

## **The Practice of Speaking Gifts**

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Do you know, there's a member of your body that, although it's relatively small, has extraordinary power to bring great good or great evil. The part of the body that I'm referring to is the tongue. An untamed tongue is more harmful to the body of Christ, marriages and relationships in general than anything else.

Concerning the damage that the tongue can bring, James wrote, *"How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell"* (James 1:5-6). During this pandemic age, there are many churches today that are either on fire or have already burned to the ground. And the match that lit the fire is the tongue set on fire not by the Holy Spirit but by hell.

Similarly, as we have observed throughout this series, the church of Corinth was in trouble. There were fires of division in the church that were burning out of control. And these fires were being fueled by immature believers that were pursuing the gifts of the Spirit, but were not under the control of the Spirit. They were aligning themselves with church leaders based on their impressive speaking abilities, but they were out of alignment with the heart of the gospel message that they preached. They were measuring their spirituality by the exercising of speaking gifts, like tongues, but they were not growing in the love of Christ.

Concerning the tongue, James also wrote, *"If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless"* (James 1:26). As we learned last week, we can speak in the tongues of angels, but without love, we gain nothing. Because the Corinthians were high on the gifts, but low on love, the practice of the gifts were not building

the church up, but instead tearing it down. Sadly, the same thing is happening in many churches today.

**Main idea:** Speaking gifts function as God intended when they are governed by love and exercised to build up the body of Christ.

To unfold this theme, we are going consider 3 ways that speaking gifts are to function in the church so that it builds itself up in love.

### **1. Speaking gifts are inspired by agape love**

First of all, speaking gifts function as Christ intended when they are **inspired by love**. Beginning in verse 1, Paul writes, *“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy”* (1 Corinthians 14:1).

Remember in chapter 12 Paul began his teaching on the gifts of the Spirit. To explain the purpose for the gifts in the church, Paul used a human body metaphor in chapter 12. And his point was that, like a human body, all the individual members of a church body are called to function in their giftedness in cooperation with one another.

But if you recall, because of their spiritual immaturity, the Corinthian believers were not seeing their gifts as integrally tied to the rest of the body. Rather they viewed the function of their gifts as a means to outshine others. Consequently, the practice of the gifts in the church led to jealousy and strife (1 Corinthians 3:3). The gifts of the Spirit are essential for the body of Christ to function in a mutually caring and interdependent manner. However, this will not happen unless the members are controlled by the self-giving love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:13-14).

So, because many of the Corinthians were not controlled by the love of Christ, but by their own self-centered desires and ambitions, Paul pauses his teaching on the gifts of the Spirit and

in chapter 13 focuses on their greater need for love. Paul explains, among other things, that even if we had the faith to move mountains or the ability to speak in the language of angels, if we have not love, we gain nothing. We gain nothing without love because it's love that inspires us to use our gifts to advance the interests of others and not just our own interests.

Therefore, when Paul again gives instructions on the practice of the gifts of the Spirit, he reiterates the greater need for the Corinthians believers to pursue love. But he doesn't exhort them to quit desiring spiritual gifts. On the contrary, he exhorts them to earnestly desire them, but to make their first priority the pursuit love.

And notice also that although he affirms their desire for spiritual gifts, he adds, especially that you may prophesy. Remember that in 1 Corinthians 12:31, Paul wrote, "*But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way*" (1 Corinthians 12:31).

What are the higher gifts that Paul was referring to in chapter 12:31? The fact that Paul emphasizes the gift of prophecy in verse 1 is a big clue that the higher gifts are related to speaking gifts. Speaking gifts are the higher gifts because they are the primary vehicle for communicating the saving and sanctifying power of the gospel. But keep in mind that spiritual gifts, including, speaking gifts, don't make you more spiritual than someone else. Love is the measure of spiritual maturity. And when the love of God governs our desires, we will be glad to serve others in any capacity.

