

Prayers

Opening prayer

Jesus, wonderful and powerful Lord; calm my spirit today as I place my trust in You. My past gives me firm evidence of Your faithful love and care, my daily life offers constant proof of Your wise correction and guidance, and I therefore have every confidence that You will secure my future. Stay close to me, Lord Jesus, that I may trust You every moment, and accept Your direction in all things. Praise Your name, Lord Jesus; **ALLELUIA!**

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: HEALING

1. For yourself

Pray about any short term conditions you tend to catch, colds or flu, or reactions such as hay fever. God has made the body to heal itself from a great deal, so give Him thanks for this

2. For your friends and family

Pray that your friends will stay healthy and overcome illness.

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the church's medical work through medical missionaries, hospitals and other charitable work.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those who are responsible for your country's policy of health care. Pray that they will always consider the needs of the poorest

Meditation

Gracious Lord and holy God, You lift us up:

When we need Your help,
You are ready to assist us,
And respond to our needs immediately.

Jesus Christ our Saviour, You hold us close:

When we need Your touch,
You reach out in compassion,
And come amongst us to heal and to save.

Holy Spirit, comforter, You breathe in us new life:

When we need Your strength,
You are ready to help us,
And restore us by Your might and power.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, You always care for us:

Before we even know our need,
You are ready and waiting,
And You have an answer to satisfy our souls.

Alleluia!

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 14:1-12

¹ Aspire to love, and strive for the spiritual gifts, most of all that you might prophesy. ² For the one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to other people but to God; no one understands, since he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. ³ However, the one who prophesies speaks to build up, encourage and comfort other people. ⁴ Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church, ⁵ and though I would like all of you to speak in tongues, I would rather that you prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up.

⁶ Now then, fellow believers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I achieve for you unless I speak to you by way of revelation, knowledge, prophecy or teaching? ⁷ Even with lifeless instruments that make a sound, such as the flute or the harp, if they do not give different sounds, how will anyone know what is being played? ⁸ So if a trumpet call is indistinct, who will be ready for battle? ⁹ It is the same for yourselves; if through speaking in tongues you say words that are not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ There are undoubtedly many different kinds of sounds in the world, and nothing is without sound. ¹¹ Now if I do not know the meaning of a language, I remain a foreigner to the one who speaks and the one who speaks remains a foreigner to me, ¹² and so it is with you, since you strive for spiritual things, seek to excel in them for the building up of the church.

Review

Immediately after 1 Corinthians 13, which is an amazing passage of Scripture, we can hardly expect Paul to continue writing with the same intensity of spiritual expression and inspiration! Chapter 14 now continues the letter by picking up the concerns left hanging at the end of chapter 12 about the priority of spiritual gifts. To begin with, it reminds us that without love, the spiritual gifts, indeed Christians themselves are as nothing (14:1, 13:1-3), but Paul continues by saying that all the spiritual gifts are to be sought, especially the gift of prophecy. Why then does Paul continue by writing here at length about tongues and prophecy? There is indeed a close connection between these gifts, and this will become clear as we study chapter 14.

It is worth pausing here to look at something important in Paul's letter. If you go back to the end of chapter 12 and read straight into chapter 14, you will find that it flows easily from one to the other as if chapter 13 did not exist! What are we to make of this? Over the centuries, some have argued that chapter 13 has therefore been inserted into the letter, either with or without Paul's knowledge. Of course, this is an argument that can never be proven, but by spotting this, we at least grasp something important about how chapters 12, 13 and 14 are connected. Chapter 14 is not an isolated chapter of this letter about tongues and good order in the church, it is about how to manage those spiritual gifts that are most important in the life and mission of the church. Moreover, everything we now read is now coloured by chapter 13, and interpreted with love.

All this should come as no surprise. Every time Paul has discussed an important issue, he has said that whatever its rights or wrongs (e.g. meat offered to idols – 8:1f., or women's headgear in worship – 11:1f.), the feelings of others should be taken into account, and 'preferred' in love (e.g. 8:9). This is surely the same as insisting that love is the highest gift (13, 14:1), and it is an essential before Paul's message in this chapter about good order in the church. As so many Christians know, love can be at a premium in some church affairs! Moreover, love is not just a matter of being generous towards others; it is like Christ's love, which is sacrificially generous. Nothing less will maintain good order in the church!

