

What to do in Church?

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[0 : 00] If this was the 9am Corinthian service, it would be very exciting. Not that the HCD 9am service is...

Not that you guys are shabby, but if this was the 9am Corinthian service, very exciting. Because halfway through the meeting, a few people would all jump up and start speaking in a language the rest of us had no idea about.

Very exciting. But the coffee break after would be torture. Because those people who got up and started speaking would be bragging about their private moment they had with God.

I am already so spiritual, they would say. For the rest of us, torture, jealousy, resentment. Where was our special moment?

Is something wrong with the Spirit? He only gave me the gift of encouragement and welcoming. Maybe I'm not even a proper member of the church.

[1 : 03] Now these days at Holy Trinity, we're a really mixed bag of Christian traditions. There'd be lots of people here who've come from churches where that sort of thing may have happened in the past.

But lots of us, I'd say the majority of us, would still describe our tradition as perhaps less open to gifts of the Spirit. And so Paul's key principle for both people, both traditions, is there in verse 1. And it's actually the key principle for this whole chapters 12 to 14. But verse 1, follow or pursue the way of love and eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.

So I put that as an equation at the top of your handout. If you're pursuing love and eagerly desiring the gifts, it determines what gifts you should use in church.

If you are anti-gifts, Paul says eagerly desire the gifts. And if you are pro-gifts, use them in love, which may limit how you use them.

[2 : 16] And so this passage today comes with a health warning to all of us. We need to be careful, otherwise we're not going to be able to get through it today. We need to ensure that our own experience and our own church tradition doesn't have the final say.

We need to come to the Bible. We need to let God's Word interpret what to make of our experience and tradition. So can we do that? Good. Otherwise, we're not going to be able to get through today. And these passages are all about tongues and prophecy, which seem a bit random and a bit irrelevant to us. But if we understand Paul's logic with tongues and prophecy, we'll understand how to use all gifts here at Holy Trinity.

And so just before, as we begin, just a few words on what tongues are and what prophecy is. So tongues are mentioned twice in the New Testament. Firstly, in Acts chapter 2.

And there, they are adult human languages. So a foreign human language of the world. So people visited Jerusalem. They heard their own native tongue. So they would hear Egyptian or Mesopotamian or Latin.

[3 : 24] Tongues like this would be very useful if you're a missionary in a foreign country and you need to learn, say, Mandarin in one year. Tongues would be useful there. The other mention of tongues is from our passage, 1 Corinthians 14.

And it seems to be a non-human language. So we're going to start flicking into our verses here. So verse 2, it does not speak to people, but it's a language that speaks to God.

Verse 9 talks about it being unintelligible. Verse 13 says it requires a gift of the spirits to interpret, not just someone from that country.

Verse 14 and 15, they say it's speaking by the spirit, not with your clear thinking mind. Now there's lots of debate about what tongues are.

But either way, Paul's main point is that they're better off at home rather than in church. Now that doesn't mean we should be anti-tongues altogether.

[4 : 26] So imagine if there was one gift that could, there was a gift of the spirit, chapter 12, that was speaking to God, verse 2, that uttered mysteries by the spirit, verse 3, that edified or encouraged you, verse 4.

Verse 14 and 15, that prays and sings and worships and gives thanks by the spirit. Imagine if there was one gift that could do all of those things. Well, that is tongues. Hence, Paul says in verse 5, I desire every one of you to speak in tongues.

And over the page in verse 39, he says, do not forbid speaking in tongues. But Paul says in verse 19, verse 19, but in church, I would rather speak five intelligible words than 10,000 words in a tongue.

And so here is a five word. Here's five words for you. Your identity is in Christ. There's a five word sermon. Paul would rather I say that and go home than give you a 10,000 word sermon in a tongue, which you would probably rather as well.

It takes me about 100 minutes to get through 10,000 words. So five words would be better. Paul says rather that than a 10,000 word sermon in a tongue.

[5 : 47] He says in verse 13, the one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the gift of interpretation. See, that's the only way Paul will allow tongues in church.

I think that's a concession. If someone's there to interpret. So that is tongues. Prophecy, on the other hand, prophecy is mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, if a prophet spoke, God spoke. Old Testament prophets are similar to New Testament apostles. And when they speak, you usually put that in the Bible.

If you disagree with a prophet from the Old Testament, you're in a bit of trouble. And if the prophet from the Old Testament proves to say something that doesn't happen, you can put them to death. New Testament prophecy is very different.