So why does Paul exhort the Corinthians to desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy? Paul continues: "*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” (1 Corinthians 14:2-5).*

Why is Paul exhorting the church to desire the gifts of prophesy in contrast to tongues? Keep in mind that because the Corinthians were big on gifts but small on love, they desired what in their minds were the more impressive gifts, like tongues. But because their desire was not first rooted in love, the practice of tongues was leading to confusion.

Interestingly, there’s still a lot of controversy today regarding what the gift of tongues is and how it should or should not be practiced. But a lot of the controversy, which often leads to division, is due to the human tendency to major on the minors, especially when there’s a lack of love. With this in mind, it’s important that we have a basic understanding of what the gift of tongue is.

The first time we see the gift of tongues being exercised was on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. When believers first spoke in tongues, their audience understood the gospel proclaimed in their own languages without the benefit of an interpreter (Acts 2:1–13). But in chapter fourteen it appears that the gift of tongues is not always given in the same way we see it manifested on the day of Pentecost. Unlike what we see in Acts 2, the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 required the gift of interpretation in order to be understood.

Therefore the gift of tongues may or may not be a human language (1 Corinthians 14:2). But herein lies the problem with the way the Corinthians were practicing tongues. To impress or to receive some kind of spiritual high, they wanted the ability to

speak or pray in an unknown tongue, but they were not concerned with whether or not it was building others up.

This brings us to a second way that speaking gifts are to function in the church so that it builds itself up in love.

## **2. Speaking gifts are intelligible to the listener**

Speaking gifts function in the church as God intended not only when they are **inspired by His love**, but when they are **intelligible to the listener**. After urging the Corinthians to prefer prophecy over tongues so that the church is built up, Paul continues:

*“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? <sup>7</sup> If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? <sup>8</sup> And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, <sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:6-12).*

Why is Paul urging the Corinthians to prefer the gift of prophecy over tongues? To answer this question it's important that we have a basic understanding of the gift of prophecy. What often comes to mind when Christians think of prophecy, is the foretelling of future events. Although prophecy, like in the Old Testament, could involve the predicting of future events, it was more than that. Prophecy involved not only foretelling, but more predominantly, the “forthtelling” of the word of the Lord. In

other words, prophecy in both the Old and New Testament was primarily exhorting or admonishing God's people where they were about His will for their lives.

When contrasting tongues to the gift of prophecy, Paul wrote: *"On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation"* (1 Corinthians 14:3). So it appears that the gift of prophecy worked together with other speaking gifts described in the New Testament, like exhortation and teaching, for the edification of the church (Romans 12:7).

Concerning the gift of prophecy, Craig Bloomberg noted, "New Testament prophecy therefore included both conventional preaching, when the preacher had the sense of being gripped and convicted by the Spirit about his message, and more spontaneous, unpremeditated utterances. Hill captures both of these concepts in his definition: Christian prophets are "those who have grasped the meaning of Scripture, perceived its powerful relevance to the life of the individual, the Church and society, and declare that message fearlessly. Their prophecy is not on par with Scripture and their exercise of the gift, like that of all other spiritual gifts, is subject to error and misinterpretation (Acts 21:4 with vv. 11, 13–14).

With this description of the gift of prophecy in mind, notice that Paul makes it very clear why the Corinthians should prefer prophecy over tongues in church when he writes: *"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"* (1 Corinthians 14:9). No doubt Paul is admonishing the Corinthians about non intelligible speech precisely because they were uttering non intelligible sounds with their tongues in the church. Consequently, their utterances were serving no redemptive purpose other than bringing attention to themselves, and disorder in the church.

And how many of you know, God is not the author of confusion. Have you ever witnessed someone speaking in tongues either on Christian T.V. social media or in-person with no interpreter? Sadly, while visiting other churches, I've witnessed this unbiblical practice of uttering unintelligible speech. And the majority of the time when I've witnessed someone supposedly speaking in tongues, there was no interpretation. And the times when I did witness an interpretation, on one occasion, the interpretation did not line up with scripture.