The basic point in our passage here is this. Firstly, prophecy is of supreme importance in the life of the church (14:1). Secondly, speaking in tongues though valuable in itself is of less importance than prophecy in church worship (14:2). This is because prophecy is God's Word communicated through normal understandable speech (14:3,4). Speaking in tongues however is different; it has its place in public worship, but it must be interpreted so that everyone can understand God's message. The gift of interpretation (14:5) is therefore essential in worship, indeed, it is akin to prophecy, because it communicates God's Word.

The rest of our reading today gives us some straightforward illustrations, which serve to emphasise these exact points, and in particular, the need for clear and understandable communication of God's Word in worship (14:6-11). The very last verse (14:12) makes the same point found at the beginning of chapter 14 and also at the end of chapter 12, God's people are to strive for the spiritual gifts, especially tongues and prophecy. They are to seek them whatever they feel about them and their use in church, for all of them have their place.

Some people can read this without difficulty because they possess the gift of tongues; Paul's advice is therefore obvious. However, it may be more difficult for those who have not received the gift. Books available today vary considerably in what they say about tongues, and some describe the gift as a one of

'ecstasy', in which the speaker experiences a state of trance. Such writing reinforces the objections of those who dislike the gift, but it is sadly misguided. The gift of tongues is indeed mysterious, but the one who experiences it does not have to be in a trance. Personally, I use the gift regularly in my prayers, and I am always in full control of all my faculties; I speak as the Lord directs, and it gives glory to God.

Tongues is commonplace in some churches, but unheard of in many; indeed there are terrible divisions between some on its account. What a tragedy and a loss for God's work in the world today when His gifts are not all received and used! Nevertheless, whilst Scripture in general says little about Christian worship, it does describe the use of 'interpreted' tongues, alongside prophecy and teaching, and Paul presumes that their use is normal in church life. Some will find the mention of tongues difficult, but we have not yet finished 1 Corinthians 14, and Paul has more to say about this!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Prophecy versus tongues (4:1-5)
- The message brought by the gift (4:6-9)
- Intelligibility and the building up of the church (14:9-12)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V1 'Aspire to love'

The first word in this sentence is often translated 'pursue' or 'seek after'. In researching this word, I notice that the principle authority on the meaning of Biblical Greek words (a Greek Lexicon by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, generally known as BADG) includes the phrase 'aspire to'. This seems to me to express best what Paul says here.

V4 'Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves'

The Greek word 'oikodomeo' can mean 'encourage, build up or strengthen'. However, the word in Greek is derived from the word for house, 'oikos'; and in this setting, it seems natural to consistently translate it as 'build up', as in building a house.

V5 'unless he interprets so that the church may be built up.'

Some translations (NRSV, ESV) say 'unless someone interprets ...' adding the word 'someone' to the sentence when it is not there in the Greek. Grammatically, the sentence means that the one who speaks in a tongue is the one who interprets, and some find this difficult to accept because Paul mentions translation (12:10) as a different gift to tongues. This is why the 'someone' is added. However, it is better to face what Paul actually says than place an interpretation of it within the translation!

V6 'what will I do for you'

The Greek says 'what will I benefit you', but because we do not speak in this way, the easiest way to express this is as I have translated. Some translations have more complex versions, such as 'what good will I be for you ...'

V7 'if they do not give different sounds'

Some translations appear to give quite different interpretations of this, but the whole sentence is a matter of the different kinds of 'sounds' or 'tones' created by instruments, and not the piece of music being played (as in the NIV), or the notes played (ESV). The meaning is obvious to a musician, but perhaps not all translators are musicians!

V9 'if through speaking in tongues'

The word hear is simply 'glossa', which means 'in a tongue', but the context makes it clear that it is what we mean by 'speaking in tongues'.

V12 'since you strive for spiritual things'

Some Bible versions have 'spiritual gifts', but the Greek is clear, Paul is here speaking entirely generally about 'spiritual things', even though spiritual gifts are the general subject of what he says. We must allow the text to speak for itself.

V12 'seek to excel in them for the building up of the church'

The Greek word here is 'perisseuo' which means having something left over, and in this case, it has the meaning of excelling in something. Paul wants the Corinthians to have plenty and do well in the use of the spiritual gifts.

In going deeper, we will look at each stage of Paul's argument. Firstly, the basic issue of the intelligibility of prophecy against that of tongues for the purpose of building up the church (14:1-5). Then, Paul speaks about the nature of the message brought by the exercise of gifts (14:6-8), and lastly, he stresses again the importance of intelligibility in the building up of God's people, the church (14:9-12).

