



When We Gather

Kicking It Off

What is something you are good at that took you years to learn, and who taught you?

Read

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Summary

Most of us come to church hoping something will land on us. A song opens something up, a verse finally makes sense, a prayer goes somewhere it has not gone in a while, and we leave knowing we met with God. That is real and it is good, and nobody should talk you out of it. Paul had that too. He says he prays in tongues more than anyone in the room, which is his way of saying he knows what private communion with God is worth.

The trouble starts when that becomes the whole point of gathering. Paul writes to a church that had made a particular gift the mark of spiritual arrival, and rather than shutting it down, he moves it. Speaking in a tongue is a conversation between you and God that nobody else can follow. Prophecy, which here means speaking God's word to people rather than predicting the future, builds up whoever is listening. So one blesses one person and the other blesses the room, and that difference is what makes it greater. The measure of a gift is not how impressive it looks. It is who gets built up.

That has a practical edge to it. In community, things have to make sense. Paul reaches for instruments to say it: a flute with no clear notes is noise, and a bugle nobody can read leaves the army sitting in camp wondering if that was the signal or just a bird. Apply that to how we talk to each other. Before you speak in your group, it is worth asking whether what you are about to say builds anyone up. That one question quietly removes most gossip, which almost never shows up as gossip. It shows up as a prayer request with a story attached.

Then Paul says a stranger can walk into a room like this, hear ordinary people speak plainly about God, find his own heart described, and go face down in worship saying God is really among you. Nobody planned that. It happened because the church

was busy building each other up in words a person could actually understand. Which raises the idea that the gift God gave you may not be for you at all.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Paul never tells anyone to stop using a gift that only blesses them, he tells them to pray for an interpreter so the room can share it. What is something God has given you that has stayed private, and what would it take to let someone else benefit from it?
3. Most of us walk into a gathering asking how it went for us rather than how it went for the body. When was the last time you left a service or a group thinking about someone other than yourself, and what made that possible?
4. Gossip rarely announces itself. It usually arrives as concern, or as a prayer request with details attached. What would change in your conversations this week if you asked, before speaking, whether these words build up the person in front of you?
5. Paul says he would take five understood words over ten thousand that nobody can follow, because speaking so people can receive you is part of loving them. Where are you using language, or knowledge, or an assumption about what people already know, in a way that leaves someone outside the conversation?
6. The passage ends with an outsider who is undone by hearing ordinary believers speak plainly about God, and he was not the one anyone was aiming at. Who has God placed near you that you have quietly assumed is someone else's responsibility?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"The measure of what makes a spiritual gift good is who gets built up."

"Would you rather have the opportunity to be rejected for speaking truth, or to be accepted for being silent?"

"Love is not speaking your language. Love is speaking the other person's language."

"When we gather, the goal is not how much you like the service. The goal is how much service you are doing for others."

Sermon Notes**1 Corinthians 14:1-25**

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. 2 For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. 3 On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. 5 Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

6 Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? 7 If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? 8 And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? 9 So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. 10 There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, 11 but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. 12 So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

13 Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. 15 What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. 16 Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? 17 For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. 18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. 19 Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

20 Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. 21 In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” 22 Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. 23 If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 25 the secrets of his heart are

disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

Outline

1. The Measure of a Gift Is Who Gets Built Up (vv. 1-5)
 - a. You are all equipped and you are all ministers. Ministry is not the work of the elders, the deacons, the Sunday school teachers, and the worship team while everyone else receives.
 - b. The individual experience of God through a gift is real and good. Every believer should know that moment where a song or a passage or a prayer connects them to the Lord and they know it was not their own wisdom that did it.
 - c. We have optimized church for that individual experience, including the way a Sunday service is arranged, and there is nothing wrong with it. It is simply not the whole of it.
 - d. Paul does rank the gifts, and the ranking is not about which one is impressive. The greater gifts are the ones that edify the body rather than the self.
 - e. Tongues is prayer between a person and God that no one else understands. Prophecy is God's word spoken for the upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation of a specific people. Prophecy is not the word of Jeremy or Matt or Craig or the elders, it is His word.
 - f. The Old Testament prophecies were not thunderbolts and condemnation. They were a call to turn back, repent, and follow the Lord so that it would go well with Israel.
 - g. Paul does not tell the tongues speaker to stop, he tells him to pray for an interpreter. The gift is not wrong, the use of it was. The logic is a numbers game in the best sense: one person blessed is good, and more than one is better.
2. In Community, Things Have to Make Sense (vv. 6-19)
 - a. A flute with no distinct notes is noise, and a child on the bugle leaves the army asking whether that was the command to charge, the command to stay, or just a bird.
 - b. God is not angry at the child with the instrument. He understands the intent. The question is what use it is to the community, and the answer is none.
 - c. This is the discipline of small group speech. Before you say a word, ask whether the Spirit is leading you to say it and whether it edifies the people in the room.
 - d. It is also how gossip gets cut out of a group. A concern for someone's marriage veiled as a prayer request is still gossip, and the closet is where

that prayer belongs. God does not wait for a small group announcement before He answers.

- e. Worship runs the same way. Paul will pray and sing with his spirit and with his mind, and the mind is what the person next to you can follow.
- f. Singing in Korean, reading the words without understanding all of them, is genuinely sweet between me and the Lord. Ask me afterward what I sang and I can only tell you that I love Jesus. That is spirit without mind, and it blesses one person.
- g. So the question shifts. Not how do I receive this, but how does the body receive it, how does the body digest it. Some songs that bless you personally are still not the right songs for the body to sing together.
- h. Love is not speaking your own language. Love is speaking the other person's language, which is why Paul takes five words with his mind over ten thousand in a tongue.
- i. Understanding Scripture well is not the finish line. There is no award ceremony for the best interpretation. Knowledge that stays behind the desk and makes people come to you is knowledge that has forgotten what it was for.

3. The Stranger Who Walks In (vv. 20-25)

- a. Paul quotes Isaiah, where God speaks to a stubborn Israel through the lips of foreigners and they still will not listen, so the unintelligible speech stands as a sign of judgment against unbelief.
- b. In Christ, Jew and Gentile are welcomed into the same family, and the church's job now is to speak words that can be understood.
- c. A room full of unintelligible speech sends the visitor home saying you are out of your minds, and nothing comes of it. No repentance, no salvation, no growth.
- d. A room where the word of God is spoken plainly does something else. He is convicted, called to account, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and he falls on his face and says God is really among you.
- e. More manifestations will not produce that. He does not understand them, and neither do you. What produces it is the gospel spoken in words he can receive, carried by the Spirit.
- f. Maybe your gift is not just for you. Maybe it is for the stranger walking through the door, and maybe he does not need to talk to me or to Giff or Scott or Dean. Maybe he needs to talk to you.

Notes

I want to start where I am going to end, because the whole series has been driving here. You are ministers. Not the elders only, not the deacons or the Sunday school teachers or the people on the worship team, but you. Ministry is what naturally happens when you walk into this building and interact with the people in it. Your job toward one another is to minister. I say that knowing there is a version of church where that does not happen, where you walk in and no one ministers to you, and it feels lonely and isolated, like a spiritual desert. I have been in that room. I have sat in a church and felt entirely alone. What I learned there is that the Lord still gives gifts in dry places, and He still gives the ability to connect with Him when nothing around you is feeding you. My family has been through seasons that felt desolate, and the grace in them was that we could still reach for God and find Him.

First Corinthians 14 is a passage people avoid because it is loaded. Tongues, prophecy, and further down the chapter the role of women in the church. I want to come at it from a different angle. What Paul is doing is explaining what the gifts are for. They connect us to God, they connect us to one another, and they build one another up. Hold all three of those together and the chapter opens up.

Start with the first one, because it is real and I do not want it thrown out. There are moments where a song lands, or a passage opens, or you pray in a certain way and you know you are connected to the Lord. You know it was not your own cleverness that unlocked the verse and not your own taste that made the song hit. Every believer should have at least one of those experiences that they cannot explain away. That is a gift of the Spirit, it is beautiful, and it is encouraging. We have built a great deal of church life around it. Even the shape of a Sunday service assumes that all of you are listening to me and hoping the word of God lands on you personally so you leave connected to Him. There is nothing wrong with that, and I pray it happens every week.

