

What to do in Church?

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[0 : 00] If this was the 10.30 service of the Corinthian church, it would be very exciting. Not that the 10.30 service of Holy Trinity is boring, but if this was the 10.30 service of the Corinthian church, it would be very exciting because halfway through the service, people would stand up and start speaking in strange languages the rest of us couldn't understand. Sounds pretty exciting.

But the coffee break after would be torture. Because those people who got up and started speaking, they would be bragging to everyone else about their own private moment they had with God. I'm so spiritual, they would say. For the rest of us, torture, jealousy and resentment. Where was our private moment with God?

What's wrong with the Holy Spirit? He only gave me the gift of encouragement and welcoming or serving tea and coffee. Maybe I'm not even a proper Christian.

These days here at Holy Trinity, and I think especially here at 10.30, we are a mixed bag of Christian traditions. There will be lots of people in this room who come from a church tradition where that sort of thing would have happened.

[1 : 20] But I think most of us would come from a church tradition that we might describe as less open to spiritual gifts. And so Paul's key principle for both traditions is there in verse 1.

It's the key principle of the last three chapters as well. Verse 1. Follow or pursue, chase after the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.

You see, if you are pursuing love and desiring gifts, the gifts you want to use in church are prophecy.

I put that on your handout as a bit of an equation. If you would describe yourself as anti-gifts, Paul says eagerly desire gifts. And if you are pro-gifts, Paul would say use them in love, which may limit how you use them in church.

And so today's passage comes with a health warning. We need to promise that our own experience and our own tradition doesn't speak louder than or doesn't have the final say.

[2 : 32] We need to promise that God's word has the final say, that it will interpret how we understand our own experience and tradition. Otherwise, we're not going to be able to get through this passage.

We won't survive. And today we're talking about tongues and prophecy, which seem a bit irrelevant to us today. But if we understand what Paul says about tongues and prophecy, we'll understand how to use all the gifts here at Holy Trinity.

And so just a quick word on what tongues are and what prophecy is to help us. So tongues are mentioned twice in the New Testament. The first time they're mentioned in Acts 2. And in Acts 2, they are adult human foreign languages.

So just regular foreign languages. So people visited Jerusalem and they heard their native Egyptian or Mesopotamian or Arabic or Mandarin, for example.

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

[3 : 42] And here it seems to be a non-human language. So 14 verse 2, it speaks to people. So it does not speak to people, but to God.

Verse 9, it's unintelligible. That is, you cannot understand it. Verse 13, it requires a gift of the Spirit to interpret it, not just a person from that country.

Verse 14, it is speaking by the Spirit and not by your clear mind. Now, there's lots of debate either way on what tongues are.

But Paul's point is, regardless of where you land, tongues are better at home than in church. Tongues are better at home than in church.

Now, that doesn't mean we should be anti-tongues. Imagine if there was one spiritual gift that could, or that was a gift of the Spirit, chapter 12. Verse 2, that speaks directly to God and not to men.

[4 : 42] Imagine if there was a gift that would utter mysteries in the Spirit. Verse 3, that would edify you, that is, build you up. Verse 4, 14 and 15, that prays, sings, worships and gives thanks in the Spirit to God.

Imagine if there was one gift that could do all of those things. That is tongues. Hence, Paul says in verse 5, I would like every one of you to speak in tongues. And in verse 39, he says, do not forbid speaking in tongues.

However, in verse 19, Paul says this. Verse 19, but in church. But in church, I would rather speak five intelligible words than 10,000 words in a tongue.

So, here is a five-word sermon for you. Your identity is in Christ. That's a five-word sermon. Paul would rather me say that and go home than 10,000 words, a 10,000 word sermon in a tongue, which you would probably agree with as well.

He says in verse 13, the one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the gift of interpretation. You see, the only way Paul will allow speaking in tongues in church is if someone is there to interpret.

[6 : 04] That is tongues. Prophecy, on the other hand, is mentioned many times in the Bible. So, in the Old Testament, when a prophet spoke, God spoke. Prophets were like New Testament apostles.

