

1 Corinthians 14

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[0:00] If you're following the Black Church Bibles. For quite a long time around the development sites down at West Ealing Station, all you could see were hoardings. You might not come to the building up that way, but it's actually the same really across the city. You see it in all kinds of different places and development sites where builders move in and they put up hoardings with pictures on them of what it's going to look like when the job is done. But for a long time, all you could see are the hoardings. And then a day comes when you notice what's being built and eventually the hoardings come down and you realise there's something there. It hasn't just been pictures, there's been work going on behind the scenes and now there's something to see. For months and years the builders have been turning up and pouring concrete and laying bricks and making a noise. And for a time there's really not been anything to see. But then there's a big old flurry, a big old fuss, the road is passable again and there it is, the construction.

They are finished, they move on, the builders, but there is a building there now. And the goal of all that they were doing remains. So they go somewhere else, their job is finished, but what they came to do has been left in their place. The Apostle Paul tells us this evening in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 that that is what love looks like in the life of the church.

Turning up, using your gifts, using your abilities, often in invisible ways, in ways that other people never see, in ways that if a photograph was taken in that moment it would look like there was nothing going on. You can't always see what you're doing. Other people can't always see what's going on. But in the end, you've built something. Paul started this section by talking about what it means to be spiritual. Do you remember? Concerning spiritual gifts. Brothers 12 verse 1, it's actually concerning the spiritual or concerning spiritual ones. Here, we're going to turn to the topic now of what it means to be spiritual, you Corinthians. Think that you are so spiritual. And he talked to them about all the gifts that the Corinthian church possessed, but despite the huge gifting that they had received from the hand of God, they were off the mark. Because they didn't understand the vital importance of love.

They really cared about what the gifts meant for them. They really cared about what the gifts meant for their status and what that meant about creating a group of people like them that could look down on others and that kind of thing. But we saw last time, if you were here last Sunday morning when we looked at 1 Corinthians chapter 13, that apart from love, apart from those gifts being expressed and clothed in love, they're just ending. The gifts of the Spirit without the foundational fruit of the Spirit, Paul says, are nothing. But this evening in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul tells us what it means to bring those two together. To exercise the gifts of the Spirit in the context of love. Look at verse 1, chapter 14, verse 1, pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts. And the pursuit of love demands that the gift that they should desire, he says, is prophecy. Do you see that? Especially that you may prophesy. Just as the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit are not equal, so the gifts themselves that God gives are not equal. Prophecy is held up as more useful because, and Paul refers to this six or seven times in the chapter, you'll have noticed as it was read, it keeps coming up, building up the church so that they are built up, so that the church is built up. He said that again and again and again all the way through the chapter. We could say that that is the goal of what he's saying here. What I'm going to talk to you about spiritual gifts actually has a construction, has something to be built up and created as a result of those gifts being exercised. It's not that one gift is good and another is sinful. Do you see that? Paul endorses both. Look at verse 18, I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Verse 39 he's saying don't give up on your gift of tongues. But he's talking about the church corporately. And the goal of the exercise of the spiritual gifts when the church gathers is that something is built. That's what we're about when we gather Lord's Day by Lord's Day.

It's like the developments at West Ealing Station. There is a building in the end. And in this case the building is not those huge towers that have appeared, but a healthy growing church. A church that is flourishing as God is at work among the many members with the many different gifts and all coming together. Now I suspect the church in Corinth, people would have agreed with that goal. They would have said yeah we can see that. I want people to be encouraged and built up. But there was evidently confusion about how they were going to achieve that. And it seems they were fixated on the exercise of the gift of tongues. It's not that different today. In some circles I can introduce you to plenty of Christians who think that unless someone speaks in tongues, they're usually spiritually deficient in some way. Tongues you see is a mark of authenticity. And if you have it you're in. If not, well you should desire it because it's really, really important. It is the thing that marks you out as being really under the favour and gifting of God. But Paul's point here is that there is something far better. He says that if you want to build something, if you want to build a church that is strong and healthy, and I hope that's true of all of us. I hope that's what we want. I hope that is what we think we're coming to bring our gifts and abilities to do in the end. To build a church that is strong and healthy. Paul says love demands. In the context of church life you prioritize prophecy over tongues. So what's going on there?

[6:38] Well before we get to the reasons for this we need to understand what he means by these two things. Verse 1, pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God, for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the spirit. On the other hand the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. For one who speaks in a tongue. What are these tongues? Well it seems to me amidst all of the confusion there are three broadly held views. The first is that these tongues are some kind of angelic speech. Now that would then assume that chapter 13 verse 1 if I speak with the tongues of angels he's talking about literal angelic speech. It's a kind of heavenly language that people on earth don't understand. That's one view. Another view is it's some kind of ecstatic speech. An expression of unintelligible words that give the speaker a sense of connection to God. Something that they do privately it's their way of communicating with God in this kind of ecstatic way. Second view. The third one is that tongues was other languages. This is what happened in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost where lots of people heard the gospel being spoken in their own language. It's the same root word here, the glossa word. These people were given the ability to speak in a language that they hadn't learned.

