

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

The “Why?” of Sunday Morning

(1 Corinthians 14:1-25)

Study #18

Introduction: When we gather...

On any given Sunday morning, there are dozens of important and timely matters we could focus on when we gather.

For instance, during the week before last Sunday, my mind and your minds had been consumed by a slew of upsetting events.

There was the awful murder of a Ukrainian woman on a train in Charlotte, North Carolina, Charlie Kirk’s murder in Utah, remembering 9/11. It was a tough week...and you noticed that none of those matters were mentioned last Sunday.

That wasn’t because they didn’t matter. They matter a lot. And it wasn’t because we don’t care about these events and others like them. We do.

They could have been mentioned and prayed for and that would have been fine.

Over the years, there have been lots of important events occurring in our world that get mentioned and prayed for on Sunday morning, including devastating Hill Country floods, covid-19, mass shootings, wars.

Very often, though, things happen - even big things - and we don’t focus on them when we gather.

The fact that recent events weren’t mentioned last Sunday and that major events often aren’t mentioned underscores that we understand that when we come together, it is for a single set of purposes that revolve around life in Jesus.

This time is set apart (sacred / holy) for Jesus. We give Him our attention when we gather. Yes, we certainly make exceptions. But we make it our aim to be fully absorbed in and focused on Him when we gather.

The Apostle Paul wrote what we’re looking at today to get the Corinthian church to the same point of full absorption on Jesus when that church gathered.

And for the time we have today, we’ll dig deep into the Corinthian weeds to see what was happening there. Then, we’ll back out to think about how what was happening there can help us, here.

Review...

I’m very grateful to Ryan Johnson for his thoughtful message last Sunday from 1 Corinthians 13. Ryan did a great job of serving up the meat in the spiritual gifts “sandwich” that make up the larger section of 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Ryan pointed out from chapter 13 that as important as spiritual gifts are, the key to the proper exercise of the gifts is love. To exercise our gifts well, we’ve got to exercise them lovingly.

Then, after Paul’s foot-stomping and pulpit-pounding on the theme of love, he reverted back to the theme of the gifts.

The transition from spiritual gifts to love and back to gifts...

[14:1] Pursue love, yet earnestly desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

What Paul has to say in this passage is as practical and relevant to us as anything we find in the New Testament.

But we are going to have to wade into the first century context to see that relevance.

Paul was addressing an issue that was dividing and troubling the church at Corinth.

This issue has surfaced in Jesus' church at various points over the last two thousand years, including in the American church, and not that long ago.

It isn't such a hot topic now in our church or in the broader American church. But the topic - two of the Holy Spirit's gifts - forces us to think about what we're to be all about when we come together.

One of these gifts was speaking in tongues.¹

Some people come to this passage and believe that these "*tongues*" are the same as the "*tongues*" of Acts 2. On the Day of Pentecost the first Christians miraculously spoke in known languages they had never learned.

Other people believe that Paul is here referring to the well-known practice of "*glossolalia*" (ecstatic babbling) and not to known languages at all.

The other gift was prophecy.

And, again, there are those who come to this passage who think that Paul was referencing the miraculous gift of speaking new revelation from God, whether that was "foretelling" events that would soon happen or "forthtelling" truth previously hidden.

Others understand Paul's reference to "*prophecy*" to be pretty much what we think of as proclamation of God's truth, or preaching.

For our purposes today, I don't think we need to identify exactly what Paul had in mind when he mentioned "*tongues*" or "*prophecy*" because the thrust of what he says here holds, regardless.

To kick off the discussion, Paul said first, "*pursue love*" (taking us back to chapter 13). They were to make the way of love the defining pursuit of their lives.

AND they were to earnestly desire spiritual gifts.

AND of those spiritual gifts that were available, they were especially to seek the gift, the, the ability to prophesy.

I suspect that when Paul was with the Corinthians, he had told them of the superiority of prophecy. Evidently, the Corinthians preferred tongues-speaking.

So, Paul explained why he valued tongues-speaking less than he valued prophecy when the church came together.²

The Defining Characteristics of Prophecy and Tongues (14:2-5)

To Speak in Tongues (14:2)

[2a] For the one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people, but to God.

In Acts 2, the first Christians weren't so much evangelizing the Jewish crowds at Pentecost when they spoke in foreign languages they had never learned.

More to the point, they were worshipping God while proclaiming ***[Acts 2:11] the mighty deeds of God.***³

Second, the tongues-speakers in Corinth may have been speaking Egyptian or Latin (existing languages) or they may have been speaking ecstatically.