You put whatever they say in the Bible. If you disagree with an Old Testament prophet, you're in big trouble. And if an Old Testament prophet was found to be false, we could all take them out the back and thrash the life out of them.

A New Testament prophet is very different. Everyone, everyone in the church can be a New Testament prophet. New Testament prophets, they stand up. They speak a word.

Then they sit down. The rest of us listen. We take the bits we like that are helpful to our lives. We thank the prophet. Silence. Silence. And so, on your handout, I put this.

A prophecy is where someone speaks a biblical word of encouragement in a situation. A biblical word of encouragement. Anyone can do it. But prophecy is not preaching.

[7 : 04] So, prophecy doesn't carry the same authority as preaching. It sits under God's word and is tested against God's word. And Paul's main idea today is this.

If you love gifts, if you pursue love and you desire gifts, the gifts you should want in church are prophecy, not tongues.

Prophecy, not tongues. And he gives three reasons, which are our first three points. Now, again, we're going to talk about tongues and prophecy, which I can see a lot of people nodding off.

But remember, if you understand what Paul says about tongues and prophecy, you will understand how to use all gifts here at Holy Trinity. So, let me read from verse 2.

And this is point 1. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God.

Indeed, no one understands them. They utter mysteries by the Spirit.

[8 : 00] 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. Prophecy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets. Why? So that the church may be edified. These verses say that in church, the priority of gifts is to build others first. That's the priority.

In chapter 12, it was called for the common good. In chapter 13, it was described as the way of love. You could imagine how this priority would shock the self-centered Corinthians.

They loved coming to church because when they came to church, they had their private moment with God, where they got to speak in tongues and show off in front of the rest of the church. But you can already see how this rebukes the consumer Christian.

[9 : 04] The Christian who turns up to churches, they get what they want, and they just go home. Without a thought to serving or encouraging other people, even though they're able-bodied.

But I wonder, too, if this priority also gives a gentle reminder to us keen beings, people who are keenly serving. I wonder if this is a gentle reminder.

See, if my gifts are all about me having my own private moment in church, if they're all about me showing off, then like tongues, Paul says it would be better if I just sat down.

Building others comes first, which means intelligibility is everything, or understandability is everything. And this is our second point.

You see, regardless of whatever you think tongues are, the issue in church is that no one else can understand them. Intelligibility is everything.

[10:09] And so Paul gives three examples. The first one is music, and it's halfway through verse 7, near the bottom of the page. So with music. Music. How will anyone know what tune is being played unless there's a distinction in the notes?

So have you ever seen a two-year-old on a piano? You know when the children rush up afterwards and they play the piano with their fists? Imagine if we were all going to sing Amazing Grace together and little Billy was bashing away on the piano.

Paul's second illustration, I think it's more life-threatening. Verse 8. Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? You see, just as a silent alarm clock is useless, even more useless is if the army trumpeter decides to have a sleep in.

You'll wake up with Babylonians in your tent. It's life-threatening stuff. Verse 9. So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone else know what you're saying?

You'll be speaking into the air. Paul's third example, it would be really common here at Holy Trinity, particularly the 1030 service. It's about human languages.

[11:26] 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'm a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me.

If English is not your first language, it's harder for you to understand everything we're saying.

Andrew and I try really hard to speak clearly and slowly.

We're printing out copies of a sermon to put at the back, if English is not your first language.

Imagine if I filled my sermon up with Australian slang, or turns of phrase, or in-jokes, or Christian jargon.

Paul says, I would be a foreigner to that listener, and the listener would be a foreigner to me. What good would my sermon be to them that day? Verse 12.

So it is with you. So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build the church. Meaning, when we come together, tongues is not the priority.

[12:36] Now, I realize that this sounds really critical to lots of people's tradition, particularly charismatic tradition. I realize this sounds really critical.

We need to go back to remember all the positive things Paul says about tongues. We need to come back to the Bible. We need to let that interpret our tradition, rather than the other way around.

