

IN HOW YOU WORSHIP (Part 2)**1 CORINTHIANS 14**

The United Kingdom was once the center of the Christian faith. A recent poll was taken of 2,000 Britons trying to find out how they define the “perfect Sunday.” A “perfect Sunday” meant waking at 8:30 a.m. to the smell of breakfast cooking, a cuddle, and three hours of television. A quarter of Brits thought an ideal weekend morning starts with a full English breakfast in bed and a third wanted to start their Sunday morning with a cup of tea or coffee, before puttering around the house for an hour. The perfect Sunday roast is said to be best served at 3:15 p.m. with, ideally, four people. Other activities Brits enjoy doing on Sunday include reading a book, listening to music, and doing some gardening. Nearly one in 10 said they spend their Sunday afternoon at the pub, while one in seven think Sundays are made for doing food shopping to keep the cupboards stocked for the rest of the week. Attending church for the purpose of worshipping God did not appear in the poll at all. Worship is our subject today.

We’ve been working our way through the entire NT letter of 1 Corinthians. The title of this message series is “In Whatever You Do”: Discovering What It Means To Glorify God.” I gave it that title because I believe the key verse to understanding 1 Corinthians is found in 10:31 (NLT), “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” Paul, the great Christian leader, who wrote 1 Corinthians was trying to help the Christians who lived in Corinth to understand their ultimate mission in life: to magnify, to exalt, to bring honor and give praise to God in every conceivable area of their lives: every situation, every task, every relationship, and every circumstance.

The Corinthians had written Paul a letter with a lot of questions in it and his response back to them is what we call 1 Corinthians. Many of their questions had to do with what happened when they got together to worship God. Worship gatherings is the context for much of what Paul wrote in chapters 11 – 14. He approved of some things they did in worship, to be sure. But other worship practices made him cringe. So it’s like listening in to one side of a phone conversation. We hear what Paul said to the Corinthians which helps us, then, to understand the concerns and questions of the Corinthians. Chapter 14 is really all about how to glorify God in how we worship. It’s a long chapter, so instead of reading all 40 verses, I’m going to refer to specific verses in the chapter as I speak today. But I certainly encourage you to read the whole chapter yourself at another time. It’s God’s Word, so you will only benefit by reading all of it. I think, first, understanding and, second, applying chapter 14 to our lives today depends on asking and answering four key questions. Here’s the first one:

WHAT NEEDED TO BE CORRECTED?

When we read chapter 14, we find lots of instruction and information. But it’s important to remember Paul was trying to correct the Corinthians. He wanted their public worship services to glorify God and edify everyone attending them. But some of their practices were making that goal impossible to achieve. So, what was going on here? The specific problem was an abuse of the spiritual gifts of tongues. So many were trying to speak in tongues, other gifts were being shut out. Many were trying to speak all at the

same time which created a chaotic environment. And often there was no interpretation, so no one could understand what was being said. Now, strange as it may seem to us now, speaking in tongues was a highly coveted spiritual gift among the Corinthians Christians. Why? Apparently, the Corinthians thought they were speaking the language of the angels. In Paul's day and time, some Jews and then some Christians thought angels had their own language. They thought speaking in tongues was one and the same as the ability to speak an angelic language. There's plenty of evidence that some of the Christians there in Corinth thought they were well on their way to becoming like angels. They didn't have to concern themselves with sex or marriage anymore (that's in chapters 6-7). They didn't need a physical body in the future, so they didn't need to be resurrected (that's next week in chapter 15). Being able to speak in tongues seemed like crystal clear evidence they were becoming everything God wanted them to be. It became a marker of high level spirituality. In other words, they thought it proved they had arrived spiritually. If the Holy Spirit had given them the ability to speak the words angels spoke, didn't that prove they were spiritually advanced? Wasn't that evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit?

Beyond the specific problem regarding the misuse or abuse of speaking in tongues, there was a deeper problem. What was that? A mistaken view of spirituality. Paul and the Corinthians were just not on the same page when it came to defining a truly spiritual person – someone filled with the Holy Spirit. The Corinthians put the wrong value on speaking in tongues. Paul was happy to acknowledge it as a legitimate spiritual gift. But they'd forgotten that showing love to one another was far more important. That's what Paul said in chapter 13 which we discussed last week. So was the transformation of your character by the Holy Spirit. While they were all enamored with speaking in tongues, they were tolerating sexual immorality, participating in idolatrous worship practices by eating at pagan temples, and acting inappropriately when they came together to celebrate the Lord's Supper. To put it bluntly, when it came to being spiritual, the Corinthians were guilty of putting the emPHAsis on the wrong syllABLE! Here's a second question we should ask and try to answer.

