

Wade Street 29.04.07 Worshipping Together: Part 1.
(1 Corinthians 14)

In the first few chapters of 1st Corinthians Paul is strengthening the line around the church. He then moves to strengthening the line through the church.

Keep in mind that the Corinthian Christians were very new to it all and they found it difficult to make a break from their pagan and mystery-religions. The first part of the letter is Paul addressing issues around them being distinctive as Christians. For example their morality. The second part of the letter, that we begin looking at today, is more about addressing issues of getting on together in the church.

We could think of the first part as being like drawing a line round the church. Paul keeps going over it until its clear and an area has been demarcated. The emphasis of the letter then shifts to demarcating the common thread that runs through the church.

Remember spirograph ? Or spiro-tot ? A set of plastic cogs and wheels with pens. Put the pen in the hole, push it round making the cogs move against each other and a few lines appeared on the paper. Keep on going round and round with the little cog-like wheels, and amazing ink patterns began to appear. That's the image I hold in my mind of what Paul was doing – reinforcing the line of the church.

If you are really skilled at spirograph, you can take your beautiful pattern and using a much smaller cog, produce continuous lines within your original pattern, inside the walls of what you have originally drawn. That's the imagine of what Paul was doing in this second part of his letter. Going over the common threads, the things that are central, so that the line running through the church is strong and clear.

What was church ?

Our way of being Church would have been unrecognisable to the first century Corinthian Christians.

They met as small house churches to worship and eat together, sometimes coming all together in a house that was big enough. We know from previous weeks that there were divisions and disagreements among these groups, some having power and authority, others having virtually no voice.

Imagine big family gathering that doesn't happen very often with groups of relatives who all have different agendas. Children only interested in presents; Great Auntie Gladys wanting a sherry and to watch the Queen's speech, uncle so and so hiding in the kitchen ! That's a bit how the gathering of all the different house churches would have been. Complete chaos !

Tongues v prophecy.

Keep remembering all the way through our reading of 1 Corinthians that Paul's letter is written as a response to what he had heard was going on.

We can read this chapter as Paul saying prophecy's great, but forget tongues.

Therefore the conclusion we should reach for our worship is 'prophecy's good and tongues are bad. NO.

Tongues are okay ! Paul is writing to redress the balance, not completely slate tongues.

V3 talks about prophecy being for building up (or strengthening), encouragement and consolation (or comfort). From this we can see why prophecy if used properly is so good for the church.

Building up – anything that shakes or undermines the faith of others is surely not prophecy. It is for the building of the church as a whole group

Encouragement –(paraklesis) is the same root of the word that is used in John's Gospel to refer to the holy spirit as paraclete. Or advocate, or counsellor. It literally means to be called alongside, to assist and support.

Comfort/consolation- Paul's word (paramythia) has the sense of whispering in the ear of the church.

So as a package we can see why prophecy is encouraged so strongly by Paul in a church that was young, divided and had power issues. They needed building up, supporting, and at times consoling.

So why is Paul so down on tongues ?

The Corinthian Christians wanted the gifts of the Spirit. Verse 12 says 'since you are eager to have spiritual gifts...' –

The Corinthians seemed to want the flashiest gifts. Did they want them because they were supernatural ?

Speaking in tongues was probably a bit like their former worship, a harking back to the mystery religions they had previously followed, where they experienced spiritual happens that by-passed their intelligence and minds.

It was certainly unusual and exciting, and we know ourselves that anything a bit unusual causes great interest and attraction.

I don't want to spend all morning comparing prophecy and tongues. I think to do that would be to miss the point.

Neither tongues nor prophecy play a prominent role in our corporate worship as we meet together Sunday by Sunday. That's not to say that they don't ever happen.

Remember again that this letter was to a particular group of Christians facing a specific situation that is very different from our own.

Orderly and intelligible ?

The overall theme that comes through from this chapter is that God desires the Holy Spirit to lead us into worship that is both orderly and intelligible. I think on the whole our worship at Wade Street is orderly and intelligible. Most weeks we tick both boxes.

So what might the relevance of this chapter be for us today ?