In verse 14 to 16, Paul lists a bunch of uses of tongues in church, and then rules them all out. So verse 14. See, Paul says, in church, you can't just pray and sing and give thanks.

You can't just have your own private moment with God in church. You have to do it with your mind. That is, with your clear understanding, your plain speaking.

You have to be in your right mind. Otherwise, verse 16. How can anyone else say amen? It's about other people. Since they don't know what you're saying.

[13:55] Verse 17. You are giving thanks well enough. God still accepts your thanks and praise in the Spirit. But, Paul says, verse 17, no one else is edified.

That is, encouraged. Building up others comes first, which means intelligibility is everything. And, again, if you see this logic here, you can see how this relates to other things we do here at Holy Trinity.

So, other gifts, say praying, for example. Praying in church or praying in your small group, things like that. Our goal is to get an amen from everyone. It means our prayers won't be sort of mini sermons or lofty poetry.

They'll be ones we can all join in with. Nor will our prayers be against Donald Trump. Or against Bill Shorten and Labor. Why?

We want Trump supporters and Labor supporters in the congregation. We want an amen from them, too. Think about music. The songs we sing in church will be ones we can all sing together.

[15:04] Not ones that only appeal to one vocal range. When we're singing, we won't disappear into our own private moment with God. We will sing congregationally as one body to God.

This is a mature and ordered church. You see, some Corinthians, they loved the sound of strange languages in their church.

They thought it was so exotic and spiritual. They thought it was a sign of how mature they were as Christians. And so Paul rebukes them in verse 20. Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. Your attitude is not maturity. It's kindergarten stuff. Prophecy, not tongues in church. Because other people come first. Which means intelligibility is everything.

And the third reason is visitors. Visitors. Here at Holy Trinity, we get loads of visitors. And I can already see some here today.

[16:08] You're really welcome. It's great to have you amongst us. Imagine if we gave a feedback form to a visitor. What would you want the feedback to be?

So would you want it to be, so verse 23, If everyone speaks in tongues and inquirers or unbelievers come in, what would the feedback be? You guys are all crazy.

Holy Trinity is crazy. Paul says they are out of their minds. Would we want visitors to say that? Or, verse 24, If everyone is prophesying, that is plain speaking, visitors are convicted of sin.

Verse 25, They will fall down and worship God. What would their feedback be? Wow, God is really among you. In church, that means, wish everyone should be in their right minds, have full control of their faculties, not in some trance-like state, speaking clearly to convict and build up everyone, even the visitors.

So they can say, Wow, God is really present at Holy Trinity. You see, the Holy Spirit is building the church. That's his job until Jesus returns.

[17:31] Now, those of us whose tradition would be typically anti-gifts, how do we expect the Spirit to build if we don't desire gifts?

Those of us who come from charismatic backgrounds, who are very pro-gifts, we need to ask, Are they pursuing love? Are they using gifts in the right way when we meet together?

Are they excited about their gifts for the right reason? Pursuing love plus desiring gifts determines what gifts you use in church. And in our last section, Paul tells us how to use our gifts in church.

This is point four. These final verses, they're all about weighing and testing. They show us how to bring order to a disordered Corinth.

These are not guidelines for how to run every service. They're firefighting verses for a confused church. And for both tongues and prophecy, the pattern is this.

[18:36] So speaking and then weighing and then silence. Speaking, weighing, silence. So tongues. Paul limits their use, verse 27. If anyone speaks in a tongue, I think that's quite limiting language.

He says two or at most three. So that's a maximum, not a target to aim for. Verse 27, speaking one at a time, nice and ordered, no one talking over the top of each other.

And someone must interpret. He says in verse 28, if there's no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in church. And that is really interesting. The speaker should keep quiet because that means people aren't going to explode if they don't get to have their say from the pulpit.

It might be more ordered and appropriate if they stayed quiet. Speaking, weighing, silence. And that presents another issue for us here at Holy Trinity.