So a prophet in the New Testament is someone who stands up. They speak. They sit down. You discuss it together, what they say. You pick out the good bits.

[6 : 47] You can take it or leave it. And so on your handout, I'll put this. Prophecy in the New Testament is where someone speaks a biblical word of encouragement in a situation.

So a biblical word of encouragement in a situation. Everyone can prophesy. Prophecy is not preaching. It doesn't have the same authority as preaching in the church.

It sits under God's word and is tested by God's word. And Paul's main idea is this. If you pursue love and are desiring gifts, the gifts you should want in church is prophecy and not tongues.

And I put that on your handout. If you're pursuing love and desiring gifts, the gifts you should want in church are prophecy and not tongues. And he gives three reasons why. And these three reasons are our first three points.

Let me read from verse 2. Please look down with me. Verse 2. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them.

[7 : 53] They utter mysteries by the Spirit. But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging, and comfort. Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves.

But the one who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you 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 edified.

These verses say that our priority with gifts in church is to build others. In chapter 12, it was called for the common good. In chapter 13, it was called the way of love.

Now, this priority, you could see already how it would shock the self-centered Corinthians. But you can already see how it rebukes consumer Christianity.

Christians who turn up to churches, they get what they can, they go home without a thought to encouraging other people, even though they are able-bodied.

[9 : 01] But then I think this priority also gives us a gentle reminder to the keen beings. See, if my gifts are all about me having my own moments in church, showing off, then like tongues, it would be better if I just sat down.

In church, building others comes first, point number one, which is why intelligibility is everything. This is point two.

You see, regardless of whatever we think tongues are, the issue is that in church, no one else can understand what people are saying. Intelligibility is everything. That is, understandability is everything.

And so Paul gives three examples. I'll pick it up halfway through verse 7, the very bottom of page 1152. The first example is music.

So how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? So, have you ever seen a two-year-old play a piano? You know when the kids run up after and they play the piano with their fists, don't they?

[10:12] Now, it would be hard for us all to sing Amazing Grace together, to encourage one another, if little Billy was leading us on the piano. The second illustration is more life-threatening, verse 8.

Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? You see, a silent alarm clock is useless, isn't it? How much worse if the army trumpeter sleeps in that day? You'll wake up to find Babylonians in your tent. Life-threatening stuff. And verse 9, so it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone else know what you are saying?

You will be speaking into the air. Now, Paul's third example would be very common here at Holy Trinity. Verse 10. Undoubtedly, there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning.

If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. Lots of people here, or for lots of people here, English is not their first language.

[11:20] Imagine if the sermon was filled up with Australian slang, and Christian jargon, or in-jokes, or, you know, turns of phrase, and idioms, and things like that.

What good would the gift of preaching be to you that day? Verse 12. Meaning tongues is not our priority when we come together.

Now, again, I realise that seems very critical to people whose background is from, say, a charismatic church. We have to go back to the verses that Paul highlights all the good benefits to tongues.

And we have to, as we said before, make sure that our tradition and our experience doesn't have the final say, but God's word does. In verses 14 to 16, Paul outlines a list of ways you can use tongues in church.

And then I think what he's doing is putting a line through all of them. Let me read. Verse 14. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

[12:39] So what shall I do? I'll pray with my spirit, but I'll also pray with my understanding. I'll sing with my spirit, but I'll also sing with my understanding. See, Paul says you can't just pray or sing in church in your spirit and have your own private moment with God.

You have to do it with your mind as well. That is, with your clear understanding, your clear thinking, your plain speaking. Otherwise, verse 16, how can someone else say amen since they don't know what you're saying?

Now, Paul agrees. Verse 17. You are giving thanks well enough. God accepts your thanks and your singing in tongues. God accepts it. But, verse 17, no one else is edified.

Building others comes first, which means intelligibility is everything. And, again, seeing Paul's logic here with tongues and prophecy, we can see how that relates to other things in church.

So think about praying in church or in public, which we do in many ways. Our goal is to get an amen from everyone. This means the prayers won't be another mini sermon.

[13:57] They won't be lofty poetry that lifts us off the ground. It'll be plain speaking. They'll be actual prayers to God. So we can all say amen.

Our prayers in church won't be against Trump, nor will they be against Labor. Why? Because we want Trump supporters in the congregation and Labor supporters in the congregation.

