

What does it Communicate? **1 Corinthians 14:1-25**

Our English language has many peculiarities that make it hard for others to learn. For example, if I asked you to define the word *bear/bare*, what would you say?

- A large ferocious animal that can be black, brown or polar.
- An adjective that means naked or a verb that means to make oneself naked.
- A verb that means to carry.

Somewhat confusing, isn't it? And if I told you:
to bare your soul to the bare bear
how would that compare with the instruction
to bear your breakfast to the bare bear?

Much of our humour is based around puns: using words that sound the same, but have vastly different meanings. For example,

Why is medieval history called the dark ages?
Because there were so many knights then.

Then we come to idioms – expressions peculiar to our English language. You know what it means to say *she'll be apples* – but that's vastly different to what someone learning the language hears. If I told a group of Aussies *to pull up your socks*, I suspect I'd get a different reaction than if I gave the same instruction to a group learning the language.

This sometimes leads to misunderstandings – even among those who know the language well. There are times when we know what we mean, but the other person doesn't get the message we intend. We think we give a message –

and we think we do so very clearly – but the other person hears a very different message altogether.

So, even when people use the same language – a language they both supposedly know and understand – there is potential for miscommunication. How much more so when people use a language the listeners don't know or readily understand? That's similar to Paul's main point in tonight's passage.

Reviewing the Context

Paul introduced the Corinthians to *the most excellent way* – the way of love. We looked at that a few weeks back – chapter 13. He wants them to pursue that above all. In chapter 14, he returns to some specific matters concerning their questions about *spirituality* and *spiritual gifts*.

- What's the most loving way to exercise God's gifts?
- How are gifts to be used for the common good?
- How do we evaluate God's gifts?
- Are some gifts more useful than others – especially in the church meeting itself?

Please note: Paul doesn't get rid of these things we call *spiritual gifts*. It's worth highlighting that. You don't pursue *love* at the expense of these *gifts*. Not at all. You pursue the gifts as well. Paul says as much in verse 1:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

However, they're not to be desired at the expense of love. Nor are they to be pursued indiscriminately. Some gifts are more useful than others. Verses 12 and 13:

So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should

pray that he may interpret what he says.

In chapter 14, Paul applies the principles of chapter 13 to the matter of spiritual gifts. In particular, he illustrates by reference to two gifts that had particular application to the Corinthian situation:

- the gift of tongues; and
- the gift of prophecy.

Now, people argue endlessly over exactly what these two gifts were, and what they may be today. We don't have time tonight to go into the details of those arguments. But I will say this: most people don't find their definitions of tongues and prophecy in this chapter – rather, they find them somewhere else and then try to force this chapter to fit those definitions.

For our purposes tonight, I want to give two simple definitions that I don't think cause problems for anyone – because they're simple and they avoid the controversies:

- the gift of tongues involved speaking in a language which hadn't been learned by the speaker and wasn't normal to the speaker and wasn't understood by the speaker; and
- the gift of prophecy involved speaking in a language that was normal to the speaker.

As I said, they're simple definitions. They don't answer all the questions we have. They don't solve all the problems. But I think they're sufficient for us to understand the main thrust of what Paul says here – and I think they are consistent with what this chapter states.

One other thing by way of introduction: in this chapter, Paul refers to speaking in tongues in two situations:

- in public; and

- in private.

It's important to realise that, and it's important to distinguish when he's talking about each. If you don't make that distinction, you'll have Paul contradict himself.

- In relation to public speaking in tongues, he's not favourably disposed towards it. For example, verse 19:

But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

- In relation to private speaking in tongues, he is in favour of it. For example, verse 18:

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

Holding those two things separate helps sort out the chapter.

The Importance of Understanding

Paul picks on these two gifts – tongues and prophecy – and compares them as to how they're to be used in the church. The main point he makes is: Which is more edifying? Which is better able to build people up? The basic answer: the one that's understood. That summarises the part of the chapter we're looking at tonight.

1. Proper Communication allows Edification

First, in verses 1 to 5, Paul says people can't be edified by what they don't understand. Suppose I said to you:

Καθάπερ γὰρ τὸ σῶμα ἓν ἐστὶν καὶ μέλη πολλὰ ἔχει,
πάντα δὲ τὰ μέλη τοῦ σώματος πολλὰ ὄντα ἓν ἐστὶν
σῶμα, οὕτως καὶ ὁ Χριστός

What's your reaction? Are you helped by that statement? Are you edified – encouraged – strengthened? No? Why not? After all, that's the Bible I just read to you. Surely

you must be edified by the Bible.