Let me ask you, will the Holy Spirit enable you to speak a so-called "word from the Lord" that contradicts scripture? If it contradicts scripture, it's not from God. I remember counseling someone who wanted to divorce his wife and had no biblical grounds to do so. When I asked him what his biblical grounds were, he said, the Holy Spirit confirmed to him that he could go through with his divorce. I responded, you may have heard from a spirit, but it wasn't the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will never lead you to act or say anything contrary to the Word of God. But sadly there are many Christians today that elevate spiritual experiences above the word of God which opens them up to all kinds of unhealthy and unbiblical practices. The bible, not experiences, must be our final authority on all matters of faith and practice.

But we must also avoid the other extreme of never seeking the gifts of the Spirit out of fear of being associated with the unbiblical and bizarre practices of others done in the name of the Holy Spirit. We must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. If we are going to be a healthy church that functions with unction, we must earnestly desire spiritual gifts. And we must practice them not in a self-serving way, but to serve others and build them up in Christ.

Do you know it's possible to desire and exercise other spiritual gifts in a self-serving manner. As one bible teacher noted: "It is

possible to take the spiritual gift of teaching and abuse it in order to appear smart, to gain a following, or to impress listeners. When pastors load up their teaching with Christianese, and theological lingo that is unintelligible to Christians or non-Christians, they effectively do the same thing that the Corinthians were doing. They put a basic understanding of the faith out of reach.” Um

Keep in mind, that although the Corinthians were off in how they practiced the gifts, Paul did not discourage them from seeking and praying for the gifts of the Spirit. After explaining that they should not speak in an unintelligible manner in the church, Paul writes in verse 12: *“So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church”* (1 Corinthians 14:12).

We should be eager about experiencing the manifestations of the Spirit in and through our lives. For we cannot expect to experience the power of the Spirit in our lives and in the church if we are content to live without it. However, if we are eager for the manifestations of the Spirit, along with that eagerness, we must strive to excel in building up the church. And when it comes to our tongues, we must strive even more to ensure that what comes out of our mouths is set on fire by the Spirit not by hell.

This brings us to a third way that speaking gifts are to function in the church.

### **3. Speaking gifts are instructional to the learner**

When speaking gifts are in operation in the church as God intended not only are they inspired by His love, and intelligible to the listener, but they are **instructional to the learner**. Paul continues, *“Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. <sup>14</sup> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> 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” (1 Corinthians 14:13-15).*

Remember that the Corinthians were eager for the manifestations of the Spirit and in particular the gift of tongues. And although their motives weren't always the purest, and Paul preferred that they prophecy instead, he didn't forbid them from speaking in tongues. What he said was that if they wanted to practice the gift of speaking, singing or praying in tongues, they should strive to do so in a way that lifted others up. Therefore Paul exhorts them in verse 13 that if they spoke, sang or prayed in tongues in the church, they should **pray** for an interpretation.

And then Paul goes on to explain in verse 14-17 why they must pray for interpretation when their minds don't understand what their spirit is praying. He writes, *“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? <sup>17</sup> For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up”* (1 Corinthians 14:16-17).

Now there's some debate today about whether or not one needs to pray for interpretation if one is given the gift to pray in tongues privately. Some would say that when you're praying in tongues the Holy Spirit is interceding on your behalf. And although it can be helpful to know what exactly the Spirit is praying on your behalf, it's not necessary. Although it appears to me that it's possible to pray in an unknown language, it's clear that Paul is also saying that to pray in the Spirit with understanding is not any less spiritual. On the contrary, it can be more fruitful, especially in the presence of other believers.

Notice that although Paul does not forbid speaking in tongues in the church so long as there is an interpreter, he still encourages prophecy over tongues. Paul continues: *“I thank God that I speak*

*in tongues more than all of you. <sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Corinthians 14:18-19).*

We should desire speaking gifts, but not so others could be impressed with us, but so we can be used by God to instruct others in love. The Corinthians however, were seeking the more impressive gifts, like tongues, and making them a mark of spirituality. And as a result they were not growing in the Lord.