And they were given that gift in order to communicate the gospel across language barriers. Paul says that speaking in tongues here verse 2 is an exercise in mystery. And I think what's going on in Corinth is that the mystery is that the speaker is speaking a language that he doesn't know and neither do anybody else around him. In Jerusalem at Pentecost the speakers may not have known the language that they spoke but the hearers heard the language, understood it and believed the gospel.

I think in Corinth what he's talking about here is something where neither speaker nor hearer understands. Only God knows what is being said. And this is why verse 5 they need an interpreter. That's why he keeps talking about the need for interpretation. And this is why Paul would prefer prophecy. Now what's that? Prophecy in the Old Testament was a gift given to an individual who spoke on behalf of God. He brought God's word to bear in whatever setting. He was called to do that. And this is why the prophets in the Old Testament, their words were appreciated or followed by a thus says the Lord. God spoke through that person to the people. You get to the New Testament, Revelation 19, we're told that the spirit of prophecy is the spirit of prophecy. So one of the angelic hosts says to John in Revelation 19, worship God for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. Therefore, we want to get a definition of what prophecy is. It is speaking the word of God faithfully in order to point people to Jesus. And then the goal of that is spelled out here in verse 4. Do you see? On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

So what is prophecy? It is speaking the word of God faithfully in order to point people to Jesus so that the church is built up, encouraged and consoled. How does that happen? It's all the work of the Holy Spirit. He can empower a man directly as he did with the prophets of old or he can gift a man to speak with authority from the Bible as he does today.

[10:18] There is lots of debate about prophecy. Books have been written, disagreed with, counter disagreed with and so on and so on. But most of the problems, I think, come because we have

flattened the road from Corinth to today. God communicated with first century Corinth in a different way to how he communicates to us. Back in Corinth, they would have had the Old Testament.

They would have had some of the gospels and they would have had an oral tradition. That is why they needed prophets. We are in a different time and at a different position, a better position. Because, do you remember what was said in chapter 13 about the perfect coming? Well, we live the other side of that. We have the fullness of God's revelation in the Bible. We are able to know what God says simply by opening the scriptures and understanding them. There is no fresh revelation today. There are no prophets today in the sense that there were in first century Corinth. But there is prophecy in the sense that the Spirit gifts and guides someone through the Bible text. Context of the first century, the Spirit would have given the prophet, like say Agabus, new words. In our context, the Spirit keeps the believer close to his words in the Bible.

In both cases, those words have the Spirit's anointing. They have the Spirit's authority, but they come by a different route. We can get ourselves all twisted up and fuss and fret over all that is going on and feeling, particularly in a pastoral way, feeling like we are somehow deficient because we don't have what we think is going on here in Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 14, when in actual fact, we have something far better. We have the scriptures. We have the words of God God with the Spirit's anointing and his authority.

[12:20] It is also worth saying that that is especially the case when it comes to what we're doing now, what I'm doing now in preaching. The Puritans were very strong on the connection between preaching and prophecy. William Perkins wrote a book on preaching that he called The Art of Prophesying.

And when you think about how Paul describes the consequences of prophecy, back to that verse, upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation, those are the same consequences of good preaching any time you hear it.

So, I take it that tongues here are an unknown language and prophecy is speaking God's words intelligibly. But to fixate on what those are, as so many people do when they get to chapter 14 here, is to miss the bigger pastoral point of the chapter, which is that love prioritizes prophecy over tongues because prophecy, speaking God's words, pointing people to Jesus for their upbuilding, is what builds the church. And it does that for two reasons. Here's the first one. It's because it's intelligible.

That's what Paul is saying here. When someone speaks in tongues, unless it is interpreted, no one knows what's said. Verse 2, for one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men, but to God, for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the spirit. Paul, verse 6 says, this is of no benefit because like musical instruments that are just played or strummed or blown, if I was to go down here and take one of these instruments and just bang away on the keys or pull one of those bows across the stream, whoever owns this, don't worry, I'll not do it. I can see you just panicking, like, don't, please don't do it. It would make a noise, but that would be all it was. It would be just a noise. There'd be no clarity. There'd be no tune. The bugle here that he speaks about, that would have been the battle call. It wouldn't have been able to be discerned. What is the battle call? Somebody doesn't know what they're doing. They just blow into this thing.

If with your tongue you utter speech, verse 9, that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what's said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning. But if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker a foreigner to me.

[14:54] Some of you will have personal experience of what Paul is describing here. You're trying to learn English, but you're finding it hard, and it's much easier to speak in your own language. But when you speak in your own language to people, they don't understand what you're saying.

