

ORDER AND DISORDER IN CHURCH

1 Corinthians 14

Introduction:

Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 14...

Many years ago, when our oldest daughter was just a toddler, we were on Vancouver Island for a few days of vacation prior to our VM Conference. We were staying at a little place not far out of Victoria and on Saturday night we picked up a newspaper and looked at the church directory to see if we could find a church to attend on Sunday morning.

We found a church with a very generic name not far away, easy to get to, service started at 10:00 AM. We found the church, went in and sat down and waited for the service to start. They began with several minutes of singing, just as we do. Everyone stood to sing. The singing was very lively, led by a woman who moved briskly around the stage as she led the time of worship.

After about 20-25 minutes the woman leading the worship said, "All right, it is time that we just all praise the Lord together." Immediately the entire room just erupted. People were jumping up and down, waving their arms, many were shouting. It was hard to hear what anyone was saying and what I could hear, I couldn't understand.

I looked at our daughter, who I was holding in my arms, and she looked absolutely terrified. I couldn't blame her, I had never encountered anything like this before either. Val and I looked at each other, and I said, "Let's go." We walked out of the service.

When I read 1 Corinthians 14, I imagine a typical church service in Corinth being much like that. As we have seen from chapter 12, Paul was concerned that the believers in Corinth were misusing and abusing the spiritual gifts by focusing attention on themselves. They were seeking specifically speaking in tongues, and other outward sign gifts, as that was seen as the true measure of spirituality. Paul addressed that somewhat in chapter 12, then went on to say, "I want to show you a better way, the way of love," which he expounded in chapter 13.

Now in chapter 14 he returns to the issue of tongues and its role in the church. As I looked at this chapter, I was very unsure how to approach it. We could do several messages, taking a section at a time and dissecting it and analyzing it. But I decided that I would prefer to deal with it as a whole in order to get a bigger picture of what was bothering Paul about the church in Corinth. So, let's consider first of all...

The Importance of Understanding vv. 1-25

I would like to read to you what Paul has to say about this matter of tongues and also the gift of prophecy. Let's read 1 Corinthians 14:1-25... *read it aloud.*

The first thing we need to keep in mind in all of this is the context in which this was written. This letter was written by Paul around the year AD 54, give or take a year. Most of the apostles were still living and the teaching of the apostles was critical, because this was a time of formation for the church. The New Testament was not in existence, it was just being written and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles was gradually being written down and distributed to these baby churches.

So, it was a time of transition. The churches were dependent on the teaching of the apostles. The Jewish leaders were suspicious of this new teaching and very antagonistic toward it, believing that God was their God and would not be bringing a new message, and would certainly not be giving that message to the pagan Gentiles. This leads to some very important things to think about concerning spiritual gifts and particularly what we refer to as sign gifts – tongues, healing, miracles – signs and wonders.

I want to address that briefly, before we look at the main point of this chapter, because I think it is significant to the context of Paul's argument. Signs and wonders were always used by God to confirm the work of God. When Moses confronted Pharaoh, God said, "...though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you." (Ex. 7:3-4) So it is in the NT, when tongues and healing and many miracles were given as evidence to authenticate the message of the apostles. There is something else related to this which I have found very interesting as I have studied the early church in the book of Acts.

I have noticed that whenever miracles, signs and wonders are mentioned in Acts, it is always the apostles who are performing these signs. Let me give you a few references:

Ac 2:43 – “And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”

Ac 5:12 – “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico.”

Ac 14:3 – “So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.”

Ac 15:12 – “And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”

Ac 5:15 – “so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them.”

Ac 19:12 – “so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his [Paul] skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.”

Acts 9:36-43 – Raising of Dorcas – why did they need to send for Peter? There were other believers there. Why couldn’t they raise her?

I have not found any indication in the book of Acts that anyone other than the apostles performed miracles or signs. It is always dangerous to build theology on what is not said, but I think it is an indication that signs and wonders were restricted to the apostolic age. In fact, I would suggest that the primary sign gifts ceased at the end of the apostolic age – the first century. Their purpose, to validate and authenticate the message was accomplished with the completion of the Word of God.

None of this is to suggest that God cannot or does not perform miracles or healing today. Certainly, all healing is of God, and there have been cases of healing that could certainly be described as miraculous.

But I believe that to suggest that someone today has the “gift of healing” is unbiblical. No one has the ability to simply speak or touch and heal anyone instantaneously, despite what some might claim.

Now, that was a long digression, but I believe it is relevant to our subject this morning. However, let’s come back to our text and what Paul says in 1 Cor. 14. What about tongues and prophecy?

