

INTRODUCTION

In this section, which remember, is focusing on the gift of tongue speaking and the benefit of prophecy within the church at Corinth. Paul reviews the primary purpose of the gift of tongues and compares it with the gift of prophecy. He then gives some guidelines for the proper exercise of both these gifts within the church.

1. THE PURPOSE OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES (vs. 20-25)

The purpose of this God given gift to the church at Corinth was a sign to unbelievers. To illustrate his point Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:11-12 in which God said he would speak to the people of Israel in strange tongues (v 21). The people of Isaiah's day had consistently rejected God's demands for repentance. God decided to bring the Assyrians against them and carry the people away into captivity.

When the Jews heard the Assyrian language, a language they did not understand, they would know that Isaiah's prophecy was right and God's judgement was coming upon them. In other words hearing a foreign language in your home city spelt judgement. Now if the Corinthians are going to understand this then they must be adults in their thinking. They must start thinking in mature ways instead of the immature ways that they have been thinking (v 20). If they were mature thinkers then they would know that tongue speaking is a sign in two ways,

a) A Sign of Judgement - Isaiah had warned Judah that judgement was coming upon its nation because of its unbelief. But the proud leaders of Judah would not listen to Isaiah's warning, for them his teaching was too simple so they refused to listen. In the book of Deuteronomy God had warned his people that the Lord would bring a nation whose language they would not understand against his people (Deuteronomy 28:49).

The strange language of this foreign nation would be a sign of God's judgement against them. The same is true in Jeremiah where once again the sign of judgement would be a language that the people did not understand (Jeremiah 5:15). On the day of Pentecost when people heard the message in their own native language the Jewish people should have known that God's judgement was imminent.

Strange languages were a sign of judgement and in AD 70 God's judgement came upon the Jews when Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the Roman General Titus. Over 1 million Jews were killed and thousands more were taken captive and the city was burned to the ground.

After the destruction of Jerusalem the reason for tongue speaking ceased to exist for the judgement of which tongue speaking was a sign had come. So for those unbelieving Jews who were present among the congregation at Corinth should be warned when they hear the strange languages spoken in Corinth. They should know God's judgement is coming and repent as a consequence.

But instead the Christians saw tongue speaking as a sign of spirituality, a sign of maturity instead of a sign of judgement.

b) A Sign of Blessing - The gift of tongue speaking was also a sign that God would no longer work through one nation as he did in the Old Testament. The church of Jesus Christ is for all people of all nations, a church in which there are many languages but no barriers. This is why when the first Gentiles were saved they were given the gift of tongues (Acts 10:44-46) it was an indicator that the

blessing of the gospel was not limited to the Jewish people but was open to everyone even the Gentiles.

Now how far this is from the abuse of the tongue speaking that went on in Corinth were it was seen as spiritual one-up-man-ship, rather than a sign to the unbelievers present that the gospel was open to everyone both Jew and Gentile.

How different that is from the purpose of prophecy, which is primarily for the edification of believers' (v 22). Picture the scene of the church at Corinth coming together to worship and everyone is speaking in tongues and there is no interpretation. Then what will those present think? Those who do not understand (probably meaning those who come regularly but are not yet Christians).

They do not understand a word of what is being spoken and what about those who are unbelievers (those who come into the church for the first time v 23)? What benefit will they gain from such a service? The truth is that they will think that the people are mad. It's all just a mass of noise and it is total chaos.

But let's say prophecy is being spoken by all the people and these two types of people come into the service what effect will such a service have on them (v 24)? Well what is being said is clear concise and understandable so the effect is that each one will be convinced by the message that he is a sinner and will be judged. The secrets that are within his heart will be revealed to him so that he is convinced that God in is that service and as a result he falls down in worship because he has been converted.

Paul's point is that prophecy is better than tongue speaking because it is clear concise and understandable. It is worth noting that Paul says that prophecy is for believers and not unbelievers in verse 22. Yet he tells us here that if an unbeliever comes into the church service and hears prophecy then he could be saved. Is this not a contradiction?

I think there is no easy answer except to say that the church service at Corinth was primarily for believers and therefore was used to teach and instruct and edify the believers. However church is also open to everyone and so if someone comes in out of interest then although the service is designed to teach and encourage believers if prophecy is taking place then God's message is being spoken.