But there is a greater gift, and Paul says so plainly. There is a hierarchy here, and it is not the hierarchy we would build. The greater gift is not the more impressive one. The greater gift is the one that edifies the body rather than the self. The measure of what makes a spiritual gift good is who gets built up. That is the sentence the whole chapter turns on. If a gift blesses one person, that is genuinely good, and Paul's question back to us is simple. What is better than one? Two. Three. Four.

That is where this gets costly, and I understand why. It would be easier to come to church and have it all be about me, to zone out, to think about no one else, to pray my prayers and leave right with God. And if you are here today because you need to be right with the Lord, then hallelujah, that is exactly what this place is for. We all need to be poured into. Paul says himself that he prays in tongues more than any of them, so he is

not pretending he has outgrown the need for private communion with God. He is saying the gifts were always meant to go further than that.

This is why Paul uses tongues and prophecy as his example. Praying in tongues is a spiritual language, utterances that do not make sense to anyone listening. I grew up going to churches where people spoke in tongues, and as a kid sitting in a room of what sounded like a cacophony of noises, I had no idea what was happening. If I could go back into one of those services now, I would not tell them to stop. I would tell them that Paul explains exactly this in 1 Corinthians 14. What you are doing is a private conversation with God, and it is not wrong, and it is also not the whole point of a gathering. Paul's instruction to the tongues speaker is not to sit down. It is to pray for an interpreter, because what you are praying may be exactly what this body needs to hear.

Prophecy gets misunderstood in the other direction. When I say prophecy I do not mean predicting the future. Prophecy is speaking the word of God, the message God has for a specific group of people. When you read the prophets, God is addressing Israel, and He is giving them His word for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. People hear that and say the God of the Old Testament is all fire and brimstone, all thunderbolts and smiting. The whole purpose of those prophecies was not condemnation. It was turn back to Me, repent, follow the Lord, and it will go well with you. Prophecy is not the word of Jeremy, not the word of Matt or Craig or the elders. It is His word, and that is why it builds people up.

Paul's illustration is instruments, and it is the right one. A flute that gives no distinct notes is noise. A bugle in the hands of a child leaves the army sitting in camp asking whether that was the signal to charge, the signal to hold, or a bird. God is not angry with the child holding the instrument, He knows what the child intends. The question is what use it is to the people who needed the signal. In community, things have to make sense.

That principle reaches into places we do not usually apply it. Think about small groups. You come in with a long week behind you and a great deal you want to say. The childish way is to let it rip, to make the whole evening about what God is doing in your life, maybe even to prepare your talking points in advance. The better way costs something. Before you speak, ask whether the Spirit is leading you to say this, and whether what you are about to say will build up the people in that room. That question, honestly asked, will cut most of the gossip out of your group. I know how gossip travels among us, because it rarely arrives as gossip. It arrives as a prayer request. Would you pray for my friend's marriage. What is wrong with it. Well, how much time do you have. Take that to your closet instead. God does not need it announced in a group before He will answer it.

Worship works the same way. Paul says he will pray with his spirit and with his mind, and sing with his spirit and with his mind. When I lived in Korea I sang in Korean. I can read it, but I do not know the biblical vocabulary well enough to follow it, so I sang loudly and with everything I had, and if you asked me afterward what I had just sung, all I could tell you is that I love Jesus. That is real, and it blessed me, and it blessed exactly one person. The mind is what lets the person beside me share it. So the question we bring to a gathering has to change. Not how did I receive that, but how did the body receive it, how does the body digest it. Some songs that bless you privately are still not the right songs for us to sing together, and that is not a judgment on you.

