

Speaking in Tongues?

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

- [0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of November 1999.
- The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled Speaking in Tongues? And is from 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 1 to 25.
- Well, please open your Bibles, if you've got one near you, to page 934. As we continue on looking at 1 Corinthians, we're in chapter 14 and we're looking at the first 25 verses this morning.
- Before we go on, I might pray. Father, please open our hearts and minds to understand your word and to apply it in our lives.
- May your word bear much fruit in us for Jesus' sake. Amen. Some years ago I went on a parish weekend to a place in the Blue Mountains where a group of Christians came and spoke to us about the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- [1 : 13] Now, I can't remember the whole content of the weekend, but I do remember being given the opportunity to receive the gift of speaking in tongues. Everybody else around me was doing it, so I wanted it too.
- I thought it was a good thing to get. So a group of people took me aside into another room and laid hands on me, praying that this would happen.
- And after a while, I can only say it was a group of people that were gibbering on. After a while, they then told me to just start speaking, to just blurt it out.
- They were virtually the words in effect. And I couldn't. There was something wrong. My mind and my mouth were unable to speak in words that I didn't know.
- Part of me wanted to start speaking in French. Parce que je parle français très bien. Je parle français pour mon baccalauréat. But that would have been dishonest.
- [2 : 19] Because je parle français très bien. Not really. It would have just been dishonest. But what was the problem here?
- This group concluded that there was a blockage with me. There was something wrong. The Holy Spirit was unable to enter into me.
- And this made me really angry. Because I believed that I had received the Holy Spirit when I became a Christian. It wasn't something that only the special few received upon speaking in tongues.
- And yet the tone of their conversation seemed to imply all these sorts of things. On reflection, I think there were a couple of problems here.
- Firstly, there was the desire for me to speak in tongues. And this desire had become obsessive. Because I wanted to join this elite group of people who could speak in tongues.
- [3 : 17] And I thought that might put me in that same sort of league. Secondly, the other problem that was going on is I think that the emphasis on biblical teaching and gospel proclamation had been lost for me as I pursued this gift of speaking in tongues.

Now this morning as we look at the first 25 verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 14, I want to help us understand what Paul means about speaking in tongues and what he means by prophecy in this passage.

And in this passage the Apostle Paul compares the two. Compares and contrasts tongues and prophecy in terms of building up the church.

So then, let me begin by asking the question, what is speaking in tongues? It's a problem which has baffled many people for many years. First of all, in verse 1 of chapter 14, we learn that it really is a spiritual gift.

Secondly, it's a language which is not familiar to us. We do not understand it. If you look at chapter 13, the beginning of chapter 13, it says, Paul says, If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love and so on.

[4 : 35] It's a language which is unfamiliar to us. In verse 2 of chapter 14, we see that it's a form of prayer to God.

For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people, but to God. So it's prayer to God. For nobody understands them since they are speaking mysteries in the spirit.

The fourth thing that we learn about tongues in this passage is that it's a form of prayer in building up the individual Christian. Verse 4, the first part of verse 4.

Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves. Now, one other thing it does is it, I think, in speaking in tongues, it transcends the limitation of human language.

When our words run out, perhaps the gift of tongues comes in. Let me read to you, written by an English author, what he says.

[5 : 36] Everybody, to a greater or lesser extent, is limited by language. I am told that the average Englishman knows 5,000 English words. Winston Churchill apparently used 15,000 words.

But even he was limited to that extent. Often people experience frustration that they cannot express what they really feel, even in a human relationship. They feel things in their spirits, but they do not know how to put them into words.

This is often true also in our relationship to God. When our words run out, perhaps God's spirit intercedes for us.

And so on. And I think that's what this author is getting on with there. Now, in what areas does speaking in tongues help?

Well, it can help the individual in their praise and worship of God. The gift of tongues enables one to continue on praying to God when their limited vocabulary, as we've just heard, seems to have dried up.

[6 : 45] Secondly, it can help us when we are under pressure, when we don't know what to say. God's spirit can pray on our behalf. And thirdly, it can help us when praying for other people.

God's spirit can give us the words to say when our words, again, seem to have dried up. But when we might think that the words, O Lord, bless them, might seem pointless, God's spirit can intercede.

