

1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-19

INTRODUCTION

Having highlighted the permanence of love and the temporary nature of the gift of tongue speaking Paul now faces the Corinthian church with their sin against love in misunderstanding and misusing the gift of tongues. Some believers at Corinth had so abused the gift that their church services were chaotic, which is why Paul devotes a whole chapter to this issue.

The abuse of tongue speaking was so representative of the sinfulness of the Christians at Corinth.

The term to speak in tongues, which Paul uses often in this chapter, was commonly used in Paul's day to refer to the pagan ecstatic language that was common among pagan religions. It seems that Paul is seeking to point out that much of the tongue speaking that went on within the church at Corinth was similar to that spoken in the pagan temples, it was a case of everyone wanting to show off and selfishness was rife.

It is clear that not much true worship took place because of the sinfulness and selfishness of the people. Because of the worldly selfishness within the church it seems that the tongue speaking that went on was not from God but was in fact counterfeit for the believers were in no fit spiritual state to use the true spiritual gifts that God gives to his church. It is within this context that Paul teaches us three things about tongue speaking.

1. TONGUES DO NOT EDIFY LIKE PROPHECY (vs. 1-5)

Paul encourages the church to follow the way of love and the word "follow" means to "hunt or chase after with intensity." Paul is saying that above all else the church at Corinth should pursue love (v 1). The problem within the church at Corinth was that it was a loveless church. As a result there were many abuses going on and the abuse of tongue speaking stemmed from a lack of love within the church.

This is why the pursuit of love would readdress many of the abuses going on within the church. What is true of Corinth is true of all churches even today.

In our pursuit of biblical love we are not to neglect spiritual gifts for when the gifts are used in an atmosphere of love then there can be no doubt that their use will be much more effective. Paul particularly highlights the desire for the gift of prophecy, which was the gift of communicating God's word to the church whether that word was foretelling or forth telling. Now the foretelling element of prophecy for us ceased with the completion of the Scriptures but the forth-telling element is, of course, still relevant within the church for in truth preaching is telling forth what God has already said in his word.

Of course for the Corinthians both aspects of prophecy were very much active in their time, as the Scriptures had not yet been complete. The reason why Paul tells the church to seek to exercise the gift of prophecy is that prophecy is able to accomplish what speaking in tongues can never accomplish.

For example a tongue speaker whose message is not interpreted speaks only to God. Only God knows what he is saying and that does not edify anyone. He simply speaks in a language that no one understands (v2). However when prophecy is spoken in the midst of the church then everyone understands for it is spoken in their language and therefore people are strengthened encouraged and comforted (v 3).

This is the constant need for the church in every age. We all need to be strengthened in our faith, we all need to be constantly encouraged to walk in obedience to God and we do need to hear those words of comfort. Now none of that is possible when someone speaks in an unlearned language and it is not interpreted which is probably what was constantly going on in the church at Corinth.

Remember the whole point of spiritual gifts is that they were to be used not for our benefit but for the benefit of others. The tongue speaking that went on in Corinth was for self-gratification and therefore was spoken without interpretation and was of no benefit to others it simply boosted people's egos.

The prophet might feel edified within himself (v 4) but this is a selfish use of the gift of prophecy; on the other hand prophecy edifies the whole church. So which gift should be given priority within the church at Corinth?

It is clear that prophecy should because the whole church can understand prophecy but the Corinthians sought after the gift of tongues more than anything else and used the gift within the church without any interpretation so that no one understood what was going on.

But Paul does not want to down play the proper use of tongue speaking within the church at Corinth (v 5). He does recognise the gift and wishes that everyone had such a gift but of course he knows that will never be the case as he has already taught that there is a rich diversity within the gifts of the Spirit.

But if he had a choice he would rather have everyone prophecy for prophecy is always greater than speaking in a tongue unless there is clear interpretation so that the hearers can be edified. Now these verses are difficult but the key is that the purpose of the church coming together is to be edified in their faith. If anything takes place in our church services that does not edify then it simply should not be part of the service.

