

1Corinthians 14:1-13 "Proper Uses of Tongues and Prophecy"

As we've been studying through this letter to the Corinthian church it is hard not to escape the fact that though these people professed to be Christians, and certainly most probably were, they did not act like Christians on many levels.

And if there's anything to learn from this it's that God is not content for us to simply profess His name and receive His Son's sacrifice on the cross for our sin. We are to be a people who live up to that name we've proclaimed as our only true God and Savior.

Isaiah 48:11 ¹¹ "For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; For how can *My name* be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another.

To do anything less is to displease our God, and as Paul points out in the letter to the Ephesians we can actually cause our God to grieve over us.

EPH 4:30 "... do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."

People have been grieving God from the first day man chose to follow Satan's advice in the Garden of Eden as they rebelled against the Lord. In fact, God so grieved over mankind that over time it turned into regret to the degree that He destroyed everything, including all of humanity, with the exception of eight people saved in the ark.

Sometimes we get the idea that simply because we're saved by grace that somehow God overlooks our sin and isn't personally touched by our rebellion. Yes, it's true that He is our Father and loves us as His children. But what parent enjoys the rebellion of their own children?

Even Israel, the chosen people of God, on numerous occasions rebelled against their Savior and Lord. And yet, what does David tell us?

PSA 78:40 "How often they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland!"

If we understood how we grieve the very God who loved us and sent His Son to die for us, we might be more prone to seek those things that please Him instead of going our own way. But, this is

precisely what these Corinthian believers had done. And they've done it with even the very gifts God gave to them.

They've taken spiritual tools, if you will, and have abused them in such a way that their usefulness for each other and their ability to give glory to God has been nullified. Kind of like using a cordless drill as a hammer. It might appear to get the job done, but in the process of modifying its original use, we actually end up destroying it over time.

In chapter 12 of this letter Paul introduced the gift of tongues and its legitimate use within the body of Christ. In chapter 13 he pointed out how this gift must be used in the love with which it was intended. And now in chapter 14 Paul is about to give some practical application for its function in love as he contrasts it with another spiritual gift.

1CO 14:1 "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy."

By the way, one of the things we notice regarding these spiritual "sign" gifts is that they are intended to be used by all in the local body whom the Spirit gifts. In other words, they were not limited to the apostles.

And so, the argument that only a select few were to use these special gifts to accompany the proclamation of the gospel is not found in the pages of Scripture so as to limit their use at any time in church history as though certain gifts can be abrogated without a clear reason for God to do so, as in the case of the gift of apostle.

The entire 14th chapter is an explanation of how the importance of particular gifts are to be measured according to their ability to edify the body of Christ. It doesn't negate any legitimate gift, only that it puts into perspective how gifts must be viewed with the entire body of Christ in mind.

If the operation of a gift takes priority over its intended use then it is a gift being used selfishly, and therefore is a gift not being used in love; love for God and the brethren.

And so, Paul continues the theme of chapter 13, follow the way of love. A better translation would be to pursue love.

By the way, the idea of seeking or pursuing entails an active purposeful approach to a task. And so to pursue love is not some

complacent, inactive endeavor where we hope the love of God will somehow grow without us being energized in the process.

We don't pursue a career by sitting home hoping we'll get a phone call from Bill Gates of Microsoft if we don't put the effort into going to Microsoft to apply for a job. We don't pursue the enemy by sitting in a fox hole and hoping the enemy will just give up. We don't pursue a potential husband or wife by counting on blind dates someone else sets up for us.

And we don't pursue the love of God by moving in a direction which is not Godward. If we don't actively seek the things above then we're not using the means God has provided to grow.

Pursuing the things of God, and the love of God, involve seeking the Lord in prayer, in His word, in the fellowship of the saints, in the corporate worship of the Lord. This is where our love for the Lord grows and this is where we find ourselves being conformed into the image of Christ.

But Paul says, pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts. Desiring earnestly spiritual gifts might involve a couple of things. It involves seeking God for spiritual gifts. This does not mean that simply putting a request in to God for any particular gift insures that we will get that gift. The giving of any spiritual gift or gifts are at the discretion of God.

1CO 12:11 "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines."

But, as one commentator put it, "God's sovereignty to give or to withhold does not cancel man's responsibility to pray." (Simon J. Kistemaker)

And so, it is not as though we can't pray for gifts of the Spirit, but it is with the understanding that any gift must be used to edify the body of Christ and also that ultimately it is up to God who is the giver of all good gifts.

