

1 Corinthians 14:20-40
"Essentials Of Edification"

Let's recall the necessary essentials of edification. Do you remember what they are? 2 things. #1 Understanding. #2 Order. In the 1st ½ of this Ch, Paul really emphasized how critical "*understanding*" is, if edification (the building up/strengthening) of the church body is to occur. If you can't *understand* me, then you can't effectively learn *from* me. I'm not going to help you grow in your relationship w/Jesus if you can't comprehend what I'm communicating. – Here in the 2nd ½, he will highlight the essential need for order.

I should also say this. Vs 21-25 is probably (at least to me) the most problematic passage of scripture in the entire N.T. from a, "How are we supposed to interpret this?" perspective. – I just want to be honest about that from the onset & trust that when we read it, you'll understand what I mean... Let's turn our attention, beginning in Vs 20

Vs 20

Again, we remind ourselves, the context that he's speaking into is how to conduct ourselves in the collective gathering of the church. We want to be wise in understanding the way that the Lord would have us come together, things that will cause our time be fruitful.

What we *don't* want to do is waste *people's* time, waste *God's* time in ineffective or even counterproductive practices... It was drawn to my attention years ago, that when we come together; say there's 100 people, 200 people, & you have them (in a teaching format) for about an hour (we'll just say an hour for the sake of the example). **That represents 1-200 of God's hours collectively. That's a lot of time to be accountable for! How are you going to invest it? In what way can you get the most return (from a Kingdom agenda type perspective) out of it?**

If you're spending your time w/everyone talking in tongues, no one understanding what the next person is saying, it's general chaos & confusion... (I'm using the illustration of tongues because that's the topic Paul is addressing in our passage) than that's an unfruitful waste of our time & of God's time. **Better to not be immature, doing ineffective, self-centered, unfruitful things. Instead, utilize that time to teach others, bring understanding of the *heart* of God, interpretation/application to the *word* of God. Equip the saints, feed the sheep, strengthen the hands that hang weak that we might be salt/light in a dark & dying world.**

If you want to be "immature" or "unlearned" in something (Paul says) don't let it be in understanding the way you're to conduct your public gathering.

Let it be in *malice* (worldliness, wickedness, depravity & perversion). Paul shared this same point in writing to the Romans. He said, **"I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil."**¹

God has a higher calling for you than to be a bottom feeder, familiarizing yourself w/the filth of this world. We're to grow up in Christ, learn what it means to be mature men & women of God. & The way we do that is through studying, understanding & applying God's Word.

Vs 21-25

I trust now that you can see how this appears to be a problematic passage for guys like me? It's left to me to try & explain what looks like a direct contradiction when in Vs 22 Paul says that tongues are a sign for unbelievers, then in Vs 23 he seems to turn around & say, "If you're all speaking in tongues & an unbeliever enters the assembly, they'll think you're nuts!" Vs 23 makes perfect sense to us. It's how Vs 22 fits in that can leave us sort of scratching our heads...

However, I believe that Vs 21 may give us some direction here. (& I'm open to my handling of this passage not being correct, though I'll do my best. But in all humility if you have an understanding that can bring clarity, please feel free to share it with me.)

I should also say that J.B. Phillips (a respected Greek translator) finds the passage so counterintuitive that he believes what we have here is a copyist error (& that could be). He believes that somewhere early on, when a scribe was copying Paul's letter, he got the "believer/unbeliever" emphasis out of order. That tongues are a sign to believers & prophecy is the sign to unbelievers. That's why Paul says that tongues will necessarily turn unbelievers off, but prophecy can bring about conviction & conversion.

Now, he doesn't believe that the *Holy Spirit* made an error (we all believe in the infallibility & inerrancy of the original manuscripts), but that perhaps the *copyist* did... I'll leave that w/you & you can do w/it what you will.

The other thought I believe finds its key in Vs 21. Paul here is quoting from Isa. 28. But the quote isn't anything positive. To the contrary it points to the judgment of Israel. God had tried to speak to them over & over by sending them prophets. They wouldn't listen. So God was going to allow Assyria to invade them, lead them off into captivity & they would be forced to listen to a language they didn't understand...

