

SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN THE CHURCH

Among the many problems at Corinth was the proper exercise of spiritual gifts.

The church at Corinth had all of the spiritual gifts.

In Chapter 12 Paul uses the metaphor of the church compared to the human body. The human body has many parts and the parts are interdependent. Likewise, no function in the local church is more important or more necessary than any other function.

We tend to hold the pastor (s) in higher esteem but what would there be to pastor if there were no sheep?

Peter's admonishment to elders needs to be recalled often:

1 Peter 5:1-5

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."
ESV

In our lesson in Chapter 13, the Love Chapter, Paul writes that if you have all of the gifts and faith that could move mountains; without agape you are just noisy and bothersome; you have nothing and you gain nothing.

The least of the spiritual gifts was tongues and that seemed to be the gift that was misused the most. Chapter 14 addresses Prophecy and Tongues.

Remember the key to the purpose of all of the gifts is 12:7:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1. PROPHECY: BETTER THAN TONGUES

1 Cor 14:1-5

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ²For 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. ³On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵Now 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.

Prophecy is placed above tongues as being better. Prophecy here is not forth-telling but truth-telling [preaching] in a forceful and effective manner to guide the church.

Vs. 1 “Prophecy is the most important of these gifts. Modern preaching is its successor.... Desire zealously this (prophecy) more than any other spiritual gift, especially in preference to “tongues.” [Fausset]

Vs. 2 “The reason for preferring Prophecy, on the principles laid down, is that one’s fellows receive no benefit from Tongues: except God, ‘no one hears’ the latter – i.e. hears understandingly [Cf. Eph 1:13; 4:29]. There was sound enough in the glossolalia [13:1], but no sense [23].” [Findley]

Vs. 3 But he who prophesies speaks to men, and his intelligible words are a means of edification, exhortation, and comfort.

Vs. 4 He who speaks in ‘a tongue’ edifies only himself, whereas he who prophesies builds up the whole church. Thus the superiority of prophecy over tongues is established by its greater usefulness.

Vs. 5 “Paul’s aim is not to depreciate tongues, but to help the Corinthians properly estimate the value of this gift. Although he would like them all to speak with tongues, yet it would be even better for them to have the gift of prophecy. Because the man who prophesies is ‘greater’ than he who speaks in a tongue, unless of course he also has the ability to interpret his utterance for the benefit of the congregation. In that case he would do in two acts what the prophet does in one.” [Findley]

The main point is that prophecy [preaching] is preferred over a tongue; why? Without interpretation the whole church is not edified. Apparently that was the case at Corinth.

2. INTELLIGIBILITY IS ESSENTIAL

1 Cor 14:6-12

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.

Vs. 6 “Knowing their exaggerated esteem for tongues, Paul asks the Corinthians to judge what spiritual benefit they would receive from him if he should come to them speaking only in tongues. Would they now be his ‘brethren’ in Christ, if on his first visit to Corinth he had merely appeared in their midst as a demented ecstatic? [23] Was it not by means of an address to their understanding in comprehensible speech that the light of the gospel had dawned upon them? [2:2] And did they not expect to reach Christian maturity by exalting to the premier place a gift which left their highest faculty unedified? [14] ‘There are not four, but only two modes of address contemplated in this verse, Revelation and Prophecy belong to one; and knowledge and doctrine to the other. He who received revelations was a prophet; he who had ‘the word of knowledge’ was a teacher.” [Hodge]

Vs. 7 “Even the inanimate things teach us a lesson. Of course there are many noises or crashes to be heard by chance, which have no musical significance. But Paul is speaking here about sounds which are the products of certain technical skill, as though he said: ‘A man cannot give life to a harp or flute, but he produces sounds, which are adjusted in such a way that they can be picked out. How absurd then that actual men, endowed as they are with intelligence, should utter indistinguishable and unintelligible sounds!’” [Calvin]

Vs. 8 “So in the military realm. The trumpet conveys the commands of the leader to men remote from him. But it is of the first importance that the trumpet should be blown so that it can be understood. If the sound is uncertain the blowing of the trumpet has failed in its purpose. It is useless.” [Morris]

Vs. 9 “In the same way, the man whose words cannot be apprehended by the intelligence is really ‘speaking in the air.’ Cf. Eccl 12:9-10 Paul here uses a very sharp expression, so that the very last Corinthian in Corinth who is still overrating the gift may finally be shaken awake out of his error.”

[E. Krajewski cited by Anthony Hoekema, *What About Tongue-Speaking?* p. 91]

Vs. 10 “Paul has no idea how many languages there are in the world, but he is convinced that none of them is without meaning. ‘Voiceless’ does not mean ‘dumb’ but what may be worse, ‘unintelligible.’ Voiceless voice, i.e. meaningless sound, had better be inaudible; it is a mere distracting noise. This was the case with Tongues in a congregation without an interpreter.” [Robertson and Plummer]

Vs. 11 “The mutual exchange of thought is impossible unless both speak the same language. Otherwise each would regard the other as a ‘barbarian,’ i.e. someone whose speech gave the impression of being nothing more than a meaningless jumble of sounds.... The ecstatic speech which seemed to the Corinthians a matter for such pride turns out to be the means of making them more than barbarians. This would be even worse for a Greek than for us.” [Morris]

Vs. 12 Paul admits that the Corinthian’s are zealous to obtain spiritual gifts. But what they failed to understand is that the distribution of the gifts among them was not for private gratification or personal display, but for the common good of the one body to which they all belong. “To this end prophecy should have the preponderance, or tongues be accompanied with interpretation.” [Godet]

3. INTERPRETATION IS INDISPENSABLE

1 Cor 14:13-20

¹³ Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to 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.

