Build Up the Church

1 Corinthians 14:1-40

Key Verse: 14:12 “So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.”

In chapter 14 Paul repeats the importance of unity in the church by emphasizing the use of spiritual gifts to build up the church. He also instructs the church on the importance of keeping order in worship. Paul’s teachings encourage not only the believers in the Corinth Church, but also us who pray for good coworking in our own church.

First, priority of prophesying over speaking in tongues (1-17) Read verse 1. “***Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy***.” What is the way of love? As we studied in chapter 13, love is patient and love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud...” Gifts of the Spirit are speaking in tongues, prophesying, healing, doing other miracles, and so on. Among these gifts Paul urged them to desire the gift of prophecy. In verses 2-25 by comparing speaking in tongues and prophesying Paul explains why we must desire the gift of prophecy more than speaking in tongues. Prophecy is known as foreseeing the future and delivering God’s message. In modern terms today it is to understand God’s words and teach them. The first reason for prioritizing prophecy over tongues is speaking in tongues is for themselves who speak, but prophesying is for others who listen. Speaking in tongues is speaking to God directly while prophesying is done to others with words of strengthening, encouraging, and comfort. For the sake of personal benefit, speaking in tongues is good, but for the sake of the church, prophesying is better. Read verse 5b. “***The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.***”

The second reason for prioritizing prophecy over speaking in tongues is to build up the church. To explain this Paul illustrates with musical instruments. Look at verse 7. “***Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes***?” Pipes and harps make different sounds. A pipe is a wind instrument whereas a harp is a string instrument. When a composer writes a musical note, he puts all instruments in their specific places so that the players can read it and play accordingly. What Paul means here is if even a note for lifeless musical instruments can be read and understood for making sounds, how much more should sounds that come out from the mouth be clearly heard and understood! The case of a trumpet sound is the same. In the army, soldiers often move by trumpet sounds. If it blasts long, they must leave. If it blasts short, they must stop, and so on. But if the trumpet sound is not clearly blown, soldiers will be confused. It is critical in the middle of a battle. Look at verse 8b. “***Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.”***

Paul spoke several languages such as Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and so on. He knew that all languages have their own meaning. If he spoke Hebrew to Romans who did not understand Hebrew, Paul would be a foreigner to the Romans. In the same way, if someone speaks in tongues to those who don’t understand, the speaker is only a foreigner to the listeners. (11-12) But if the speaker speaks in a language all understand, he will be greatly honored and accepted as part of the same people. Look at verses 13-17. “***For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. For 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 understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified***.”

This year is 70th anniversary of the alliance between the US and S. Korea. To celebrate this anniversary, President Yun of S Korea visited the White House and addressed the Congress. In his welcoming party in the White House, President Yun sang the song, “American Pie.” All guests in the party, including President Biden, were surprised by his singing with many “wow’s,” and they praised President Yun with a standing ovation. His singing touched many people’s hearts not only because of his singing skill, but also his friendship, courage, and communication skills. The song “American Pie’ was written and sung by Don Mclean, an American singer who was popular in the 60’s and 70’s. The song sung by President Yun broke the racial, cultural, and language barrier between two nations at least in that moment. This is because all people who knew and understood the song, whether they were Americans or Koreans, became one at that moment. Suppose President Yun sang a very sentimental Korean folk song, he would not receive as friendly a response from the American hosts. President Yun edified the welcoming party with a song that everybody loves. What I want to say here is we must use our spiritual gifts to encourage others and edify the meeting, the ministry, and even the country. This is the same message from Paul to the people in the Corinth Church.

Second, five intelligible words (18-25) Look at verses 18-19. “***I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue***.” There is no one who could speak in tongues better than Paul, still Paul chose prophesying. He chose to speak five intelligible words which strengthen, encourage and comfort others more than speaking in tongues. This is because Paul was concerned about others and the church. Paul chose to edify the church with five intelligible words rather than to speak in ten thousand tongues for himself. Do you have any five intelligible words which edify others and the church? Kit often offers special music for worship service with the songs which he wrote. All his songs have God’s message, and they are much better than 10,000 tongues. Our men and women missionaries meet once a week and encourage one another with our testimonies. I was often encouraged by the words which Dr. Joseph and James Lee shared. When we share encouraging words for each other, we edify the church and solidify our friendship in Christ. I thought about my five intelligible words yesterday. They are, “Jesus loves you.” “I love you”, “Have faith in God!”, “Forgive me.” and “Let us pray!” I like Paul’s instruction to the believers in the church of Ephesus. “*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*” (Eph 4:29) I pray for all of us to have at least five intelligible words which can encourage and strengthen others and edify our ministry. Amen!

Third, good order in worship (26-40) In verses 26-40 Paul instructs the importance of keeping order in worship service. In chapter 11 Paul gave a similar instruction with the issue of veiling the head during the worship service. He emphasized the importance of spiritual order for the sake of unity. In 14:26-33 Paul illustrates the general picture of worship service in his day. Some came to church with words of instruction. Others with hymns, still others with a revelation or a tongue, and so on. (26) It is the same as today; each of us is assigned to be a prayer servant, a music servant, a messenger, a presider, and so on. To those who speak in tongues Paul gave them some rules to keep. They must bring interpreters and they must speak in tongue one at a time for the sake of church. If not, they should keep quiet in the church. These rules were applied to those who prophesy. While some prophesy, others must listen carefully and weigh what they are saying. (29) They also must prophesy in turn so that everyone might understand and be encouraged. Let us read verse 33. “***For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as is all the congregations of the Lord’s people***.” We apply this into our ministry. While a person speaks, others must wait until he or she finishes speaking. We must be patient and respectful to others so that we may not cut off each other’s speech and break the peace of the ministry. Our God is the God of peace and God of order.

Paul especially warns women in the church who tried to influence others. Paul urged them to keep silent for the sake of peace and order in church. Look at verses 34-35. “***Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.***” Paul did not diss the equality and right of women as we studied in chapter 11. But he instructed women to keep spiritual order for the sake of building up the church. He repeated the same message in 14:34-35. At that time there should be some women who raised their voices to influence the church, overpowering their husbands and their congregation. Paul warned such powerful women to be silent and keep spiritual order in the church. It is reported that generally women talk three times more than men do. So, our men’s testimony meeting lasts an average of 30 minutes, but our women’s meeting lasts one and half hours. Here, what Paul wants to say is that we all must keep spiritual order for the sake of peace. We must be patient, self-controlled, respectful, and humble to build up the church. Int this respect “build up the church” means “value and respect the church and sacrifice yourself for the sake of the church community.” Remember how the Lord Jesus built up his church. Even though he is God himself, he did not consider equality with God, but humbled himself and appeared as a man. (Php 2:6-8) He loved his disciples to the end and washed their feet. He gave a new command, “*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*” (Jn 13:34) Jesus sacrificed his life to bring God’s kingdom. He gave everything for God’s kingdom and for his church.

Paul makes his conclusion in verses 39-40. Let us read verses 39-40. “***Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.***” Amen! We must seek God’s blessing and gifts of the Holy Spirit to build up our church. We must teach the Bible. We must pray hard until we experience special grace of God. But all these things must be done in a fitting and orderly way for the sake of the unity and the ministry. Love is not selfish. It does not envy, it is not proud. Love is patient and it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Love never fails! Amen!