

1 Corinthians 14

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- [0 : 00] Well, good evening and welcome. We are in the midst this fall in a preaching series through Paul's letter, first letter to the Corinthians.
- And so the exposition tonight is to cover the ground of the entire chapter, although we only had the first five verses read.
- 1 Corinthians 14. Every culture has a set of gifts that they prize.
- Things we prize above other things. As it is in the culture, so it is in the church. If you or I were to identify those things that we prize, we would have uncovered what we value most.
- And more often than not, the things that we value most are those things which bring us honor. We prize things.
- [1 : 09] In doing so, we uncover what we value, and we value those things that bring honor. 1 Corinthians 14 is connected in the midst of those things which the church prizes.
- Let me take you back to last week, chapter 13, and put your eyes on the text. The first three verses of that famous love chapter, Paul mentions three things prized.
- Three things highly valued. Three things with their corresponding honor. One Corinthians 13. One Corinthians 13. Paul mentions that which the church in Corinth prized most.
- He writes, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels. Tongues was something they prized. He mentions what he prizes most in verse 2 of chapter 13.
- And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and have all faith. Indeed, Paul prized prophecy.
- [2 : 28] In verse 3, he mentions what the Corinthian culture prizes, and undoubtedly an element within the church itself. Verse 3, he says, If I give away all that I have, and even give my body to be burned.
- Indeed, in the Corinthian culture, the gift of philanthropy was to be prized. The wherewithal to give funds that would host great games would be highly valued and bring to the individual much honor.
- It's interesting that Paul mentions those things prior to our chapter. And in some sense, it unlocks where our chapter sits in the letter.
- The love chapter, chapter 13, is one where Paul is shifting. Shifting that away from that which we prize to that which he really wants them to possess.
- Love. What is it to prize tongues if you don't possess love? What is it to prize prophecy if you don't possess love?
- [3 : 45] What is it to prize philanthropy if you don't possess love? And so the corrective has been made.
- And with that point now put in place, he's able to move to his preference. Chapter 14 really is the preference of Paul regarding the set of gifts that should be elevated above other things with its corresponding honor.

So what is the preference of Paul when it comes to gifts in the church? Chapter 14, really, verses 1 through 25 lay out his preference for prophecy over and against tongues.

If I were to divide the whole chapter into two simple units, verses 26 to the end would simply be distinguished from the first half this way.

It would be Christ's plan for the church meetings in light of that which Paul prefers. There's the whole chapter in two simple divisions.

[5 : 04] Paul's preference for prophecy over tongues and Christ's plan for the church gatherings in light of it. which really begs the question, why does Paul prefer prophecy over and against tongues?

Or to put more directly, perhaps first, what is the distinction between prophecy and tongues? The gift of tongues was a speaking gift, according to chapter 13.1, that could have been in the languages of men mankind, humankind, or in the languages of angels.

It was a special utterance given to an individual by the power of the Holy Spirit wherein they suddenly found themselves speaking in the languages of other people, languages they had never learned, or languages that of the angels, something no one on earth had ever learned.

Indeed, this is the way it worked back in the book of Acts, chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit arrived and the individuals who had been anointed with the Spirit began to speak in the open places in Jerusalem.

They were obviously speaking languages, known languages, by other people because they understood them in the marketplace, although the one speaking had never actually learned it. And the words there, what they were declaring, the mighty works of God, used two other times in Acts, in each case directly meaning they were giving praise to God in languages they had not yet learned.

[6 : 51] The Corinthian church valued this gift highly because of the honor that it bestowed upon the one who had it.

Paul prefers prophecy. What is prophecy? Well, like tongues, it is a speaking gift.

It seems to be something that is equally spontaneously given. But in the language of the people among whom we are presently gathered, it would be an insight, a word on the word, an exhortation, an instruction, an admonishment that would strengthen all of those around.

When you look at 1 Corinthians 14, Paul begins by saying, pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

Paul prefers prophecy. You can see it there as well in verse 5. Now I want all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.

[8 : 04] Or take a look at what he says in verse 19. Nevertheless, in church, I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue.

His preference is that in the church gatherings, they would value more highly a spoken word through a variety of individuals rather than, that could be understood, rather than a word of praise in a tongue unlearned and unknown, certainly uninterpreted, that only benefited the one who was speaking.

He valued prophecy more highly than tongues for what it produced. It produced the building up of the church. Just take a cursory look at our chapter.

Verse 3. The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. Look at verse 4.

The one who prophesies builds up the church. Verse 5. Unless someone interprets, that is tongues, so that the church may be built up.

[9 : 20] Verse 12. So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. Or verse 17.

For you may be giving thanks well enough, that is the one speaking in tongues, but the other person is not being built up. He prefers prophecy for what it produces.

The building up of the church. The gift of tongues, by way of contrast, verse 4, only built up the individual who had it.

