



Imagine for a moment two builders going off to work. The first walks through the winding streets of town until he comes to a little plot of land where he's building a small but lovely house. It's just big enough for him and his family. The outside of the house is nothing special at all, but inside is spectacular. The finish work is amazing, the furniture is handcrafted, the artwork is original. There's even a beautiful courtyard. It's like a sanctuary for him and his family, but the rest of the world won't be allowed in. It's just for them.

The second walks through town to the public square. He takes his place with dozens of others working together on a new cathedral that will fill one entire side of the square and transform the city square into a place of grandeur. The foreman assigns each worker their jobs for the day; one is hauling pillars into position, another is sorting colored stones for the mosaic, and another is working on the great carved doors. None of them are thinking about the kind of home they live in because they're building a place of beauty, awe, and above all prayer and worship that will last 1,000 years.

The contrast between these two builders is the contrast the apostle Paul makes throughout 1 Corinthians 14. He's prepared his listeners in the previous chapters by explaining that the church is like a body which is one and as in a body every part plays a different but important role. He's also said whatever role you play must be done in love or it becomes as useless as clanging cymbals. But now in chapter 14 he deals head-on with the specific issue that brought all this up in the first place; an issue that deals with what happens when they come together for worship.

The contrast is between the person who builds up their private spirituality and the person who is more focused on building up the whole community. Paul has nothing against private spirituality. To go back to our analogy, there is a place to adorn the inside of our own little house and make it a place of beauty, joy and light. But when you come to worship, you need to think about what builds up the whole community.

The word Paul uses for this throughout this chapter is **edification**. In v. 26 he says *"Let all things be done for edification."* That's a word right off a construction site. It means to build something. In this case, it's not a house but it's lives being built

up. In chapter 12 Paul listed several different spiritual gifts—special abilities the Spirit gives to believers. Why are they given? To build up the body of Christ. These gifts aren't for your own private enjoyment. They aren't given so you can strut around like a peacock and show them off. When you come to church, when you worship and serve, everything you do should be to build up not just yourself but the whole body.

The problem in Corinth centered around two gifts in particular. He spends the whole chapter talking about these: the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. Both of these were very prominent in Corinth. These are speaking gifts. One good thing about the Corinthians is when they came to church they expected to hear from God; they believed he still speaks, and he speaks through people. But let's start by defining what these are.

What are tongues and prophecy?

Tongues

First, the gift of tongues. From the best we can tell, these are actual languages, although there is some debate about that. But Paul makes it clear in v. 2 that this tongues-speech is directed toward God: *"For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God..."* Later in v. 14 he says, *"If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays..."* So we can define tongues as prayer or praise spoken in a language not understood by the speaker. Later he even talks about singing in tongues (v. 15). By the way, sometimes the gift of being able to interpret the tongue was given either to the speaker himself or to someone else in the body. Either way, the gift of tongues was something Paul himself experienced.

In v. 18 he says *"I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all..."* But we also know not everyone has this gift. Back in 12:30 he said, *"All do not speak in tongues, do they?"* The answer he expected, of course, was no. But as we'll see, the Corinthians placed this gift above all the others. And that troubled Paul for several reasons that will be apparent as we go along. But one thing was that in other pagan religions of Paul's day, people had similar experiences. They could be easily led astray. By the way, today tongues is practiced by several non-Christian religions, including the Mormons. So at the very least Paul was concerned about this and chapter 14 is meant to correct them in their use of tongues.

Prophecy

The other gift he focuses on is prophecy. We're all very familiar with one definition of prophecy: predicting the future. May 21 has come and gone and at least one so-called prophecy didn't come true. But prophecy is much more than just predicting the future. In the Old Testament prophets were considered the mouthpiece of God. They spoke God's word about not just the future but the present.

In the New Testament there are two ways prophecy is seen. First, it's found in what we know as Scripture. The apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the church by giving us the New Testament Scriptures. The Bible is the prophetic word of God to us. In that sense, there is no more prophecy to be given. What theologians call "the canon" of Scripture is closed.