The same correction lands on knowledge. Some people can open a Bible and understand it in a way others cannot, and they know it, and it turns into a quiet verdict on everyone who reads more slowly. Congratulations. You understand the text. There is no medal for that and no award ceremony for best interpretation. Understanding is the beginning of the assignment, not the end of it. Now translate it so that other people can hold what you are holding. I have met men who would rather stay behind a desk and have people come to them, because going to people means learning their language, and their language always sounds a little coarse from a distance. Love is not speaking your own language. Love is speaking the other person's language. That is why Paul takes five words with his mind over ten thousand in a tongue.

Then Paul goes to Isaiah, and this is where the chapter gets its edge. God said He would speak to a stubborn Israel through the lips of foreigners, and even then they would not listen, so that unintelligible speech stood over them as a sign of judgment. Now look at what Christ has done. Jew and Gentile are welcomed into one family, and the church has been handed the job of speaking so that people can hear. If a visitor walks into a room where everyone is speaking what he cannot understand, he will say you are out of your minds, and he will leave, and nothing will come of it. No repentance. No salvation. No growth. More manifestations will not fix that, because he does not understand them and neither do you.

But if he walks in and hears the word of God spoken plainly, that repentance is real, that Christ died and rose, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life, that his sins can be forgiven, then something happens that no one in the room arranged. He is convicted. He is called to account. The secrets of his heart are laid open, and he falls on his face and says that God is really among you.

So think about the stranger walking through that door, and think about whatever gift God has actually given you. Maybe it was never only for you. Maybe he does not need to talk to me, or to Giff, or Scott, or Dean. Maybe he needs to talk to you. I do not particularly want to see our church get bigger. I love this church. What I want to see is

people repenting and turning to the Lord, and I want Him to use you in that as much as He uses me. If your answer is that you are not trained enough or that you do not understand well enough, then thank God you are surrounded by people who can walk with you and pray with you while you learn.

Suppose the only gift you had was tongues, the very gift I have been pressing on all morning. You could conclude that God gave you the wrong one, that no one understands you, that you may as well go be alone with it. Paul already answered that. Pray for the interpreter. Your gift and someone else's gift were designed to work in harmony, which is exactly why this was never a one man show and never could be. An interpreter with no one speaking has nothing to interpret. A tongues speaker with no interpreter has nothing the room can use. Put them together and God has an instrument. That is what a church is. Every one of you carries something, and tuned to each other those gifts make an orchestra, and when people come in they will hear the whole sound and fall on their faces and say the Lord is real, He loves me, He died for me, and I give Him my life.

Blog

All of us have been the outsider in a room. You sit down at a table where the everyone else seems to have thirty years of shared history, and the jokes land and you smile half a second late. You start a new job and the first meeting runs entirely on acronyms nobody thinks to explain. Nothing unkind is happening, the words simply were not aimed at you, and while everyone else enjoys the conversation you are quietly doing the arithmetic of whether you belong. Anyone who has visited a church for the first time knows the feeling, standing a beat behind everyone else, hearing a prayer about being washed in the blood, catching the word the room says back without knowing what it meant.

This Sunday we come to 1 Corinthians 14, the last stop in an argument Paul has been building for three chapters and the last sermon of this series. In chapter 12 he established that one Spirit hands out many gifts to one body, and that the body cannot spare a single member. In chapter 13 he gave us the criterion, the more excellent way, and told a gifted and competitive church that without love their most impressive abilities amount to noise. Chapter 14 carries that criterion into the room where they actually met. He opens by refusing a split we make all the time: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." Chapter 13 was never an argument for wanting less. It was an argument about what we want the gifts for.

The Corinthians had made tongues the marker of spiritual arrival, which is not hard to understand, since most of them came into the church out of a religious world where ecstatic speech was taken as proof that a god had hold of you. Paul does not suppress the gift. He says he wants them all to speak in tongues, and later in the chapter he tells them not to forbid it. What he does is relocate it. The one who speaks in a tongue speaks to God, and no one understands him. The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. One builds up himself and the other builds up the church, and that single difference decides which one belongs in the middle of a gathering.

