

The Imperfect Church – 25
The Speaking Church
1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Introduction

From the very beginning, God has been a speaking God. In the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 we find the refrain as God creates everything from nothing, "God said...and it was so." God is a speaking God. God spoke directly to the OT patriarchs like Abraham and Moses. The Bible even includes the detail that God would speak to Moses face to face, as a person speaks to a friend. As time moved on, God would speak to a representative figure who ruled over his people, like the judges or kings. God would speak to prophets, who would then communicate that message to individuals, or Israel, or the nations. God is a speaking God.

When we get to the NT, we find that God speaks to us in a unique and definitive way. John 1 describes Jesus as "the Word" who is from God. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of God's word to us and God's will for the world. Hebrews 1:1-3 sums up this perfect Word from God - **Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. ² And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. ³ The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.**

After Jesus died and rose again, and then ascended into Heaven, he gave to us his final form of communication...the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16 says that the Bible is inspired, or "God-breathed." This is why we believe in what is known as the Doctrine of Inspiration...that the Bible is given to us by God and is the complete, error-free, sufficient Word of God. God has always been a speaking God.

Because of that, God's people have always been a speaking people. From cover to cover in the Bible, God's people are told to sing, to pray, to encourage, to confess, to teach, to preach, to share their faith with the lost. We speak.

Psalm 71:15-18 – **¹⁵ I will tell everyone about your righteousness. All day long I will proclaim your saving power, though I am not skilled with words.**

¹⁶ I will praise your mighty deeds, O Sovereign Lord.
 I will tell everyone that you alone are just.
¹⁷ O God, you have taught me from my earliest childhood,
 and I constantly tell others about the wonderful things you do.
¹⁸ Now that I am old and gray,
 do not abandon me, O God.
 Let me proclaim your power to this new generation,
 your mighty miracles to all who come after me.

Psalm 145:4-7 – Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts;
 let them proclaim your power.

⁵ I will meditate on your majestic, glorious splendor
 and your wonderful miracles.
⁶ Your awe-inspiring deeds will be on every tongue;
 I will proclaim your greatness.
⁷ Everyone will share the story of your wonderful goodness;
 they will sing with joy about your righteousness.

Colossians 3:16 - ¹⁶ Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

As God is a speaking God, God's people are a speaking people. However, our speaking is governed by our speaking God. The NT letters consistently warn us against, and forbid sins of speech...lying, gossip, slander, coarse joking. Jesus said in Matthew 12:33-37 - ³³ "A tree is identified by its fruit. If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad. ³⁴ You brood of snakes! How could evil men like you speak what is good and right? For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. ³⁵ A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. ³⁶ And I tell you this, you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak. ³⁷ The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you."

When God's people gather together, speaking is the vast majority of what we do. We sing. We pray. We discuss. We encourage. We teach and preach. But even in Church, especially in Church, our speaking is governed by God to ensure that the Church is what it is supposed to be, and the Church does what it is supposed to do. This is what Paul now turns to as he begins closing up this section on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14.

Before we read the text, let me remind you where we are, and give a couple of other reminders that will help us engage the text better. Paul is in his final 3-chapter argument in the letter, this one on spiritual gifts. In chapter 12 he laid out what spiritual gifts are and how they are to function in the life of the Church. Every believer has been given at least one gift and are to use that gift for the benefit of the body of believers. An un-serving Christian is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. But since the Corinthian Christians were using their gifts in an unhelpful way, chapter 13 helps set us all straight to show us that love for others is to guide all of our actions. Now in chapter 14 Paul will zero in on two specific spiritual gifts that were being particularly mishandled in Corinth, and they are two primary speaking gifts...tongues and prophecy.