¹ In all of the New Testament, tongues are only mentioned here in 1 Corinthians 12 and in Acts. Acts 2, the event on the Day of Pentecost; 8:14-17 when Samaritans believed in Jesus; 10:44-48 when Gentiles believed in Jesus at the home of Cornelius, the Roman centurion; 19:1-7, where a few disciples of John the Baptist believed in Jesus.

² The last two gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 are "*various kinds of tongues*" and "*the interpretation of tongues.*" Many have observed that listing tongues last indicates less importance.

³ The evangelizing would come later when Peter preached.

Either way, **[2b]...for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.** The tongues-speaker didn't understand what he was saying.

That's tongues-speaking. Prophecy is very different.

To Speak Prophetically (14:3-5)

Prophecy is purposeful (v. 3)

[3] But the one who prophesies speaks to people for edification, exhortation, and consolation.

The tongues-speaker spoke to God. The prophet spoke to people about God. Very different gifts.

And the tongues-speaker spoke what he didn't understand while the prophet knew full well what he was saying. His words were purposeful, intentional.

And who benefitted from the exercise of these two gifts?

Prophecy edifies (v. 4)

[4] The one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but the one who prophesies edifies the church.

Here, Paul used the term "**edify**." It's a very important Bible word. It means "*to build up*."

In the first century this was a construction term. A stonemason would place stone on top of stone to build the structure he was working on.

We could say that he was "*edifying*" his building project.

So, the picture Paul is painting here is of a Christian who gathers with others on Sundays - at other times, too.

That Christian arrives with the goal of interacting with others in such a way that they are "*built up*."

That's how you and I are to come to church. We're to arrive looking for opportunities to help build up a brother or a sister so that the whole house / church is built up.

It wasn't a bad thing for a tongues-speaker to edify himself. But self-edification wasn't the purpose for the gifts. They were given for the benefit of others.

And the gift and the ministry that builds up / edifies others is prophecy. Paul was telling the Corinthians, "*Make your choice - either build yourself up or be used by God to build others up*."

Paul had made his choice.

Comparing Tongues-Speaking and Prophecy (v. 5)

[5] Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues,⁴ but rather that you would prophesy; and greater is the one who prophesies than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edification.

Paul is clear here. There was nothing wrong with people speaking in tongues. However...in the church, tongues-speaking was far less important than prophecy.

Having said that, Paul went on to give a fuller explanation as to why prophecy - and not tongues-speaking - was one of **[12:31a] the greater gifts**.

For one thing, it isn't clear communication.

⁴ Some have said from these words that every Christian should speak in tongues. However, in 7:7 Paul said that he wished everyone had the gift of celibacy, but he certainly didn't expect universal that everyone would remain single.

The Problem with Public Tongues-Speaking (14:6-19)

It's Unclear...So It Doesn't Meet the Moment's Need (14:6-9)

Tongues-speaking does not benefit the church (v. 6)

[6] But now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation, or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?

Paul could have spoken to the Corinthians in any number of languages.

We know that he spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Probably Latin, maybe others? Most people in the world today and through time have been multi-lingual (except me...).

And, as we will soon see, Paul himself did speak in tongues (v. 18), so he could have spoken in a known tongue that the Corinthians didn't know or by way of ecstatic speech.

But that would have not helped the Corinthians grow in Jesus. They would not have been edified. What they needed was clarity.

So, Paul chose to speak their language - Greek - and blessed them with true revelation about God, fuller knowledge about Jesus, a prophetic word about grace, and teaching about life in Christ.

This may all seem like a big "Duh!" to us, but Paul had to hammer it home to the Corinthians. To them, it wasn't a big "Duh."

They were thoroughly enjoying speaking in tongues in the worship service, but it wasn't helping anybody. There was no clarity, and clarity is crucial. As Paul went on to write...

Examples from the world of music (vv. 7-8)

[7] Yet even lifeless instruments, whether flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?

[8] For if the trumpet produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

If you go to a wedding, and right at the start of the reception the band strikes up a funeral dirge, everybody will be confused. If it is time for the army to attack and the bugler plays "Taps," there is no victory.

So, again, Paul's point is that the only kind of speech that edifies the listener is clear and appropriate-to-the-moment speech.

[9] So you, too, unless you produce intelligible speech by the tongue, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will just be talking to the air.

Remember the big picture here. Paul is making the case for prophecy in the public meeting of the church rather than tongues-speaking.

One problem is the lack of clarity. There are other drawbacks. Paul says it was divisive.

It's Divisive (14:10-12)

[10] There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and none is incapable of meaning. [11] So if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be unintelligible to the one who speaks, and the one who speaks will be unintelligible to me.

Ever since the days of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), there have been all kinds of languages in the world.

And if you remember the purpose behind God's creating different languages at Babel, it was to divide people. It was the method God chose to force people to spread out from the plains of Shinar and populate the earth.