We want an amen from them too. The songs we sing in church, they won't be songs that suit one particular vocal range. They'll be ones we can sing together.

Nor when we're singing will we disappear into our own private moment with the Lord. We will sing congregationally as one body to God.

This is a mature and ordered church. You see, some Corinthians, they love the sound of strange languages in church. They thought it was a sign of how spiritually mature they were.

[14:59] And Paul rebukes them. Verse 20. Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. Your attitude is not maturity, he says. It is kindergarten thinking.

Prophecy, not tongues. Because other people come first. Which means intelligibility is everything. And the third reason is visitors.

This is point three. We get a lot of visitors here to Holy Trinity. And if that's you, you're really welcome. In a room like this, there'll be a few of you. It's great to have you here.

Imagine if we gave visitors a feedback form for the service. What would you want the feedback form to say after the service? Verse 23.

Well, if everyone's speaking in tongues and the inquirers or unbelievers come in, what will the feedback be? End of verse 23. They are out of their minds.

[15:57] But, if everyone is prophesying, that is plain speaking, verse 24, they are convicted of sin.

Verse 25. They will fall down and worship God. And their feedback will be, wow, God is really among you. That means in church, we should be in our right minds.

Have full control of our faculties. Not in some trance-like state. Speaking clearly. To convict and build up everyone.

So that even visitors would say, wow, God is really among you. You see, the Holy Spirit is building a church. He's building the church.

That is his job until Jesus returns. And those of us whose tradition might be considered anti-gifts.

We need to ask ourselves, how do we expect the Spirit to build if we limit his gifts?

[17:02] If we don't desire the gifts. But those of us whose tradition is more charismatic, we need to ask whether we are pursuing love. Are we using gifts the right way when we meet together?

Are we excited about gifts for the right reasons? Pursuing love, desiring gifts, determines what gifts you use in church. Are we aligned to the Spirit's thinking when it comes to gifts?

And in the last section, Paul tells us how to use them. This is point four. These final verses, they're about weighing and testing. They show us how to bring order to a disordered Corinth.

Now, these verses are not a guideline for how to run every church. They're how to fix a confused church. Now, for both gifts, for tongues and prophecy, there's a pattern which Paul establishes.

And the pattern is speaking, and then weighing, and then silence. Speaking, weighing, silence. I've put that on your handout. So, for tongues, we said before that Paul limits their public use.

[18:12] Verse 27, Paul says, If anyone speaks in a tongue, I think that's limiting language right from the beginning. If anyone speaks in a tongue, he says, Verse 27, So, not everyone sort of talking over the top of one another.

And someone must interpret. Verse 28, If there's no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in church. And that means that if people don't get to have their say in church, they're not going to explode.

It may be more ordered or appropriate if some people just stayed quiet in church. Speaking, weighing, silence. Here at Holy Trinity, lots of...

I suppose we've got an embarrassment of riches at this church. Lots of people in our congregation could preach and teach and lead. But I think it's more ordered that we don't have a revolving door on the pulpit.

And so, it would be appropriate for those people to eagerly desire other gifts. So, they can still be useful on Sundays.

[19:26] That's tongues. Prophecy has a similar pattern. Verse 29 says, Two or three. Verse 30 says, If a revelation comes, that is, a revelation to weigh the prophecy, then that prophet should be quiet and allow the weighing to happen.

Speaking, weighing, silence. If we're going to eagerly desire gifts, we need to eagerly desire testing and weighing.

Remember Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus? Even Pharaoh's magicians, who were evil, could produce a sign. We need to have testing and weighing.

At the Anglican Synod, which is the big Anglican meeting, coming up very, I think it's next week, lots of motions are made. Lots of prophecy is given for this is how the church can do things in a biblical way.

But not all those proposals are godly. We need to have a focus on testing and weighing. Now, here is the deep water. Some charismatic churches, some charismatic churches say, if you can speak, or if you can't speak in tongues, you can't be in the inner sanctum of Christians in this church. [20 : 52] They say you can't serve publicly. You can't go into full-time ministry if you can't speak in tongues. I have friends who work for churches like that.

And a common sense tells you, common sense says, when you order your church like that, you are asking people to fake it. To fake speaking in tongues. Because you've got an in crowd, those who can speak in tongues, and those who can't.

Human nature will tell you that you will get people faking it. There needs to be a focus on testing and weighing gifts. But equally, on the other side of the coin, I have a few friends who work for a huge Anglican church in the city.