Though we defined these two gifts a few weeks ago, let's remind ourselves what these biblical gifts actually are and set aside all the goofiness surrounding them from our present day. Speaking in tongues is not the gibberish stuff that happens in so many Charismatic environments. The biblical gift of tongues, as is made absolutely clear in Acts 2, is the supernatural ability to speak a human language (word for 'tongue' means language) that is unknown to the speaker but known to the hearer. It is an evangelistic gift that enables the Gospel to travel around the world without any language barrier. If you have the gift of tongues, congratulations you are called to the mission field (this will come up in our text today). Prophecy is best understood to be preaching/teaching today. The word literally translates as 'to speak in front of.' To prophesy means to stand in front of a person or people and speak on God's behalf. With that in mind, let's look at our text:

1 Corinthians 14:1-25 - Let love be your highest goal! But you should also desire the special abilities the Spirit gives—especially the ability to prophesy. ² For if you have the ability to speak in tongues, you will be talking only to God, since people won't be able to understand you. You will be speaking by the power of the Spirit, but it will all be mysterious. ³ But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them. ⁴ A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally, but one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the entire church. ⁵ I wish you could all speak in tongues, but even more I wish you could all prophesy. For prophecy is greater than speaking in tongues, unless someone interprets what you are saying so that the whole church will be strengthened. ⁶ Dear brothers and sisters, if I should come to you speaking in an unknown language, how would that help you? But if I bring you a revelation or some special knowledge or prophecy or teaching, that will be helpful. ⁷ Even lifeless instruments like the flute or the harp must play the notes clearly, or

no one will recognize the melody. ⁸ And if the bugler doesn't sound a clear call, how will the soldiers know they are being called to battle?

⁹ It's the same for you. If you speak to people in words they don't understand, how will they know what you are saying? You might as well be talking into empty space.

¹⁰ There are many different languages in the world, and every language has meaning. ¹¹ But if I don't understand a language, I will be a foreigner to someone who speaks it, and the one who speaks it will be a foreigner to me. ¹² And the same is true for you. Since you are so eager to have the special abilities the Spirit gives, seek those that will strengthen the whole church.

¹³ So anyone who speaks in tongues should pray also for the ability to interpret what has been said. ¹⁴ For if I pray in tongues, my spirit is praying, but I don't understand what I am saying.

¹⁵ Well then, what shall I do? I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand. I will sing in the spirit, and I will also sing in words I understand. ¹⁶ For if you praise God only in the spirit, how can those who don't understand you praise God along with you? How can they join you in giving thanks when they don't understand what you are saying? ¹⁷ You will be giving thanks very well, but it won't strengthen the people who hear you.

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you. ¹⁹ But in a church meeting I would rather speak five understandable words to help others than ten thousand words in an unknown language.

²⁰ Dear brothers and sisters, don't be childish in your understanding of these things. Be innocent as babies when it comes to evil, but be mature in understanding matters of this kind. ²¹ It is written in the Scriptures:

"I will speak to my own people
through strange languages
and through the lips of foreigners.

But even then, they will not listen to me,"
says the Lord.

²² So you see that speaking in tongues is a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers. Prophecy, however, is for the benefit of believers, not unbelievers. ²³ Even so, if unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your church meeting and hear everyone speaking in an unknown language, they will think you are crazy. ²⁴ But if all of you are prophesying, and unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your meeting, they will be convicted of sin and judged by what you say. ²⁵ As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, "God is truly here among you."

In this text, Paul lays out for us exactly what it is that is supposed to be happening when we gather as the Church. When we gather, we:

1. STRENGTHEN OTHERS (V. 1-5)
2. COMMUNICATE CLEARLY (V. 6-11)
3. ENGAGE MENTALLY (V. 12-20)
4. WELCOME OUTSIDERS (V. 21-25)

1. STRENGTHEN OTHERS (V. 1-5)

He begins in v. 1 by transitioning out of this great chapter on love to specifically dealing with these spiritual gifts. "Let love be your highest goal" is a good summary of all of chapter 13. Our love for others is to be of utmost importance to us in the Church. Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is the motivation for who we are and what we do. Therefore, we don't just settle into a view of love that is all emotion and no action. Which is why he says to pursue spiritual gifts. Don't just say you love people. Don't just feel love for people. Utilize your spiritual gifts to actually love them. And of all the gifts to pursue, he says to pursue prophecy especially. Why is that?

The answer is in v. 2 as he gives his first of several negative comments about speaking in tongues. If you speak in tongues you are talking only to God, he says. Now, this verse has been used to teach that speaking in some gibberish in church is some spiritual prayer language (talking to God). That is not Paul's point. His point is that you are only talking to God because he is the only one who could understand you! You won't be helpful to anyone. Again, since tongues is an evangelistic/missions gift, if you start speaking Spanish to someone who doesn't know Spanish, the Lord knows what you are saying, but this person doesn't. It's not helpful. Yes, it's by the power of the Spirit, but it's mysterious. Not mysterious in a cool way, but mysterious in a waste of time kind of way.

