

A Study of First Corinthians

Week Twelve

1 Corinthians 14:9-40

Day One

9 So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. 10 Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. 11 If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. 12 So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

v. 9 – Paul went on to finish his analogy of a trumpet making an uncertain sound, tying it to the need for those speaking in a church setting to use words that people can understand. Truthfully I am surprised both by how much Paul wrote about this topic and the patience he exhibited in answering the question raised by the Corinthians. This was due to a few possible reasons.

First, this must have been an important issue either to Paul, the Corinthians or both. Perhaps speaking in tongues was much more prevalent then than we imagine, both in the church and in the pagan cults. Second, it seems that there were no minor issues where the life of the church was concerned. If it affected and impacted the churches he planted, then Paul took the issue seriously. Third, Paul seized every opportunity to teach and leave a set of written instructions for the church present and future. As I've stated in other studies, Paul was an excellent pastor and apostle, and provided loving and complete care for those he oversaw.

vs. 10&11 – Paul took his instruction one step further and reminded the readers that every language had a set meaning. If one meets another person and they don't share a common language, then communication is almost impossible. For someone to come to a church meeting and not understand what is being said would defeat the purpose of coming together. The implication was clear: Don't do anything in the public meeting that doesn't have the opportunity to impact the listener.

v. 12 – Paul's point, still drawing on his love teaching in chapter 13, is that one should strive for gifts that will bless and build up the body of Christ. Love should be expressed in the meetings, a love for others that precludes any selfishness when gifts are exercised.

Are you eager for spiritual gifts? Are you looking for ways to build up the Lord's church and people? If so, can you improve? If not, what you can do to get started? I think discovering your gifts would be one option, and then a concerted effort to express them would be another.

Day Two

13 For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. 15 So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. 16 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? 17 You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

v. 13 – It must have been common and permissible for believers to speak in tongues publicly; that isn't what Paul was forbidding. He was forbidding someone who would hijack the meeting and *only* speak in tongues, somehow feeling that was an acceptable spiritual practice. Paul's advice was simple. If you speak in a tongue, then be willing to pray for the interpretation. Clarity and love were the two ingredients that Paul was looking for when anyone expressed their spiritual gifts.

v. 14 – Speaking in tongues does not require one's mind, just one's spirit, since speaking in tongues is a "spirit-ual" exercise.

v. 15 – Given the fact that tongues is an exercise of the spirit as stated in verse 14, then Paul's goal for anyone who prayed in tongues was for them to speak or sing using their spirit, and then interpret for others using their mind (in the public meetings). I suppose that this is a directive that worship was to include spirit and mind, body and soul. I like that concept of using the whole being to worship the Lord. I think that is embodied in the *Shema* that every Jew spoke regularly:

Hear, O Israel : The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Since God is one, then we should worship Him as one—one body of believers using all their faculties to worship the one true God. Since God created us spirit, soul, and body, then we should use all our being in our public meetings. **Do you agree? Does that happen where you worship? I have found that many churches are unbalanced, focusing on the mind, for example, at the expense of the spirit and body, or focusing on the spirit at the expense of the mind and body. Have you experienced that dynamic?**

v. 16 – Once again Paul addressed the need for others to be able to participate in what was taking place. He argued that one who is worshipping in spirit only is hindering another from entering into the process by understanding and saying, "Amen."

v. 17 – While one member is worshipping or giving thanks effectively, others cannot enter in and thus worship is hindered. Paul did not want this to happen. I think he has

made his point, but he continued the stream of teaching in the following verses. I am surprised at the number of verses devoted to this topic; aren't you?

Day Three

18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. 19 But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. 20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. 21 In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord.

v. 18 – I don't think Paul could possibly have known whether or not he spoke in tongues more than everyone in the Corinthian church. But I think he was making a statement that he used tongues a lot, that tongues was an important part of his worship and devotional life. Paul used exaggeration, sarcasm and humor to get his point across when he wrote.

If Paul used tongues with such regularity, what about you and me? Should we not use tongues more than we do? But you may respond, "I don't speak in tongues." Then I respond by asking, "Why not? What is stopping you?" I suppose it comes down to whether speaking in tongues is only for a few or for many? A special gift or one that is shared in common? What do you think? Do you speak in tongues? Do you want to, or are you afraid of it?

v. 19 – So Paul must not have restricted speaking in tongues to his private devotional life and never used the gift in public. **Do you get that same impression?**

v. 20 – The implication here is that if one spoke in tongues publicly and did not interpret, that person was acting like a child. Perhaps we can define childish behavior in the church as doing something, even something spiritual, with selfish motives or in a way that doesn't benefit others. **Is that the proper conclusion here?** But if I operate in love and do something for others, in many ways I do receive something, but the motive wasn't selfish in the first place. I suppose that is the difference.

v. 21 – Paul quoted Isaiah 28:11 in this verse and I can't really comprehend why. It seems not to fit with the context of speaking in tongues publicly. I think we need to look at the next verse to understand the point that Paul was trying to make. So let's move on to tomorrow!