As we think about that I remind myself of Adrian Plass's wonderful phrase 'spiritual hand grenades' that he uses to describe how verses of scripture are sometimes plucked from the Bible and chucked randomly at a situation before metaphorically exploding all around. I'm really keen that we don't use Paul's words out of context as spiritual hand grenades, but bear in mind that God's Holy Spirit brings inspiration and fresh meaning from his word as we study it together.

So seven things that I believe we can take from this chapter that are important for us as individuals and a church community:

1. Building up/edification – Paul was quite clear that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were for building up the church. If we are to build God's church here then we need to be open to receive the Holy Spirit, we need to be eagerly desiring the Spiritual gifts, and we need to be using them in a way that always builds people and the church community. Never in a way that could be destructive.

We have in the last few years literally 'built up the church', as we've increased the size and quality of our premises. We have 'built up the church' as our membership has increased year on year. And we thank God that His Holy Spirit has lead us in those aspects.

Let's allow the Holy Spirit to continue working in our church now for building and strengthening us as a community of people.

2. The local expression of Christ's body is so important. We mustn't underestimate the value of the local church.

In an age when the church is perceived so negatively and is declining in so many denominations, I think Paul reminds us that it is still something good, to be celebrated. Undoubtedly we face challenges of how we can be church in a way that is relevant to our changing society, but that doesn't change the value of church as local people who are the body of Christ meeting together.

3. We don't suffer such obvious divisions as the Corinthian Christians did, but there are times when different groups pull in opposite directions.

Be clear here what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that we all have to agree on everything. I'm not saying that we're always going to get on brilliantly with everyone. I am saying that when it gets out of hand, the health of the church, and therefore our Christian witness, suffers.

4. Elevating people is no good. Anything that happens in our church life where some people end up looking or feeling superior to others is no good. It means we're well and truly off track and we need to take a serious look at where we're heading. The Holy Spirit does not lead us to elevate some people above others.

In a few weeks we'll be looking at chapter 12 of this letter and thinking about the body having many parts. The Holy Spirit is not in the business of setting some above others.

5. Just wanting flashy gifts is no good.

Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to 'stop thinking like children' in their attitude to spiritual gifts.

If we are tempted to behave like a 'kid in a toy shop' wanting the best looking toy even if it is not the most appropriate for us, then again we are heading off-track. We need to grow up a bit in our Christian maturity, ask ourselves what we are wanting it for.

6. By-passing our brains is no good. Of course there are times when God works and we really didn't know we were going to say or do something, but that's not an excuse to stop thinking hard about stuff, for not preparing well, for not using to the maximum the intelligence we have been given

7. And finally, Paul took it for granted that the Holy Spirit was present in the Corinthians worship. Is that the case for us, or do we sometimes major so much on God the father and God the son that we forget God the Holy Spirit ?

Wade Street 29.04.07 House Group Notes
'Worship Together: Part 1' 1 Corinthians 14.

In the first part of his letter to the Corinthian Christians Paul has been dealing with matters that make Christians distinct from the culture around them, eg. matters of morality and conduct. The focus then shifts to dealing with aspects of Christians living together as a community. This is the focus in chapter fourteen.

The Corinthian way of being church was based around small groups meeting in houses to worship, sometimes all coming together. On these occasions the worship was obviously chaotic as everyone wanted to contribute in different ways with different styles.

The tongues v prophecy debate is the result of Paul addressing a particular issue in the Corinthian church, and so we need to be careful how we transfer this teaching across to our 21st century context.

In a church that was young, divided and suffering power issues prophecy was good because it built up, encouraged and consoled the church. Tongues was an issue due to the Corinthians having a liking for 'flashy' gifts, and a harking back to their former pagan worship.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit allow worship to be conducted in a way that is both orderly and intelligible.

For Discussion.

1. Is it possible to distinguish between Scripture that is time and culture specific and timeless truths ?
If yes, how ? If no, what are the implications for us ?
2. What do you think constitutes 'prophecy' in the 21st century church ?
3. Would you defend the gift of tongues ? Why ?
4. What issues come out of this chapter that are particularly relevant for you ? For Wade Street Church ?