He contrasts this in v. 3...prophecy (speaking on God's behalf to another person) "strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them." Wow, what a difference. Instead of wasting their time or being unhelpful or frustrating, you are making a real difference. He's used this word for "strengthen" several times already in the letter...it is the word for building a house. People are to be built up by our conversations with them. What we say, what we teach, how we encourage...all of that is to strengthen them.

Ephesians 4:29 – ²⁹ Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

Notice what he says in v. 4. The person who speaks in tongues is personally strengthened, but the person who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the whole church. Again, this verse has been used to justify goofy charismatic practices, saying that gibberish has its place because the individual believer is built up, and that is good for them. Again, that is not Paul's point. He has already said in chapter 12 that the entire purpose of spiritual gifts is to serve others. So when he says those who speak in tongues are personally built up, that is not a good thing. That's not the point. Your personal enjoyment and growth is never the point of the Church. You have been gifted by God, not for your growth, but for the growth of others.

He circles back around to this again in v. 5 by flat out stating that prophecy is better than tongues. Unless...the language you are speaking can be interpreted. Then, since it is interpreted for everyone to understand, "the whole church is strengthened." Friends, this is why we gather. We sing to celebrate the goodness of God and remind ourselves of the glorious truths about God. We listen to teaching and preaching so we can be built up on the foundation of the Gospel and God's will found solely in the Bible. We come alongside one another and pray for each other and encourage each other...so that God can use those things to strengthen our faith, our love, our hope. If something comes out of your mouth that doesn't strengthen the Church, you have missed the point of Church.

2. COMMUNICATE CLEARLY (V. 6-11)

Look at the beginning of v. 6 – "If I should come to you speaking in an unknown language, how would that help you?" That is the point he is trying to make all throughout this passage. If you can't understand what I am saying, it isn't helpful at all. You get nothing out of that. He uses a couple illustrations to make his point: a flute, a harp, and a trumpet make noise, but unless there is a melody to it, it is useless.

v. 9 - ⁹It's the same for you. If you speak to people in words they don't understand, how will they know what you are saying? You might as well be talking into empty space.

This is why we are intentionally clear when we preach, teach, and pray. We could get all nerdy with big words and phrases like: tetragrammaton, dispensational premillennialism, aseity, perspicuity...or we could only use insider lingo comprised of Christian slogans, empty "Christianese" jargon that means nothing to most people. Instead, when we use big words we define them. We keep truth at an accessible level for anyone.

You shouldn't need an advanced theology degree to understand and follow a sermon. I've never been accused of being so smart that people can't understand me. You shouldn't need 20 years of church experience to understand what is happening. This is why we take time every single week to explain why we do the things we do, like take communion and receive an offering. Just because you've been around and know exactly what is happening doesn't mean everyone in the room is on the same page as you.

Look at v. 10-11 as he shows us what it is like when we are not clear in what we communicate: **¹⁰ There are many different languages in the world, and every language has meaning. ¹¹ But if I don't understand a language, I will be a foreigner to someone who speaks it, and the one who speaks it will be a foreigner to me.**

If you have ever travelled to another country and got lost or needed info and couldn't find someone who spoke English, you understand the frustration of this. I got stranded once in Japan and couldn't find anyone who spoke English to help me get travel arrangements made. It was a terrifying and frustrating 12 hours. They couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand them. That's Paul's point. In fact, when he says "foreigner" he uses the Greek word *barbaros*, where we get our word 'barbarian.' The Greeks labeled anyone who didn't speak Greek as a *barbaros*. Why? Because that is what their foreign language sounded like to them. Bar, Bar, Bar. If we aren't clear in our communication about Jesus and about the Bible to those around us, all they hear is incomprehensible nonsense.

