

1 Corinthians 14:1-25 Tongues and prophecy

Coming out of chapter 13 understand that ALL spiritual gifts must be rooted and framed in love for them to have any substance or value.

Chapter 14 is really Paul's big corrective push in regard to how the Corinthians were exercising the vocal gifts during their church gatherings. He focuses primarily on only 2 of the many spiritual gifts that were addressed earlier in chapter 12 - tongues and prophecy.

It appears that the Corinthian church, in their zeal and appreciation for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, swung wildly toward charismania - being more in love with tongues than any other gift. You'll notice Paul didn't have to offer additional instruction on wisdom, administration, teaching, helping others, or even healing.

Could you imagine going to a church where none of those things were a big deal but free-willing tongues was the norm? It would be a cacophony of people speaking over one another - noisy chaos!

In contrast to the Corinthian church, which was overly focused on the noisier vocal gifts, nowadays it might be prudent to write a corrective letter to churches that are over-administered, encouraging them/us to get out of the way and let the Spirit work.

V.1-5 flows from the main thought found in chapter 13 - pursue love - chase it! We're chasing so many other things in our lives, what about love?

So often we are ready to give up on love at the first sign of resistance or discomfort - which is not in Christ's nature.

AND desire spiritual gifts - the two are not mutually exclusive.

Remember love is the anchor of our spiritual gifts. By God's love our spiritual gifts are held steadfast, constant, rooted in Christ for the benefit of others and not the glorification of the worker.

BUT ESPECIALLY that you may prophesy - this is the Body's chance to be God's mouthpiece as so directed by the Holy Spirit. Most often the church listens to a singular voice, one person does all of the talking - which can be prophetic, it's certainly a gift of the Holy Spirit, though you may not think so sometimes! Any good word that comes out of my mouth is not of my own fabrication - but by God's grace and His Spirit. I get to be God's mouthpiece very often and I revel in that, it's glorious.

Paul's encouragement to desire the gift of prophecy is because YOU have the chance to be God's mouthpiece too! In that moment the members of the Body each get a chance to offer God's word to the the Body as directed by the Holy Spirit.

V.2 - Paul is laboring to bring the worship service of the church back into balance and v2 offers insight into why Paul says we should ESPECIALLY desire to prophesy - because tongues can be confusing to everybody! The person speaking in tongues is speaking directly to God.

Now, God of course is not limited to any human language or angelic language, but is the discerner of our hearts. (God isn't mono-lingual).

So with tongues there's a very intimate, sweet moment occurring between the person speaking in tongues and God. But that is an A-B conversation...so often we are trying to C our way out.

V.3 - Prophecy is for many people, specifically for:

Edification - to build people up

Exhortation (paraklesis) - to come alongside encouragingly

Comfort - man, don't we need some comfort

I'm glad the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these criteria. When people get up and rant and rave and holler and spook the church that that isn't Biblically based prophecy.

So, if we were to ask - what does biblical prophecy exercised in the church look like - well it's telling forth God's word as directed by the Holy Spirit in such a way that is edifying, exhorting and/or comforting.

That's a good way to judge prophecy - it doesn't have to be exclusively about the future - that's a very narrow way to look at prophecy! Is it edifying, exhorting, or comforting? Is it God's word? Then that's prophecy!

Here's what prophecy can sound like:

[Jer 29:11-13 NKJV] 11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 And you will seek Me and find [Me], when you search for Me with all your heart.

[Eze 34:11-12 NKJV] 11 'For thus says the Lord GOD: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 "As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day.

V.4-5

Paul, had an earnest desire that the church would exercise these gifts - he wished that they ALL spoke with tongues but more so that they would prophesy.

Prophecy is greater than tongues because prophecy, speaking forth God's word, ministers to the church, builds up the church, while tongues are a single person experience.

Paul's caveat is, unless he interprets - if somebody is there to interpret then the Body can be edified by the prayer of the Spirit being offered up by the person speaking to God in an otherwise unknown language.

V.6-8 Paul illustrates his point by way of practical application - his first question is rhetorical and meant to illustrate that speaking in tongues doesn't profit the hearer - but speaking forth revelation, knowledge, prophesying, teaching - those things are valuable to everybody that hears them.

Similar to 13:1 Paul uses the analogy of a music instrument - where in 13:1 he said any spiritual gift we exercise without love is just like loud, unorganized noise - he says the same thing here. If the vocal gifts don't have a recognizable sound then they are pointless - confusing, disorganized - not traits we would say edify or build us up, or prepare us for action.