WHAT IS THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

Many of you know I was raised in a Pentecostal church. Speaking in tongues and words of prophecy were common practices in our worship gatherings. So what Paul wrote here doesn't seem strange, or weird, or out there to me. But I'm fully aware that some listening today haven't been exposed to the worship practices of Christians who identify as Pentecostal or Charismatic, and so what we read here sounds strange at best and distasteful at worst. Careful! Let's be very careful about ever despising the gift of tongues or thinking it's unnecessary. It is most definitely a gift of the Holy Spirit. If God chooses to give it, it would be arrogant for any of us to despise it as illegitimate.

So, what exactly is tongues? It's a personal prayer language with God. Usually the person speaking in tongues doesn't understand what's being said. Paul wrote here, "For if I pray in tongues, my spirit is praying, but I don't understand what I am

saying. Well then, what shall I do? I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand.” (14:14-15 NLT) It’s a way to communicate with God in prayer and praise that transcends my knowledge or understanding. How does someone actually speak in tongues? Everyone’s experience may be slightly different, but here are a few observations. It’s not when someone just opens their mouth and God takes over their tongue. It doesn’t happen by repeating some sound or phrase faster and faster until God takes over your mouth. Instead, a word or a sound occurs to your mind and you vocalize it. With the gift of tongues, you simply continue to speak the words and sounds coming into your mind, trusting God is prompting them. You believe He understands fully what you’re vocalizing and that through the Holy Spirit what you say is perfectly appropriate for the moment.

OK, but what’s the benefit of speaking in tongues? Its primary purpose is personal spiritual edification. As hard as it may be for some of us to grasp, spiritual edification can take place in ways other than through logical understanding. With the gift of tongues, the intent is to speak to God and not to other human beings. Therefore, it’s fine if no one understands you when you speak in tongues, because God understands you. Paul put it like this, “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.” (14:2-3 NLT) So, the person who speaks in tongues is edified by their own communion with God through the Holy Spirit without the need for perpetual understanding of what’s coming out of their own mouth.

Now, neither the person who speaks in tongues nor the person who hears them can understand what’s being said. That was a most important point Paul had to make over and over again in chapter 14. If used in worship gatherings, tongues needs to be interpreted. Paul wrote, “If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.” (14:28 NLT) Paul had the gift of tongues himself, but he apparently didn’t exercise that gift in worship gatherings. “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you. But in a church meeting I would rather speak five understandable words to help others than ten thousand words in an unknown language.” (14:18-19 NLT) He didn’t forbid tongues in worship gatherings, but he insisted on interpretation if it was used. “So anyone who speaks in tongues should pray also for the ability to interpret what has been said.... If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.” (14:13, 27 NLT) If tongues get interpreted, people can then understand what’s been said and be blessed by it. It’s like when we read one of the psalms. We can be blessed by what other people say to God through their prayers and words of praise. But if not, people – especially unsaved people – might think you’re just crazy and have lost your mind. “So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” (14:23 NLT) That brings us to a third question we’ll try to answer.

WHAT IS THE GIFT OF PROPHECY?

When we read 1 Corinthians 14, it becomes clear that while Paul thought tongues with interpretation was fine in worship gatherings and should be allowed, he had a clear preference for another spiritual gift: prophecy. So what is that gift about? It's a spontaneous, Holy Spirit inspired, intelligible message for others. Now Paul was not talking about a sermon prepared in advance. There was actually another Greek word he would have used if he meant preaching. Within a worship gathering, a person exercising the gift of prophecy is compelled to share out loud a message he or she feels is straight from God in a language everyone in the room understands. When I've heard it – again, in my growing up days – it had a real “Thus saith the Lord” quality to it. Oftentimes the speaker would even use the first person singular as if God Himself was speaking to the group as in, “I love you, my people” or “I say to you, my people.” When you speak in tongues, it's directed toward God. In contrast, the gift of prophecy is directed toward people. When you prophesy, you speak to people on God's behalf.