3. ENGAGE MENTALLY (V. 12-20)

Notice v. 13-14 - **¹³ So anyone who speaks in tongues should pray also for the ability to interpret what has been said. ¹⁴ For if I pray in tongues, my spirit is praying, but I don't understand what I am saying.**

Again, this is all about understanding what is being said. Comprehending the truth of the message and then doing something with it. You can't apply, process, or live out something you can't comprehend. When he says "pray in tongues" that is not endorsing the view that says this gibberish blamed on the Holy Spirit is some prayer language. Those with the supernatural gift of speaking in another language have the ability to speak, to pray, even to sing in that other language (as he says in a couple verses). So if someone prays in a different language that the don't speak...their "spirit" is praying. Notice the word is not capitalized, so we aren't talking about the Holy Spirit. Think, soul or emotions. That person is praying at a heart level, but not engaging their mind...they don't know what they are praying! I hope it's good!

v. 15 - ¹⁵ Well then, what shall I do? I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand. I will sing in the spirit, and I will also sing in words I understand.

Yes, pray from the soul. Pray from your heart. Sing from your heart. It is fitting for emotions to be involved in these things. But we don't rely on our emotions to guide us. They are not a firm foundation. Faith is not about how you feel. So we engage the mind. So yes, pray from your heart...but pray with your mind as well. Sing from the depths of your soul...but ensure you are thinking about what you are singing. Mentally engage with the truths of the song, don't just hope you feel goosebumps because of a good key change or harmony. When Paul uses this phrase "I understand" it literally translates as "with the mind."

We don't check our brains at the door and come in here for an emotional experience. That doesn't help anyone. This isn't a cool concert and a Ted Talk. This isn't Christian karaoke and a speech. This is worship and a sermon...it's supposed to be different.

The pastor of one of the largest churches in America, who has written a dozen NY Time bestsellers, travels around the world to "preach," and boasts a church of almost 50,000 in weekly attendance...is a heretic. He has consistently preached/written things that are directly contrary to the Bible. Yet he's a tremendous communicator. Years ago one of his traveling shows came through St. Louis and I was disappointed that 50 people from the church went to it. I asked one guy why he went, when he knew he didn't preach truth. His answer: "He makes me feel good about myself."

Friends, that's not the point! You may be disappointed by what comes from this pulpit. But please understand...the purpose of this pulpit is not cultural commentary, not political pundancy, not stand-up comedy act. This purpose of this pulpit is to teach the Bible, to herald the Gospel, to introduce people to the glorious truth of the love of God for sinners like us. We aren't here to entertain. Our children's programming isn't here to entertain your kids. Our student ministry isn't in the business of entertainment. We are here to come alongside you and your family to introduce you to Jesus and teach the Bible. If all you are after is feeling good, you will have to consciously ignore large parts of the Bible. When the Holy Spirit convicts, it doesn't feel good. It hurts. This is why we engage the mind...emotions are a terrible master.

4. WELCOME OUTSIDERS (V. 21-25)

In v. 22 Paul confirms what we have said about the gift of tongues...it is for unbelievers. It's an evangelistic gift, designed to overcome the language barrier so the Gospel can go anywhere. Prophecy, speaking to another on God's behalf, benefits believers. Christians are encouraged, strengthened, helped, convicted, by God's clear word to them. And we have the privilege of sharing the truth of God's word to them, and being used by God to make a difference in someone else's life.

However, what happens if any unbeliever comes to Church? And that is certainly true today...there are always people in this room who haven't trusted in Christ and don't believe what the Bible says. We love that you are here, you are welcome here. There is nowhere better for you to be, to explore, to ask questions. With unbelievers in the room, does that mean we start speaking in tongues since that is for unbelievers? Absolutely not!

v. 23 - ²³ Even so, if unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your church meeting and hear everyone speaking in an unknown language, they will think you are crazy.

William Baker – "While tongue-speakers may think their gift is a demonstration of God's power to unbelievers and an encouraging sign to believers, neither is true. Incessant tongue speaking looks like nothing more than immature grandstanding to believers and like uninhibited craziness to unbelievers. It is a sign to drive them away from God to their own condemnation apart from Christ."¹

No. Nothing changes. We continue to speak clearly, share the truth of the Bible, make everything understandable, and God uses that to make an eternal difference in people's lives.

v. 24-25 - ²⁴ But if all of you are prophesying, and unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your meeting, they will be convicted of sin and judged by what you say. ²⁵ As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, "God is truly here among you."

That's why we are here. This is not only our plan to have this happen here. This is God's plan to have this happen here. Hear/Believe/Confess/Baptize

¹ William Baker, "[1 Corinthians](#)," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 201.