

INTRO

Have you ever undergone a course of body-building - muscle-building exercises and dietary supplements, in order to gain the physique of Charles Atlas, and no longer be a seven-stone weakling?

Physical exercise is a good habit. Perhaps you train regularly for your personal fitness, as a requirement for physical demanding work, or to be an effective member of a sports team, or to rebuild strength lost after an operation or illness?

What about spiritual exercise - to build up your personal faith and godliness?

What spiritual habits could help you be a more effective member of your local church?

For the last few weeks we have been reading Paul's letter to the Corinthians and learning about the Gifts given by the Holy Spirit to build up both ourselves and the church family. Paul writes to the Corinthians because they have been comparing and contrasting the gifts of the Spirit, and the status they attach to them. Some were admired, others disparaged - we don't need you. In particular some were proclaiming that the gift of tongues was the mark of a truly spiritual Christian, and Paul aims to correct them, first by reminding them that all gifts will fade: only love is eternal and essential, and also by reminding them what the gifts are for - for building up the Church.

I am not aware of any quarrels in our fellowship about these spiritual gifts, so why are we bothering to consider them this morning?

Firstly because these gifts still cause controversy in churches today, and we need to be prepared to deal with them in a godly way, and **secondly** because the principles Paul applies to the gifts of tongues and prophecy apply equally to all gifts, and will help protect us from unhelpful attitudes that say, My gift is the best, or disparage the gifts of others.

I do not want to stir up the very disorder about gifts that Paul was trying to reduce, but rather encourage us to use all God's good gifts for the common good, and so to expect God to work among us for his glory by his Spirit, lest we have too low an expectation for when we gather as a church.

Paul says repeatedly that he expects all Christians to exercise a spiritual gift.

12.7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

12.31 Eagerly desire the greater gifts. 14.1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

So let me begin by elucidating what Paul means by Prophecy.

POINT 1: THE PURPOSE OF PROPHECY

People tend to assume it means foretelling the future, but in the Old Testament prophecy is intelligible speech by which God calls his people to fidelity and

faithfulness (i.e., it is not primarily predictive). God puts his words in the mouth of the prophet, and the community is responsible to obey. (S Ulm) In the New Testament *Church* means Community, assembly, God's people coming together NOT a building. 1 Corinthians 14 describes a meeting of the church. You may find it confusing that Paul sometimes compares the church (people) to a building: he wants the people to build up the church, and in Ephesians compares it to a New Temple: "you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."

The prophets may refer to the prophets of the Old Testament, whose words reveal deep truth about God, but there were also clearly prophets in the New Testament church, as the book of Acts reveals- men and women inspired by the Spirit to speak to God's people, individually and as a church.

In Acts 9 we meet Ananias, living in Damascus who is told to go to Straight Street and speak to a notorious persecutor of Christians called Saul and give him a message from Jesus. In Acts 13 prophets tell the church to set aside Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries to Asia, and in Acts 21 the daughters of Philip and Agabus prophesy a warning to Paul that he will be arrested in Jerusalem. This is not the same level of prophecy as we meet in the Old Testament but it fulfils the definition Paul gives us here in v 3: "the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation." We have a God who can speak truth to churches and individuals to strengthen, encourage and console. We do not still expect God to add to the Bible- that revelation is complete, but we still need local encouragement, and I see no reason to deny that God still speaks through spiritual gifts.

In v 6 Paul describes **different forms of prophecy**: "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?"

Through church history many have regarded preaching as a form of prophecy- not in foretelling the future, but in challenging, encouraging and comforting God's people. William Perkins the great Puritan wrote a book on preaching called, "The art of prophesying". But we cannot limit it to preaching. God can speak truth to us in different and remarkable ways - a word of insight. Here is one: Mr Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, pointed to me and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays, and I did, Sir. I should not have minded that, but he also said that I took ninepence the Sunday before, and there was fourpence profit out of it, and I did, but how he should know that, I could not tell. And then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first I was afraid to

go again to hear him, lest he tell people more about me, but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me and saved my soul.” (autobiography of Charles Spurgeon 2.226)
 Do we expect God to speak to us today? It need not come through the preacher, but through a friend, with a word of insight, concern, a bible verse that they think you need to hear. Paul says that prophecy builds up the whole church, and he wants us all to prophesy. Let us desire it eagerly.
 What then of tongues?

POINT TWO: The GOOD GIFT OF TONGUES

Every year at Pentecost we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in power on the 120 disciples in the upper room when (Acts 2.4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. People from many nations present in Jerusalem gathered and said “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” v.11 That was a unique miracle, but it is clearly NOT what was happening in Corinth. Paul tells us quite explicitly
 v.2 anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.
 v.9 you will just be speaking into the air
 vv.10-11 If I do not know the meaning of the language, I am a foreigner to the speaker.

Yet Paul uses the same word ‘glossai’- tongue or language, and he thinks it is a language of some sort. The Corinthians may have thought that they were speaking in ‘angel’-which is why Paul says,
 ch 13.1: If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
 Indeed he advises in v13 that anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret - in other words even the speaker does not understand his own words. Paul is clearly speaking from personal experience. He speaks in tongues and knows that his spirit is praying but his mind doesn’t understand.

So what is the gift of tongues?