But there is a second aspect to eagerly desiring spiritual gifts. This includes the idea of eagerly desiring to use those gifts. It's not as though we're simply in the business of being collectors, like someone who enjoys earnestly desiring and obtaining baseball cards for his collection.

We're not to seek and receive spiritual gifts simply to put on the shelf and admire. To seek and obtain a gift also involves using that gift for the edification of the body. Now, in the case at Corinth it

appears that they had sought for the gifts and were attempting to use some of those gifts, but not for the sake of the body, as much as for the sake of self.

And this raises another aspect of desiring to use the gifts and that has to do with using them within the framework of God's word, which means any gift must find its expression as conforming to the word of God. And the only way for this to be effectual is for the individual with any gift to be in the word of God as that word conforms them to the image of Christ.

And so, any spiritual gift from God must be used to help the body and honor God in the process. But notice in the first verse that Paul makes a qualifying statement about seeking earnestly spiritual gifts. He says, especially that you may prophesy.

Now, why does he say this? Why not seek the gift of knowledge, or the gift of miracles? Well, in the context it appears that the gift of tongues is the one gift most of these people were trying to utilize as though God had given a special gift to the mature. And so, the gift of tongues was seen as a sort of entry way to more spiritual things.

And by the way, it is much easier to fake such a gift than say, the gift of miracles. You either have it or you don't. Now, people may attempt to fake a miracle in much of what we see on T.V. today, but when you're up close and personal and you know of someone who was blind but now can see, there is no faking that.

Tongues on the other hand can be easily counterfeited. And so, if you don't have the gift of tongues it doesn't take much to make everyone around you feel as though you too have been specially blessed by simply opening your mouth and producing all sorts of strange sounds.

In the case at Corinth this is what appears to be part of the problem. Some didn't have the real thing, or were not properly using it if it was real. This will not edify the body of Christ. It just becomes so much noise, like that clanging cymbal.

But, there is a gift which is spiritual in nature and cannot be misconstrued as being unintelligible. That is the gift of prophecy. Now, since I have taught on this subject previously in this study on 1 Corinthians when we came across it earlier in this letter, I'm not going to teach on it now. You can get the tapes on both prophecy and tongues in both my studies in 1 Corinthians and Romans.

But, I will say that the gift of prophecy, in contrast to the gift of tongues, is a gift which allows the believer to hear from God in a way that is encouraging and uplifting and enables the body to be edified in the sense that they know that God is in their midst, since only He can give such a true prophetic word.

Now, for the sake of clarity, we should point out, as I have in my previous studies, that the gift of prophecy is not the equivalent to O.T. prophecy, where the prophets of old spoke the very words of God, which now make up our O.T. Scriptures. The N.T. "gift of prophecy" is not the equivalent of Scripture when it's utilized in the church.

Now, granted if the apostles used this gift under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit then it could be used to give us the N.T. Scriptures. But, generally speaking it is not designed by God for such use since it would mean that our present bible is an open book, where anyone claiming to have such inspiration can add to the word of God, as they use the gift of prophecy.

And this is where the confusion has been as the proponents of the cessation of such gifts rightfully claim that if this gift was meant to be utilized for giving us the very word of God, then yes, it would not be for the church today. The Canon is closed.

But this gift is important in that it is utilized by the Holy Spirit to encourage the body of Christ. This distinction from the gift of tongues is brought out in our text.

1CO 14:2-3 "For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort."

There is a misconception among many Pentecostal and Charismatic groups which contend that the gift of tongues is a gift which is used to speak to the body of Christ and give special messages in a tongue, then to be translated for the body to build them up with a special teaching or encouraging message from the Lord.

This is not what the gift of tongues is designed by God to do. Clearly, here in verse 2, Paul points out one of the functions of this gift, **which is to speak to God, not to men.** What he means by this is that the gift of tongues is used primarily to give praises to

God, to declare His greatness, as the disciples did on the day of Pentecost, and to be used to pray to God.

These are all different aspects of speaking to God. This is why when some groups promote tongues and if an interpretation is given they often will give an interpretation which addresses the congregation with a message from God.

Paul says that this gift doesn't work that way. The gift of tongues is a gift which is directed vertically to God. And so, if there is an interpretation, it will be one which is a prayer, or praise or any other speaking to God which gives Him glory.

