

Love at Work in the Church

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[0 : 0 0] no two churches look exactly the same even in the free church of scotland no other church looks exactly like crow road free church and that's good we believe in unity not uniformity every church should be an expression of christ's grace in its own context and setting glasgow isn't galspy and partic isn't for tree but while no two churches look exactly the same every gospel believing church should hold certain things dear and be unwilling to compromise on these principles the church in corinth looked very different from our church does today we don't exactly know what it looked like but one thing we do know is that its worship services were chaotic noisy and disordered it's tempting to think isn't it that in the new testament the church had it all together back to the simplicity of the new testament church many people say the reality was very different especially in corinth the early church in corinth was a mess in a letter sent by the leaders of the corinthian church to paul a letter that we no longer have they asked him about the place of spiritual gifts in the life of the church so from chapters 12 to 14 the apostle deals with that question what place should spiritual gifts have in the life of the church in chapter 14 paul zones in on how those spiritual gifts should be exercised in the church's public worship services in particular he deals with the gift of speaking in tongues now there's much we do not know about the new testament gift of speaking in tongues many christians including the apostle paul possessed that gift at risk of disagreeing with my charismatic friends i would suggest that these were human and not heavenly languages furthermore with the close of the canon of scripture at the end of the first century a.d the spiritual gifts of tongues began to wane now i'm not saying it no longer exists but certainly not to the extent that many charismatic christians suggest i know i don't have it but i'm open to the idea that other christians especially in places where a written bible is very scarce may still possess such a gift the problem in corinth was that the spiritual gift of tongues was elevated to the highest place in the church those who possessed that gift lorded it over others listen they said i can speak in tongues i've got a better gift than you so tongue speakers began to dominate the public worship services of the church turning them into a disordered chaos never mind the preaching of the word or prophecy speaking in languages no one understood was the most important element of public worship in corinth but you see if tongues were such an important element in the christian life it's very surprising that jesus never mentions them and mention is made only of tongue speaking in the book of acts and first corinthians even in the early church speaking in tongues was not a primary feature of public worship nor of christian discipleship again if tongues were such an important gift why in first corinthians chapter 12 verses 8 through 10 do tongues come last in the list of

spiritual gifts with even helping an administration above them in importance well the place of tongues in the public worship of the church affords paul an opportunity to lay down timeless principles which ought to govern the public worship of every bible believing church every church should look different but these principles should be present in every one of them these principles are to govern every aspect of our public life and worship as a church as we shall see as we apply each one of them in turn in this passage paul lays down five timeless principles about the public worship of the church first it's all about love second it's all about others third it's all about understanding fourth it's all about gospel and fifth it's all about unbelievers to what extent we hold these principles determines our faithfulness to paul's vision for the church in first corinthians 12 through 14 they also provide an answer to anyone who may ask us why do you do things the way you do them in crowd because it's all about love others understanding gospel and unbelievers so first of all then our public worship services are all about love love our passage begins with the words pursue love love paul uses the present imperative tense this is something that we always should be doing pursuing love last week david parker preached from first corinthians 13 and in that passage paul proclaims the superiority of love over the spiritual gifts he begins if i speak in the tongues of men and angels that have not love i am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal love comes before any spiritual gift a person may be spiritually gifted but if they do not practice love they're nothing but an annoying noise a boy racer with a souped-up exhaust speeding down cruel road the passage concludes in first corinthians 13 with the words so now faith hope and love abide these three but the greatest of these is love love does not merely stand tall above every spiritual gift but above every spiritual virtue all the spiritual gifts will pass away as paul says in first corinthians 13 uh 8 through 12 as will all the spiritual virtues of hope and faith hope will be fulfilled and faith shall be replaced by sight but love will never end life in the church is primarily characterized not by its order not by its preaching not by its praise but by its love so again paul begins chapter 14 verse 1 by proclaiming the superiority of love that love which takes priority over all the spiritual gifts especially the speaking in tongues is described in chapter 13 that love which is patient and kind which does not envy or boast it's not arrogant it's not rude it does not insist upon its own way it's not irritable resentful it doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing it rejoices with the truth it it bears all things that believes all things it hopes all things it endures all things this is the love that's superior a christian may be the most gifted person in the church but if