Day Four

22 Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. 23 So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? 24 But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that

he is a sinner and will be judged by all, 25 and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

v. 22 – It seems to me that Paul was saying that God speaks unintelligibly to unbelievers but never to believers. So to speak in tongues in the assembly where believers are gathered makes no sense, according to Paul. It is actually a violation of a biblical principle that God speaks plainly and directly to His people.

I am glad Paul made that connection with Isaiah 28:11, for we would never see that principle had it not been for the Spirit leading Paul to see it in the first place. That is why we must allow Scripture to speak for itself wherever and whenever possible, without us trying to find unusual or bizarre interpretations that don't exist or that God never intended. It seems that the lesson here is: God's people should always understand, unbelievers should struggle to understand.

v. 23 – This is straightforward enough. If unbelievers come in and hear everyone speaking in tongues, they will think the people present to be out of their minds. I go to a church where they regularly spend large amounts of time speaking in tongues publicly during the worship service. I am not judging them in what they do, but I don't think what they do is in line with what Paul was teaching in this chapter. Yet the church is growing and unbelievers come forward to surrender their lives to Jesus every week. So obviously God isn't offended by this practice, for His presence remains. If He's not offended, then I won't be either.

v. 24 – It seems that Paul determined that prophecy could reveal the secrets of the hearts of those present. That is because when people prophesy, they would speak intelligible words under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The things said would allow the visiting unbeliever to know for sure that God was in this place, since the believers prophesying were telling the unbelievers things known only to God and that unbeliever. For example, I was recently in a meeting where the speaker prophesied that there was a person present who had murdered someone. No one dared move when he said that, but I understand the person came forward in the counseling room for prayer. I think that is an example of what Paul was trying to say here. That unbeliever who had taken someone's life came in, heard a prophecy and said, "Only God could have known what the man just said. God is real."

v. 25 – When someone's secrets are revealed in prophecy, letting that person know that they have just heard something about themselves that only God knew, they could either run or fall down and say, "God is in this place." I have seen people do both. **Isn't that the dynamic that we need in our churches so that people, believers and unbelievers alike, can have an encounter with the living God through His people?**

Day Five

26 What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be

done for the strengthening of the church. 27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, two — or at the most three — should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. 28 If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. 29 Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. 30 And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.

v. 26 – I have seldom seen it occur that people come together and each one has something to offer the assembly. Why? I think our worship structures have changed in 2,000 years to either a liturgical or team ministry format. In the former, one person directs what is pretty much the same program every time the Body gathers. In the latter, a few people exercise their gifts of music, preaching or administration while everyone else is a spectator. Seldom do the members in the congregation join in, except to sing, give or say “Amen” to the preached word. I’m not suggesting that I know how this dynamic could be expressed in today’s mega-churches with thousands of members. Perhaps our churches have gotten too big or maybe we are spiritually lazy, content to watch a few operate in their sphere of ministry gifting.

Someone once said the church is like American football. American football is played by 11 men on each side in desperate need of rest and watched by thousands in desperate need of exercise. That does indeed sound like the state of the modern church. **So are you on the field or in the stands where church is concerned?**

Paul said these gifts that everyone has to offer *must* be expressed so the church can be strengthened. If they’re not, then that must mean that many of our modern churches are weak.

vs. 27&28 – Paul still wasn’t finished with his instructions for the public meeting where speaking in tongues was concerned. He limited the tongues speakers to two or three and insisted that someone be there to interpret. So Paul did not forbid the speaking in tongues in the public meeting, but he did forbid it if no one was there to interpret.

Where did Paul get this insight? He could not have learned this from Judaism. This must have been part and parcel with his apostolic role of overseeing the churches. Paul left nothing to chance or to personal preference or interpretation. He was clear and spent a lot of time teaching why he directed things to be as they were. One must admire Paul’s attention to detail and his zeal to see the churches thrive in the Spirit.

v. 29 – Paul’s directives for prophesy were similar. Only two or three were to speak at any given time and there must be some standing by to judge what was said. This is where the modern Pentecostal churches have missed it where prophecy is concerned, in my opinion. Those who allow prophesy don’t judge it nearly often enough. They tend to accept it at face value. Then people consider prophets and prophecy infallible, which they are not.

If prophecies are words from the Spirit, then those words should be examined to make sure they are real. Then they should be examined to see how they can be obeyed or carried out. I know many people who have prophecies who are waiting for God to fulfill them. **Do you have any prophetic words that have been spoken to you? What are you doing about those words? I have often said that a prophetic word is like a photograph negative; both need developed to see the real picture. Are you developing your prophetic words to the best of your ability? Or are you waiting for God to do what only you can do?**

v. 29 – Paul say the possibility that someone sitting in the assembly could receive a revelation while others were already prophesying. Somehow that person was to receive a chance to speak while the others were quiet. Paul assumed that the church leadership would work out the specifics of how those with a prophetic word would be noticed and released to speak.

