

*Sermon on 1 Corinthians 14:1-25 prepared by Jonathan Shradar*

Can you imagine your surprise if you were to read and click on a news headline that said, “Local church splits over Spiritual Gifts?” Okay maybe the headline wouldn’t be so surprising, but as you continued to read would you be confounded if the story unfolded like this: “Members of Charity Church were thoroughly pitted against one another and dividing in a few camps recently over the Spiritual gift of hospitality. Some of the more ardent faithful of the church were confident that this gift had ceased with the closing of canon, the Bible. But recently some new faces have become part of Charity Church where they aggressively attempted to live like this gift was of the Lord...”

Now this is silly, but if we insert some different gifts of the Spirit, those more miraculous, than it would make perfect sense, maybe we would even be quick to pick a side.

This is exactly what Paul hopes to avoid in the church at Corinth. There is division over the specifics when it comes to spiritual gifts, and in order to avoid the death of the church, he has lovingly corrected them and guided them to a better way. In our text today, Paul will talk specifics, targeting the gifts being expressed in the church and he will steer them in a better direction than the one they had been going.

**The church gathered should be a place of understanding for the good of others and the glory of God.**

**1 Corinthians 14:1-25** “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. [2] For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. [3] On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. [4] The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. [5] Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

[6] Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? [7] If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? [8] And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? [9] So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. [10] There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, [11] but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. [12] So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

[13] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. [14] For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. [15] What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. [16] Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? [17] For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. [18] I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. [19] Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

[20] Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. [21] In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” [22] Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. [23] If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? [24] But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, [25] the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.” (ESV)

*Context:* “With this section and the next Paul proceeds at last to offer specific correctives to the Corinthians’ apparently unbridled use of tongues in the assembly. He began his argument with them by setting forth the broader theological framework in which these specifics are to be understood. In chapter 12 he argued for diversity, tongues being only one among many manifestations of the Spirit, who gives gifts to each as he wills for the “common good.” In chapter 13, reflecting the theme of the common good, he insisted that none of them, himself included, counts for anything, no matter how “spiritual” they are, if they do not likewise manifest love. Now he puts these together by insisting that in the gathered assembly the single goal of their spiritual zeal should be love, which is expressed in the language of “building up” the church.” Fee

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### **1) Intelligible Worship as Goal**

The ramp of confirming spiritual gifts and using them in the context of love arrives here at pursuit of them and expression of them in gathered worship of the church. And Paul puts one gift ahead of the others...“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.”

Paul has named two gifts here but the point extends to all gifts, especially those we would label speech gifts. The overarching goal in **gathered worship** is that it would be intelligible; made up things that can be understood..

Corinth is meeting for worship in homes so the largest assembly of the church would be around 150 people. What was happening was that they would come together and all begin speaking in tongues, from what Paul will discuss in the next section it seems this would happen without much structure, a cluster of voices all rising above each other in unintelligible sounds. For the Corinthians this was proof that they were “spiritual” but Paul says otherwise.

What are tongues? This is a gift of speech that is in a language that the speaker does not understand. It can be a foreign language or as Paul says the language of Angels. In Acts 2 it was the proclamation of the gospel in languages known by visitors to Jerusalem, but here tongues are not understood. And Paul is encouraging the church to steer toward a gift that can be understood.

This is the prophecy that he thinks should be especially desired. This is Spirit given revelation of truth from God. In the moment, spontaneous, a word that can be heard and understood. "Prophecy is the speaking forth in merely human words of something God has spontaneously brought to mind." Storms

Since gifts are given for the common good of the church the public expression of gifts should be beneficial for the gathered church, communicated in a way that can be understood by everyone present.

Paul even says that the one who prophesies is greater in the context of the church gathered. It is not inherently greater, since all gifts come from the Spirit and are beneficial. It is greater precisely because it is intelligible.

Just as instruments are meant to make distinct sounds, so too the gathered church must be understandable. Even those that don't believe in ongoing gifts of the Spirit can benefit from this goal - lose our Christianese for clarity - especially as they Spirit empowers us.

This is how we attempt to function as a church. If someone has a word they believe to be prophecy they come to an elder and determine if it is to be shared, now, later or not at all - always with understandable words.

“So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.”

## **2) For the Good of Others**

Without a doubt the gifts of tongues is good and helpful but it appears it is something of personal edification (personal improvement and growth). "The one who speaks in a tongues builds up himself" (v. 4). Paul even wants everyone to speak in tongues, but in the environment of worship with others, that even more would prophesy.

The crucial question is not whether one speaks in tongues or not, but what is appropriate in the assembly. Paul is saying that the point of everything in corporate worship is not personal experience in the Spirit, but building up the church itself... it is for the good of believers.

#### a) *Believers*

The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding, encouragement and consolation. Those that believe in Jesus and are part of the church will gain from prophecy. They will be "constructed, developed, brought to maturity" by what is heard and understood. They will be encouraged in the faith, to continue in trusting Jesus and laboring in community. And they will be consoled, comforted in the wake of hardship or suffering.