Prophecy versus tongues (4:1-5)

If you read different versions of the Bible, you will find that verse 1 is translated in very different ways. The translation above is important, because it makes clear that each phrase has something very significant to say. Firstly, 'aspire to love' reflects the influence of chapter 13 on the whole of what comes next, and it also sums up everything Paul has said about 'preferring the other in love'. So when Paul goes on to say '*strive for the spiritual gifts*' (14:1), it is subtly different from what he said in chapter 12; '*But you strive for the greater gifts!*' (12:31). Notice that Paul has left out the word 'greater' and replaced it with 'spiritual', and this reflects the heart of what Paul wanted to say. Instead of striving for greater things, the Corinthians (and Christians today) should focus on what is spiritual. The message is simple, we should strive for what God wants for us (what is spiritual) and not what we want for ourselves (what is 'greater').

The argument that Paul gives next is easy to understand. Obviously, tongues is of great benefit to the one who uses it, but the lack of intelligible words means that it is of limited benefit for the building up of the church. If we think about this carefully, it would be easy to argue that collectively, if all God's people worshipped the Lord in tongues, this might be a wonderfully intense experience of worship, and some may have wanted this experience. However, Paul's view of this reflects an understanding of the fact that not everyone speaks in tongues, nor should be expected to; for some, such an event in worship would be meaningless, and the principle of 'preferring others in love' meant that their needs should be acknowledged. For this reason, prophecy was of greater benefit.

It is interesting that Paul said that prophesy brought 'encouragement and comfort' to the church (14:3) and built it up. There is a great deal of debate today about what church growth might mean, or how God's people should go about building up the church. It is all too easily forgotten that almost hidden in this passage there are some clear indicators of what Paul regarded 'building up the church' to mean. Clearly, this was different from evangelism, because Paul always listed this clearly and separately, and we know what this means and why it is important, but Paul did not equate it with 'building up the church'. The building up of the church was about enabling God's people to create a loving community that was itself a witness to the love of God to the wider community. To develop in this way, people needed encouragement to do what was right, and comfort in times of difficulty.

In verse 5, Paul indicated briefly that the gift of interpretation together with the gift of tongues equates to prophecy. We might not think this unless Paul said it so clearly, for whilst speaking in tongues, a person might be saying anything to God, nobody knows. Nevertheless, Paul believed that whatever was said in tongues, the gift of interpretation conveyed in normal language the word of God contained within that tongue. This explains why sometimes, an interpretation of a tongue will be of quite different length to the tongue spoken. We should not be looking for a translation in a literal sense, but a spiritual interpretation. Whether what is said by way of interpretation is right before God must therefore be judged in the same way that prophecy is judged, according to the wisdom of God's people (1 John 4:1f.) and whether it honours Christ.

The message brought by the gift (4:6-9)

In the next few verses, Paul says more about tongues and communication. It is not always recognised that in verse 6, Paul does not speak about prophecy, but says that in the context of worship and of preaching, what is required is not a 'tongue' but intelligible 'revelation, knowledge, prophecy or teaching'. We should pause over this text, because what Paul has done here is to prevent people from taking prophecy and making more of it than he intends. We rightly assume from the first few verses of chapter 14 that Paul gave prophecy a higher priority than other gifts, but he did not want to make prophecy appear to be everything or 'all important'. In this verse, he placed prophecy amongst related means of communication, including 'revelation', something not included in any other list of spiritual gifts. Paul does not call this a spiritual gift here, but it is reasonable to ask whether in the light of the general topic here in this part of 1 Corinthians, it should be regarded as a gift! Certainly these four means of communication are important, and are worthy of our study. It is possible that these four summarise what Paul regarded to be the spiritual gifts employed, in differing ways, within preaching.

The example of the instruments is easy to understand, but it has unfortunately been hindered by some bad translations, including one that seems to misinterpret the difference between 'notes' (not mentioned in this text), and 'tone' (clearly mentioned in 14:7, but translated here as 'sound'). The translation notes above explain more about this. Paul's point is that the differing individuality of musical instruments goes together to make intelligible sounds, and we recognise messages by knowing the distinctive sounds made by them (see 14:8). Intelligibility is everything in worship, because God's people ultimately need to know what God is saying. As one who speaks in tongues, I know the power and importance of this form of spiritual expression;

but whilst tongues reflects what is between ourselves and God, we need something intelligible to relate the things of God to this world. We cannot live in a spiritual world that simply addresses God, because God demands that we address the world with His message.