But as you read the New Testament it seems there was a secondary kind of prophecy as well. When I interpret and apply the word to you here on Sunday that's a form of prophecy. God speaks through this. That's why we take it so seriously. But as we read the New Testament it's clear prophecy could also come in the form of a spontaneous word from the Lord that he gives to someone in the body for someone else or for the church as a whole. While tongues are directed to God in prayer or praise, prophecy is directed to other people. Look at v. 3. ***"But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation."*** Notice how prophecy can be just a word of up-building, or it can be an encouragement to do something (exhortation), or a word of comfort (consolation).

Now as you might imagine there's danger in this. We can't have everyone going around claiming to have a word from the Lord. So as we go through this chapter we'll see Paul lay down some ground rules for how to use this gift.

Prophecy is preferable to tongues.

Prophecy is intelligible; tongues is not

But one thing is for sure: Paul placed a high value on prophecy and he prefers prophecy to tongues. He gives three reasons but they all boil down to this one thing: edification. Look at verses 4–12.

One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying. But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching? Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how

will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me. So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.

First, Paul prefers prophecy to tongues because prophecy is intelligible; tongues is not. Spiritual gifts are designed to edify others in the body and if they can't understand what you're saying they can't be edified! Now if the tongues are interpreted that's a different story. Then others can benefit from what's being said. But the Corinthians were just babbling away and no one including the speaker had any idea what they were saying. It was chaos!

I love the three examples he uses. Just playing random tones of a flute or a harp is hardly music. Who benefits from that? And a bugle is used to rally the troops for battle, but if you can't make out the sounds, how will the troops know what to do? How will believers be equipped for battle if we don't understand what's being said? Finally, there are a multitude of languages but unless you are understood you're speaking into the air. Have you ever sat through a lecture where someone speaks in a language you couldn't understand? That's as exciting as watching paint dry!

Prophecy engages the whole person; tongues do not

Another reason he prefers prophecy to tongues is prophecy engages the whole person; tongues do not. Look at verses 13–19.

Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

When a person prays in a tongue his spirit is engaged but if he has no idea what he's saying, his mind is left out of the equation. Paul says it's much better to engage the whole person when you

pray. Not just your spirit but your mind as well. This is true not just for the one doing the praying and singing but also for the ones listening; the people in church with you. It's much better for them to understand what you're praising God for and giving thanks for because then they can say "Amen." They can benefit and be blessed by what you're saying to God.

What Paul wants is balance. There are some Christians who tell you what really matters in worship is spirit. It's all about emotion and feeling and spontaneity. Your mind just gets in the way. They don't want to plan anything. Worship become a free for all. But there are others who say it's all about the mind. Sermons are akin to a university lecture. Prayers and songs are carefully rehearsed. Worship services become dry and boring and emotionless. There's no heart. It's all about the mind.

Paul concludes he'd rather speak five words in church that people can understand and benefit from than 10,000 in a tongue no one can understand. I think the Corinthians criticized him for that. They said. "Paul, what kind of Christian are you? We've never heard you speak in tongues. How do we really know if you're filled with the Spirit?" But Paul says he did speak in tongues more than all of them. But if he couldn't do it in a way others could benefit from he'd keep his mouth shut.

Prophecy draws unbelievers to God; tongues cannot

There is one more reason prophecy is preferable to tongues. It had to do with what guests at church would think, especially those who were not yet believers. Look at verses 20–25.

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, "BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME," says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe. Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

Paul is concerned with those he calls "an unbeliever or an ungifted man." What will they think if you're just babbling away? They'll think you're mad!

