

1 Corinthians 14:3–11

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church. I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying. Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me.

Verse 3 — What Prophesying Does

Verse 3 is not so much a definition of prophesying as a statement of what prophesying produces. Edification, encouragement, and consolation — these are its results. The apostle's attention is on the outcome, because that is what he is pressing throughout this chapter. Verse 4 then draws the contrast: he that speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he that prophesies edifies the assembly. The

apostle would that they all spoke with tongues — he is not disparaging the gift — but he presses the greater: *rather that ye prophesied*.

It is worth noting that these three things — edification, encouragement, consolation — do not include entertainment. Certain parts of Christendom proceed as though verse 3 read, *edification, exhortation, and amusement*. That is not there. The consolation is in Christ, and it is genuine. But the flesh is not catered to.

Two Gifts Together Equal One Prophesying

Verse 5 gives grounds for understanding that the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation, when exercised together in completeness, produce the same effect in the assembly as prophesying. *Greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying*. That exception — the unless he interpret — admits a case where the two gifts together achieve what prophesying achieves on its own. So the two complementary gifts, when completed, render to the assembly what one gift of prophecy renders directly.

Verse 13 adds that the tongue-speaker is to pray that he may interpret — which implies he may or may not have that ability, since it is a separate gift. And chapter 14 makes clear that if there is no interpreter present, the tongue-speaker is to keep silent. There is no provision for an interpreter for the moment, just as there is no provision for a gift for the moment. The man who spoke in tongues had to look around and be certain an interpreter was there. He could not proceed on the assumption that one would be raised up.

The Profit Motive — God's and Man's

Verse 6 presses the point from the angle of profit: *if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you?* The word *profit* connects back to chapter 12:7 — the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. And it connects to chapter 13:3, where even giving all one's goods to feed the poor, without love, profits nothing. God's idea of profit is not the same as man's. The world counts the spectacular as profit. But here, speaking in tongues without interpretation profits the assembly nothing.

Verse 6 names four things whose presence in intelligible form would constitute genuine profit: revelation, knowledge, prophesying, and doctrine. Each contains intelligible content. Each addresses the mind and conscience. They are like four facets of one gem — revelation carrying the sense of something opened from above, knowledge bearing an intrinsic character, prophesying as the direct speaking of God's mind, and doctrine as that which is received and then passed on to others. All four require intelligibility. None is served by ecstatic utterance.

Pipes, Harps, and the Trumpet

The apostle turns to the material world for illustration. Even lifeless things that produce sound — pipe and harp — give a distinction in their sounds. That distinction is what makes them music rather than noise. The pipe is not trying to say it is better than the harp, nor the harp than the pipe. The point is simply that each gives a distinct, recognisable sound. If they gave only an undifferentiated jumble, no one could know what was being piped or harped.

The trumpet is even more pointed as an illustration. In the Roman military practice which the apostle's readers would have known, different trumpet calls signalled different actions: breaking camp, assembling, beginning the march. Each call had a specific meaning that every soldier knew. An uncertain sound — a sound that could not be identified — and no one would prepare for battle. The entire point of the trumpet call was intelligible communication that produced a

specific, appropriate response. The apostle draws on this to press the same principle upon the tongue-speakers: *except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air.*

Speaking into the air is almost a definition of what the glossolalia of Pentecostalism amounts to. And it is what is expressly not recommended here. The passage does not commend it; it condemns it. Yet time after time, verse after verse through this chapter, the point is pressed — intelligible content, intelligible speech — like a repeated blow of a hammer on the same nail.

The Barbarian — and the Tower of Babel

Verses 10 and 11 observe that all the many voices in the world — every kind of animal, every language of man — have a distinguishable sound. Even birdsong is distinguishable; those who study birds can identify each species by its call. Porpoises communicate by clicks. In every case, what is communicated has distinguishable character. The barbarian — in Roman usage, one who lived outside the borders of the empire and spoke languages other than Greek and Latin — was unintelligible to those who did not know his tongue. Yet even he was intelligible to other speakers of his own language. The point is always intelligibility within the sphere where communication is intended.

There is a connection here with the Tower of Babel in Genesis. It was the pride of man — the attempt to build upward to heaven and throw off subjection to God — that brought about God's judgment in the confusion of tongues. From that point, men began to speak to one another without conveying meaning across the newly formed language barriers. The barbarian state — mutual unintelligibility — is in a certain sense the fruit of human pride against God. And speaking in an uninterpreted tongue in the assembly reproduces exactly that: I am as a barbarian to the one who hears me, and he is a barbarian to me. The flesh that sets itself up

in pride ends in producing Babel.

Unity of the Spirit — and the Difference Between Demons and the Holy Ghost

Darby has a note on verse 12 that illuminates the whole passage. He writes that the Corinthians did not adequately hold the unity of the Spirit — capital S — but looked for spirits' — lowercase s — power and action to distinguish them. Such is man. Hence the apostle was obliged to point out the difference between demons and the Holy Ghost.

That is a dimension of this passage that can be overlooked by readers today. We are more likely to think of Pentecostalism when reading 1 Corinthians 14. But the Corinthians had no Pentecostal churches; they had temples of idols where demons were worshipped. In some of those temples there were so-called ecstatic utterances — devotees acting under the impulse and power of a demon, unable to control themselves. The apostle is drawing a clear line between that and the operations of the Holy Spirit in the assembly of God. The Spirit of a prophet is subject to a prophet. Self-control is of the essence of Christian ministry. There is no pleading that the spirit made me do it. That is not how the Spirit of God operates.

And the unity of the Spirit means that there is one source — not many competing spiritual forces, as in the plurality of idols and the demons behind them. In Christianity, one Spirit distributes these various gifts. The pipe does not compete with the harp; the harp does not compete with the trumpet. Each does what it was given to do, and the whole is harmonious. The object of the exercise of gift in the assembly is never personal distinction or self-promotion. It is the edification of the assembly of God.

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