Intelligibility and the building up of the church (14:9-12)

Paul continues from this point in the last section. Verse 10 reads strangely, speaking about different sounds and where sounds may or may not be found; but what Paul means is that the world is full of intelligible sound, and this is how we gain our bearings in life. If we cannot make sense of the sounds around us, we are like a 'foreigner', in a 'foreign' setting. All of us know the feeling of going into some situation where we do not have a clue what is going on. We feel completely excluded. Paul's objections to the inappropriate use of tongues is most powerful at this point, but notice that Paul does not specifically talk about speaking in tongues after verse 9. He wants to qualify the use of tongues quite drastically, but he does not want to offend those who feel that the gift is important to them. This comes from his own need to 'prefer the other in love' in the writing of the letter.

The most important feature of this section is what Paul says in verse 12. He knows that the Corinthians are 'eager for' the spiritual gifts; and this is the background of everything that he has been saying. However, he avoids the term 'spiritual gifts' here (Greek 'pneumatikon') and uses a more general term, best translated 'spiritual things' (Greek 'pneumaton'). Some feel that the two words are so close that they mean the same thing, but there is no grammatical necessity to change the word, so it is right to suggest that Paul wished to give a different and more general slant to the word 'spiritual' at this point.

In addition to this, many Bible versions (see notes above) speak about excelling in the spiritual gifts for the building up of the church, but I doubt that this is what Paul meant. I am convinced that Paul did not want the Corinthians to be competing in the matter of spiritual things. He simply wanted them to have more and more gifts, rather than better and better gifts. Spiritual gifts were not for competition. The last verse makes it clear in my opinion that Paul felt the building up of the church would happen when people strove for more and more of the 'things of the spirit'. That is surely true.

Discipleship

Application

If we read this passage as people who speak in tongues, there is no need for us to be threatened by what Paul says here. He simply gives a proper context for the use of the gift in worship. It is unfortunate that some, believing that Paul virtually banned it in this passage of scripture, do not appreciate the gift and avoid speaking in tongues in worship. In reality, his advice was that speaking in tongues should be balanced against the need to be intelligible in worship, for the growth of the church, and for evangelism. It becomes clear later in chapter 14, that Paul regarded speaking in tongues to be a normal feature of church worship, and we will have to discuss some other misunderstandings about this when we look at the same issue as it arises in 14:22 ('tongues, then, are a sign not for believers, but for unbelievers'). At the very least, we must accept that speaking in tongues in worship should be accompanied by due sensitivity about the need for interpretation. This is clearly something that those leading worship and preaching in church should bear in mind, though most preachers will know whether this is likely to happen in any particular church.

If we read this passage as people who do not speak in tongues, then we are right to rejoice that Paul puts the gift 'in its place' and refuses to allow people to elevate it beyond its proper place amongst the other spiritual gifts. However, we would be unwise to discount it on the grounds that it is not something we appreciate. Everyone has a duty to 'prefer the other in love', but if we expect others to exercise this for our benefit (and refrain from speaking in tongues), then we have perhaps gained the wrong impression of how this principle works. It is what we do for others, not what we expect of others. Consequently, the one who does not speak in tongues but knows all about the gift, should be able to accept its use in church providing it is done with due scriptural sensitivity. However, the emphasis in this passage of scripture on the importance of prophecy should play on all our minds. Paul's clear assumption is that all wish to be involved in communicating the things of God, and should all aspire to prophetic gifts because we all wish to communicate the Word of God. Now, that is a challenge!

Ultimately, the use of tongues and prophecy in worship is something that church leaders should understand and enable. Worship is essentially a form of communication between God and His people, in which we give God His due, and He blesses us because we worship Him. Everything about this process should be the concern of the church leader and preacher, especially tongues and prophecy.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss how can we all 'aspire to love' in the midst of what is happening in our own church.
2. What does the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues offer to those who worship God, and how can this be done helpfully?
3. What does the gift of prophecy offer to God's people in worship, and how can this be used for the best in our churches?

Discipleship challenges

- *If the gift of tongues is something that you have felt you would appreciate but have never known, then find someone in the life of your church who knows this gift but does not brag about it, and talk to them about what it means. Then ask them to pray with you that you might receive the gift. Wait for it to come expectantly!*
- *If you are someone who has spoken in tongues many years ago, then pray and ask the Lord to bring this gift back to you, and do your best to use it in your private devotions regularly. Let the Lord minister it to you with grace.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, Your love is amazing. You help us deal with difficult situations, You encourage us when we feel depressed, You challenge us with exciting possibilities, and You rescue us when we are in trouble. Thank You Jesus for Your love. AMEN