Paul, in v. 21 refers back to the book of Isaiah, chapter 28 where God is pronouncing judgment on Ephraim and Jerusalem. There he says, *“For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the LORD will speak to this people, to whom he has said, ‘This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose’; yet they would not hear.”* (Isa 28:11-12 ESV)

Paul refers to that word of judgment to point out that the idea of speaking in a foreign tongue was originally intended as a sign of warning to those who would not listen to God. It was a sign to unbelievers.

In the book of Acts, there are only three occasions where it is said that people spoke in tongues – Acts 2, when the Spirit fell on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, as a confirmation of the Spirit’s arrival and the birth of the church; Acts 10, when the first Gentiles received the gospel and believed, and the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues, as the Spirit confirmed their acceptance into this new body, the church; Acts 19, when Paul introduce a group of Ephesian believers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and once again they began to speak in tongues as a sign of confirmation.

There is one other occasion which may also have included tongues – Acts 8, when the gospel came to the Samaritans. When Peter laid his hands on them the Holy Spirit came in such a way that there was clear visible evidence of it, which may have been tongues but it is not stated.

In all of these situations speaking in tongues was clearly a confirmation or authentication of the Holy Spirit’s ministry, so that those who might not have otherwise believed what was happening would be convinced that the Holy Spirit had indeed come upon these individuals.

But in the Corinthian church they seemed to be convinced that speaking in tongues was the ultimate indication of spirituality, that it made them more important than others who did not speak in tongues.

So, Paul addressed this attitude by comparing their use of tongues to the gift of prophecy. We need then to look at prophecy and try to define and understand that.

There are two key aspects to the idea of prophecy. In its most basic form prophecy is a revelation of truth from God that is revealed for our understanding. My Greek English dictionary describes it as, "...*a discourse emanating from divine inspiration and declaring the purposes of God, whether by reproofing and admonishing the wicked, or comforting the afflicted, or revealing things hidden; esp. by foretelling future events.*"

The basic idea is that, in prophesying, one would receive some new revelation of truth, given by the Holy Spirit, for the benefit of the church. So the gift of prophecy would enable someone to declare truth from God for the edification of other believers in the body of Christ.

The other way in which the concept of the gift of prophecy is sometimes applied today is really the area of preaching—taking the truth of the Word of God, the revelation of truth that we have already been given, and expounding it so that others can understand it.

However, I would suggest that the primary characterization of the gift of prophecy has to do with revelation. As such, it would be my contention that this gift also ended with the end of the apostolic age. When the apostles had revealed all of the truth that we now have in our Bible, there was no need for prophecy as there was no new revelation. Now there are those who take exception to that idea, but I am not going to get into that today.

But, remember, when Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth, they were still in that apostolic age. They did not have the written word of Jesus or the apostles. They were dependent on the gift of prophecy to bring them the revelation of truth from God. And, if I can give them the benefit of the doubt, they perhaps needed the gift of tongues in order to confirm or authenticate the message that came as people spoke the oracles of God.

But it is clear that they had seriously misplaced the emphasis that they should have had on these gifts. That is the message of this chapter.

The basic message of this whole chapter, the message that Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand is that without a clear message there can be no understanding. And without understanding there can be no growth or edification. Let me just refer back to a few of the verses that we read earlier.

- vv. 2-3 – tongues speak to God, but prophecy builds up the listener
- vv. 6-9 – the importance of a clear message
- vv. 18-19 – tongues are fine, but I would rather give a clear message that instructs others
- vv. 23-25 – if unbelievers come into the service and hear everyone speaking in tongues, they will think you are crazy. But if they hear a clear word of prophecy, they can understand and respond to it and be saved.

Conclusion

Well, I have rambled on long enough. What does all this mean for us? I have already indicated that I do not believe that the gifts of tongues or prophecy are intended for today. The revelation of God's truth is finished with the completion of God's Word and there is no further need for the authentication of the word through tongues or other signs. So, in one sense, this passage seems to be irrelevant to us today.

However, I believe that there is an important lesson in this passage that we need to think about. When unbelievers, or newcomers come into a service in our church what do they hear? What do they see? How do they feel?

Is our message clear? That is a challenge for me, as well as for Justin, as we prepare our messages. Is the gospel presented in a way that people can clearly understand and respond?

What about the way we do things in our service? Can people clearly understand what we are doing at different points in the service? Are things explained in a way that people understand? E.g. – VM Spotlight

Next time we will look at vv. 26-40 of this chapter where Paul gives further instruction regarding order in the church. But for now, let's just consider these questions as we close in prayer.