Vs. 13 Since the church can only be edified by hearing an intelligible message, the man who speaks in 'a tongue' should pray that God would also grant him the ability to interpret this ecstatic utterance.

Vs. 14 Paul applies what he may do to what the Corinthian's are actually doing. His own spirit may be edified, but if it is not transformed into intelligible speech, no benefit is communicated to the congregation.

"It is strange that those who so prided themselves upon their wisdom, should need to be told that intellect is not to be ignored, but ought to be brought to full development [20]. [Robertson and Plummer]

Vs. 15 "Because worship of God is an exercise which engages the whole man, Paul is resolved to pray and sing not only with the spirit, but also with the understanding. Fervency of spirit must be found in alliance with the illumination of the intellect, and neither is acceptable without the other. Rational prayer is not less spiritual than irrational." [Barrett]

Vs. 16 – 17 "The man who speaks in a tongue when the church is at worship is guilty of 'unseemly' behaviour [13:5] towards his fellow believers, because his unintelligible utterance forces them into a place which is not properly theirs, viz. that of the 'uninitiated' into God's mysteries." [Godet]

Vs. 18 – 19 “It is not that Paul is himself a stranger to ecstatic experiences of this kind that he discourages tongues in public worship. [Cf. 2 Cor 12:1-4] Indeed he speaks ‘with tongues more than ye all.’ He surpasses them all in this mode of speaking. Had he wished to point to a greater proficiency in foreign languages he would rather have said: ‘Because I speak in more languages than you all.’ [Godet] But he only exercise this gift in private, for he would prefer to speak five sensible words to instruct his fellow Christians ‘than to utter a torrent of words in a tongue.’ [Morris] Thus it was not through exciting emotional experiences that the apostle sought to edify the Corinthians, but by addressing a rational message to their minds. In presenting the Christian gospel we must never, in the first place, make a direct approach either to the emotions or to the will. The emotions and the will should always be influenced through the mind. The normal course is for the emotions and the will to be affected by the truth after it has first entered and gripped the mind.”

[D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Conversions: Psychological and Spiritual*, p 39]

Vs. 20 “It is characteristic of the child to prefer the amusing to the useful....”
[Godet]

Paul anticipates that they would think that he didn’t understand their use of tongues. He tells them he speaks in tongues more than any of them, but only in private, and that preoccupation with tongues is a sign of spiritual immaturity.

4. PROPHECY MAY LEAD TO FAITH; TONGUES MAY CONFIRM UNBELIEF 1 Cor 14:21-25

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.

Another reason that prophecy is preferred over tongues is that prophecy may lead to faith while tongues may confirm one in unbelief according to Isaiah. Suppose everyone spoke in tongues and there was an unbeliever present; wouldn't he conclude that you were all a bunch of lunatics, and thereby be confirmed in unbelief? On the other hand, if the unbeliever heard prophecy he might be convinced of sin and be converted.

Vs. 21 “Paul next introduces a free quotation of Isaiah 28:11-12.

Isa 28:11-12

¹¹ For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the LORD will speak to this people, ¹² to whom he has said, "This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose"; yet they would not hear. ESV

Paul is thus illustrating the danger of despising a clear revelation {prophecy} in favour of an unintelligible utterance {tongues}. According to the true interpretation of Isa 28: 9ff, the drunken Israelites are mocking in their cups the teaching of God through His prophet, as though it were only fit for an infant school; in anger therefore He threatens to give His lessons through the lips of foreign conquerors (11), in whose speech the despisers of the mild, plain teaching of His servants (12) shall painfully spell out their ruin... God spoke to Israel through the strange Assyrian tongue in retribution, not to confirm their faith but to consummate their unbelief. The Glossolalia (speaking with tongues) may serve a similar melancholy purpose in the Church.” [Findley]

Vs. 22 “The application of this quotation (Isa) is that if the Corinthians persist in their perverse preference for the obscure phenomenon of tongues, then they must not be surprised if their unbelieving rejection of prophecy is judicially confirmed by God. Paul desires to quench rather than stimulate the Corinthian ardour for Tongues.” [Findley]

“It is wholly otherwise with prophetic exhortations. These are a sign of faith or of the disposition to believe which already exists in those to whom God thus speaks.” [Godet]

Vs. 23 “Here Paul shows the disastrous impression which the unbridled exercise of tongues would make upon the interested inquirer ... and the unbeliever alike. If the Tongues are, as many Corinthians think, the highest manifestation of the Spirit, then to have the whole church simultaneously so speaking would be finest exercise of spiritual power; but, in fact, as a congregation of lunatics! [Findley]

Vs. 24 - 25 “Tongues may succeed in arousing the scorn of the unbeliever, but only prophecy can make him a believer... What passes in him at such a moment resembles what passed in Paul on the way to Damascus. Struck by this light, he casts himself in the dust, not before man, but before God, acknowledging that such brightness can only proceed from the Holy of holies and the Searcher of hearts; that consequently it is He who speaks by the mouth of those into the midst of who he has come.” [Godet]

5. THE ORDERLY EXERCISE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS 1 Cor 14:26-35

²⁶ What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷ If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, ³² and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Paul lays down several principles.