Five words of instruction in the worship service does more to build the believer and the church than ten thousand words in a tongue. So if you have the gift of tongues pray that you may interpret that other believers will be build up. Bring what is understandable for the good of the church.

This focus for Paul is the way of maturity, this ongoing concern for the others around us. And in the gathered worship of the church this looks like using gifts that can be understood. And these are not gifts that can be forced - they are to be sought and discerned, striving to excel in the good of the church. And they are timely to the current need of edification in the church.

Those with the gift use it and wield it carefully and humbly, not for his or her own benefit, not to be impressive, but in order to build up another believer.

Prophecy though is not only for the good of believers but it is also hope for the unbeliever as well.

#### b) *Unbelievers*

In verses 21-22 Paul is quoting from Isaiah 28 telling of the rejection of God's word in foreign tongues. Then he says that tongues are a sign for unbelievers. We might be prone to read this and think that means uninterpreted tongues is meant for unbelievers but in the context, Paul is saying it is a negative sign for them. It confirms their unbelief. They function as a sign of judgment for the outsider and unbeliever because they may conclude from hearing them that Christians are out of their minds and so leave the church, never to return.

But prophecy, understandable words of truth, spontaneously given by the Spirit, for the unbeliever it will bring conviction, exposure of the heart and conversion. They will believe. The powerful revealing work of the Spirit that convicts of sin and leads to repentance.

This week we have been praying that the Lord would give us as a church a heart for the lost for Revision 2017 (40 plus days of prayer), and here we have that heart matching with a desire for spiritual gifts, that some might be saved.

There's something beautiful when somebody comes and is able to exercise speech gifts and people's hearts are moved. Someone with this gift speaks winsomely, and there is an insightful "ah-ha" moment when there is deep conviction about serving a particular idol. It is a beautiful use of that gift when someone is speaking the truth in and the listener is gripped by its loving truth, so those words should not be refused or rejected.

In the gathered community only what is intelligible is permissible - because what is intelligible, especially prophecy, both edifies God's people and leads to the conversion of others.

And what is it that both the believer and the unbeliever hear when the prophetic voice is lifted in the congregation?

It is that which builds up, encourages, comforts... It is that which convicts, calls to account and humbles...

### *c) The Gospel*

The truth that man is sinful and running after the wrong things, attempting to make himself, or herself, god. That our hearts keep many secrets of thoughts, longings, our history, bitterness, greed, envy, self-righteousness. Apart from an act of God himself we are left in this mess of self, of sin and destined for wrath for it.

It is the truth that God has acted, that Jesus, in love for you, lived a perfect life of obedience, untainted by the lure of self and sin, and he did it for you. That he sacrificed himself as your substitute taking on the wrath you deserved on the cross. That he brings you to God. That not even death could hold him and that his life extends to you.

It is the truth that Jesus has claimed you and called you his own. That in him you are a child of God, with a loving and committed Father. That in Christ nothing can tear you away from this love.

That there is no condemnation for those that believe in Jesus. Forgiveness, new life, purpose and the power to live for the good of others! And the promise of eternity, secured by Christ and belonging to you.

This message is what makes it worth coming and being part of the church!

When gifts are used intelligibly for the purpose of edification, encouragement, and consolation, the result is that the message of the gospel rings clear and true. People are transformed by it. It is the gospel proclaimed with regularity and spontaneity that does this good, by the Spirit.

And more than just being good for others and for us... it brings glory to God.

### **3) For the Glory of God**

Hearing the truth of the gospel, the prophetic word, convicting and revealing the heart... “falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.”

Humbled, worshiping God, giving glory to God for his goodness, his grace, his mercy, for Jesus.

This is what the church exists for, to extend the worship of God, to incite the declaration that God is among us, that we must belong to Jesus. This is the result of the gifts we desire, of the love we pursue.

**1 Corinthians 10:31, 33** “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do (prophesy), do all to the glory of God... [33] (in the expression of the gifts) do not *seek your* own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.” (ESV)

*Response:* I know of a church in need of edification... and I know those in need of Jesus. This is for us.

The application is the text this morning. **Pursue love, desire the gifts, especially that you may prophesy.**

Prepare the way in the word (now the truth of God that the Spirit will use as a spark in the prophetic - orderly), do this in community for the building of the church, and ask for this gift.

Then proclaim; build up the church with the gospel.

We began with an absurd hypothetical news article and we end with the invitation to write one of our own. “Local Church Pursues Love... the ragtag group of people from varied backgrounds and experience have agreed to pursue love and desire the gifts of the Spirit, especially that they would prophesy. Something mysterious has happened... the church miraculously proclaims forgiveness in Jesus Christ and people are believing in him. One man on the street declared “surely God is among them...”

May it be so with us.