

**PREFACE**

More than just a few in the Corinth church thought rather highly of themselves; the evidence for this is scattered throughout this letter, as Paul responds to the troubling letter *they* wrote to *him*. And if we were to reduce down these instances of rebuke, we learn that at the root, the Corinthians’ problem was their perspective, their philosophy, of what it means to be people of the Spirit.

Our passage in this session includes the third time Paul has spoken the words, “If anyone thinks he is...” Each time he has used this phrase it has been to address an errant position taken by the church in Corinth. [Please turn back to Chapter Three](#). In the first two chapters the apostle rebukes the church for considering themselves to be so “wise.” Unfortunately, much of their “wisdom” had come not from God, or from the indwelling Spirit, but from the world.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-20.**

The Corinthians made a claim not just to wisdom, but knowledge. Sadly, their knowledge—if it was really there at all—was absent the essential component of love. This is what Paul addresses in his second use of this phrase in Chapter Eight, in which he makes the application to their eating of food that had been sacrificed to idols.

**Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.**

Now for the third time Paul employs the phrase to answer their claim to a superior level of “spirituality.” Thus, in the three major sections of this letter the apostle “highlights the Corinthians’ perception of themselves as wise, knowing, and spiritual” (Garland). He will now close this discussion by pointing out, especially in vv36-38, that the proof of this (if it indeed is true) will come not from their self-perception, but from their obedience to the Lord and His truth. That is, a truly spiritual person (*pneumatikos* = “[a person of the Spirit](#)”) validated not by his ability to speak in tongues or prophesy, but by his devotion to the commands of the Lord, and his willingness to accept Paul as a legitimate apostle *of* those commands.

Let’s read our passage—and let’s include v36, for it just as well sets up the final paragraph, as concludes the previous.

**Read 1 Corinthians 14:36-40.**

*If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.*

These two verses (37-38) make a powerful and sobering statement about who we might *think* we are; who we are actually, in God's eyes; and the fateful consequences when the two fail to match. This passage hearkens back to something someone in our class said several weeks back. She took issue with the repeated identification of Paul as the writer of this letter, since it is really God's word, as communicated by the Spirit. (My response was that this is true enough, but considering the makeup of our class, I know that that distinction need not be hammered home every week. We all are well aware of that truth.)

That point she made is at the heart of these two verses. As we have seen repeatedly, some of the Corinthians—certainly not all, but many of the leaders responsible for penning the letter they sent to Paul, which he is in the process of answering—considered themselves to be deeply, profoundly “spiritual” people, and they saw their gift of speaking in tongues as the mark of this self-considered distinction. In the meantime, however, they were arguing against some of Paul's teaching—even those he declared to be from the Lord.

Here Paul states in unequivocal terms (paraphrasing): *OK, if that's what you think of yourself, let me tell you that the true prophet, the true person of the Spirit acknowledges that what I have written and continue to write to you are from the Lord—they are His commands.* (Paul will expand on this in Chapter Fifteen.)

This was not a position unique to Paul; we have John's words that say much the same.

### **Read 1 John 4:4-6.**

The Corinthians in the first century had the benefit of the *ex cathedra* apostle and prophet, Paul, communicating the words—the precepts, the commands—of Christ Jesus. On occasion he transmitted to the church the commands *spoken* by Christ (e.g., in 7:10 Paul's basis is what Jesus said in Mark 10:11-12). At other times he spoke/wrote commands that were in agreement with the gospel via the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The lesson for us here in the twenty-first century, who no longer have *ex cathedra* prophets in our midst, is that our level of “spirituality” is determined not by what we think of ourselves, nor by any supernatural gifts we may possess, but in our faithful obedience to God's word—as penned by Paul, John, Peter, et al. They were merely the pens, the writing instruments; the author was God, speaking through the Holy Spirit to the pens.

*But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.*

Paul employed the same train of thought here, regarding a person's "spirituality," as he did at the beginning of Chapter Eight, regarding "knowledge."

### Read 1 Corinthians 8:2-3 (again).

In v3 he states in the reverse what he does in v38 of our present passage: *If you love God, He knows you.* Here it is, *If you do not recognize His word, He does not recognize you.*

What happens when someone, as did at least a few in Corinth, reject this counsel, that is, they "[did] not recognize this"? There are some interesting things going on here behind the various translations of the repeated word *agnoeo*, translated in the NASB, "recognized."

One can see right off that our common translations do not—at least on the surface—agree. The first thing to note is that in the NASB of vv37-38, the same English word is used: in v37, "...let him **recognize** that the things which I write to you..." and in v38, "But if anyone does not **recognize** this, he is not **recognized**." However, the words are different in the Greek.

v37: *epiginosketo*, which means to know exactly, to recognize, recognize to be so, acknowledge (that something is true). In other words, more than just seeing or recognizing something exists (surface), this word means "to know *thoroughly*," and to acknowledge what it truly is.

v38: two forms of *agnoeo*: *agnoei* and *agnoeito*; these are the words translated so differently across our common translations.

NASB: recognize/recognized

ESV: recognize/recognized

TLV (Tree of Life): recognize/recognized

NIV84: ignores/ignored

NIV2011: ignores/ignored

KJV: ignorant/ignorant

NKJV: ignorant/ignorant

Except for the KJVs ("ignorant") these are not really far apart. The difference between the NIVs and the first three is essentially just using a synonym to say much the same thing. If one does not "recognize" Paul's authority, that is much the same as "ignoring" his claim. Likewise, the penalty of such is essentially the same: to not be recognized is, in practical terms, the same as being ignored. Ignored by *whom* we will get to in a moment.

By following different original texts, and thus different tenses for these two verbs—the first active, the second passive—the KJVs take a different tack. If one persists in remaining ignorant of Paul’s authority, let him remain/continue in his ignorance.

Most modern scholars and interpreters, however, favor the former (as in NASB, ESV, NIV), based on the Alexandrian, Western, and Palestinian texts. This also would agree with Paul’s usage in 8:2-3 (W. Harold Mare). Because the second verb tense is passive, that means that the one who rejects the authority of Paul is being acted upon by someone else—that is, he is being “not recognized” or “ignored” by someone else. Who? Paul? The Church? The gospels help us discover the answer to this.

### Read Matthew 7:21-23.

Jesus, in His sermon on the mount, says much the same thing as the apostle Paul. It is not enough to just give lip-service to Christ; some people will call Jesus “Lord,” but not obey “the will of My Father who is in heaven” (v21). When facing Christ on His judgment seat, they will protest, saying (very much as the Corinthians) “Did we not prophesy in Your name?” Christ’s response to those who failed to do the will of the Father, the one who, as He says in v26, “...hears these words of mine and does not do them,” will be met by these chilling words: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (v23).

So in vv37-38 Paul is saying that a truly “spiritual” person would understand that what he, Paul, writes comes directly from the Lord. Anyone who does not acknowledge this truth, will one day stand before that same Lord hearing those terrible words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

### vv39-40

*Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.*

One can look at vv36-38 as something of an aside, or parenthetical. If so, in vv39-40 Paul returns to the topic on which he has spent most of this chapter: well-ordered worship in the assembly. In v39 he repeats that both prophecy and tongues can be part of that worship and edification of the church, but by the manner in which he words this it is clear that he favors prophecy (“earnestly desire”) over tongues (“do not forbid”). But of course, these and all other components of the authentic assembly must be conducted “properly and in an orderly manner” (v40).