and when I received the gift it was at a time of need – which is another story for another sermon.

I use the gift in times of private prayer and I find it give me an intimacy with God but I am cautious about using the gift publicly because of the instruction of Paul. He doesn’t want believers falling into the temptation of strutting around like peacocks displaying their spiritual giftedness. He regards the gift of tongues as something between you and God and not useful for public worship because no one can understand you. He would rather the gift of prophecy.

Prophecy doesn’t mean just foretelling the future, though that may happen sometimes, but like the OT prophets it can be a concern with the present and God’s concern in the here and now. It is God given wisdom, understanding, insight and teaching that the church badly needs if it is to go forward instead of round and round in circles. The church needs to be built up as a community instead of as an accidental collection of individuals.

As the chapter develops Paul insists over and again that prophecy, like all ‘spiritual phenomena’ does not need to be spontaneous to be genuine. We don’t want unintelligible ramblings but intelligible instruction; a fresh vision of God; new knowledge that one person has acquired, whether through study or special God given insight to exhort, rebuke, encourage, teach. You need to deploy your mind Paul says in verse 15.

Our ‘Getting to grips with the Bible’ course is an opportunity for applying our mind to understanding the scriptures and our faith – to be grown up in our thinking as Paul urges in verse 20. There are many Christians who can tell you which film star is getting divorced but can’t tell you where in the Bible you might find teaching on the subject.

The underlying point is that Paul wants them to grow into maturity: mind, body and spirit – don’t separate off either component of what makes us human and consequently make sure your worship has order and balance between all those aspects of our created selves, made in God’s image.

We are created male and female but 1 Corinthians contains some ‘controversial’ instructions from Paul based on gender and sexual orientation. For all his appeals to unity in this letter is he not being blatantly divisive?

In 1 Corinthians 6 he says

‘Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men **10**nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

In this chapter he says:

 **34**Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. **35**If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

We have friends who go to a big church in Nottingham, 500 members, mainly graduates and professional people – well educated women, who are at the top of their professions, consultants, managers, leaders. Yet the church won’t allow them to be leaders in the church, nor preach. Because it says so in the Bible!

There are three churches in this town that likewise will not have women leaders.

The Congregational Church, which was a founding member of the United Reformed Church was the first denomination in Britain to have women minister when Constance Colman was ordained in 1917. So, are we liberal and defiant of biblical teaching? Well, we would argue that you need to apply your mind and be open to the Spirit – get to grips with the Bible – or rather let the Bible get to grips with us and our prejudices and our predefined interpretations. What have other people told us about how to interpret the Bible and have they closed us down to other readings of scripture?

The Bible contains a curious double message on sexuality: it emphasises the distinction between male and female, but de-emphasises the differences. [[2]](#endnote-2)

The absence of difference between Adam and Eve is startling. By saying that Eve was made from Adam himself (Genesis 2:21), the creation account emphasises that they were exactly the same. She was an ‘identical’ twin, but female.

Genesis honours Eve very highly. In describing her relationship with Adam, the King James translation calls Eve a ‘help meet for him’ (Genesis 2:18). In modern English, this makes her sound like a domestic servant, and that has had a huge legacy for demoting women as ‘the weaker sex’. But the words ‘meet for him’ translate from the Hebrew word *kenegdo*: a combined meaning of ‘like’ and ‘beside’ and ‘him’. So she is, in fact, very similar to Adam.

The surprise lies in the word ‘help’ (Hebrew *ezer*), because the Bible always uses this word for someone who is *more*powerful; often a warrior or for God himself: God is our helper (Psalm 115:9-11). So, in contrast to what we might assume, Eve is more like Lara Croft than a Stepford wife.

How does someone with diverse sexualities feel about these gender differences?

What are the primary biblical messages to hold in mind as we explore these issues? First and foremost, God loves us as we are. The demands of society may force us to conform in all kinds of ways – in clothing, manners, food and sexual stereotypes – but we shouldn’t blame God for this.

Paul is sometimes regarded as heavy-handed about conformity because he didn’t want Christians to unnecessarily offend anyone in the society of his day say with the wrong food or wrong headwear (1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 11:13-16). But he recognized that people have different experiences of sexuality. Paul himself preferred singleness and encouraged it, but he also accepted that marriage was good and, in fact, preferable for some who might fall into sexual immorality without it (1 Corinthians 7:8-9), although unfortunately he couldn’t bring himself to admit any other positives. He sums this up with  the principle:

***17****Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches 1 Cor 7.17*

Even in Paul’s alleged forceful anti-homosexual teaching, he still held to this principle. He criticized those who engaged in homosexual behaviour because it wasn’t natural to them (c.f.Romans 1:26). He doesn’t merely mean that they *should*have been heterosexual, because he later states that they already *actively were*heterosexual before they decided to try something different: (Roms 1v27) ESV). In other words, their sin lay in the way they acted contrary to their own nature; contrary to the life the Lord had assigned to them.  Paul also associated homosexual behaviour with idol worship and male prostitution and arguably knew nothing about the homosexual orientation.

Our deliberations on same sex marriage a couple of years ago opened up for us some of these issues on how to get to grips with the Bible.

Women remaining silent in church? Well the first thing to say is that the earliest copies of the manuscripts of this chapter don’t have this verse. It suggests it was a later addition by scribes anxious to keep public worship a matter of male leadership only.

If Paul did write this passage what could he have meant by it?

In chapter 11 he has already assumed that women will take leadership roles on praying and prophesying. In other letters women are named as leaders in some of his churches (e.g. Roms 16). So I don’t think Paul has an agenda for keeping women down.

Some possible scenarios have been suggested. The context is about order and peace in worship. It is likely in that day that men and women were separated in worship as they still are in synagogues. If worship was conducted in the main formal language of the day, which in Corinth would have been Greek – many of the women who because of the patriarchal dominance of that society would have been uneducated and could only understand local dialects - wouldn’t have been able to grasp what was being said. As you could imagine the women could be disruptive in worship by shouting across the segregation to their husbands: ‘what’s he on about?’ Talk about it at home is Paul’s advice. Do your evaluation and discernment there – don’t prolong the worship any longer. Paul is having to deal with a real problem as he faces it and not necessarily condoning it.

Western societies have only recently woken up to the complexities of human sexuality, and the Bible is usually blamed for this late willingness to engage with the issue. It is true that the Bible makes clear distinctions between male and female, but it also affirms that each should ‘lead the life that the Lord has assigned to them’. Far from being black and white on sexuality, the Bible is sympathetic I would argue. God made us as we are and loves us. The challenge for many of us is to agree with God, to go beyond our predetermined interpretations of God’s Word, let the Bible get to grips with us and do the same.

May we never quench the work of the spirit, who brings transformation and change to our world. Paul is desperate for us not to do but to have that lively engagement with the gospel itself and the how it impacts the world. But Paul is also concerned that everything be done in a fitting and appropriate manner and that all our gifts are used to build up the body of Christ.

1. Tony Campolo, *Who switched the Price Tags*? Word, 1986 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2014/November-2014/Male-and-female-he-created-them> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)