Language barriers still divide people. Whether in India, Russia, or Mexico, or Chile, if you don't speak the language - there's a relationship barrier, a difficulty in making connection.

People who spoke all kinds of languages converged in Corinth. With excellent harbors on both sides of the Corinthian isthmus, merchants came from all over the Mediterranean world to trade.

The residents knew well the exasperating situation of dealing with a language barrier.

When the church gathers - as it does every Sunday for worship and celebration and connection - all barriers to communication that CAN be set aside SHOULD be set aside.

But in Corinth, some were erecting unnecessary barriers by speaking in tongues in the public meetings of the church.

Paul saw that as counter-productive. So he wrote, **[12] So you too, since you are eager to possess spiritual gifts, strive to excel for the edification of the church.**

When a speaker spoke a language that the listener didn't know, the speaker might as well have been babbling. The content didn't matter and there was no building up.⁵

Solution? Prophecy.

And Paul listed one final problem with tongues-speaking when the church gathers.

It's All "spirit," No Mind (14:13-16)

[13] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue is to pray that he may interpret. [14] For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unproductive. [15] What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. [16] For otherwise if you bless God in the spirit only, how will the one who occupies the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you are saying?

⁵ The Corinthians were to examine their motives as they exercised their gifts. They were to be more interested in edifying others, than in self-edifying.

The vision for what should happen when the church gathers involves heart, passion, enthusiasm AND thoughtful reflection and our intellect.

But tongues-speaking (at least as the Corinthians were practicing it) disengaged the mind. That wasn't right.

Emotionalism doesn't cut it. But neither does cold intellectualism.

We are to engage the mental and emotional parts of our lives as we deal with each other, and, especially as we deal with God.

So all of this - tongues-speaking's lack of clarity, divisiveness, and emotionalism - leads to Paul's next comment.

It's Surpassed by Prophecy (vv. 17-19)

[17] For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. [18] I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; [19] nevertheless, in the church I prefer to speak five words with my mind, so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Here was a Christian engaged in rapturous devotion, speaking in tongues. Fine. But without interpretation, he won't edify anyone. And THAT is what is to happen when the church comes together.

Paul has taken us back to first principles. The public exercise of the gift of tongues (when not interpreted) fails the sniff test of edification. It doesn't build others up.

So, the reason Paul wasn't all that thrilled about tongues-speaking in public worship was because it didn't do all that much good.

For that reason, when he had been with the Corinthians he didn't speak in tongues. He prophesied, preached, taught, exhorted.⁶

⁶ Did the Corinthians not know that Paul had the gift of tongues because he had never exercised it in their presence due to their immaturity?

And here he urged them and he urges us to maturity, [20] ***Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.***

Maturity puts others first. Maturity seeks to edify. And when the church gathers, edification of Christians is the goal - but it isn't the only goal.

To highlight a second goal for when the church gathers, Paul turned a sharp corner - and maybe one we hadn't expected - and gives a quote from the Old Testament.

The Impact Of The Two Gifts (14:21-25)

Tongues-Speaking's Purpose(s) (14:21-22)

From the Law (actually, Isaiah 28:11) (v. 21)

[21] In the Law⁷ it is written, 'BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,' says the Lord."

This quote from Isaiah refers to the time when Israel was overrun by soldiers who spoke a foreign language: the Assyrians.

When the Jews heard these foreign Assyrians talking at their cities' gates, they knew that destruction was at hand. (2 Kings 17:23) The foreign "*tongues*" were a sign of judgment.

Paul took that historical situation and applied it to the church at Corinth. He drew a conclusion with respect to the exercise of the gift of tongues in church.

The purpose of tongues; the purpose of prophecy (v. 22)

[22] So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is not for unbelievers; but for those who believe.

God's purpose for the use of "*tongues*" was to indicate that judgment was coming. That's how it worked in the 8th century BC toward Israel. (Isaiah 28) That's also what was going on at Pentecost. (Acts 2)

When the first Christians were speaking in tongues in Jerusalem on Pentecost, the crowds of Jews were brought by that sign - and by Peter's preaching - to see that judgment was coming for their having put to death God's Messiah, Jesus.

Sure, Paul wrote that speaking in tongues (either according to the model of the miracle of Pentecost or by way of ecstatic speech) was a blessed experience for a Christian in private worship, or, as we will see next Sunday, if they are interpreted in a public gathering.

But, with respect to the unbeliever, tongues were a sign of judgment.⁸

So, what will happen if tongues-speaking occurs when the church gathers for all the reasons that a church gathers - worship, instruction, connection - and lost people are present?