Therefore God by His Spirit can use that message to convict and convert sinners even though that was not the purpose of the message. I think it says something to us about how we should evangelise and also the importance of preaching God's word. Evangelism in the New Testament seemed to me to take place outside of the regular worship services.

The church went into the world and preached the gospel to them and shared their faith as the opportunities arose.

Secondly we must learn that whether a church service is designed for believers or unbelievers it has power to convince and convert sinners. I have been guilty of feeling bad after having a number of unbelievers present because my message was prepared and aimed at building up Christians in their faith. But that is underestimating the work of the Spirit and the power of God's word.

The entire bible is God's word and can be used by His Spirit to convince and convert sinners even if the tenor of the passage is aimed at believers. God does not need clear gospel preaching to save sinners, He can save sinners while listening to preaching from the most difficult of books

within the bible because it is all God's word and the Holy Spirit uses all God's word for the salvation of sinners.

2. THE PRACTISE OF PUBLIC WORSHIP (vs. 26-40)

Having told us the purpose of tongue speaking in the church at Corinth, Paul now tells the church how to regulate the practise of tongue speaking and he does this in the context of public worship. The practise can be summed up in two words; systematic and orderly (vs. 26-28). This was of course contrary to what was going on in Corinth, which was one of confusion and chaos.

In Corinth everyone wanted to participate at the same time and they were not interested in serving one another or in learning from others. All that mattered was self-expression and self-glory. Everyone it seems vied for attention and pre-eminence.

It seems that at Corinth they had a very open form of worship where members of the congregation could participate. Someone might read or sing a hymn (v 26), someone else might share a word of instruction from God's word, other members claimed they had a new revelation from God or maybe some new insight into an old truth, while others spoke in tongues and others gave the interpretation. All of these things if used properly within the church at Corinth were good and helpful parts of the worship service. The problem was that it seems that all these activities were done at the same time, everyone was talking no one was listening and so the place became bedlam.

In the light of such confusion and disorder Paul gives a clear commands which is let everything be done for the strengthening of the church (v 26). One of the reasons why we worship together is to grow as Christians; every Christian is responsible for encouraging and enabling growth to take place within their fellow Christians. Therefore one purpose of coming to church is for others.

That others might benefit through our ministry to them. Often we can be very selfish when it comes to church and think that we come to church because we need it, it does us good. The problem with such thinking is that once we feel we don't need it or it does not appear to do us good then we cease going. But actually it only does us good as we minister to others and as others minister to us.

So we can say we come to church for the benefit of others, so that even when it seems to be doing us no good, we will continue to come to church in the knowledge that our presence and our ministry is being used by God to strengthen others. When we are tempted to miss church for whatever reason and give into that temptation then we are being selfish. Church is not about you or me but it is about us and our ministry to one another.

Another thing that we must think about is the purpose of what we do within our church. All that we do must be for the strengthening of our fellow believers. So the hymns we sing, our public praying the children's talk etc. must all have that one purpose in mind?

All that we do as individuals within the church must be for the strengthening of one another. Whatever gifts we have and exercise must always be used with others in mind. It is for this reason that Paul gives clear guidelines for how to conduct public worship. He address a number of issues here:

a) The Use of Tongue Speaking in the Church at Corinth (vs. 27-28) - He says that tongue speaking must be limited to only a few people and only then if there is someone who has the gift of interpretation. This tongue speaking should be in an orderly manner. The principle that this teaches us is that there must be structure discipline and order in our public worship services. Every act of worship needs careful thought, we are worshipping Almighty God therefore we must

never allow chaos to reign but must always seek to plan our meetings so that there is a clear structure to them.

It is not a free for all as some churches would like us to think, there were many at Corinth who wanted to speak in tongues but Paul says don't let them if two or three have already spoken and if there is no interpreter.

It is of course good to change our structure and order of service from time to time but there needs to be a basic structure so every week those who worship know and understand what to expect as far as order and structure is concerned.

b) The Use of Prophecy in the Church at Corinth (vs. 29-33) - During the time when Paul is writing this letter to the church at Corinth prophets were still functioning within the church. They were it seems the key leaders within the very early church; they were after all the foundation along with the Apostles on which the church is built (Ephesians 2:20). Therefore when prophecy is being given in the church at Corinth then once again there must be order and structure to it. Only two or three should speak. These prophets most of the time spoke what had already been said giving clear understanding to the writings of the Old Testament but from time to time there was a predictive element given to them by God. However nothing should be accepted as from God without it being weighed by others probably meaning other prophets (v 29).