Now this is a good test for us all as we consider our own acts of worship in this church. Is all that goes on edifying us? Do the hymns we sing and public praying help us to be edified? Is the children's talk edifying and so on? The key to the sermon is to ask am I being edified by the message of God's word.

We need to guard our public services for sometimes it is so easy to turn them into entertainment activities which actually distract us rather than strengthening encouraging and bringing comfort to us. The whole point of our service today is to be edified and the whole point of using our spiritual gifts within the church is so that the church may be edified. Edification means the promotion of spiritual growth the word was used in Greek to build a house.

Therefore the services in our church on a Sunday and throughout the week must be building us up in our faith; they must be used to help us to grow up as Christian people. This is why it is vital that we attend such services for if we fail to do so we will be missing opportunities to be edified, opportunities to be built up in our faith and to grow as Christians.

We must always as Christians be seeking opportunities to grow and one means of growth is the ministry of God's word whether that is in our own church or in other services like the North Yorkshire Bible Rallies.

2. TONGUE SPEAKING WITHOUT INTERPRETATION IS UNINTELLIGIBLE (vs. 6-12)

Tongues by themselves are simply unintelligible. To illustrate his point Paul uses himself as an illustration. Imagine says Paul that I come to the church at Corinth even as an Apostle speaking in

unlearned languages then what profit is that to you (v 6)? It is only of profit if it is interpreted so that the revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching is made clear to the church. It simply serves no useful purpose for the church if the church cannot understand what is being said.

The key to usefulness of spiritual gifts is clarity and tongue speaking without clear interpretation is simply a useless exercise. Yet within the church at Corinth they thought that tongue speaking was evidence of spirituality but actually it is a sign of worldliness for clarity is what helps and encourages churches not some supernatural gift that no one understands what is going on or is being said.

That sadly is often what seems to happen in some churches where tongue speaking is often seen as a sign of spirituality. But if we want to be a spiritual church then we need to work hard to make ourselves clear as we seek to communicate God's word to others within the church.

A spiritual Pastor and Elder is the man who spends hours in his study seeking to understand God's word and seeking God's help to communicate God's word. An unspiritual Pastor and Elder is the man who relies on some form of spare of the moment "spiritual enablement" in order to serve the church. I have heard of people who do not know what they are going to say until they get into the pulpit and then they claim God gives them a message. Such nonsense is a sign of an unspiritual man and no wonder churches that rely on such ministry are so immature.

The main task of every pastor and Elder is to communicate God's word with great clarity.

Paul gives another illustration this time from the world of music. A flute or harp are painful instruments to listen too unless they are played properly. There must be a distinction in the various notes; the instrument must make musical sense if everyone who listens to it is going to benefit from it (v 7). Likewise if a trumpet does not produce a clear call to battle then how will anyone know to get ready for battle if they do not understand it (v 8)?

Paul's point is that in the same way you cannot communicate Christian truth through meaningless sounds like tongue speaking. It only confuses and is painful to listen too (v 9). If the message cannot be understood clearly then it is like playing a musical instrument badly or it is like playing the wrong tunes in the battlefield. Tongue speaking without clear interpretation is simply like speaking into the air. This is why prophecy is better for it speaks in the known language of the people and seeks to speak in an intelligent and understandable way.

The whole point of the message is to understand it and respond to it but the tongue speaking that went on at Corinth could not be understood and therefore how could anyone be built up in their faith and made strong as Christian people.

Paul goes on to show that all known languages in the world are understandable languages to those who speak them (v 10). There is no such thing as an unintelligible language no matter what language it is; it is always an understandable language even if we don't understand what is being said those who speak the language will.

Language is about communication but the Corinthian's were so selfish that they did not care about communication. They were only interested in impressing others, not communicating with them, much less edifying them. They did not care if no one understood what was being said all that mattered to them was that they impressed others by showing off with their use or should I say abuse of tongue speaking. Paul says they were like a musical instrument being played by someone who cannot do so. A language without meaning is pointless in fact a language without meaning is not really a language for it is meaning that makes language what it is.