Day Six

31 For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. 32 The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. 33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, 34 women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

v. 31 – Paul did not put limits on prophecy. Instead he encouraged it and not just from those in leadership or those with seasoned prophetic gifts. Paul expected the church to be instructed and encouraged when others prophesied. Paul had great faith not in the Corinthians who had the gifts, but in the Spirit who gave them the gifts and revelations in the first place. I have often said that Jesus knows how to build His church in the power of the Spirit. As a leader, I have too often been afraid to let Jesus and the Spirit work in the midst of the people.

Notice the lack of emphasis on the leadership throughout this teaching. Paul expected the body to conduct the ministry and not the leaders. **Today it is the other way around, don't you think? Is that a problem or is that the way that worship has developed and evolved over the last 2,000 years?**

vs. 32&33 – Prophecy isn't something that "comes on" or overwhelms someone so that they must speak, even at odd or inappropriate moments in the public worship. The prophets control what they do so that one person speaks at a time and then waits while the prophecy is judged. Then another can speak. God is a God of order in the public meeting so that the body can be instructed, encouraged and built up. According to Paul, the gifts were free to be expressed, but only in such a way that was clear and understood by all present. I think that was good advice then and good advice now.

vs. 34&35 -- It seems that Paul made a sudden topic shift or did he? He went on to write that women should be silent in the churches. I would think that we must examine what Paul said in light of the context, which was a discussion of tongues and prophecy. Was Paul saying that women were never to speak in church and, if so, does this still apply to the church today?

First of all, the promise in Joel that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, which must include female as well as male flesh. So if gifts were given to all and a woman had a prophetic gift, she had to be able to speak. If Paul forbade her to do so, then he was contradicting what he said in other places.

It seems that Paul was forbidding women to ask questions in the public assembly, which must have been an acceptable practice for men. Women were not permitted to raise an alternative view to what was happening in the assembly. They had to share their concerns and ask their questions at home or in some other setting than the public venue. I would think this was a safeguard against the issue that Paul addressed with Timothy:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

Since women tend to be more spiritually open than men and since they are more susceptible to being deceived, Paul urged them not to take public roles but to still exercise their gifts in a submissive and orderly manner.

Day Seven

36 Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? 37 If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. 38 If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. 39 Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

v. 36 – The Corinthians were a bit arrogant in their spirituality as we learned in the earlier chapters of this epistle. Paul was being a bit sarcastic here, asking if the word of God had emanated from their midst. He further asked if they were the only people that had received the Word. The obvious answer to both questions was “no.” The Word had not originated from them, nor had they cornered the market on spirituality. Thus they were to be open to what Paul had to say, for he was more experienced and gifted to address the issues they were raising.

When I first met the Lord in 1973, I thought I had received something that no other generation had ever received. I thought it was fresh and new, and I had it. That made me a bit arrogant and reckless with God’s word and ways. As I matured, however, I realized

that the Word and Spirit have been present in every generation since Jesus. I found that I had a lot to learn. I still do.

v. 37 – I think Paul was basically saying, “I don’t want to hear any other theories from anyone about how the church should operate where gifts are concerned. This is the way it is!” I admire Paul that he didn’t say this in the first place. Instead he gave a magnificent teaching on the subject, making a strong case for the directives he gave. But then enough was enough and if anyone still disagreed with him or had any other notions, they were to keep that to themselves. He had just delivered God’s command to them and he expected them to follow what he wrote.

v.. 38 – Simple enough. If anyone ignored Paul’s instructions, then that person was to be ignored. For a prophet or someone else with a public ministry, that was a tough sentence, for they needed an audience to be effective. For one to have a platform for ministry in the church, one must follow the ground rules or else forfeit their privilege to minister.

v. 39 – Finally, Paul wrapped up this section on tongues and prophecy with a quick summary. He urged that all seek to prophesy (as long as they followed the rules) and that tongues not be forbidden but managed appropriately.

v. 30 – Prophecy, tongues, communion, male and female roles in the church, giving, worship, all were to be conducted in an orderly manner that rendered maximum benefit to the people present.

I wish that the focus in every meeting was the benefit of the people and not those who are ministering. **If you are a leader, do your meetings benefit the people who come? Do they leave in better shape than when they came? Do you make room for the Spirit to emerge from the congregation from time to time and lead the meeting? If you are a member and not a leader, do you come ready to give something when you attend a service? I’m not referring to something monetary, but something related to your spiritual gifts.**

Paul had a passion for effective public meetings that benefited the people present, both believers and unbelievers. I suggest that we would do well to have the same passion.