That's what we see on the day of Pentecost.

Acts 2:4 ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

Acts 2:11-12 we hear them in our *own* tongues *speaking of the mighty deeds of God.*" ¹² And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

It is a language which the person did not previously learn. This is why it's called a gift. In fact, it appears that within any local congregation where the gift of tongues is used the language being utilized is one which few if any would normally understand in that group.

For Paul says in verse 2, that no one understands what this person is saying as they speak mysteries in their spirit. It is wondrous, it is supernatural, but that's the extent of the experience for the entire congregation because they don't understand what the one gifted is saying.

In contrast to the gift of tongues, the gift of prophecy is much more useful from an edifying standpoint since the message is directed, not to God, but to the congregation; and in their own language.

1CO 14:3 "But **everyone who prophesies speaks to men** for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort."

The gift of prophecy is a gift the Holy Spirit uses to give a message to the body for strengthening, for encouragement, and for comfort. The strengthening may come from a Scripture the Holy Spirit may lay on someone's heart which He wants the body to hear.

The encouragement may come from the same Scriptures or may come in the form of God giving a special word addressing a particular situation in that church which God is aware of, and the Lord can encourage as He explains how He is going to work through that situation.

The comfort may come from the word of God as He again lays a special passage of Scripture on someone's heart, but it may also come in the form of a personal message from the Lord who comes along side an individual or the body of Christ and makes them aware that He's personally working things out for their good and not to lose heart.

In short, the gift of prophecy is an encouraging message from the throne of God for His people. And through this gift the Lord allows the body of Christ to know that He is near. He's not a God who simply wrote a book and then took off to the other side of the universe while we just read the instructions He left behind.

No. Our God takes His written word and personalizes it in a variety of ways through this gift as He enters into our presence with His love and allows us to enter into His presence in the Spirit.

This is why, if someone who claims to have the gift of prophecy and the message is not one of strengthening, encouragement and comfort, then the testing of this gift will bring that to light and must then call into question if they really heard from God with this gift, or if another gift is actually being utilized.

Any gift from God, including the gift of prophecy, must be put to the test against the written word of God. If it violates any aspect of the written word then it must be confronted as something in violation of God's word.

Now in the next verse Paul continues to give us practical information as to some of the things this gift of tongues accomplishes.

1CO 14:4 "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church."

Now, this might suggest that tongues is a gift which is designed to simply edify the one with the gift. But, keep in mind that the context of this entire letter is to help these Corinthian believers to get away from self-serving motives to loving and serving others.

This doesn't mean that there is no legitimate use of this gift in self edification, but it is also to be used in the broader context of the entire body. If it's never used in the body it can't edify anyone but the user. Now, what this suggests is that it is a gift which can and should be used in private as well as in public.

After all, if it is a gift which is directed to God and not to men, in other words, if it is a gift designed for prayer and praise, it would make sense that we can use such a gift anytime we go to prayer and praise, including those times we go to our proverbial prayer closet.

On the other hand the gift of prophecy is better suited to build up the body of Christ on a consistent basis since it is designed by God to be used exclusively in the public setting of the body, according to verse 4.

Now again, Paul is not putting down the gift of tongues, only that it must be viewed within its limits as God placed those limits on the gift.

1CO 14:5 "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified."

Now, here is where Paul qualifies another use of the gift of tongues. Remember, one use is for the edification of the user in that his spirit is blessed, even though he or she doesn't understand what they're saying.

But another use is for the body of Christ when that gift is interpreted. And that gift cannot be interpreted unless another gift is employed; the gift of interpretation. If you and I are given the interpretation of a tongue, we actually understand what this person is saying to God. And so we enter into their prayer or praise as we eventually can say amen to their speaking to God.

Aside from such an interpretation we simply recognize that they are speaking to God, but it's like trying to be involved in a conversation with someone who won't speak English in that conversation.

I take my car to Fast and Easy Automotive, on 41 and Easy St. here in Port Charlotte. The owner/operator is from Russia. The other day Cheryle and I were up there at closing to pick up our car and Boris' wife was there to pick him up. The two of them begin

speaking in Russian. I didn't understand a word and soon I simply tuned them out as I spoke with Cheryle.

I got nothing out of their conversation. There was legitimate communication going on, but not between me, Boris and his wife. And so, I lost interest. The same is true with the gift of tongues without the interpretation. Communication is going on, but not with the body of Christ, and therefore they are not edified in the process without an interpretation.