I don't think it's wrong to say, Lord, bless them either, by the way. But God's spirit can intercede in those situations. So that's a little bit of a summary of what tongues are.

Let's move on to the next area of what is prophecy. Again, we see that it is a spiritual gift in verse 1, which fills it out more fully in chapter 14.

It says, Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. Verse 3 in chapter 14 tells us that those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding.

[7 : 48] In other words, the gift of prophecy is for the benefit of the whole church. The third thing is that Paul desires that the Corinthians prophesy in verse 5, and that the one who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless there is someone there to interpret so that the church indeed may be built up.

Now the fourth thing about prophecy, and I think that this is its main purpose, prophecy's main purpose is to communicate God's message as revealed to us in Scripture to people, and prophecy provides insight, warning, correction, and encouragement.

And among the list of gifts that Paul talks about in chapter 12, Paul gives a higher priority to the gift of prophecy. And the closest thing that we have to it today is perhaps something like our preaching, but it's not identical with that.

It's not the delivery necessarily of a carefully prepared sermon, but the uttering of words directly inspired by God. So that's a little bit of what prophecy is and so on.

What are the effects of prophecy? Verse 3 tells us, Those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

[9 : 18] And at the end of verse 4 we read, Those who prophesy build up the church. Now, why does Paul write to the Corinthian church about these two issues?

We don't know exactly why he's addressed these issues, but because he devotes a considerable portion to the subject, and you might see it throughout the book of Corinthians, it is not unreasonable to deduce that there were some people in the Corinthian church who held that tongues was the more important gift to have.

Perhaps there was even the thought that those who spoke in tongues were superior Christians. Now, it's important to realise here that Paul doesn't belittle the gift of speaking in tongues, which I think that we can tend to do today, and I've been a proponent of that.

I've tried to belittle it in years gone by. But Paul actually shows here that the gift of tongues is a legitimate gift to have. Every gift of God is good, and therefore ought to be used.

So if you do have the gift of speaking in tongues, use it. Now, while legitimising the gift of tongues, Paul goes on and curbs the exaggerated regard that some of the Corinthians had for it, and insists that the gift of prophecy is much to be preferred.

[10 : 48] So following on from chapter 13, where Paul demonstrates the importance of love, he insists that the building up of God's people should be the prime consideration in anything that we do with any of our gifts that we have.

So, does one's gift help other people is the question we should be asking. Do the gifts that I have help other people? Does it build up the church? That's the important thing to remember.

And that's why Paul does compare and contrast prophecy in tongues in this chapter. Now, if you look at verse 3, there are three words describing the results that the gift of prophecy will bring into the church when it is properly used.

The first word is up-building. Paul's concern is that the Corinthian church is built up in the Lord. Today, our preaching ought to reflect this.

It should have the same concern that God's people are built up in the Lord, that they understand God's word, challenging them and encouraging them to apply it to God's word.

[11 : 55] What we learn in the Bible, applying that to our lives. And any preaching which undermines or shakes the faith of others or that is contrary to God's word ought to be rejected outright.

Sadly today, there are many churches which offer incorrect teaching and proclamation of God's word. Many churches don't even really go and proclaim the Bible.

The teaching that comes out of the pulpit does not seek to build up the people in the Lord. Rather, it seeks to build them up into something else.

Something to build them up into themselves, into their own rights, and all those sorts of things. It's not building them up in the Lord. So the first word is up-building.

The second word that the gift of prophecy will bring into the church is encouragement, in verse 3. And friends, we all like to be encouraged. And for the Christians, the greatest encouragement we could have is the constant reminder that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[13 : 08] Knowing that through Him, our salvation is not dependent upon us, but on what He has done by His work on the cross. The proclamation of God's word, whether it's read, preached, or spoken, should bear consistent and convincing witness to this very fact, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Any prophecy, any proclamation, should bear that. It may convict the unbeliever of their sin, of their lostness, and so on.

And that's a good thing as well. But for Christians, it will encourage the believing person. So it encourages us. The third word to describe how a true word of prophecy will help the church is consolation.

Perhaps another word is comfort, which would fit in there. And the Greek word here has the sense of whispering in the church's ear, probably in the sense of allaying fear and enabling God's people to be calm under pressure.