We have what you would call an embarrassment of riches when it comes to preachers and teachers and leaders. Lots of people at Holy Trinity could stand up and preach and teach and lead.

[19:44] But it's more ordered that we don't have a revolving door on the pulpit. And so for those people, rather than them have those gifted teachers bursting because they don't get to have a say, they can eagerly desire other gifts.

Other gifts. Welcoming, morning tea, creche, all the children's ministry, praying, so they can still be useful on Sundays. Prophecy, like tongues, has a similar pattern.

Verse 29 says, two or three should speak. Verse 30 says, if a revelation comes, that's a revelation of weighing, the prophecy, then the prophet should be quiet and allow the weigher to stand up and speak.

Speaking, weighing, silence. You see, if we're going to eagerly desire gifts at Holy Trinity, we need to put equal weight on testing and weighing.

Remember Pharaoh's magicians? Even Pharaoh's magicians who were evil could produce miracles. We need to put an equal weight on testing.

[20 : 54] At the Anglican Synod, which is the big Anglican meeting, I think it's next week, lots of people put forward motions and say, oh, this is how, this is prophecy.

This is how the Bible would suit our church. But lots of them are not good. We need to put a focus on weighing and testing. And now here comes the bit where I take a deep breath.

So, some charismatic churches, I know this for a fact, some charismatic churches will say, if you can't speak in tongues, you are not part of the inner sanctum of the church.

I know this for a fact. One of those churches is very, very close to us. If you can't speak in tongues, you're not a real member of the church or you're not part of the inner sanctum. Therefore, you can't do anything up front, nor can you go into full-time ministry.

Of course, that's nonsense. Common sense will tell you that if you order church like that, you are asking people to fake tongues.

[22 : 00] Because the church will be divided. Those who can speak in tongues and those who can't. You could do the same with any gift, actually. But similarly, a friend of mine, on the other side of the ledger, a friend of mine, a few friends of mine, work for a really big Anglican church in the city.

And they tell me that they have people leading their Bible study groups who don't even believe in Jesus. We have to put equal focus on weighing and testing people's gifts.

Now, as if all this wasn't tricky enough, here comes some more deep water. Verse 34. Paul talks about who can weigh and test.

Verse 34. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. Now, you'd have to be an idiot not to think that this seems fiercely sexist.

Fiercely sexist. And lots of this relates back to what Andrew said a few weeks ago in chapter 11. Chapter 11 assumes that women can pray and prophecy in church, but the weighing and attesting bit is for men.

[23 : 09] Now, this is not a skill or capability issue. It's just an authority issue. Similar to 1 Timothy 2, if you're taking notes. See, weighing and testing prophecy carries authority, just as teaching does.

Paul says in verse 35, if they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it's disgraceful for women to speak in a church. Now, in some cultures in the world, in some cultures, they would think it's disgraceful or shameful for women to speak in church.

That's the language Paul's using about a culture. Now, I'm thankful that that is not the culture in Australia. It is not disgraceful or shameful for women to speak in church in this culture.

But Paul appeals to something further back than culture. verse 34, at the very end, he says, women must be in submission as the law says.

Now, the law he's talking about here is not sort of the Greco-Roman law 2,000 years ago, nor is it Australian law. It is the created law or the created order from Genesis 1 and 2.

[24 : 22] Genesis 1 and 2 sit outside and predate human culture as we understand it to be. These verses say that men have a servant headship role in the church.

And in chapter 11, Paul agrees. He says, the head of the woman is man, just as the head of Christ is God. You see, Jesus is not less than God, is he?

He's the king. He just has a different role to his father. In the same way, women are not less than men. Of course, they're not. Both made equally in the image of God.

Both men and women carry dignity. Of course, that's the case. But just like Jesus and the father, we all just have different roles. Men and women have different roles in the church. Just as tongues and prophecy have different roles to build the body, so men and women also have different roles in the church.