OK, so what's the benefit of the gift of prophecy? It provides a positive message of encouragement, challenge, or conviction to those gathered in worship. Paul sums it up well in v. 3 (NLT), “But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them.” It's intelligible. You can understand it; therefore, it can bless you. Edification is building something up. It's a construction term, and here it means to be built up in the Lord. A word of prophecy will build you up, not tear you down. It's like a speech from the coach in the locker room before the big game, rallying the team to go out there and perform as they were trained to perform. A word of prophecy will encourage not discourage you. A word of prophecy will strengthen you. And a word of prophecy might even convict you. I believe that's what Paul meant when he wrote, “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. 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.’” (14:24-25 NLT) That brings us to a final question that might well be the heart of today's message.

WHAT DOES GREAT WORSHIP LOOK LIKE?

There are many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches throughout our country and our world where the gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy can be witnessed or experienced. Should the worship services at our church look more like them? Perhaps. But let's also remember that we might never have heard about either gift if it wasn't for the fact they were being misused in the worship services at Corinth and Paul had to correct them. We don't know if all the other New Testament churches had worship services like the Corinthians. Nevertheless, there are some transferable truths or concepts from this chapter that I believe contribute to a great worship experience regardless of whether they include gifts like speaking in tongues or prophecy.

For example, great worship is both personal and corporate. As human beings, we tend toward extremes. On the one hand, a growing number of Christians today believe corporate worship services with other believers is unnecessary. They believe in personal worship only. They worship God on their own at the local park or at home.

They don't feel any need to gather with other followers of Jesus to worship God. On the other hand, other Christians can attend Sunday morning worship at their local church, but never cultivate any meaningful personal worship of God. Worship isn't meant to be either personal or corporate. Great worship demands both. Personal worship appears to be the primary place speaking in tongues can and should be exercised. Paul knew the value of tongues in his own personal worship of God. He said, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you." (14:18 NLT) Paul was able to unburden his soul before God in a way beyond human language and intellect. He could pray, praise, and intercede beyond his ability to understand and articulate. Whether or not you speak in tongues or, instead, you sing hymns and worship choruses, meditate on Scripture, or pray, it's right and good to be spiritually edified by worshiping the Lord by yourself or personally. But great worship is also corporate – with other believers.

Great worship spiritually builds up all who participate. That was Paul's overriding concern throughout this chapter. He wrote here, "Since you are so eager to have the special abilities the Spirit gives, seek those that will strengthen the whole church.... Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.... so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged." (14:12, 26, 31 NLT) Worship should increase our knowledge of who God is and what it means to know, love, and serve Him. Worship allows us to experience God. Worship is a means of comfort and encouragement because it points us toward God's grace, love, and goodness.

If worship was and is spiritually edifying, it will also be understandable, orderly, and courteous. "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.... But be sure that everything is done properly and in order." (14:3, 40 NLT) When you read between the lines in chapter 14, it's clear worship gatherings at Corinth were pretty chaotic events with several people speaking at the same time and speaking over each other. If there were lots of people speaking in tongues with no interpretation, many couldn't understand anything going on. Paul wanted them to take turns, show some basic courtesy toward one another, and enter into a worship experience that was orderly. Great worship isn't about people getting so overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit they lose control of themselves. God may well do in a worship service what we consider unusual or unpredictable, but He's not the author of confusion or general weirdness either. It needs to make sense to the people who participate in it if it's going to edify anyone. Now, orderly worship should never be defined as being formal, ritualistic, or rigid. Don't interpret it to mean worship must always be quiet either. No, great worship can be spontaneous, loud, and joyful, too.

Paul assumed something else that results in great worship. It's fully participative. "What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation." (14:26 NLT) Because no church buildings had been erected yet, it's likely that the Christians in Corinth got together in smaller groups in different homes to worship the Lord. So, one person might read or sing a psalm. Another person might offer a word of teaching. Someone else might pray in a tongue along with an interpretation. Perhaps another person might have a revelation - a word from God's heart and mind for those

gathered in worship. True enough, it's harder to be fully participative when a large group of people gather for worship as is true today in many churches. But the principle holds. Worship is not a spectator sport. It's not an event we watch from the bleachers. It's not something we get to critique like a theater show. Paul assumed worshipping God was and is a highly participative experience with different people offering up different gifts. But all that diversity in worship needed to have one unifying purpose. Whatever was said or done must edify, build up, strengthen, and encourage everyone present.

In this matter of full participation in worship, let me address briefly two verses in this chapter that contradict that truth if they are authentic. "Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings." (14:34-35 NLT) I don't believe those two verses were written by Paul; therefore, they're not inspired Scripture. Instead, I believe they were an editorial comment made by someone copying 1 Corinthians sometime later and were then mistakenly inserted into the text by other copyists because they were uncertain as to whether they should be included or not.