One writer goes on and says, consolation calms the storms of fear, anxiety, and despair. It helps us rest in the presence of Jesus. It leads us away from the hectic bustle of daily affairs, away from the restlessness of this life, into the great peace of God.

[14 : 38] And a recurring theme of both the Old and the New Testament prophets and of Jesus, who was the great prophet, who was the Son of God, is this.

Do not fear. Do not fear. Isn't that a great thing to know, that we as Christians have nothing to fear? It's a word of consolation.

If this is something of the impact prophecy can have on the church, it is no wonder that Paul wants every Christian to desire such a gift, because this gift of prophecy builds up the church.

Now in verse 18, we learn that Paul also speaks in tongues. In fact, he speaks in tongues more than all of the Corinthians that are there.

But it's not something that he boasts about, nor does it seem he uses this gift from God in the context of public worship. The reason being is seen in verse 6.

[15 : 45] He says, If I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?

And then Paul goes on to illustrate his point by saying that musical instruments must play each note in order for the music to be clear. We wouldn't know how to sing a tune if the piano didn't play the correct notes.

Thank you, Heather, for playing the correct notes this morning. And similarly, in battle, Paul goes on again to illustrate that the bugle conveys the commands of the leader to men who are remote, who are far away from him but can hear the sound of the bugle.

So it was important that the bugler, when going into battle, blew the right note so that it could be understood by the people. And if the sound is not clear and the hearer doesn't know whether to advance or retreat, the bugler has failed his purpose.

It's useless. Just imagine if the bugler in a battle played something from Trumpet-A-Go-Go rather than the command to retreat. His hearers would not know what to think.

[17 : 03] They might get massacred. They might hear some good music on the way down, but they would probably get massacred because they did not know what the command was. They have no idea what to do.

Well, the same goes for those who speak in tongues. Although the gift is helpful to those in private worship and helpful in public worship with interpretation, Paul says in verse 19, In church, I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others rather than speak 10,000 words in a tongue which nobody could understand.

Now, Paul is not downplaying the gift of tongues because it is a gift from God. But he wants to see that it is used in the right context and not abused.

And he offers some wise advice to those who do speak in tongues here in the Corinthian church. He says basically this, you shouldn't stop there. Just because you can speak in tongues doesn't make you a super Christian.

In fact, you should use the gift for the benefit of building up the church. And one way this can happen is if you pray for the gift to interpret your tongue in verse 13. But the principle is broader than just that.

[18 : 24] Verse 12 says we should all be eager for the spiritual gifts. All be eager for the spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church. Not for our own selfish benefit but for the benefit of the church.

So we shouldn't be eager just for the gift of tongues. We should also be eager for the gift of prophecy. We should also be eager for the gift of knowledge. Whatever gift we eagerly desire should be for the benefit of the church.

For the benefit of building up God's people. Quite clearly we should eagerly desire the gifts of the spirit. And I believe that God equips his people with the required gifts that the particular body of Christ that is the church.

We are the body of Christ that the body of Christ needs. And I think that here at Holy Trinity we are gifted with an enormous amount of people to carry on God's work and be involved in ministry here.

And we should be thankful for the gifts that we have and we should also exercise those gifts. Not in mindless ways. Just waiting for the Holy Spirit to do his work.

[19 : 34] But in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Verse 14 tells us that when we speak in tongues the spirit does the work and our mind is unproductive.

But in verse 15 he asks the question of what part should he do? Verse 15. But what should I do then? And then he goes on to answer that in two parts.

He says I will pray with the spirit. I will sing praise with the spirit. I will pray with the mind also. I will sing praise with the mind also.

You see it is our own intellect or common sense as well as God's spirit that is involved in the whole of our life. God has given us common sense.

He's given us wisdom and he expects us to use those sorts of things in our daily life. It's not just the flesh if you like or the spirit.

[20 : 36] They both work together. Let me read to you a story of a lady who perhaps just worked on one of the notions. There's a story of the woman who each morning having consecrated the day to the Lord as soon as she woke would then ask God whether she was to get up or not and would not stir till the voice told her to dress.

As she put on each article she asked the Lord whether she was to put it on and very often the Lord would tell her to put on the right shoe and leave off the other.