Paul continues: *“Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature” (1 Corinthians 14:20).* To be mature in our thinking we must learn to think biblically. Sadly, we have too many immature believers that come to church looking for a spiritual experience or for the preacher to entertain them, but they are not seeking to be instructed by the word.

Because of their desire for the impressive gifts, the Corinthians believers were impeding the growth of others. They were not helping others to think biblically, but instead were becoming a stumbling block. Because of the lack of spiritual maturity, their practice of the gifts were not turning people to the Lord, but away from the Lord.

To further explain, how their misuse of the gifts, in particular the gift of tongues, was more of a liability to the church than a blessing, Paul continues: *“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.” <sup>22</sup> Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. <sup>23</sup> 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?” (1 Corinthians 14:21-23).* What does Paul’s reference to the Law, namely Isaiah

28:10-11, have to do with the Corinthians misuse of tongues in the church?

The passage in Isaiah about God speaking by the lips of foreigners, refers to the rebellious Israelites who had refused to obey the intelligible words of the prophet. Since they refused to obey, God sent “*men of strange tongues,*” namely the Assyrians, as judgment on His people. But although He judges them in this way, they continued to reject the word of the Lord. In light of this, Paul concludes, “*Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers*” (1 Corinthians 14:22).

How is the gift of speaking in an unknown tongue a sign for unbelievers and prophecy a sign for believers? In view of verses 23-25, about the negative reaction of outsiders to tongues and the positive reaction of outsiders to prophecy, Paul seems to be saying that by their misuse of the gift of tongues they themselves were inadvertently turning it into a sign of judgment to the lost. In other words, if speaking in an unknown tongue causes unbelievers to despise what is happening in the church, then the impact of the gift would be a negative sign just like it was to the rebellious Israelites in Isaiah 28. Rather than helping them come to Christ, it left outsiders in unbelief. But on the other hand, if an outsider is converted as a result of prophecy, it is a sign for believers in the sense that it is the vehicle that leads them from unbelief to faith in Christ.

Notice in contrast to the negative sign the misuse of tongues becomes to unbelievers, Paul concludes of prophecy: “*But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, <sup>25</sup> 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*” (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).

O brothers and sisters, when spiritual gifts in general are functioning in the body of Christ as God intended, God's presence and power is manifested and outsiders that come into the congregation will have the opportunity to experience a genuine life changing encounter with God. And in particular, when speaking gifts are functioning in the body as God intended, not only will the body of Christ itself be built up, but even outsiders stepping into our fellowship can encounter God speaking to their hearts, convicting them of sin, and touching their hearts in ways that only God can to bring them into a saving knowledge of Jesus.

When Paul says, "*But if all prophesy...*" he doesn't mean that an outsider will encounter the presence of God when he walks into a church where everyone is prophesying at the same time. Remember, as we learned in chapter 12, not everyone in the body of Christ receives the same gifts. What Paul means is that when all who have the gift of prophesy are using their gifts in an orderly fashion, the church and even outsiders will have the opportunity to know that God is in our midst.

And let me add, that although all may not have the gift of prophesy, there are a variety of speaking gifts, like teaching, exhorting, words of knowledge and words of wisdom, that we can all pray for so that we all can encourage one another in the Lord. God didn't design the church to be built up by only one person preaching the word from a pulpit on Sunday morning. We are all called to build one another up in love.

## **Conclusion**

Do you know that Jesus is the Word made flesh? He came to reveal the glory of God to us through the life that He lived, the words that He spoke and the love that He showed when He gave His life for our sins. And all who put their trust in Him as Lord and Savior receive not just gifts from the Spirit, but the gift of the

Spirit so that our lives can reflect His beauty. And not just individually but together as the body of Christ.

May we all strive to excel in building up the body of Christ as we all, inspired by the love of Christ, exercise our gifts to the glory of His name.