¹ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). [Ro 16:19]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

If they wouldn't listen in their own language, they would be given over to a language they didn't understand & even at that, it wouldn't jar them into sobriety (so to speak). "& Yet, for all that, they will not hear Me."

So the "sign" wasn't a *good sign*. It was a sign of judgment, that God had rejected them. Here's the point. We tend to think of a "sign," as being something that causes people to believe. In reality, a sign is something that sends a message. In the case of Isa 28, the sign that God was judging them (Israel) was the Assyrians speaking to them in a strange language (because they wouldn't respond to the plain message in their own language). –

Paul, could simply be saying that the fact that unbelievers don't understand what's going on when someone speaks in a tongue, only testifies to the reality that they're under the judgment/condemnation of God rather than the deliverance/salvation of God. (Just as that's what the foreign tongue testified to unbelieving Israel). So it's a sign *not* that leads them to believe, but draws into the light for them that they really *don't* believe.

(That's about the best I can do w/this).

Either way, his point is plain. Tongues will not lead to edification in a mixed assembly of believers/nonbelievers. Believers might think it's real neat, unbelievers will think you've lost your mind (which again, serves to testify to the fact that they don't know the Lord). But it can drive a wedge between them & the Lord. God would have us *build bridges, not drive wedges*. How can we do that?

By sharing the *heart* of God, through the plain & easily understandable *word* of God... (Which is essentially what you have in prophecy). Tongues will edify the individual personally, but prophecy will be beneficial for the entire assembly. – For the believer (as we learned last week) it brings edification, exhortation & comfort (you can download that message if you're interested in those things). For the *unbeliever* it lends itself to personal/inward *examination*, leading to *conviction*, leading to *conversion*.

Paul says, if an unbeliever joins your assembly & each of you share in the gift of prophecy, they'll be *convinced* (that God is w/us), *convicted* (the secrets of their heart being revealed) & *converted*. Faith comes by hearing, hearing by the word of God.

Tongues do nothing to draw the unbeliever to God, in fact, if anything, it will turn him off, turn her away. But God's word searches the heart. Remember Heb 4? *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."*

And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”²

Why focus our time on things that only turn unbelievers off, or testify to them that they don't understand the things of God & are headed for judgment? Why not rather concentrate our efforts on things that will lead to the edification/sanctification of the believer & the *salvation* of the unbeliever?

Tongues expose the unbeliever to a scene of seeming chaos, prophecy brings them into an environment of conviction. Because God's word has the power to convince, convict & convert the soul. & Btw (as we'll see) when Paul speaks of everyone speaking in tongues or everyone prophesying, he means sequentially, not simultaneously.

Vs 26

Family; that's the key. Regardless of how you want to interpret the previous Vs, the last sentence in this Vs sums the intent of our goal in gathering together. "Let all things be done for edification." As Paul put it in the book of Romans, *"Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another."*³

Now; there are those who think that this Vs is a bit of a rebuke. Paul kind of chiding them for all wanting to get into the limelight. Based upon the context of coming out of Ch 12-13, I don't think that's the case.

Back in Ch 12 he spent ample time developing the fact that each individual believer has been gifted by God & needs to be active in their serving of the body in order to edify (build up) & bring health/growth to the body. That if any member of the body isn't functioning according to its role, it presents a problem for the rest of the body. Paul isn't down on everyone's participation; the opposite would be true. If you're not participating in any way, Paul would want to talk to you about that. God has entrusted a role, a responsibility to you, He's invested the gifts of His Spirit in you. What are you doing w/it? Is He getting a return on it? Or is His investment into my lying dormant as lethargically, apathetically let life pass me by as I simply feed from week to week... Paul would have a problem with that!

So, what we have here is insight into the way a service was conducted in the early church. Everyone would be involved... But what Paul is doing here is saying, "What's going on is good, everyone is participating, but the way it's going *isn't* good.

