

Sunday Morning – October 22, 2017

Growing in Grace, Growing in Community  
Life Lessons on Maturity with the Corinthians

***The Gift of Tongues: Its Meaning and Purpose***  
***What was it and why was it given?*** 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

The immaturity of the Corinthians extended into the spiritual gifts, and Paul spends three chapters (12-14) trying to get them to correct their overemphasis on a narrow and soon-to-be obsolete gift. He reminds them that the gift of tongues was a sign to the nation Israel that they would soon be under God's judgment and that the Good News was now going out to the nations. The way to understand this gift is to anchor it to the three times it is mentioned in the book of Acts (2, 10, 19) beginning with Pentecost. There, Jews from many nations heard the love of God in their national languages rather than Hebrew, a true reversal of Babel's curse. The idea that tongues are "ecstatic utterances" rather than languages is based upon assumptions we make about the text, not the simple reading of the text and comparing scripture with scripture. Paul is not praising this minor gift, but explaining its origin and purpose and curbing its abuse.

- ❖ "First, remember that a spiritual gift is for the assembly not the individual." vv. 1-5  
Tongues may build up (puff up?) the speaker, but we grow by understanding. Prophecy, like tongues, is revelation, but in the speaker's native language.
- ❖ "So think about it: Unintelligible sounds don't communicate!" vv. 6-12  
Languages, music and even bugle calls are designed to deliver messages. We should strive to communicate and build up the church, not make noise.
- ❖ "And as impressive as the gift of tongues is, it simply is non-edifying to others." vv. 13-19  
Word count exercise: One intelligible sentence is preferable to 40 illegible pages.
- ❖ "And recall that this sign to a rebellious nation is not for believers in church!" vv. 20-25  
The occasion of this gift in the first century paves the way for its obsolescence. (When Jerusalem was destroyed, the Times of the Gentiles began. Luke 21:20-24; Daniel 12:7; Romans 11:25)

**Growth Principle #17: The spiritually mature Christian treasures the edifying, clear revelation of God in the assembly, not displays of gifts for their own sake.**

1. Tongues = Human Languages. How do we know?

First, because there were perfectly good Greek terms for "ecstatic utterances," but they are never used in the New Testament. Various Greek and Roman temple oracles spoke in trances and "ecstasy," but this is a pagan idea, not Christian. The fruit of the Spirit is self-control, and Paul clearly assumes that tongues speakers are fully capable of self-regulation (1 Cor. 14:27, 28). Second, church history shows that no one suggested that Paul was discussing anything other than human languages until the late nineteenth century, and even then, the idea was not widespread until the twentieth. Third, the only place in the Bible where the purpose of the gift is discussed is here, and Paul says that it is for a sign to one nation in the language of other nations. This fits perfectly with the Acts 2, 10, and 19 accounts.

2. Tongues = Divisiveness and Confusion, then and now.

In the next few verses, Paul lays down specific rules for tongues speakers (and indeed, the entire meeting) because good order was not being followed. But order aside, when people suggest that tongues is a major gift, or an essential gift, or a universal gift for all believers, or an ecstatic utterance of some kind, it creates the same confusion and division as in Corinth. While we should never say what the Holy Spirit would not do, we can say what He has written, and be charitable to those who read and interpret differently. God does not author confusion. 1 Cor. 14:33

***Going Deeper--For Growth Groups***

1. What is it about the gift of tongues that makes it so intriguing on the one hand and so divisive on the other? Have you seen the effects of this divisiveness in a church?
2. Why does Paul suggest that the church pray for interpreters instead of tongues speakers? What would happen if they did?
3. Why would "all speaking in tongues" look like they were "out of their minds"? (v. 23) Can you summarize Paul's thinking so far in this chapter in a couple of sentences? What principles are at play?