Paul continues this thought in the next verse.

1CO 14:6 "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?"

Now, Paul is not redefining the gift of tongues here. He is not saying that tongues can be used to bring revelation, knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction. All of those endeavors are speaking to men. Tongues, as we've already seen, is directed to God.

What Paul is saying is that his ministry is not about his personal relationship to God being used only to edify himself. What use would that be to the body? His ministry is reaching out to the body with knowledge and revelation and prophecy and instruction as God gifts him in these areas to build up the body.

Therefore, this makes these gifts much more practical and useful from the standpoint of edifying the church. But if you're going to use the gift of tongues publicly, then it should be used to edify the body, as the gift of interpretation is utilized. This is why he continues in the next few verses.

1CO 14:7-9 "Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? 8 Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? 9 So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air."

If a lifeless thing is designed to make a clear sound, with a purpose of being heard and understood by others, how much more a gift from God? If your gift doesn't communicate to people then it is essentially useless as a means of edifying others. You might as well be speaking into the air out in the middle of nowhere.

And by the way, when Paul says in verse 9, "Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?", he's not referring to the gift of tongues. He's referring to other means of clearly communicating something which will edify the body of Christ.

1CO 14:10-12 "Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. 11 If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. 12 So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church."

Paul is saying, "Look even if a language isn't understood by someone, it doesn't mean it isn't a legitimate language." There are myriad's of languages throughout the world, and they all have meaning. But they only have meaning to the ones who can understand them.

Even if you were bilingual, why would you speak in German, for example, if no one in your presence could speak German? It doesn't mean the German language is useless, only that it is useless around others who cannot understand you. Stick with the language they can understand. In this way your communication is effectual.

In the same way, why use a gift in public which can only edify yourself when there are other gifts which can be employed to communicate God's will and ways for everyone present? "Try to excel in gifts that build up the church", Paul says.

And chances are pretty good that if you have the gift of tongues, you probably have other gifts which can in fact build up the rest of the church. Use them. Now, if that means using the gift of tongues, then use it in a way that will build up the body.

1CO 14:13 "For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says."

Here is an interesting qualifying statement regarding the gift of tongues in a public setting. The gift of tongues in this setting must be interpreted to be edifying for the body. But here, Paul suggests that the one speaking in a tongue is also the one who should pray for the interpretation.

This wouldn't limit others from seeking the gift of interpretation, but would include the one speaking. What this does from a

practical standpoint is that it would insure that someone would always be present to interpret. And here's how it would work.

Since we know that the gift of tongues can be used privately, the one using this gift in private can pray for the interpretation. If they get the interpretation then they can probably be pretty sure God will continue to give them the interpretation in a public setting.

If however, when you use the gift of tongues in a private setting, and you pray for the interpretation and God doesn't give it to you, then there's a good chance that you may not get the interpretation from the Lord in a public setting.

Does this mean that if you don't have the gift of interpretation you can't use your tongue in a public setting? No. Someone else who has this gift may find in their private use of tongues that they are given the gift of interpretation. They would then be confident to use their gift of tongues knowing that the Lord has given them the interpretation in the past and will probably do so in a public setting.

That being the case we now know who has the gift of interpretation and others with the gift of tongues can be confident that someone will have the interpretation since God has given them the interpretation previously in their own private setting.

However, these are not hard and fast rules. It's certainly not beyond God to give someone the gift of interpretation who doesn't even speak in tongues. So, we don't want to limit the way God may work, but these can be guidelines.

We have more to add to this as we continue to go through our text, but it will have to wait until next week. But one thing is clear from what we've seen so far. It's not about tongues, and it's not about prophecy. It's about edifying the body of Christ; something many of the Corinthians were not engaged in.

Tongues and prophecy just happened to be an issue of contention which Paul is dealing with here in our text because they are gifts which are more mystical in nature. And it seems the more mystical they are the more they are pursued to the exclusion of the true reason any gift is given; and that is to be a servant of others.

I mean, Jesus identifies Himself as a servant along with Paul, Peter, James and John. And even the angels in heaven identify themselves as servants. With this being the case, then we need to

consider how we too might be servants of all with the gifts God has given us.

We are not in the kingdom of God to be self-serving. We are not in the kingdom of God to use our gifts for ourselves exclusively, but for the good of the body as we edify each other; to build up one another for the glory of God.

ROM 14:19 "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

1TH 5:11 "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."