² *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Heb 4:12-13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ro 14:19). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

There needs to be order to the service.” Let me remind you of this as well. The early church didn’t meet like we meet today in sizeable structures where 10’s, 100’s or even 1,000’s can meet simultaneously. These kinds of facilities simply weren’t available. So they met in homes, several homes throughout the city. & Even homes of people who were wealthy, could host maybe 10-12 people at the most... So in these small, home group kind of atmospheres there would be a freedom/responsibility not only to receive, but to give.

Each person would contribute. One might read/sing a psalm/hymn, one might offer a word through teaching, another might pray in a tongue or give a revelation. & That’s *exactly* how small groups (home groups) should function! A men’s group, women’s group, home group should allow for active participation, not passive absorption or receiving only. Peter said it like this, *“As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen”*⁴

This is also why one reason we try to keep home groups small. Because between 8-10-12 people, each one can share w/the others. When there’s 25, 40, or 100 people in one gathering (or more) time simply doesn’t allow for that. But this is why small groups can be such a dynamic environment for spiritual growth. The context is perfect for “each one” sharing something w/everyone else. Of course, there has to be some caution there as well. Sometimes a person w/poor doctrinal understanding can try to dominate the group & you have to be able to bring correction & chart the ship back into safe waters, but generally speaking, they’re a great blessing to the body of Christ.

How does that look in a larger gathering, or a Sunday morning kind of gathering? Well, we can’t *each* share w/*everyone*, but we can each share w/*someone* & should have it purposed on our hearts to do so. Have the mentality, “I’m not coming to church only to receive a blessing, I won’t leave until I’ve *been* a blessing.” Think of the 20/20 opportunity. 20 minutes before the study, 20 minutes after the study can be some of the most opportunistic & dynamic times of ministry in the church. It’s when you’re encouraging one another, praying for one another, loving *on* & ministering *to* one another. – Refuse to come & go w/out acknowledging anyone else or staying in your bubble of comfort.

⁴ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (1 Pe 4:10–11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

When Paul says, “Let all things be done for edification” it means, “let everyone come to church with a heart to build up someone else.”

Vs 27-28

Again, small groups are the perfect environment to work on & flow in these dynamics. Everyone has a chance to share. If it's in your heart to share a tongue, when the time is turned to you, go for it. But tongues aren't to dominate the group, just 2, maybe 3 people. Not simultaneously, sequentially & if after the 1st is finished, if there's no interpreter than if anyone else has it on their heart to make utterance in a tongue, just do so silently between you & God. It's not going to edify the gathering. Make sense? (Besides, you're speaking to God & not men anyway. Vs 2)

“Why then do some churches have a general, ‘let's all speak in tongues’ time?” Great question, I have no idea. It's not scriptural. It may be well meaning, but it's out of order biblically.

Vs 29-33

Simple instructions to facilitate & maintain order. Tongues are to be regulated & so is prophecy. The whole meeting isn't given over to either. Paul is obviously, appropriately far more positive about prophecy publicly, but even still, keep it orderly & just 2-3. The gifts of the Spirit aren't the focus of the gathering. We're to focus our time on worship & the Word of God. The gifts flow (under God's direction) *around* the focus upon worship & the Word.

& Even w/prophecy, we don't just receive it blindly. The leadership is to judge & see if it bears witness. Perhaps a well meaning individual receive a word from the Lord that was for them personally but shared it w/the body. Or it was meant for someone else specifically but not the general assembly. Or perhaps it simply wasn't a word from the Lord... **We're to test the spirits. – By what measure? By the standard of God's written, revealed word. God will never contradict Himself. If someone speaks in a manner that doesn't line up w/God's word, we reject it.** As the prophet Isaiah said, **“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”**⁵ So there's to be consideration/examination of what the individual has to say. (1 Jn 4:1, 1 Thess 5:19-21, Gal 1:8) Does it build up, encourage, comfort? (Vs 3). God has given us tools by which to test.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Is 8:20] Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

& You should never abandon or compromise what you *are* sure of (God's written word) for what you're *unsure* of (a word of prophecy). People can be well meaning, but not always correct. If it's from the Lord, it'll strengthen you, it'll come to pass. If it's not... it won't. Just stay true to God's written/revealed word, & if He has a plan for you that He's revealed to you personally, He'll be faithful to bring it to fruition.