V. 9 - anything we utter forth has to be easy to understand or else we are just speaking into the air - goes in one ear and out the other. That's easy for us to comprehend with tongues - if I don't understand it then I don't care about the content.

BUT, a more relatable experience for most of us is actually from right here in the pulpit. IF it's not easy to understand then it is altogether unprofitable and pointless. A valid criticism against many Bible teachers has been our desire to show off how much we know in the pulpit, an exercise in vanity, instead of speaking forth God's word in an understandable and relatable way.

V.10-11 For tongues specifically, we who don't understand the language are foreigners - even for common languages like Spanish, French, or

Italian. Nothing will make a confused look come across one's face quicker than being in a foreign country not speaking the language.

AND, how many languages can the Holy Spirit speak through somebody? There are between 6500 and 7100 living languages in the world today.

How do you know when somebody is making up a language or babbling senselessly in tongues? Only the speaker would know that and for the speaker to tempt the Holy Spirit like that would be an act of extreme disrespect toward God the Spirit.

V.12 - the lynch pin on which this all turns - be zealous for gifts. Why? To edify, to build up, the church.

V.13-14 - for those that speak in tongues without an interpreter - pray that you might interpret that we might all be built up AND that the speaker might be built up - Paul teaches that it's possible for the speaker to also be clueless of his utterance. His spirit soars, yes, but his understanding withers - it's unfruitful. What a frustrating feeling that must be.

V.15-17 Paul begins to reinforce this crucial teaching on tongues - to join these gifts together WITH understanding, exercising spiritual gifts WITH understanding so that the body might be built up is the ideal that the church should seek to practice.

It also appears that giving thanks is a large part of tongues - "you give thanks well" - there's a commendation here.

V.18-19 Paul boasts a bit in his exercise of the gifts - he didn't say, ewww that's weird, he recognized the validity and place in the body for such gifts BUT demonstrates tremendous Spirit inspired wisdom by penning the words, "in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in tongues."

To speak 5 edifying, Spirit inspired words clearly, for the benefit of the Body is of much more worth and requires much more preparation and prayer than rambling on in an unknown language OR rambling on in any known language for that matter!

"How long does it take you to prepare one of your speeches?" asked a friend of President [Woodrow] Wilson ... "That depends on the length of the speech," answered the President. "If it is a ten-minute speech it takes me all of two weeks to prepare it; if it is a half-hour speech it takes me a week; if I can talk as long as I want to it requires no preparation at all. I am ready now."

V.20-25 the work of tongues and prophecy outside and inside the church.

At first glance these verses seem paradoxical - first Paul says tongues ARE a sign to unbelievers and then he says inside the church unbelievers will think you're crazy.

Then he says prophecy is NOT for unbelievers but finishes by saying if prophecy is exercised IN church then unbelievers will see that God is speaking through His people.

So how do we reconcile the conflict?

I propose that it is the difference in geography - outside the church v. inside the church.

Here's why - in Acts 2 when the disciples began to speak with other tongues they began to speak the wonderful works of God and the people, jews, devout men from every nation, outside the church in the public realm heard these in their own languages and were cut to the heart. The entire setting is supernatural from the exercise of the gifts to the reaction of the people - God was reaping unbelievers into the kingdom in that moment.

This is why context matters - because if we don't allow for nuance and exceptional movements of God then we become formulaic in our practice; this is exactly how we get from Acts 2:38 to the stated belief "if you don't speak in tongues you're not saved."

In the broader context - tongues were a sign to the unbeliever - those apart from Christ as seen in Acts chapter 2.

More generally, tongues are not a sign for unbelievers IN the church but to the believer because we, students of scripture, have a biblical

understanding of the nature and purpose of the gifts that they are for the edification of body when exercised in love.

BUT, bring an unbeliever to a service and start shouting in tongues -- that's a good way to provoke a panicked look and questions about our sanity because there's no context for that unbeliever, all they see is confusion, and commotion - and is that an accurate reflection of God? No.

Same for prophecy - outside the church, prophecy is of little value to the unbeliever - for the street preacher standing on the corner proclaiming, "thus saith the Lord..." the response from the unbeliever is often - yeah right, that man is delusional - I've said the same things.

BUT, if we lovingly bring unbelievers into the church, into our space (which would indicate that we have a relationship with them), and they see God's ordinary people, not weirdos, speaking forth God's holy word decently and in order for edification, and encouragement, and comfort - for the the benefit of all and exercised in love - then that is a tremendous testament to God's spirit - that's a great picture of God.

And that is our hope - that the report will be, God is truly among you. Because...He is, by His Spirit and by His Word. Amen.