If instead I say to you:

*The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts;
and though all its parts are many, they form one body.
So it is with Christ.*

you have a much better chance, don't you? As a listener, it doesn't matter how good the words are – they can be the very words of God Himself – if you as the listener do not understand the words, you can't be edified by them.

That's the big difference between tongues and prophecy in terms of the use of these gifts in church. Verse 4:

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

When I read that Greek to you before, were you edified? No. What was your reaction?

- Maybe you thought: this is a waste of time. I came to learn about the Bible and I can't even understand what he's saying because it's not English. Wake me when he finishes, for sleep's the only beneficial thing I'll get from him.
- Maybe you didn't realise I was reading and you thought: this guy must be super-spiritual to be able to babble in such a lofty and exalted language. I wonder what's the secret to such an impressive performance.

Maybe you reacted some other way – but you weren't edified because you couldn't understand what I said.

If I went on and on in another language, the only one who could be edified is me – the speaker. Now Paul may make this comment tongue-in-cheek – that the person

who speaks in a tongue in church builds up himself:

- in the sense of building up his own ego;
- in the sense of puffing up himself;
- in the sense of putting himself on show in such a way that his own image is built up in the eyes of everyone else;

It's quite possible Paul has a bit of a dig at this person who speaks in tongues in church.

But I think it's more likely that Paul's quite serious. He thinks there is some personal benefit in speaking in a tongue. After all, as he says in verse 2, the person does speak to God. So it's quite feasible personal edification does occur at some level – even though they don't understand what they're actually saying. Perhaps their own spirit is encouraged by this gift.

Either way – whether Paul has a dig at them or whether he speaks seriously – when we apply the test of love to this situation, the result's the same. In church, speaking in a language not understood by others, doesn't result in edification for those others. Thus, the loving thing to do – remembering chapter 13 – is not to speak in tongues in the public meeting unless someone can translate what's said into a language everyone can understand. Looking only to benefit yourself is too small a goal for those who've meditated on 1 Corinthians 13.

As an aside, an issue you hear from time to time. Some people look at verse 5:

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy.

and say: There you go. Paul wants everyone to speak in tongues. Everyone must have this gift. Two quick things

- first, that ignores what Paul said at the end of chapter 12, where he quite clearly states everyone is not given the same gift; and
- secondly, turn to 7:7. Paul writes in a similar way:
I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

There, Paul talks about the gift of celibacy – but no one wants to say all Christians should have that gift, even though Paul uses very similar language.

One final point from this paragraph. The second part of verse 5 strongly suggests that tongues plus interpretation equals prophecy. If you have a gift of tongues from God and God gives you a message in tongues, and if that message is truly translated so all can understand, isn't that then the same as the church receiving a prophecy from God? The big difference between tongues and prophecy is how readily the message can be understood by those who hear – and thus how readily they can be edified by it.

2. Proper Communication allows Understanding

The next paragraph – verses 6 to 12 – says much the same thing. Paul gives a couple of examples.

- Suppose you had a guitar and tuned all six strings to the same note. How useful would your guitar be for playing a tune?
- Suppose your bugler in the army is so bad that the soldiers can't tell the difference between his rendition of attack and retreat. He's told to play retreat, but all the soldiers think he's playing attack.

In order to communicate properly via those musical instruments, you must play the right notes and you must play them clearly.

It's like that in the church too. Suppose I conducted this meeting in Swahili. There's nothing wrong with Swahili, is there? It's a good, solid language. The truths of the Bible can be readily communicated in Swahili. Yet, you wouldn't understand what was going on. I could tell you to stand up, and you wouldn't have a clue. I could warn you a terrorist had a gun pointed at your head, and you'd bow your head for prayer. If I conducted the service in Swahili, it'd be as if a foreigner ran the service. There'd be no real communication between me and you. So you may as well not be here. I could do the whole thing without you just as effectively.

The Catholic Church used to conduct the service in Latin – no matter what country the church was in. Could the people understand what went on? No. Did the service communicate anything to them? No – except that God only spoke a foreign language and He wasn't interested in getting them to understand what it's all about.

Paul concludes in verse 12. In the church meeting, when you're together, seek for gifts to build up the church. Follow the way of love. Don't try to climb your way to the top of the spirituality ladder. Don't compete with one another over who has the most spectacular gift. Work at building each other up. Think about what you do. Will what you do or say build up those present? If they can't understand what you say, how can that build them up?

3. Proper Communication allows Participation

The third paragraph – verses 13 to 19 – emphasises the element of participation. If someone can't understand what's going on, how can they really participate in it?