they do not love in this way they're that boy racer going down in his corsa probably souped up exhaust making a nasty noise and it irritates us all it's love not the spiritual gifts which are to characterize a bible believing church and again we ask well what is this love which is to take priority over the spiritual gifts it is the self-sacrificial love of christ the greek word agape never does a church look more like its lord than when it looks when it lives in love it may possess all the spiritual gifts including the charismatic gifts of healing and tongues but if there's no love it is a synagogue of satan i'm not a christian church furthermore it's the love of god in first john 4 13 we read these timeless words god is love we'll come to this later but how shall an unbeliever know that god is present in a church it shall not be by the exercise of its gifts but the presence of love jesus said by this all men shall know that you're my disciples if you love one another the presence of love in a church is a mark of god's presence there tongues shouldn't impress us love should impress us the spiritual gifts including tongues must take a distant second place to the love of christ that work among us now this is a real challenge especially to those of us in positions of leadership in this church it doesn't matter that we're spiritually gifted as much as it matters we are people of love many gifted men have made shipwreck of their ministries because they were bullies and did not love they may have been tremendously gifted but they were not men of love love must come first i'd rather be ministered to by a minister who loves me than by the most gifted man in the world love must come first the love of god the love of a shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep never mind how gifted we are brothers are we men of love it's all about love second it's all about others about others well from the beginning of this section in chapter 12 the apostle paul's been insisting that the spiritual gifts god has given us are for the common good my gifts weren't given to me for me but for you and your gifts weren't given to you for you but for me the ear wasn't given to the body for the benefit of the ear but for the benefit of the body this is the nature of love is it not it's not concerned with its own good it's concerned with the good of others well paul continues his argument here into chapter 14 especially in the context of speaking in tongues in verse 2 he says the one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to god and then in verse verses 4 and 5 he goes on to say the one who speaks in a tongue builds himself up the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues now we'll come on to the gift of prophecy in a moment but we can see what paul is saying here unless there's an interpreter present who can tell us what that tongue speaker is saying the gift of tongues is for the individual christian no one else understands what's being said so by definition tongue speaking in corinth was not for the benefit of others and that's what relegates tongue speaking to the lowest place in the spiritual

gifts unless there is an interpreter present it is not given for the good of the other in the context of the corinthian church paul is saying unless there's an interpreter present those who speak in tongues should be silent in public worship because the exercise of their gift benefits themselves and not others and again although it's given in the context of speaking in tongues we have another principle public worship is all about others and not ourselves i have many preferences about what we sing and how we sing it how short or how long i would like to preach for and the things i'd like to preach about how we do communion and so on these are all personal preferences of mine we all have preferences things we like and things we don't like we disguise them as points of principle but let's be honest in reality the vast majority of them are preferences paul turns our preference-based judgments on their heads and says don't ask what's good for you ask what's good for others we may have been christians for decades and have a preference for the way things used to be done but what about new christians and what's good for them should we not place their needs before our preferences we may be young christians and have our preferences for the kind of praise songs we sing but what about older believers and what's good for them should we not place their needs before our preferences in the end this argument of what's good for the other it always ends up with a compromise that we ditch our personal preferences for the common good and that's fine never mind what's good for us as individuals what is good for the other that's the principle third it's all about understanding understanding the apostle turns now to how in a practical sense of public worship tongue speaking is of limited if not no value surely it is no no value to speak in tongues if no one understands what you are saying surely it's not for the good of the other if he cannot understand the words you are using unless there is an interpreter present the words spoken in a tongue mean less than nothing i might as well be lecturing to you in latin as we read in verse 4 the one who builds him the one who speaks in a tongue builds himself up but no one else and this passage is filled with examples of how our public services of worship should be understandable to every christian present every word must be chosen carefully so as not to send out a confusing message we must not engage in paul's words in verse 2 in uttering mysteries we must not in paul's words in verse 7 to be a a distinct tune with our words how will we as the lord's servants get ready for battle if the bugle doesn't give a distinct sound we must use words which everyone understands lest we treat our brothers and sisters in christ as strangers and foreigners to use paul's words in verse 19 it is verse 12 rather it is only as we say things which is the everyone understands that we shall build up the whole church now paul was a tongue speaker but he knew that the mind was primary in our discipleship and speaking in tongues often bypassed his

mind and that's why he says in verse 19 nevertheless in church i'd rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than 10 000 words in a tongue i've been in charismatic churches where there's been a time of tongue speaking and everyone babbles away and no one's got a clue what anyone else is saying how does that build up the body of christ paul's saying save the tongues for your own private times of prayer unless there's an interpreter present who can help the rest of us understand what you were saying so here then we have another principle for first corinthians 14 public worship everything that's said should be understandable it should not be inaccessible in the middle ages the church conducted services in latin a language the majority of common people at the time did not speak that is an obvious breach of this principle but there may be many many other ways in which we can break this principle without resorting to the obvious one of speaking a different language to that which is commonly spoken by the people our bible translations for example should be worded in contemporary english our fathers in westminster made this a primary principle in the westminster confession of faith they write of the words of the bible the language in which it's presented they should be translated into the vulgar or common language of every nation into which they come the common language of every nation into which they come for as much as i might hold the language of the king james version dear because i was brought up with it it is not the common language of scotland so if we're to be obedient to first corinthians 14 and to our reformed fathers in westminster we should use a more contemporary version our songs and our prayers and our sermons should be phrased in language accessible to every christian of course there'll be words and ideas which need to be explained like propitiation and inspiration and so on but the words themselves should not be mysterious or obscure or dated if the people of god are to grow in their faith they must understand the words which are being used so we must try our best as preachers even at the cost of classic eloquence and rhetoric to be plain spoken paul's first corinthians principle is that it's all about understanding fourth it's all about gospel gospel you know all the way through this chapter the apostle paul has been downgrading the value of tongues and upgrading the value of prophecy for example in verse one he writes pursue love earnest desire the spiritual gifts especially that you may prophesy he goes on to say the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation in verse five he writes the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues prophecy exhibits love because it's for the other building them up in words which they may understand now it is unclear what constituted prophecy in the early new testament church we think of prophets as people who can see into the future like the brahan seer certainly old testament prophets seem to have some of that ability so isaiah for example saw the destruction of jerusalem a hundred years before it happened he makes prophecies about the