In other words there was accountability within the church. Now we have no prophets today but God gives to His church the gift of pastors and teachers called Elders. It is they who bring God's word to us and they are accountable to God for their ministry. However there is a sense that we are all accountable for the ministry of God's word.

We are not just to accept whatever the preacher tells us but we must examine it weight it up, consider it to see if it is in line with the word of God. God's word is the tool that we use in judging the messages from those responsible for bringing God's word to us. If we do not agree with what is said or are unsure about what is being said then it is our responsibility to examine it using the word of God and if necessary correct it.

Every church gets the preacher it deserves and if a church allows a man to preach something that is untrue then that church will soon become an untrue church, which sadly is what has happened to our liberal churches today. Far too many true Christians failed to test the word that was preached to them, they failed to do anything about it.

Again there was to be structure and order with prophets speaking in turn so that people can hear and therefore be instructed and encouraged (v 31). There must be control and peace throughout the act of worship because it must reflect the character of God who is not a God of disorder but of peace.

Although there are some churches who tell us that having no or little structure is spiritual and waiting for the Spirit to move people is better, this passage does not teach that although it is this passage that they get such ideas from. This passage teaches that our acts of worship must be structured organised orderly and peaceful.

c) The Role of Women in the Church at Corinth (vs. 34-35) - The function of women in churches is not one of public speaking says Paul. They are not to bring God's message to the congregation. Paul has to say this because no doubt women were giving messages and claiming they were from God but Paul says women are not to exercise such ministries. God's law states clearly the principle of submission for women (Genesis 3:16). Paul teaches within the New Testament that the man is the head of every married relationship. As a consequence God's design is for male

leadership within churches and therefore women are not permitted to teach or have authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:11-12).

Paul's argument is not based on the culture of the time as some people claim but on the creation ordinance. Adam was created first (1 Timothy 2:13-14), therefore men are to lead in love and women are to submit in love that is God's plan and design. There are many roles and functions that women can and do fulfil in churches but the public ministry of God's word is not one of them that is the role of men only.

It seems that some women at Corinth would not accept this and some who were so keen to learn that they were asking questions publicly and probably disruptively and therefore Paul tells them to ask their husbands at home rather than disrupting the services of the church. Of course these words imply that their husbands were able and capable men of instructing their wives at home. Sadly in our churches today this is not always the case. Many men have neglected their duties to instruct their wives because they have neglected their own spiritual lives so that they are simply unable to answer questions. Many of the women in our church are spiritually more mature than their husbands even though their husbands have been Christians for years.

Sadly many Christian men have even handed over the leadership of the family to their wives because they are unable to take the lead themselves because of their own neglect of spiritual things.

d) The Need to Accept Paul's Word in the Church at Corinth (vs. 36-40). - It seems that there were many in the church that contended with Paul on all these matters and so Paul's final word of the subject of spiritual gifts to the church is a plea to accept his teaching. It seems there were many in the church that were determined to do their own thing and continue to promote themselves and their gifts within the church.

In doing so Paul reminds them that they are placing themselves above the Scriptures (v 36). Paul tells them that if they didn't write Scripture then they must obey it. If they are not the only receivers of God's word then they must submit to it like other churches are doing. No church or no Christian has any right to place themselves over the Scriptures we did not write it therefore as a church we must obey it. It was written for all true churches; therefore our church must submit to it like every other true church.

Paul goes on to tell them that if anyone considers himself to be a true prophet of God or if there were others who considered themselves spiritually gifted then they would recognise Paul's message as from God and obey it. If they fail to do so then they are not true Christians (v 37).

Therefore his conclusion to the church at Corinth is to obey God's word when it comes to spiritual gifts and worship. Prophecy is to be sought after because it is clear and understandable as we saw last time. However they are not to neglect the gift of tongues, which can be interpreted.

Everything that takes place during the public worship services of the church at Corinth must be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Our final application is that all that we do as part of our public worship services must always be in line with God's word. Therefore there will be order and structure in our worship services so that everything will be done in a way that is fitting for the worship of Almighty God.

Amen