I find that often. What happens is both sides feel the difference. I'm told I'm speaking English, but they don't seem to understand it. What ends up happening is that there's confusion.

They don't know what I'm saying, what you're saying. You don't know what they're saying. Paul says it's like this with tongues. Unless those tongues are interpreted, in which case they become like prophecy. But prophecy builds up the church because it is intelligible. You can hear God's voice.

You can respond to what he says. You can easily know what it is that he's telling you to do. And since the church is not a forum, as we've seen again and again and again in this section, the church is not a forum for people to show off their gifts, but rather a context to be built up in God's word.

Prophecy should be desired above tongues. Or tongues used in order to prophesy with their interpretation. It's like Chris Kitchen learning Farsi in order to share the gospel and be understood among our Persian friends.

[16:23] Point is that what happens in worship should be intelligible to as many people as possible. We can, of course, apply this beyond our worship services. When you think about your spiritual growth, when you ask God to mature you and to grow you up, do you pray for the ability to understand and explain God's word to others in an intelligible and edifying way?

How will you be built up personally? Understanding God's word and it being applied to your life and taking root and bearing fruit there. How will you be a blessing and a cause of upbuilding to others in the life of the church as you share God's word with them in an edifying way? This is what will build the church. This will leave something tangible when your time here is done and you move on. All of us are here at IPC Ealing for a time. Some of us will stay for a long time.

I hope lots of you will. For others among us, this is a season. I hope you're planning to invest your family and your life here for as long as you can. The more people who leave this group because their race is run, they leave, as it were, in a coffin, the better. Actually, for all of us. The more we stay, the more we serve, the better it is. But when your time has come to move on, whenever that might be, you will want to have built something. You will want to leave behind men and women, boys and girls, standing for Christ because you spoke to them of Christ. Verse 2, for their upbuilding and their encouragement and consolation. Verse 19, for their instruction.

So can you see as we go about this building project, prophecy is superior to tongues because it is intelligible. But then secondly, it is also better because, point number two, it is accessible. It is accessible. When the church gathers, although we gather to worship God, that's the main thing that we do when we gather like this and we do what we do on God's terms, what is said needs to be accessible to those who don't believe. Look at verse 20. Brothers, do not be children in your thinking.

[18:29] Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. In the law it is written by people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners. Will I speak to this people? And even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord. Thus tongues are a sign not for believers, but for unbelievers.

While prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers, but for believers. If therefore the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues and outsiders or unbelievers enter, they will not say that you're out of your mind. Will they, sorry, will they not say that you're out of your minds? But if all prophesy and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he's convicted by all. He is called to account by all. The secrets of his heart are disclosed and so falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. What's going on here? Well, the church thinks that it is tongue speaking that is a sign of spiritual maturity. And Paul says it's the opposite. In fact, Paul quotes there from Isaiah chapter 28, where God's people hearing languages they didn't know was a sign of God's judgment. God was judging them by having the message come by language that they didn't understand because they weren't able to respond. It wasn't accessible to them. That was the way that God judged them. They were being overrun by other nations. They weren't able to understand and turn back to the Lord. And Paul says that tongue speaking in the church is like this. It is a sign of pending judgment on those who can't understand.

And so think like some did at Pentecost that we're like drunk people. Prophecy, on the other hand, is accessible so people can hear. They can be convicted of their sin and so they can believe.

If tongue speaking goes on in the worship service, what does that tell the unbeliever about the Christian faith? It tells them, first of all, that it doesn't make sense. But more than that, it tells them that they're excluded. That there's nothing here for them. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, a way of telling them to go to hell. But that's not what we want. It's definitely not what we want. And it's not necessary. We want them to hear that there is no condemnation for those who bring the dark secrets of their heart to Christ. We want them to understand that God is merciful to all and any who will put their faith in Him. We want them to know that God has grace in abundance for any and all who turn from their sin to worship Him.

Can you hear my voice this evening? If you understand what I'm saying, God is calling you.

[21:08] Turn to Him. Receive the forgiveness that He is holding out to you and be reconciled to the God who made you for Himself. The God who made you longs for a relationship with you. You have broken relationship with Him in your sin.

You've decided that it's better to live in God's world on your terms. That's the definition of sin. That's what we all do by nature. We take all of God's good gifts and we say, you stay out of the picture. I'm going to live my life in your world my way. And He didn't leave us to it. He didn't let us head off and destroy ourselves. Instead, in His great love, He sent His Son, the Lord Jesus, who came and He lived the life that we should have lived but didn't. He died the death that we deserved in our place, on the cross, and three days later, He rose again to defeat sin for our justification.

You can be reconciled to God right now in your seat if you will put your faith in that Lord Jesus. He is the one who has taken every sin on Himself. You can take your sin and you can put it on Him. It was paid for at the cross.

