

Text: 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

Title: Understanding and Edification

Truth: Rather than seeking spiritual gifts, seek spiritual growth in the church.

Date/Location: February 7, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

Paul is going to deal with some more “gift” problems in the church.

I. Summary Exhortation to Pursue Love and Desire Spiritual

Gifts, v. 1a

- A. Chapter 13 was about the exercise of spiritual gifts in love, and chapter 12 ended with a call for the church to desire the best gifts in its service to Christ. Those two ideas are summed up in the first part of 14:1: “Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts.”

Review: Remember that when you become a Christian, God connects you to the church, which is a “body” or “organism” headed by Jesus Christ. He forgives you and gives you new spiritual life, and several other things.

One of those things is that God’s Spirit outfits you with one or more abilities that are intended by God to advance God’s work inside and outside the church. Every believer has some such divinely-given abilities, such as a gift of serving, an ability to administer or lead, the capability to teach the Bible, a desire and capacity to be generous with one’s time or finances, or the skill of shepherding souls and leading a church as a pastor. These are good gifts, and they should be used well.

Such gifts are necessary because church work is not natural work. It cannot be done with mere human wisdom and strength—if it is, then it is not a real church or it is a church not pleasing God!

- B. Up to the time of Paul’s writing the letter, the church had been pursuing spiritual gifts with a wrong focus. Remember the inferiority and superiority complexes and mistreatment of fellow

members in the church? Boasting and not recognizing the interconnected nature of the body of Christ were problems in the church. The love-emphasis of chapter 13 goes a long way toward correcting those problems because love is concerned with God and neighbor as opposed to self.

- C. In sum, Paul encouraged the pursuit of spiritual gifts. That was fine if they did so as a corporate body, not as individuals seeking to aggrandize themselves. But more importantly, they were commanded to pursue love with all the vigor and more than they were pursuing spiritual gifts.

II. Special Emphasis: Prophecy, v. 1b

- A. The gift of prophecy is singled out among the all the gifts. Something about it made Paul say that it was especially worthy of their desires. What is that? It goes back to the nature of prophecy itself.

Remember, we have stated there are two flavors of prophecy—one miraculous, and one “run of the mill.” The former was given before the Bible was completed, because the church needed guidance that was not yet in writing. Today only the latter is available. This kind of prophecy is the Bible preaching and teaching ministry. In it, we proclaim the Word that has been once-for-all delivered to the church.

- B. Why prophecy then? The nature of the gift is that the person with it speaks to the mind and heart of the audience so that they can first understand the truth principles in it, and then experience God’s work through that Word through applying it to their lives. For example, if I teach you about fearing God in 1 Peter 2:17, I should explain what it means to fear God, and then help you to examine yourself to see if you are fearing God.
- C. The gift of tongues (immediate ability in a foreign language) cannot accomplish the same thing as proclamation. Suppose a speaker delivers a message in one of the Sara Kaba languages in our church. Only God would understand what is being said. We would not have a clue. “No one understands him...he speaks mysteries.”

What he says is unknown and effectively unknowable because it is locked in an unknown language.

D. But the gift of prophecy (teaching and preaching) is different. It uses the common language of the people to proclaim the truth of God. According to verse 3, it results in three things: edification, exhortation, and comfort. I take it that different words are used to convey three distinct ideas, not that one idea is repeated three times.

1. **Edification.** If you “edify an edifice” that means you build a building. If you edify a person, that means you build them up. You strengthen them spiritually or emotionally or in some other part of their life.
2. **Exhortation.** This means to make a strong request to someone, or to push them into a course of action, to tell them what to do.
3. **Comfort.** This words you use serve to encourage someone who is depressed or grieving or down for some reason. Perhaps they are facing trials and need an uplifting word to remind them to look “from whence comes their help” (Psalm 121:1).

E. We each should ask ourselves—whether in vocational ministry or not—do our words accomplish those three things? Do they encourage others, build them up and bring comfort? Or do they destroy and discourage and mislead and discomfort?

How about at home? In the church? In the workplace?