It strengthened them. It consoled them. It encouraged them. It brought praise to God through them. But they were the end of the gift.

for the one who would prophesy, the others were the end. How did it build up the church?

[10 : 20] In two ways. It edified people. If you go back this evening and read the entire chapter, you'll see words like it instructed them.

Or it encouraged them. It consoled them. It edified them. It fed them. That's what the church needs.

Men and women who exercise a gift verbally articulated, spontaneously done, perhaps even after the service tonight, that would strengthen, console, and encourage those who are following hard after Christ by faith.

There's an irony there, and we'll come back to it at verse 26, because it begins to inform why you go to church. There's a second element, though, wherein it builds up the church.

Not only edification, prophecy has the added advantage of producing evangelistic result. This is a fascinating moment in the text.

[11 : 38] It really is the embodiment of verses 20 to 25. Look at the way that part ends. If all prophecy, an unbeliever, or outsider enters, he's convicted by all, he's called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he'll worship God and declare that God is really among you.

Imagine, this evening, one here who is not in a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. Hearing words that they can understand, that bring them to a place where they believe God is real and is to be worshipped by faith in him alone.

Paul prefers prophecy for what it produces. It produces the building up of the church through two means. It edifies those who are already coming along in Christ and it evangelizes those who do not yet know Christ.

Look at the first part of that latter section, verse 20. Brothers, do not be children in your thinking, be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature, in the law it is written, and we had this reading tonight, by people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people.

And even when they will not listen to me, says the Lord, thus tongues are a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign, not for unbelievers, but for believers.

[13 : 08] If therefore the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, an outsider or unbeliever enters, will they not say that you're out of your mind? Fascinating bit in the chapter, and I was reminding Robert earlier this evening that when we preached through this letter in the morning service some years ago, I gave three extended sermons to this chapter, each of which was 45 minutes in length, and I was puzzled as to how I would get all the way through tonight in 15.

But indeed, it's not as difficult as it might first appear. He prefers prophecy because it has some evangelistic end, that much we know.

But at first glance, those middle verses can appear difficult or hard to determine or understand. It indicates that tongues is a sign for unbelievers.

while prophecy is a sign for believers. How so? Haven't we convinced ourselves that tongues is a sign that would wow the world?

And speak of the manifestation of the Spirit and convince the unbeliever? Not according to Paul. So why does one who prophesies have a role in evangelism where the one who speaks in tongues does not?

[14 : 46] The key is the quote from Isaiah. You'll see it in our text in verse 21. And 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. The reading from Isaiah is in the context of referencing what God would do through Assyria in overrunning the unbelieving Israelites.

And so on the day when Assyria entered into Israel and took over, tongues was a sign. Their foreign speech was not understood.

For as the Assyrians spoke, it was of no value or benefit. It had no positive result in the hearer. It just was a sign that we'd been judged, overrun by a foreign people.

In that sense, it judges the unbeliever. What Isaiah longed for, and I think what the Spirit longed for through Isaiah, is that they would hear his prophetic word, his prophesying word, and that hearing his word in their own language, they would repent and come into a proper relationship with God.

[16 : 14] But they didn't. And so God overran them with foreign tongues. And those tongues were of no value to them, simply a sign of their judgment and unbelief.

Paul borrows all of that via the quotation of one line and throws it forward with meaning in the church today. You want to see the world come into a proper relationship with God through faith in Christ?

Then you'll need to speak words they can understand that instruct, encourage, console, and win. Indeed, if you only speak words of praise to God in a language unknown to them, it will only be a sign to them of God's judgment upon them.

So he prefers prophecy to tongues because prophecy builds up the church and it builds it up in two ways.

It edifies those who believe and it evangelizes those yet to believe. Paul's preference for prophecy.

[17 : 34] The chapter concludes, verses 26 to the end, with what I would call Christ's plan for church gatherings in light of it. I say Christ's plan more than Paul's plan because by the end you'll notice that when Paul makes his appeal he says in verse 37, I'm writing to you a command of the Lord.

If anyone does not recognize this, he's not recognized. So what is the plan for church gatherings? Let me give you four or so applications of the chapter.

The first one's right there in verse 26. What then brothers, or you actually know now he's beginning to apply his passage to them. What's the application, Paul, this preference for prophecy?

First, when you come together each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation, let all things be done for building up. That's the first application of the principle. Why do you go to church?

Well, let me tell you why they went in Corinth. They went in Corinth to worship. And in doing so, they'd gotten it wrong. They went to Corinth merely to worship God in a way that they got something out of it for themselves.

[18 : 56] and in that way they got it wrong. They went to Corinth to praise God, but in a strange way had gotten it wrong.