Remember this as well, "By the mouth of 2-3 witnesses". The word should bear witness, God will confirm His word to the heart of the leadership present at the meeting. Even if it's scriptural, but doesn't bear witness, it may not be something God wanted to speak at that time to that group... Having said all that, prophecy can be a tremendous blessing & shouldn't be *despised*, simply *tested*.

Vs 32-33 should also be highlighted in your heart. Don't ever let anyone tell you that the Holy Spirit just took over & man I just couldn't stop myself. The Holy Spirit may place an unction on your heart, but you have control. You can share, or wait till it's the appropriate time, Gal 5:23, the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. The spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. Not everyone has to speak the moment they believe the Lord is revealing something. The Holy Spirit won't force you to laugh uncontrollably, or writhe on the floor weirdly. He won't override your ability to control yourself. The spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. God is not the author of confusion, but of peace. (These are "pro tips" on discerning the moving of the Spirit of God in a meeting). A godly service will reflect God's character. The goal (Vs 31) is that all my learn & be encouraged.

Vs 34-35

Some of you are thinking, "You thought that *previous passage* was problematic!" Allow me to remind you once more, anytime we're studying isolated passages, we need to be careful to not allow the overarching context to escape us. We know that this is not a categorical command because Paul has already expressed in Ch 11 the appropriate nature of women praying/prophesying in the church.

Also, Paul has been adamant about the fact that wives should honor their husbands in the corporate gathering. Be it in the way they speak, or dress, not being flirtatious w/other men, so on so forth. In *this* passage, Paul has said that when one prophesies, others are to judge what's being said. I think it's best to understand *this* in light of *that*. So that what's being said is, "Wives, when your husbands steps up to prophesy, allow the leadership to be the ones to judge what he's saying.

Don't embarrass him or dishonor him by stating that you don't think that what he's saying is from the Lord. Or if you want further clarity, wait till you get home. Don't question/challenge him publicly, honor him."

I should also state that it seems that the early church kind of followed the protocol of the synagogues in that the men would sit on one side, the women sat on the other. Today, if you're not clear on what I'm saying, you just shoot a little text to your husband, it doesn't distract anyone. But then, you'd have had to make some kind of motion like, "What's he talking about?" Paul says, "Don't be distracting/disruptive (which I would apply to anyone), God is not the author of confusion. Wait till after services, or till you get in the car to talk about it."

Vs 36-38

Paul is exercising his apostolic authority in establishing order in their services. He says, "Hey, did God's word originate w/you?" No. They received it from Paul. He's putting a stop to a would be prophet saying, "I have a new word from God, He's pleased w/how we do things, Paul's ways are just is opinion." Paul says, "No, if you're truly a prophet you'll acknowledge these aren't my opinions, they're the commandments of the Lord."

Then he says, "But if someone is ignorant, let them be ignorant." Or another way this has been rendered, "If anyone ignores this, let him be ignored." If you're truly spiritual, you'll acknowledge the authority of the Word of God.

Vs 39-40

God wants you to flourish, don't despise or be reluctant of the gifts. Just be careful to honor the Lord in their use. Let all things be done, let the gifts flow, minister to one another in a manner that reflects the heart/character of God. It will edify the body & glorify God.

Prayer Points:

God we receive Your word today. Give us a mind/heart to do all that we do w/the desire to edify others. That we purpose to show up a little early, to stay a few minutes late, that we might be a blessing & encourage one another. Give us eyes to see the need & a heart to meet the need. Be glorified here we pray.

God wants to be glorified in your life. That begins w/Him being *in* your life. If you've not surrendered your life to Him, why not today? God loves you, desires to rescue you from the power/penalty of your sin. Believe on the Lord J.C. & you will be saved.