Our Bible did not supernaturally descend from Heaven intact and in the form that we have it today. The NT was written in Greek by several different men over some 60 years. None of the original manuscripts still exist today. Paul's original letter to the Corinthians doesn't exist. Instead, over the ensuing centuries copies of copies of copies were made so that now we have some 5,000 different manuscripts of all or portions of the NT. You can imagine that when you have multiple handwritten copies of the same text, variations are just going to happen. So, scholars have developed a rigorous science and art known as textual criticism in order to establish what is undoubtedly the original text of the NT. What's truly amazing is how confident we can be that what we hold in our hands, read, memorize, and love as God's Word is something like 95% absolutely accurate in its entirety as to what Paul, or Peter, or Luke actually wrote. Yes, there are some minor variants here and there, but not one of them obscure or change any important or vital truth about our faith.

Why, then, do many Bible scholars and myself consider v. 34-35 to be inauthentic? In most Greek manuscripts they appear in their current location. But in a significant number of other Greek manuscripts they appear at the very end of the chapter – after verse 40. How do you explain such a significant displacement unlike anything else in the NT? Remember people who copied the Scriptures were just copyists not editors. We're left with just three options: (1) Paul wrote them in the v. 34-35 location and someone moved them to after v. 40. (2) Paul wrote them at the end of v. 40 and someone moved them to the v. 34-35 location, or (3) they were not part of the original text, but were instead a very early editorial comment that was then subsequently and mistakenly placed in the text at two different locations.

In addition, if you think those two verses were written by Paul, you have to explain why he contradicts himself. Back in chapter 11, Paul was dealing with head coverings for women in worship gatherings. In that chapter he clearly assumed women could participate verbally in worship gatherings, because he says there, “But every woman who prays or prophesies.... Is it right for a woman to pray to God in public without covering her head?” (1 Cor. 11:5, 13 NIV) Finally, v. 34 appeals to the Law regarding prohibiting women from speaking in a worship service. You can’t find any such teaching in the OT. Yes, there are other ways to interpret those two verses differently and still consider them as authentic – written by Paul - and inspired by the Holy Spirit. But for me, it makes sense to see them as inauthentic and, therefore, not inspired Scripture.

A final transferable truth about great worship. It’s filled with the presence of God. I find that in 14:25 (NLT) where Paul wrote about what can happen when people in a worship gathering hear authentic prophecy. “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.’” God is truly here among you. Have you ever been in a worship service and you could sense God’s presence in a real, tangible way? I still remember attending a pastors’ retreat prior to the Billy Graham Crusade held here in Columbus back in the 1993. The retreat was held up in Cleveland at a Catholic retreat house on the shores of Lake Erie. It was the single most profound worship experience I’ve ever been in. I’ve heard other men talk about those huge Promise Keepers events held in large stadiums and hearing 60,000 Christian men sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy” together. You can’t create the presence of God. You can’t force the presence of God. But when He chooses to show up at a worship gathering of His people in His great power and presence, that’s the greatest worship you can ever experience this side of Heaven. I’m convinced those opportunities are intended to be exceedingly rare. They give us a foretaste of Heaven – an appetizer, so to speak. Nevertheless, the test of any and all authentic worship is simply this. Does it make us feel the presence of God?

Most people know about the passion of Martin Luther King Jr. for racial justice and nonviolent resistance. However, some people aren't as familiar with King's deep personal faith in Jesus. In January 1956, King returned home around midnight after a long day of organizational meetings. His wife and young daughter were already in bed, and King started to get ready for bed himself. But a threatening call—the kind of call he was getting as many as 30 to 40 times a day—interrupted his attempt to get some much-needed rest. When he tried to go back to bed, he couldn't shake the menacing voice that kept repeating hateful words in his head. King got up, made a pot of coffee, and sat down at his kitchen table. With his head buried in his hands, he cried out to God. There in his kitchen in the middle of the night, when he had come to the end of his own strength, King met Jesus in an experience that would carry him through the remainder of his life. "I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on," King recalled. "He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone ... He promised never to leave me, no never alone." The presence of Jesus proved more convincing than the threatening voice of that anonymous caller. The presence of Jesus gave King the courage to press on and fulfill God's calling upon his life.

It's the presence of Jesus alone that will sustain us in life's most difficult moments. And we find Jesus' presence when we worship personally and when we gather with others. May we glorify Him in how we worship.