Sometimes she was to put on both stockings and no shoes and sometimes both shoes and no stockings. it was the same with all the articles of dress.

Well I don't think that's using your intellect using your common sense we're to work with these things together. It's common sense that we put two shoes on isn't it if you've got two feet and those sorts of things.

Now back in verse 15 Paul singles out two activities in public worship prayer and singing. Both must be done intelligently with the mind that is.

[22 : 01] And clearly Paul is not looking for unintelligible prayers or hymns or songs chosen on the basis of attractive tunes with no regard to the theology that they may express.

The mind and the spirit are to be active in both. And that means we do prepare our prayers for public worship. That we do think about the sorts of songs that we sing in the context of the service and so on.

And why do we spend time in preparation? Verses 16 and 17 give us the answer. If you say a blessing with the spirit how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the amen to your thanksgiving since the outsider does not know what you are saying?

For you may give thanks well enough but the other person is not built up. Why do we spend time in preparation? It is so that all who are present say in a public service of worship can say amen so they can understand what is going on.

So they too know what is going on in the whole process. And that's why when we use the prayer book you will find the service leader usually indicates the page number or the paragraph that we're at.

[23 : 20] That's why we use services in our own language so we can respond. And that's why we have a Mandarin congregation so our Mandarin brothers and sisters can learn about God's saving plan through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now if we were to run a service which was unintelligible for other members of the congregation, congregation, how would people be able to enter into the worship of God?

I don't think that it would be helpful for example to run a church service where Warwick spoke in tongues throughout. I can't see how it would edify those who attended and I can't see anyone saying amen.

Amen. Let me read to you verses 20 to 25. Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking, rather be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.

In the law it is written, by people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, yet even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.

[24 : 38] Tons then are assigned not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. If therefore the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the unbeliever's heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring God is really among you.

Now these are not easy verses to understand at a glance. But Paul here I think is telling the Corinthians to stop thinking childishly as he did at the end of chapter 13 in verse 11 where he says, when I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became an adult I put an end to childish ways. He's saying to put an end to these childish ways again. And while it is appropriate that the Corinthians should be innocent of evil, they should think like grown ups, mature people.

And this involves understanding what is written in the law or the scriptures that we have before us. And so Paul goes on to quote from Isaiah chapter 28. And from this passage that he quotes, he deduces that tongues, the gift of tongues, are a sign for the unbeliever.

[26 : 10] In other words, it will confirm his or her unbelief and that prophecy is for Christians. Now if an unbeliever or an inquirer were to come into our church and found everyone speaking in tongues, if someone just walked in here and we were all speaking away in tongues, I think that they would conclude we are all insane.

But if they came in and found people prophesying, that is proclaiming God's word, the unbeliever or the inquirer is bound to be affected because they can hear what is going on, it's audible, it mightn't make sense, but it can have a profound effect upon them.

Now while it could be argued that speaking in tongues is one way to reach an unbeliever, as it was on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, Paul argues here in chapter 14 that clear preaching, gospel proclamation, is usually better.

It will have a more profound effect. Well let me conclude. Paul is convinced that the gifts of tongues and prophecy are spiritual gifts, there's no doubt about that.

And like all the gifts, we should eagerly desire them. It's not something that we should shy away from, but that we should desire it. All the gifts that God has placed in his church are there for the benefit and building up of the church.

[27 : 47] that's why God has put them there. And for this reason, he places prophecy above the gift of tongues as something that we should all strive for.

Now next week, we continue on with the rest of this chapter and we will see how the gifts should be used in the context of public worship. So let me conclude with a prayer. Our Father, we thank you that you have endowed your church with the many gifts.

gifts. And Lord, we pray that we as a church, your people, would be using the gifts that you have given to each one of us. Help us not to be afraid or to shy away from them, but to eagerly desire them.

And help us to eagerly desire the gift of prophecy. Help us to be proclaimers of your word in this suburb of Doncaster and wherever we go.

Not for our own benefit, for your sake and for the building up of your church. Amen. We willOC and back home again.

[29 : 22] Help us dabei zwei just Sizce.■■■orrehyc ways that you will be together to He ags,Recordize,oni,■, with to Science.

For you, John and TJ, with perhaps Stone and revenge.