And they say that they have people who don't even believe in Jesus leading Bible studies there. There needs to be a focus on testing and weighing. Now, if all of this wasn't tricky enough, Paul goes on to say, who can test and weigh?

This is verse 34. Women should be silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. Now, you don't have to be, you don't have to have the gift of the Spirit to know that this seems fiercely sexist in our culture.

[22 : 15] But lots of this relates back to what Andrew Price said a few weeks ago in chapter 11. Chapter 11 assumes that women can pray and prophesy in church, but the weighing and the testing, that's for the men.

It's not a skill or capability issue. It's an authority issue, similar to 1 Timothy 2. See, weighing and testing carries authority, just like preaching.

Paul says in verse 35, if they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for women to speak in the church.

Now, some cultures, perhaps a Muslim culture maybe, some cultures think it's disgraceful, or shameful is the word, for women to speak in church.

That is not the case in this culture, which I agree with. It's not shameful for women to speak in church. However, Paul appeals to something further back than culture.

[23 : 19] Verse 34, at the very end, he says, women must be in submission as the law says. Now, the law here is not Greco-Roman law, nor is it Australian law.

He's talking about the created order from Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1 and 2 sits outside of and predates human culture, as we understand them.

In chapter 11, Paul says, the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God. You see, Jesus is not less than God.

He just has a different role to his father. He's still the king. He's the son of God. In the same way, women are not less than men in any way.

Both made in the image of God, with dignity. But we all just have different roles in church. Just like tongues and prophecy are different roles, men and women have different roles in church.

[24 : 18] Andrew said, really helpfully a couple of weeks ago, he said that verses like these ones can really upset us if we think that roles in church equals our status.

That's where confusion and hurt feelings can come. Now, I haven't spent nearly enough time on this, so please come and speak to myself or Andrew if you'd like to talk further about this.

But we need to wrap all of this up. Paul says, speak in prophecy, don't speak in tongues. And this, all of this seems a bit irrelevant, doesn't it, to Holy Trinity?

Because there aren't a bunch of people breaking down the door to speak in tongues in our service. But equally, we don't appear to have much prophecy in church either.

Now, for various reasons, the church services here are only around an hour long, which is actually quite a short time. And in that time, we focus on pretty much five things.

[25 : 20] So the Bible reading, preaching, prayers, singing, and the Lord's Supper. Now, in our context, therefore, in the culture of Holy Trinity, it would be very disordered if we allowed two or three people every week to stand up and have their say, and then we thank them, we weigh what they say, we apply it.

It wouldn't leave much time for our time in the Bible. However, there are lots of other Holy Trinity gatherings where prophecy is appropriate and necessary.

So after the service is a huge one. After the church service, people should be encouraging one another, sharing with one another how they were challenged or encouraged by the sermon or the service.

That is prophecy. Bible study groups are a huge place for prophecy. We discuss together around tables how a passage applies to our lives.

We're all encouraged. That is prophecy. The person who speaks up in a Bible study, they're not in some trance-like states, nor will they burst if they don't get to have their say.

[26 : 30] We listen. We evaluate. The Bible leader is there to test and weigh. We thank them. We take what we want. That is good order. Church meetings.

Anglicans are nothing if not good at a good old meeting. Parish council, for example, or other planning meetings. People provide advice on how we can apply the Bible to a certain situation.

That is prophecy. Prophecy is tested or weighed. Would the proposal, like would planting at St. John's be a good use of Holy Trinity resources? Is it legal?

Is it biblical? Does it further our mission of gathering and growing? The prophecy can be adopted or not. Next week, as Andrew said, next week is Thanksgiving Sunday.

There will be an opportunity for everyone to share on the microphone the way the Lord has helped them or the way the Lord has been working in their lives this past year.

[27 : 28] We can all hear that and be encouraged. That is prophecy. Paul says, pursuing love and desiring gifts determines what gifts you use in church.

If your tradition is anti-gifts, how do we expect the Spirit to build the church if we don't desire gifts?

Those whose tradition love spiritual gifts need to ask whether they are pursuing love in the way they use their gifts.

Are they excited about their gifts for the right reasons? If it's more ordered for you not to use your gifts in church, are you eagerly desiring other gifts so you can still be useful as you are able?

In both ways, Paul is asking, do we have the Spirit's heartbeat when it comes to gifts? So I'm going to finish there and pray.

Amen. Amen.