The many languages in the world all sound different but each language has a common purpose that is to communicate, to transmit meaning among those who speak that language.

Likewise the very nature of communication means that both the hearer and the speaker must understand what is being said otherwise both the speaker and the listener are foreigners to each other (v 11). If you have been in a foreign country then you know the frustration of not being able to understand the native language it is clear to you and to those speaking that we are foreigners to each other.

Well that is how it is in the church at Corinth when tongue speaking takes place without clear and concise interpretation. Therefore if the church at Corinth is so keen to use spiritual gifts then they must use them in the way God intended them to be used, they are to be used for the benefit of the church and not our own self gratification (v 12). Spiritual gifts must be used for the edification of the church of Jesus Christ. That is true of tongue speaking in the church of Corinth and it is true of all gifts that are still in existence today in our own church. Your spiritual gifts are not for your own self-gratification but we must always ask God to help us to use our gifts for the benefit of the whole church and then we must seek practical ways to use those gifts.

If our gifts are communication gifts then we need to work hard to make our communication clear concise and understandable otherwise our gift is of no use to the church for people will only be built up in their faith if they understand the message being spoken.

3. THE EFFECTS OF TONGUE SPEAKING UPON THE CHURCH (vs. 13-19)

In this final section Paul continues to teach about the importance of interpretation when tongue speaking is taking place and the effect upon the tongue speaker and the congregation when there is no interpretation.

If someone is given this temporary gift of speaking in tongues then they must pray for the ability to interpret what is being said (v 13). Otherwise what effect will tongue speaking have if there is no interpretation? Now we must admit it is difficult to know exactly what Paul is referring to in these verses but it is clear that the church at Corinth would know exactly what Paul was meaning.

If Paul prays to God in an unlearned language given to him from God but he is not given the interpretation then although Paul and God knows what is being said the church will not know. Therefore Paul's mind is unfruitful in the sense that it is not bearing fruit for the whole church because there is no interpretation given (v 14). So what Paul resolves to do is to make sure people understand what is being said (vs. 15-17).

Paul says that his praying and his singing in tongues must be understandable to others so that others can agree with what is being said. We cannot say "amen" if we do not understand what is being said and if a person is giving thanks to God in an unlearned language which is not interpreted then how will anyone else know what is happening and how can the church then be edified?

The lesson is clear every part of our worship must be understandable; otherwise people will not be edified. So the hymns that we sing must be understood, which must at least cause us to think about the younger generation who find some of the words in the great older hymns difficult to understand. Perhaps we need to take the time to explain some of them.

I am convinced that the editing of older and traditional hymns that have taken place over the last number of years has been a genuine attempt to make the older hymns more understandable and more accessible to our younger generation. Whether you agree with the end product or not we must admire the spirit of those involved in such projects. Hymns must be understood to be of benefit to the church.

Likewise our praying must be in everyday language rather than some “religious pious language” that we hear so often in our prayer meetings. We must simply pray in words and sentences that are understood by others otherwise how can anyone say amen in agreement to a prayer that they have not understood. We should therefore consider others when we are praying together as a church.

How you and I pray when alone with God does not matter but we must pray with consideration of others in public. Likewise the sermons that we preach must be understandable otherwise no benefit is gained. There is no benefit in coming to church and singing hymns you do not understand and listening to praying that uses words that are above you and listening to a sermon that is so heavenly minded that it is simply no earthly use to us.

Paul was given the use of this gift of tongues and used it more frequently than was evident in the church at Corinth (v 18). But for Paul speaking with this gift of tongues is of no benefit if there is no interpretation. That is why when in the meetings of the church Paul; would prefer to speak five words that are understood and are able to instruct and teach others rather than 10,000 words in a tongue that is not interpreted and therefore of no benefit to the church (v 19). The church can only be taught and instructed and built up if communication is clear understandable and instructive.

That must always be our aim as a church on every occasion when we meet together. May God help us in every aspect of our worship so that we will be understood and so that we will collectively and individually be edified and built up in our most holy and precious faith?

Amen