Paul gives a couple of examples.

- First, a private example. In verses 14 and 15, Paul refers to the private use of tongues. He asks: what happens if I pray in a tongue? He says: If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays along quite happily, but my mind isn't really involved. Because I don't understand what I pray, my mind is unfruitful.
- The second example is verses 16 and 17. Paul goes back to the public situation. If someone prays in a tongue in church, how does the rest of the church know whether they can say *amen* at the end? Saying *amen* is a way to affirm someone else's prayer. It says: Yes, I agree with that prayer. But if you don't know what they prayed because they prayed in a tongue, how can you put your *amen* on the end of the prayer?

What's the solution? Verse 13:

For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.

That gets around the problems Paul mentions:

- If you can interpret your tongue, then your mind can pray along with your spirit when you exercise that gift in private.
- If you can interpret your tongue, others listening to your prayer will be able to say *amen* at the end of it – if they agree with your prayer.

Now, praying for the gift of interpretation doesn't mean God will give that gift. However, especially if you want to use your tongues in church, the loving thing is that the tongue be interpreted so others can understand and participate.

Paul isn't against speaking in tongues. Verse 18:

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

Nowhere does he completely forbid the exercise of this gift. He recognises it as a spiritual gift from God. Yet, in the public situation, the gift of tongues by itself doesn't edify. The way of love is to refrain from using it – unless the gift of interpretation is also present. Verse 19:

But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Even in private, Paul feels there's more benefit to this gift if you are also given the gift of understanding.

4. Proper Communication allows Conversion

The fourth paragraph – verses 20 to 25 – contains some difficulties of understanding. The main difficulty relates to Paul's quote from Isaiah and the sentence that follows it in verse 22. What's he mean by it? I don't have time to go through all the possibilities tonight, so let me just give you what I think's most likely.

In Isaiah's time, God threatened judgment on His people. God sent many prophets. They were home-grown – not foreigners. Those prophets used the language of God's people. They could easily understand the words. Yet, the people didn't repent. They didn't pay attention to their words. So God says: I'll speak to them in foreign languages. I'll put them in a place where all they'll hear is the babble of foreigners. I'll judge them and take them into exile. Maybe that'll get their attention.

Verse 22 thus forms Paul's inference from Isaiah.

- Tongues were the sign – a rather negative sign – for unbelievers in the Jewish community. They would

not listen to the prophets, and so were forced to listen to foreign tongues.

- Prophecy, on the other hand, was a sign – a more positive sign – for believers in the Jewish community. Because they were believers, they accepted God's word as spoken through the prophets.

Paul asks: What happens when a non-Christian comes into the church meeting?

- If they come into church and hear people speaking in tongues, how will that impact them? It'd be like me watching a Japanese movie without subtitles. They'll wonder what's going on. They may think it madness. It'll all sound foreign to them. Because they can't understand it, it will only leave them in their state of judgment.
- If, however, they come into church and hear people prophesying, how will that impact them? They'll be able to understand that message, even though it's intended primarily for believers. They'll hear from God. Because they can understand the message, they may even be convicted by it and converted.

Conclusion

In this passage, many people get caught up in arguments about speaking in tongues. While that's a significant part of the passage, it'd be sad to focus on that so much that we missed the overall direction. Paul deals with the issue of spiritual gifts and their use in the church meeting. He does so in the context of chapter 13. How can we lovingly exercise spiritual gifts in the church meeting?

To me, the big thing is we're to aim for understanding. Our aim is to build each other up – to edify, to encourage,

to strengthen, to comfort. That's why we meet together. For that to happen, we must understand what goes on.

In Corinth, that wasn't happening because they emphasised speaking in tongues when they met. People may have enjoyed their own private quiet times within the public setting – but that's all they were: private devotions. No real communication took place. Individuals may have felt good about their own personal performance of their gift, but they didn't build up one another. It was all individual – not for the common good.

I'm told the exact same problem is still around in some churches today. But it's not our problem. But that does not necessarily mean we're totally OK at this point. We may have other barriers to understanding. We may have other ways of not serving one another when we meet together – other ways of not loving one another:

- If the preacher uses high-sounding, academic language that sends everyone to sleep – wouldn't that have the same effect as speaking in tongues?
- If the songs use archaic language modern people don't use or understand – wouldn't that have the same effect as speaking in tongues?
- If we used strange rituals that people didn't know the meaning of – wouldn't that do the same thing?
- If people leave without feeling edified or strengthened or comforted – have our meetings served their proper purpose?

Or perhaps people are being edified already – but there are things we could change or introduce or improve that would increase that.