[20 : 23] the birth and the life and the death and the resurrection of christ he even makes prophecies about the end times remember the heavenly messianic banquet that comes from isaiah but the prophets did far more than that having seen what lies in the future they called the people of their day to repentance and faith in god having seen into the future they instructed the people of their day to prepare themselves for the future and i can see no reason why the new testament prophets in the early church didn't perform exactly the same function prophets in the early church are similar to preachers in today's church with the exception that they had a clearer vision of the end times than we do they had been given visions of what the new heavens and new earth would look like so they both proclaimed those visions to the church and then they called christians in the church to live in the hope and comfort of what lay ahead for them prophets weren't christianized fortune tellers give me 10 pound and i'll tell you your future variety prophets in the new testament it seems to me were obsessed with the vision of god and the glory of his kingdom and they proclaimed to god's people the encouragement hope and comfort it gave if simple faith in a crucified and risen jesus christ brings full salvation then this they would say is what the fulfillment of our salvation looks like joy joy peace and glory in the presence of god himself so for those early christians who were struggling what comfort it would bring to them to hear that their suffering would one day end and be replaced by eternal pleasure for those slaves in the church in corinth badly treated by their masters what consolation it brought to them to hear from the prophets that heaven is a place of freedom and plenty for those christians who were backsliding in their faith and living immoral lives what a challenge to repentance to hear from these prophets the doctrine of the end times heaven will be a sinless place backsliding brother they would say therefore sin does not belong in your life now the superiority of prophecy in the corinthian church gives us another principle for public worship it is all about the gospel everything we do preaching praying praise should all be focused on the gospel the story of our salvation from beginning to end the victory of christ on the cross and resurrection that alone is what shall give encouragement hope and comfort to god's struggling people it is what alone will build them up in their most holy faith it is what alone will bring the backslider to repentance and rededication so our services of worship from beginning to end should be structured around the story of the gospel from approaching god in adoration and confession to hearing god and his word and through preaching through committing ourselves to god in prayer and dedication all our songs must be gospel all our prayers must be gospel our preaching must be an exposition not just of the word but of the gospel the sacraments of the church should be a living demonstration of the gospel if it's about anything else if a brilliant preacher who's got the tongue of an angel or a worship leader who can play divinely takes the place which Jesus alone deserves the service becomes a blasphemy it is all about the gospel well last principle from this passage it's all about unbelievers it's all about unbelievers there are many many more principles we could apply to public worship taken from other parts of the bible most important of which is that it's all about god and not us it's all about god and not us likewise it's all about the bible not what we think in our tradition this is what we call the regulative principle of worship scripture regulates our praise however in this last case from 1 Corinthians 14

I want to draw attention to the last few verses of our passage in these verses Paul is again pointing out the shortfall in the spiritual gift of tongues times too short to explore the meaning of verses 21 and 22 we want to focus on 23 through 25 so as often happened and often happens an unbeliever comes into the church and they hear people speaking in tongues they don't have a clue what's happening what's being said so they conclude to themselves that these Christians are out of their minds verse 23 the word Paul uses here translated as out of your minds is literally the word mania from which we get the word maniacs unbelievers non-Christians seeing the chaos of tongue speaking conclude that Christians are mad the gospel is a serious offense to unbelievers without adding the further offense of insanity rather it is when prophecy is spoken when the gospel of the kingdom of God together with the significance of the cross and resurrection is preached that is when in Paul's words in verses 24 and 25 the unbeliever is convicted called to account and the secrets of his heart are disclosed that is when he shall fall to his face and worship God declaring that God really is present in the church it is when the word of God is spoken in a language in a language everyone including unbelievers can understand the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of its hearers so

I'm going to take this right back to basics we who have been brought up in the church know what we mean by the word prayer but does someone who has no experience of the church and is just walking in off the street we sing psalms some of which even though they have contemporary language have themes which are difficult to follow note to self here to make them more accessible to unbelievers perhaps we need to need to work harder at summarizing the meaning of the psalm before we sing it or as I learned two weeks ago in a morning service when we had a couple of newcomers with us when it comes to reading the Bible we cannot assume that visitors know where Bible books are or what a verse of the Bible is how you can find 1 Corinthians 14 verse 25 isn't it easier just to give the page number without overly dubbing down or compromising on meaning how accessible are our worship services for unbelievers most of whom have had no experience of church before it's been said

I think it was Tim Keller who said it the church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints the church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints to what extent are we making our services easy for unbelievers to access and understand so no two churches look exactly the same nor should they but every gospel believing church should have these five principles at the heart of their public worship according to Paul here it's about love others understanding gospel and unbelievers are these principles among others at the heart of our public worship of God the greatest compliment any visitor to our church could pay us would be for them to say of us God is really among you through