Paul says if you want to praise God or worship God or give glory to him in that way, well, you have homes to do that in. The one thing you can't do Sunday evening at Holy Trinity that you can do the rest of the week is encourage, instruct, console, and say perhaps five words to another here tonight that would send them on their way in Christ.

We come together in our gatherings to build up, to edify, to be evangelized, and to evangelize others that they might know the word of Christ.

What a revolutionary turn that would be, wouldn't it? So I hear you're going to Holy Trinity now. Yes, I've been going for a while. Really, why are you going? Well, I go each Sunday prayerfully committed that God would use me in some way to encourage, instruct, or console others around me.

It's the only time I'll see them all week. I hear you're going to Holy Trinity now. Why do you go to church? Well, I go to church to, well, I used to go to church for what I'd get out of it, and I'd leave a church if I got nothing out of it, but I've been studying Corinthians now, and I go to church to see what I can give on account of it.

[20 : 44] It would change everything, and that's what Paul wants done. Desire gifts where the end will be others.

Verse 27 and following, then he begins to outline the application of that text, first in regard to what the plan then looks like with tongues.

He says, if anyone speaks in a tongue, let there only be two or three at most, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there's no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God.

So there's this limiting effect on a gift, a speaking gift, that is merely going to strengthen the individual. not too many in number, and make sure there's an interpretation so that others can be built up.

And if no interpretation, well, tell him to continue to exercise his gift, but do it at home or quietly in his pew, where he's not disruptive to the whole.

[21 : 56] You almost get the sense that in the Corinthian congregation, there was this cacophony of sound that was legitimately done in worship to God.

But to what end? Paul brings this plan of Christ that when you enter through the back doors and find your way in, your mind is already prepared for ways that you can serve others and strengthen them in their faith.

It's interesting, after talking about tongues, he moves then to prophesy, prophesying, because he also has directives for that. This is the plan. Verse 29 and following, let two or three prophets speak and let them weigh what is said.

If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent, for you can all prophesy one by one so that you may learn and be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, for God's not a God of confusion but of peace.

Again, there's this limiting movement, which is an indication that at the church, everyone had something to say nearly all the time. And if it wasn't this cacophony of praise, ascending to the heavens that were building up the individuals, it was this spirit of hand raising and when do I get to have my word?

[23 : 22] He said, well, let's bring everything back down, two or three at most, and don't tell me that you couldn't control yourself. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

No indication that, well, I have to do this right now. No. Let it be there. And the limitation there of silence moves on.

He actually indicates there, as in all the churches of the saints, and now here's another particular application where we see again that gender matters.

the women should keep silent in the churches, for they're not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the law says. If there's anything they desire to learn, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it's shameful for a woman to speak in church.

A fascinating little bit in the chapter. It's so easy to say more than it actually means. There's a commentator by the name of Robbins and another by the name of Weeks that elevate their understanding of this text beyond its meaning, and they call for this universal, absolute, refraining of any speech from any woman in any gathering.

[24 : 41] They say more than the text is really saying. We've learned earlier in chapter 11 that Paul expected women to exercise the gift of prophecy, and that he anticipated they would be involved in the prayers.

It certainly doesn't mean this universal, absolute restriction here, whatever it means. There's also an element here, though, where we want to make it say less than it says. Gordon Fee, someone I studied under and who I have great respect for, on this point amazes me.

He was one of the world's foremost textual critics, yet he calls these verses an interpolation, that they don't really belong here, that they were a later addition, that Paul didn't write them.

Problem is, in all the manuscript evidence, it's in each manuscript. It's always in the letter when we have it.

A few variant manuscripts place it at a slightly different moment in this chapter, but it's there. It would certainly not be wise to do what he does there, and to disregard it as this has no meaning in the church.

[26 : 03] No, I think Margaret Mitchell, who teaches New Testament here, has a better way forward. She would reject the interpretation that would never permit a woman to speak, and she would reject this one that says these verses were never here because they are here, and she thinks that perhaps it could be applying to what she calls the general chatter of questions from non-efficiency in the ceremony.

This persistent sense of I have to say something before we leave today, and that Paul is quieting that. Just as he quieted the prophets, just as he quieted those in tongues, and he says this is the way Jesus would have it as he concludes the chapter, but all things should be done decently and in order.

Chapter 14. We all prize sets of gifts, and what you prize will reveal to me what you value most.

And we often value most those things which bring us honor. Paul prizes the gift of prophecy, five words spoken in an evening service in Hyde Park to another individual who attended that would strengthen them, that Christ might be honored.

May it be so for all of us. May this chapter begin to redefine why we go to church and what we're doing while we're here, that we might be strengthened in our faith, and that others might come to know him.

[28 : 15] Our Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this chapter in the letter and our brief peering into it tonight.

I pray for our congregation that we would prize those things that honor Christ, and that we would each be vessels that you would use through the instrumentality of your spirit to strengthen your work in our midst.

We commit that to you in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.