First of all whatever is done must benefit all (26).

Second, no more than three persons may speak in tongues in a church service, only one at a time, and there must be an interpreter. The same restrictions to prophecy, not a bunch of people talking at the same time!

The third principle is that the gift is not uncontrolled by the person (32).

A fourth principle involved the order of creation again. Women are subject to men. With their newfound liberty in Christ, some women were reflecting badly on their husbands with excessive and ill-timed public speaking. If they wanted to ask a question; ask at home (33-35). If a woman had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9) she must acknowledge God’s creative order with her head covered. It is unlikely that Paul is rigidly forbidding women to not speak at all in church, but they must not control the worship service.

Vs. 26 “Having concluded his treatment of spiritual gifts, Paul next shows how they are to be used in the church (26-33). These detailed directions were necessary because the abundance of gifts possessed by the Corinthians was matched by their eagerness to exercise them. Consequently, spontaneity in worship quickly degenerated into confusion and disorder. In this section Paul is at pains to point out that this unseemly behaviour must be rectified at once (33). E. A. Abbott expands the verse thus: ‘Just when ye are assembling for sacred worship, and ought to be thinking of Christ and of Christ’s body, the congregation, each one is perhaps thinking of himself, “I have a Psalm,” “I have a doctrine.” “I have a revelation.” Have done with this! Let all be done to edification.’
[cited by Robertson and Plummer]

Vs. 27 - 28 “Although there may be many in the congregation ready to speak in Tongues, no more than two, or at most three, should be allowed to do so, ‘and that in turn.’ Furthermore, if no interpreter is present, the Tongue-speaker must keep silent in the church, and exercise his gift privately at home. For without interpretation his gift is of no value to the church.” [Robertson and Plummer]

Vs. 29 - 31 Likewise, only two or three may prophesy and others with the gift of discernment are to judge whether their words are inspired or not.

Vs. 32 - 33a “Unlike the diabolical inspirations of heathenism [12:2], the breathings of God’s Spirit do not carry the prophet away without his consent or will, and therefore ‘he has no right to make inspiration a pretext for refusing to submit to the rules laid down by the apostle.’ [Godet]

Vs. 33b – 34 “The Church in Corinth was not a law unto itself, and was not therefore free to permit what was forbidden in other churches. However, it is not merely on the strength of universal custom that Paul enjoins silence upon the women of Corinth during the public worship; it is an authoritative command because it is of Divine origin [Cf. Gen 3:16] ... In many places women may speak and teach even publicly, but in no place where she will exercise ‘dominion over a man’ by her teaching.” [Cf. 1 Tim 2:12-14] [Lenski]

Vs. 35 This prohibition extends to even asking questions in the worship service.

6. CHALLENGE AND SUMMATION

1 Cor 14:36-40

³⁶ Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? ³⁷ If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹ So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But all things should be done decently and in order.

Vs. 36 "...do you set your judgment above that of the other churches, do you pretend that your church is the first from which the gospel came, that you should give law to all others? Or are you the only persons unto whom it has come?" [Fausset]

Vs. 37 Having concluded his external discussion of spiritual gifts [chs 12-14], Paul now affixes the seal of his authority to what he has written. Let anyone who thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, prove his claim by acknowledging that what the apostle has writing is the 'Lord's commandment.' Anyone who fails to recognize the inspiration and authority of Paul's words not only shows that he has no spiritual discernment, but also affords proof positive that he is not of God.

Vs. 38 "But if anyone is ignorant of the source of Paul's authority, he must be left to his ignorance and all it entails. An argument likely to have weight with the Corinthians, who admired 'knowledge' so much." [Fausset]

Vs. 39 "The whole discussion is now affectionately summed up in one lucid directive. [v. 39-40] ... A vast difference; the one gift to be greatly longed for, the other only not forbidden." [Robertson and Plummer]

Vs. 40 "The lasting importance of this chapter lies in the fact that Paul sets forth what the character of the divine service must be. That which he writes about that subject is still valid. Furthermore we learn that God the Holy Spirit had endowed early Christians with special gifts, charismata, and that He guided the ancient church by means of them. We also notice how great the dangers connected with those gifts. That should make us grateful that in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments we have all that we need." [Grosheide]

Paul concludes with three commands:

- 1) Desire prophecy {preaching} above all other gifts;
- 2) Do not forbid speaking in tongues provided all the constraints are used;
- 3) Do everything in an orderly way.

What about today?

The answer is found in whether you believe in continuing revelation from God.