Andrew said a few weeks, two weeks ago, he said, verses like this can really upset us if we tie our status to what role we're doing.

[25 : 28] Now, I realise I haven't spent nearly enough time on that and please come and speak to me or Andrew if things we're saying here bother you. But I hope you think that we are teaching the Bible as it's presented to us.

Now, we need to wrap all of this up today. Paul says, prophecy, not tongues. And the issue and the reason why some of you might have been nodding off today is because we don't really have people

clamouring at the door to speak in tongues, do we?

But nor do we have lots of people prophesying in church either. Remember, prophecy is a biblical word of encouragement. Now, for various reasons here at Holy Trinity, for various reasons, our church service is about an hour and a quarter, so 75 minutes.

And in an hour and a quarter, we focus on five things. So, reading the Bible, preaching the Bible, singing, praying, and the Lord's Supper. Now, it would be, in our culture, in our setting, quite disordered if every week we allowed a few people to stand up and share some thoughts and everyone gets a go and then we weigh it and test it and then thank them and sit down.

It would leave less time in that 75 minutes for time in the Bible or singing or praying. However, there are lots of gatherings at Holy Trinity where prophecy does and should happen.

[26 : 51] A huge one is after the service. So, straight after the service, we should be sharing with one another how we've been encouraged or challenged by the sermon.

We need to get better at talking about the sermon and God's words straight after the service rather than the weather and football. Can we all agree that the weather is nice now?

And we're all thankful that summer's here. Can we all just say that? Brilliant. Now, after the service, we can talk about how the Lord's been working in our lives this week or how challenging or how much they didn't agree with what the sermon said.

That would be prophecy. Another huge one is Bible groups, Bible study groups. Lots of us are in them. In Bible study groups, we prophesy.

That is, we discuss a passage together and how it relates to our lives. someone speaks something to us and we take their word, we thank them, they sit down, the leader's there to test and weigh.

[27 : 54] That's prophecy. Now, the person who speaks up in a Bible study group, they're not bursting at the seams, they're not going to explode if they don't get to have their say. We listen, we take what they say, we pick the bits that are appropriate and we thank them and then they stay quiet.

That is good order. Church planning meetings, Anglicans are nothing if not good at a church meeting. So parish council, for example, or other meetings, people provide advice or prophecy as to how the church can apply the Bible.

Think of the plant to St. John's. Someone at some point said, I think we should plant at St. John's.

The council weighed and tested that. Is that a good use of resources?

Does it further our mission? Is it illegal? Is it consistent with the Bible? And then we were free to take up the idea or to leave it. That's prophecy.

Here at 1030 Service, do you notice that every three weeks we have either a testimony from Warwick or we have someone else sharing something about how to apply the Bible in their lives?

[29 : 02] I remember Wally and Glenn a couple of weeks ago. How to be Christians in the workplace. That's prophecy. How to parent our children. How to do family quiet times. When Warwick leads the testimony, people encourage us with how Jesus has impacted their lives.

That's all prophecy. Next week, Thanksgiving Sunday, there'll be a roaming mic. A chance for you to thank the Lord or say publicly how the Lord has been working in your life.

That would encourage us all. That is prophecy. Paul's principle, pursuing love and desiring gifts determines what gifts you use in church.

If your tradition is anti-gifts, how do you expect the Spirit to build if you don't desire gifts? If your tradition loves gifts, maybe it's more charismatic, are you pursuing your gifts in love?

Are you excited about your gifts for the right reason? Perhaps it might be more ordered for you not to use gifts in church and to eagerly desire other ones to still be helpful on Sundays.

[30 : 14] In both ways, Paul's point is do we have the Spirit's heartbeat when it comes to our use of gifts in church? So I'm going to finish there and I'm going to pray.

Father God, thank you that you build the church by your Spirit. and Father, thank you for all the many gifts here at Holy Trinity. Please help us to pursue our gifts in love.

Please help us to desire more gifts if we are able. And Father, we pray that your Spirit would build this church and we pray, Father, we would be considering others.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.