He quotes from Isaiah 28 where God says that as a mark of his displeasure with unbelieving Israel, he'll address them in the strange languages of their Assyrian captors. This would be a sign

of judgment to them for their rebellious ways. So he says tongues are a sign of judgment for unbelievers. Those who truly believe and follow God don't need to be addressed in this way. Those who don't yet believe won't have the opportunity to hear the good news that God loves them and sent his Son to save them. The last thing you want is for the not-yet-believers in your midst to reject the gospel because you come off as insane babblers! It's much better if they come to church and hear God's word spoken and through that the secrets of their hearts disclosed. If that happens they'll be much more likely to fall on their face and worship God!

This tells me we should be sensitive to those people who come to our church and are not yet believers. It's not that the whole thing is designed for them, but we should think through how what we do and say will impact them. It reminds me of the old hymn where one line says, "Here I raise my Ebenezer." What's an Ebenezer? Even most Christians don't know. I didn't know until I looked it up. It means a "stone of help" or a reminder of God's presence but it doesn't do any good to sing it unless we know what it means.

But there you have three reasons why prophecy is more edifying than uninterrupted tongues: 1) Prophecy is intelligible; tongues is not. 2) Prophecy engages the whole person; tongues do not. 3) Prophecy draws unbelievers to God; tongues cannot.

Worship that edifies will take place in an orderly manner.

The need for order

Starting in v. 26 Paul switches gears a bit. He's still talking about prophecy and tongues, but instead of explaining why prophecy is preferable to tongues, he explains how they both should be used in the context of public worship. Again, his main concern is edification. And what he says here is whether it be prophecy or tongues, worship that edifies will take place in an orderly manner. Look at v. 26.

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation Let all things be done for edification.

In contrast to that, the Corinthian worship services were like a circus. Anything could happen at any time. People were interrupting each other all over the place. They were trying to "one up" each other with displays of what they considered spirituality. By the way, I think this is why Paul said in chapter 13, ***"love does not boast"*** and ***"love does not act unbecomingly."*** This is how the Corinthians were acting in worship. So he lays down ground rules to ensure order.

Order as it applies to tongues

If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God (verses 27–28).

First, this is what he says about the use of the gift of tongues. Instead of everyone babbling at once, he says one at a time, no more than two or three in one meeting, and finally if there is no interpretation, stay silent in church. If you want to do it in private that's fine, but church is for edification.

Order as it applies to prophecy

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (verses 29–33).

Once again, one at a time, no more than two or three in one service, and then he adds something we haven't seen before. He says after a prophecy is given, *“let the others pass judgment.”* So you don't accept at face value what someone says just because they say they have a word from God. You need to have leaders in the church who are mature and discerning and can evaluate what's said. There are several questions that should be asked: Does this glorify God? Is it in agreement with Scripture? Does it build up believers? Is it spoken with love? Is the speaker in control of himself? That's what he means when he says “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.” In other words, a person won't just be carried away by the Spirit; he won't be out of control. A big question in all this is whether or not the person speaking is willing to submit to the judgment and consensus of others. Humility is a mark of authenticity.

Order as it applies to women

The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church (verses 34–35).

The third area in which he calls for order is in regard to women or to wives. Now this sounds rather bizarre. This is one of those places where we need to consider the context. Paul just mentioned the importance of others passing judgment on the given prophecy. We've already seen from chapter 11 that he assumed women will be praying and prophesying in church. He said they were free to do it but should wear a head covering to symbolize respect for their husbands. So whatever he says about keeping

silent must take that into consideration. It's also important to remember that most likely men and women were segregated during worship. This is still true in many churches in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe. So if a woman wanted to say something to her husband she'd have to shout across the church.

With all that in mind, it's very likely what was happening was the married women in the church were disrupting the service by shouting across the aisle and either asking questions of their husbands about a given prophecy or even evaluating a prophecy their own husbands had given, and perhaps doing so in a sharp and critical way. That's why Paul says “let them ask their own husbands at home.” This verse has been taken way out of context in some churches where women aren't allowed to speak during worship at all. That's not what Paul means. Again he simply wants order because order allows for edification. Look how he closes in verses 39–40.