The word running underneath the whole chapter is the word for construction and building up. Paul uses it six times in twenty-six verses, and he has already told this church what the building is. "You are God's building," he wrote back in chapter 3, "God's temple, and the Spirit dwells in you." So when Paul asks whether something builds up, he is not asking whether it was inspiring or whether people enjoyed it. He is asking whether anything got added to the structure God is raising. That is a harder question than the one most of us ask on the drive home, and I include myself in that. It moves the measurement off my experience and onto the person sitting next to me.

An honest question surfaces about here, and I would rather raise it myself than leave you sitting with it. We do not speak in tongues on a Sunday morning. So is Paul solving a problem we do not have? The gift is not what he is finally after. Any time we speak in the gathering in a way the person beside us cannot follow, we have reproduced the Corinthian problem in different vocabulary. We have our own version of speech nobody can use, and it sounds like the shorthand we picked up years ago and stopped hearing ourselves say. A visitor cannot tell the difference between a language he does not know and a sentence in his own language that quietly assumes ten years of church behind it. Both leave him standing outside the conversation.

Paul argues the point from sound, and the illustrations are deliberately ordinary. A flute that gives no distinct notes leaves you with noise instead of music, and a bugle with an unclear call leaves the army sitting in camp. He never suggests the Spirit is absent from the speech. The trouble is that the meaning does not arrive, so the words go into the air, and air was never the point. His test for whether the meaning arrived is the smallest word in the service. If you give thanks with your spirit, he asks, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? A man who cannot follow you cannot agree with you. Your prayer may be entirely genuine, and Paul grants that it is, saying you may be giving thanks well enough. But the other person is not built, and that is the verdict he cares about.

Then Paul puts himself under his own rule before he puts anyone else there. "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue." He claims the very gift they were competing over, claims more of it than any of them, and then sets it aside in the assembly for the sake of five words somebody can actually use. Being understood costs the speaker something, and that cost is the form love takes when a church gathers. I feel this in my own work before I feel it anywhere else, because the man with the microphone is the one most able to speak into the air, to be interesting for forty minutes and leave a room unbuilt.

Paul then quotes Isaiah 28. Isaiah had been teaching the priests and prophets of Judah, and they mocked his instruction as baby talk, precept upon precept, line upon line, the way you would imitate someone talking to a toddler. God answered that if they would not hear plain words, He would speak to them by the lips of foreigners, meaning the Assyrian army whose language they could not understand. Speech you cannot follow was the sound of judgment falling on people who had refused speech they could. Paul applies that pattern to a church whose gatherings had become unintelligible, and it explains what he says next. If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues and outsiders walk in, they will say you are out of your minds. The word means

raving, and it is exactly what a Corinthian visitor would have said about the temples down the street.

Set against that is the other room. "But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and falling on his face he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." Both of those verbs come out of the courtroom. He is exposed and he is examined, and what the examination turns up is the part of himself he had not planned to bring in with him. I do not want to soften that into a general welcome, because Paul does not. The man hears ordinary people speaking plainly about God, his own heart gets described more accurately than he could have described it, and the only thing left to do is go face down. What he says on the way down is not that the service was excellent. He says God is really here. Nobody in the room was aiming at him. Paul never tells the Corinthians to redesign their meetings around visitors, he tells them to build one another up in words people can follow, and a stranger who walks into that will be taken apart by it. He is not converted by a program pointed at him. He is converted by overhearing a body being built.

We started this series in Acts 2, and the two rooms belong next to each other. At Pentecost the Spirit fell and the crowd outside heard the mighty works of God each in his own language, and three thousand people were added that day. In Corinth the same Spirit was at work in a room where an outsider could not follow a word of it. The gift had not changed, the aim had, and the aim is what Paul is trying to get back. So the question for us on Sunday is not whether we are gifted, because we are. It is whether anyone was built, and that question has ordinary answers. It looks like sitting next to someone you have never met and quietly telling him what we are doing and why. It looks like praying in words a guest can follow. It looks like staying for the conversation after the service, because the person you were gifted for is standing three feet away. Come Sunday ready to ask it of yourself. We were called out, gathered in, and handed gifts, so that when we assemble the love of God gets spoken plainly enough for the person who came in the back door to meet Him.