III. The Critical Matter of Understanding: The Speaker

Without comprehension, there can be no edification. That is because without comprehension, each audience member is making up in their own minds what to think, and the result is not necessarily what God is saying. In that situation, there is no true edification going on. There is individual ignorance or personal opinion, but not real building up.

Edification never bypasses the mind. So how can we help create understanding?

- A. Speak clearly, both in diction and content. The speaker must be able to articulate his words with enough clarity and volume that people can understand what he is saying. He cannot speak too fast, or be distractingly slow. He cannot have too thick of an accent.
- B. Furthermore, grasp the content and communicate it in an orderly fashion so that it can be understood. A pastor must have the ability to put together long series of Bible messages that are substantial and not repetitive. He should be able to state and justify the truths he is teaching from the Bible. He should be able to offer persuasion, illustration, argumentation, reasoning, etc. He should be able to help you apply what he is teaching.
- C. He should be amplified clearly. I am thinking of the “technology” of the setting in which the speaker and hearers are situated. In modern times, that would include intelligible sound amplification. It might include hearing assistance for those who are growing deaf. It might include sign language. It includes adequate reproduction of the sound and/or video for those who are at a distance. In ancient times, the “technology” was not electronic in nature, but there was a kind of “technology” in using natural or constructed amphitheatres, or a natural phenomenon like sound carrying over water. Jesus used these techniques, as did many teachers both before and after Christ.

IV. The Critical Matter of Understanding: The Hearer

- A. The “natural man” is a person who does not know Christ truly yet. He is unable to truly grasp the things of God. He can understand some of the facts, but he is unable to “see” the implications, significance, and thus real “meaning” of the facts for his situation. He cannot see how those facts impact him. This person cannot truly understand the proclamation of the Word of God.
- B. So, there is a pre-requisite for understanding God’s word: salvation. Prior to salvation, our minds are “darkened” in spiritual understanding. See Ephesians 4:17-20. Post salvation, there is not only a newfound ability, but also a desire, to read and learn the Bible. 1 Thess. 2:13 becomes true of every new Christian. God becomes our teacher; the Bible our textbook; and our minds desire

to learn. We desire the Word of God like a baby desires milk (1 Peter 2:2).

- C. The hearer must be committed to learn about God.
- D. Holiness is crucial to right understanding. The hearer must be living a holy life, not hindering their grasp of God’s truth with carnal living. This does not mean that if you are living in sin you are hopeless. No—what will happen is that as you hear and respond properly to God’s word, you will confess and repent and be brought into a greater measure of holiness. But if you are hiding sin in your life, obviously you will not be committed to learning about God.

V. Tongues and Prophecy Compared, v. 4-5

We already know how Paul “ranks” the two gifts head-to-head. But he goes on to compare them further.

- A. Tongues-speaking results in “self-edification.” I put that in quotation marks. It is “puffing up” the speaker rather than true “building up” of the church.
- B. Contrast this with the one who proclaims God’s word well. He builds up the church. *The benefit flows outward instead of inward.* That is service. This is a major point of what we are getting at here. Church is not about how I can be built up. It is about how I can build others up. In so doing, you will find that you naturally grow in grace too!
- C. Therefore, yes, it would be sort of nice if everyone spoke in tongues, but far better that everyone was a teacher of God’s word. Prophecy is simply better than tongues. Paul does not mean that the *person* so gifted is “better” ontologically than the person who speaks in tongues, but rather that the gift is superior because the outcome is superior. Weighing against this is the truth that not everyone should be a Bible teacher because not only it is difficult and requires God’s gifting, but those who teach will be subject to a stricter judgment.
- D. The only exception to that general rule is if the tongue-speaker interprets so that the church can *understand*. Then the church will

receive edification. As I understand it, interpreted tongues are basically like prophecy / proclamation of the truth, which does not require the extra step of translation. But in Corinth, they were speaking on tongues—either real ones or fake gibberish—without interpretation so no one understood what was going on.

Conclusion

The matter of understanding comes up again in the next verses of chapter 14. If you do not understand something that I am saying, you **MUST ASK**. That not only will aid you, but it will help me see where I need to improve my preaching. If you are not understanding things, you must change that so that you are not merely wasting time or doing a religious ritual.

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