First it is a personal gift - it is a good gift from God because
 v,2 The speaker is speaking to God and utters mysteries.
secondly, It is a language of prayer and praise, as Paul seems to be saying
 vv 14-16 if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.
 The Corinthians regarded Paul with suspicion for various reasons, despite the fact that he was the first to come and preach the gospel to them. Perhaps some regarded him as being less spiritual, because he didn’t speak publicly in tongues. So in these verses paul is emphatic.

v6 I could come and speak in tongues: v14 If I pray in a tongue
 v18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.
 I don’t know how Paul could know that he spoke more - but he could hardly be clearer that he valued tongues as a good gift from God. It builds us up personally. He says in v 5
 “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues”, although he had asked in ch 12.30 “Do all have gifts of healing? Do all prophesy, or speak in tongues?” clearly expecting the answer ‘no’. We do not have to prophesy, or speak in tongues.

So what is it? It is an audible articulation of syllables that is fully under the control of the speaker, yet the speaker does not know the meaning. Some call it ecstatic, but that suggests loss of control. Others call it emotional, but that again seems to disparage it. Let me share with you that I regularly speak in tongues. that may impress some of you, and appal others. I do so always in private, often when walking past a shop, church or school, council office or the home of someone I know- or when I think of something that concerns me, and I don’t immediately know how to pray, I pray in tongues. I have done so ever since I took part in the **Alpha Course** in the late 1990s as a Curate in Ivybridge. Alpha devotes a whole session to the gift of tongues (ch 10 How can I be filled with the Spirit?). I am grateful for the gift, but I do not regard myself as a superior Christian because I have been given it.
 I know that the gift has caused **much division**. I was told as a young Christian that I wasn’t a proper Christian, if I couldn’t, and that was unkind and untrue. The gift has historically been neglected, until the Pentecostal Movement brought it to prominence in the early 20th Century. Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are spreading around the world - the fastest growing Christian movement: there is a new one in Newton Abbot, and the Alpha course has brought the movement into all the mainstream churches - Baptist, Anglican, Catholic, so we all need to be aware of and respect the gifts, and understand what the bible says about them, especially here in Corinthians. But let me repeat again what Paul says. it is not essential: receiving it does not make you superior, and lacking it does not make you a second-class Christian. It is a good gift: Paul says v5 “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues”. We do not need to fear any of God’s good gifts. Jesus says: Lk 11.9 Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

POINT THREE: BUILDING UP THE CHURCH vv 20-25

Paul has one more thing to say about the use of spiritual gifts in church, and that is its effect on outsiders. When the Corinthians gathered, it is clear that there were non-Christians present, presumably welcomed and invited to these public meetings. And Paul wants them to come to faith and encounter God. Therefore he warns the Corinthians not to abuse tongues.

The basic meaning of vv 20-25 is clear. If 'outsiders - unbelievers visiting the church hear everyone speaking in tongues, it will not be another Pentecost, they will say NIV "You are out of your mind!". The greek word is mania - more frenzy than insanity. There were plenty of secretive religious cults in the ancient world that indulged in frenzy and wild behaviour - with the help of drugs or copious quantities of alcohol. There were plenty of rumours that the special Christian meal - the Lord's Supper, the agape, was some sort of love feast - nudge, nudge- an orgy. So Paul wants visitors to see the church prophesying, speaking the word of God, the gospel, intelligibly to one another, so that the Spirit may work in them.

v24 he will be convinced (convicted) by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

This is the work of the Spirit of truth- as Jesus said:

John 16.8 When the Spirit comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

[I haven't time this morning to explain vv 21-22 which seem to contradict that meaning, so please ask me to explain if you are concerned, or use the study notes on the sheet.

CONCLUSION

Do we want to build up the body of the Church? Then let each one of us use the gifts that God has given- to build up our own faith, and to serve the body. Do we want God to be with us and at work among us? Then let all the Spirit's gifts be held in honour. Though with Paul, we have focussed this morning on prophesy and tongues, there are many other gifts, listed elsewhere in Corinthians and Romans. Let us learn from Corinth not to be fixated with the spectacular or use them to exalt ourselves, but always to aim for the common good, and let us expect God's Spirit to work among us, to speak to us, through the sermon, and in other ways. Let us pray and expect God to work among us by his Spirit, drawing people to join the church as we gather, and encounter his presence in our midst. To God be the glory!

O thou who camest from above
O for a heart to praise my God

The meaning of vv 20-25 is clear - but then Paul quotes Isaiah 28.11-12 and everyone gets confused. p.710 Do read verses 1-12.

"Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord.

It's confusing that Paul says this is from the Law, when it's clearly Isaiah. and it's even more confusing that Paul seems to say that tongues are a sign for unbelievers, and prophecy for believers. Hold onto the good sense that we made: prophecy not tongues will help outsiders find faith. Then remember the context of the Isaiah quotation which Paul does not explain, but I am sure has in mind. Isaiah was denouncing the proud city of Ephraim's capital, Samaria, their drunken priests and prophets. God is saying that it is a waste of time trying to teach them through prophets- they are v.9 like infant or naughty children- too young to learn, too disobedient. So instead the LORD announces he will teach them with foreigners- who will invade and conquer. That will teach them. The people of Ephraim are unbelievers, and their conquest by foreign powers is the sign- a sign of judgement- but they won't believe. Paul had experienced similar stubborn disbelief in the 18 months he had spent with the Jewish Synagogue in Corinth. When they rejected the message of Jesus, he walked away,(Acts 19.9)

Paul here is simply trying to illustrate his point by saying, "If you speak in unintelligible tongues, you are giving a negative sign to your visitors that will repel them. If you prophesy intelligibly, you will enable them to believe.