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.

Once again, I hope you can see the balance here. On the one hand, we shouldn't forbid either prophecy or tongues. Ironically, many Bible believing churches do this, but they seem to have missed this part of the Bible. On the other hand, we should make sure it's all done in an orderly manner. Call it “orderly spontaneity.” It's like Paul said in 1 Thess. 4:19-22, *“Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.”* Do you see the balance?

What order doesn't mean

Whatever we say about the need for order, let's not forget that order doesn't mean no spontaneity in worship. It's clear there were things happening in their worship services they didn't plan for. We have to be careful today not to plan everything so tightly that we leave no room for the Spirit to do something unusual. I can just see the Spirit saying to us, “Excuse me, would you mind if I interrupted your order of service?”

Nor does order mean that only a few can really contribute and participate in worship. It's very clear as you read this chapter that many were involved. Someone might bring a psalm or a hymn, someone else a teaching, still someone else a tongue or an interpretation. Now understand their worship gatherings were much smaller than ours. Most scholars think they probably had less than 100 people present. This allowed for more participation. This is part of why smaller groupings of people are so important in a church like ours. It's in those groups that more people can contribute. But “orderly” doesn't mean just a few people are involved.

Finally, order doesn't mean there is no sense of the presence of God in worship. In the midst of all we've seen in this chapter don't lose sight of one thing: God is present in our worship gatherings and we should expect to hear from God when we meet together. And how does he speak? He speaks his word through people. We should expect even unbelievers to see this and fall on their face and confess God really is God.

Honestly, at a church like CPC, our problem isn't chaos instead of order. Our problem might be we just go through the motions of worship and never expect God to show up in a real way at all. Gordon Fee may be right when he says, “If Paul were writing the average congregation today, his advice would have to work the other side of the street. Rather than an unstructured spontaneity that creates bedlam, he would be confronted with a well regulated order of worship that often creates boredom. The smallest of churches often prints for its members a program of everything that's going to happen during the hour and the sequence in which it will take place, and once it has been printed it becomes a sacred thing to those who planned it. And the likelihood of the Spirit's leading anyone to say or do anything that was not anticipated on Tuesday when the stencil was cut is very remote.”

Conclusion

The elite team of Navy SEALs that killed Osama bin Laden on May 1 is still shrouded in mystery. But in a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* a former Navy SEAL divulged the one quality that makes for a successful SEAL—the ability to think about other people and a higher purpose. He writes:

“The rigors that SEALs go through begin on the day they walk into Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training, seen as the hardest military training in the world. It lasts a grueling six months. The classes include large contingents of high-school and college track and football stars, national-champion swimmers,

and top-ranked wrestlers and boxers, but only 10-20 % of the men who begin manage to finish

“What kind of man makes it through Hell Week? That's hard to say. But I do know—generally—those who won't make it. There are a dozen types that fail: the weightlifting meatheads who think that the size of their biceps is an indication of their strength ... the preening leaders who don't want to get dirty, and the look-at-me former athletes who have always been told they are stars. In short, those who fail are the ones who focus on show. Some men who seemed impossibly weak at the beginning of SEAL training—men who puked on runs and had trouble with pull-ups—made it. Some men who were skinny and short and whose teeth chattered just looking at the ocean also made it. Some men who were afraid to the point of shaking, made it too.

“Almost all the men who survived possessed one common quality. Even in great pain, faced with the test of their lives, they had the ability to step outside of their own pain, put aside their own fear and ask: How can I help the guy next to me? They had more than the ‘fist’ of courage and physical strength. They also had a heart large enough to think about others, to dedicate themselves to a higher purpose.”

What strikes me about this is it sounds exactly like the people Paul was looking for in Corinth and exactly what we need in the church today. Not preening look-at-me people who want to show off their gifts, but men and women who feel impossibly weak but want to build up the guy next to them. When you come to church, find a way to do that.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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