We'll see that depicted beautifully as we come to the Lord's table in a few moments time. And if you put your faith in Him, He will forgive you completely and He will reconcile you to God.

[22 : 34] If you can hear my voice, I want you to know that there is hope for you in a world that desperately hungers for hope and His name is Jesus.

I mentioned Isaiah a moment ago in the context of Isaiah. It was God's people who had turned their back on Him and were being judged. In the gospel there is hope for those who have wandered away. Wherever you come from, whatever you've done in your life, this hope is for you.

And we speak plainly from the Bible because if that is you, we want you to be able to hear this and to come back. Come to Jesus. Come back to Jesus.

If you can hear that invitation, He is the one who is calling you. It's not just me. He is calling you. So come now. What is said?

When the church gathers, something will be built. It needs to be intelligible to the whole church. It needs to be accessible to the unbeliever. And it's prophecy that does that. Speaking the truth of God's Word, pointing people to Jesus in order that they might be built up.

[23 : 43] And Paul then concludes by getting practical. Look at verse 26. What then, brothers? Saying, well, what will this look like in practice? Well, it means then that these church gatherings will, thirdly, be ordered.

Prophecy is better than tongues because it is intelligible and it's accessible. And when this is applied, it will mean that our gatherings are ordered. Paul describes how the different gifts in the body will work.

But that doesn't mean that everybody gets to play, so to speak. He outlines what will enable the church to be built up, verse 27. He says that this will happen through peace, verse 33, which comes, verse 40, through order.

But all things should be done decently and in order. So in the context of Corinth, verse 27, when someone brings a tongue, they do so one at a time.

With interpretation, verse 29, when a prophet speaks, again, it's one at a time. Tongues must be interpreted. Prophecy must be weighed. It's not a free-for-all. That's his point. Make sure whatever way this is working.

[24 : 47] And remember, this is a context that we're taking a principle from. We're not trying to replicate that. We move on from there. We've got the scriptures now. But it is interesting because Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, has described our time as, quote, the age of authenticity.

He's saying in our day and age, we prize about many things being authentic. And for us, to be authentic, we put a high value on spontaneity. We think if we're spontaneous, that's the real us, the truly authentic version of who we are.

And we see this in the church when people don't just, well, they don't typically prepare. They come and they say, I'm going to wait on the Spirit and see where he leads me. We call that laziness. But they say things like, I'm going to speak to you from the heart this evening. Or, you know, I haven't prepared anything. I just want to come to you from the heart. But careful consideration about what to say.

Order in worship gatherings. That's as authentic, that's more authentic than anything spontaneous. And God speaks clearly, perhaps even more clearly, with carefully ordered and prepared sermons.

[25 : 52] With carefully ordered prophecy than something apparently spontaneous. And that is why, verse 33, look at verse 33. The spirit of the prophets is subject to the control of the prophets.

Even when in the first century, the spirit of God spoke directly to someone. They control what is said. And this explains the charge in 34 to 35 about women keeping quiet.

So taking this wider section together, it seems that Corinth, there were some of the women were interrupting the speakers during the worship services. And Paul's saying that's a problem. Remember back in chapter 11 what he said about men and women and the created order that our gender reflects.

This is the development of that point. So if you imagine I'm preaching here and my wife were to stand up and say, no, Reuben, that's wrong. Let me tell you what's right.

It would be very awkward for a start. But more than that, it would not reflect the order of authority either in marriage or in the church. That's the point that Paul's making here. And that's what Paul wants to prevent.

[26:57] It seems to me that what was going on in the worship services in Corinth was a bit like the Wild West. And he's saying, don't do that. She can speak to you about it at home.

Not in a way that disrupts the order of the worship service. Order provides the context for intelligibility and accessibility so that the church may be built up.

But also because that order speaks of the one who stands behind it. The creator. The Lord of glory. The God of peace and order. So we can pull this together a bit.

If you're still awake, well done. As you think about your involvement in church life, do you want to build something spiritual? Something that will outlast you?

Well then, give yourself to edifying others. And join in worship that is intelligible and accessible and ordered. And play your part to the full.

[27:59] It might not sound or look outwardly impressive. But it is gatherings like these. Gatherings like what we are doing this evening. That down the centuries in the purposes of God have transformed lives.

Because it is in this context that the spirit works to bring people to declare. God is really among you. And to bring them under his rule and care. And as Christ builds his church in this way, it isn't just lives that are transformed.

But communities and even nations as well. It all ripples out. God brings us together each Lord's Day. And he works among us for our upbuilding.

That we might go out and bring his word and the hope of his gospel into the world. And as individuals are changed and families are changed and communities are changed and nations are changed.

This is all part of what we are doing when we worship in this way. Let's give ourselves to this and trust that God will do his work.

[29:04] Let's pray together.