Tongues' and Prophecy's Impact on the Outsider (14:23-25)

They'll say that you're insane. (v. 23)

[23] Therefore if the whole church gathers together and all the people speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are insane?

⁷ Paul says, "*the Law*" (technically, Genesis - Deuteronomy) but was quoting Isaiah 28:11. Evidently, anything from the Old Testament could be referred to as "*the Law*" even though the OT divided into Law, History, Writings and Prophets. Roughly, Paul means here, "*before Jesus.*"

⁸ The disobedient Jews refused to listen to the clear message that God repeatedly sent them through His prophets. So, He chastised them by invaders who assaulted their ears with unintelligible language. In the same way, those who fail to believe in Jesus are chastised by hearing wonderful sounds which they cannot understand.

Paul knew that people who didn't believe in Jesus sometimes attended the Corinthian church's Sunday morning gatherings.

It might have been out of curiosity, or because of a friend's invitation, or out of spiritual hunger.

So, what if those who didn't know Christ as Savior came into the worship service to see what Christianity was all about and found numerous people speaking in unintelligible languages?⁹

What conclusion could they draw but that the church of Jesus was filled with crazy people?

I'm not saying that they were crazy, at least as the church guests might have thought.

But it was crazy to act in a way that would likely drive away from the faith the very people they wanted to win for Jesus. That is nuts.

So, tongues-speaking is inappropriate for worship that is open to the public because of the impact it will have on the visiting unbeliever.

It turns out that there's nothing better for a church to do when it wants to be winsome to that guest than to speak clearly.

The prophesying, proclaiming church blesses all (vv. 24-25)

[24] But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; [25] the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you."

Prophecy - clear speaking about the things of God - benefits everyone: believer and unbeliever.

The self-scrutiny that prophecy and instruction and exhortation invite will produce the fruit of worship and faith.

Two applications emerge from this passage. They both have to do with the purpose for which we gather.

Conclusion:

Edification

First, with respect to the attitude each of us is to bring when we gather, there is this: We are to have as a top priority edify - to build up in the faith - those around us.

Six times in what we have heard today, Paul says either that tongues-speaking is to be avoided because it **doesn't** edify or that prophecy is to be practiced because it **does** edify.

The sniff test of whether something should be done or not done when we're together, is, "*Does it edify?*"

Prophecy edifies. And besides prophecy, the possibilities for edification are endless when we gather.

- If you're a Deacon, you've got coffee to make and doors to open and a/c units to turn on and the Lord's Supper to prepare.
- You've got a hand to help someone with a walker or to help someone to handle an extra child.
- You've got a song to sing or an instrument to play, a PowerPoint or a livestream to run.
- You may have a class to teach or to help with.
- You've got a word of encouragement for someone who looks sad.
- You've got a greeting for someone you haven't seen in a week.
- You've got a prayer to pray for someone who's hurting.
- You have a hug or a firm handshake to give.

⁹ Paul knew well that interpreted tongues could be of great benefit when exercised publicly and he'll have more to say about that in the rest of the chapter. But he also knew that this was not the way the gift was being exercised at Corinth. The

tongues-speakers were expressing themselves in an unrestrained manner that edified no one.

The Christian's purpose when he or she gathers with fellow believers is to edify.

As we make our way to church or to a small group, let's be thinking of ways to enrich those we're about to see. Think inside and outside the box. Be creative and be intentional.

Aside from coming ready to worship God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, I can't think of a more important piece of preparation for our Sunday mornings together than this.

Second, it is so striking that the last words of Paul we hear today address arranging our time together so that we provide a rich experience for a guest.

Accommodation

It is clear from today's passage that when Christians come together, they come together to worship God, to learn and grow in Jesus, and to make deep relational connections with fellow believers.

But it could not be more clear from this passage that Paul wanted the church at Corinth to tailor and to adjust what they were doing when they came together so as to be sensitive to those who might visit and who had not yet believed in Jesus.

As we think about what needs to happen on Sunday mornings when we come together, we need to factor in not only what we like and appreciate, but also what a visitor will experience and how that experience will likely impact him.

We would never adjust the content of the Gospel, of course.

It is crucial that when someone comes to church, they see the beauty of the cross of Christ and that they see Christians at worship with their hearts and minds.

But we must be sensitive to the likely preferences of the visitor when it comes to music style, format of announcements, length of service, physical surroundings, and friendliness quotient.

God will use a culture of acceptance, the open arms of welcome, and the passionate and thoughtful, clear presentation of what life in Jesus is all about to open hearts to Jesus.

We want to create an accommodating space where those who do not yet know Jesus can learn about Him and believe in Him.

In that kind of a setting, God gets His due, believers are edified, and guests receive a taste of the grace and love of God.