BUILD UP THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 14:1-40

Key Verse: 14:12

“So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.”

As we have studied in chapters 12-14, Paul instructs the Corinthians how to have meetings that build up the church. This is really important. When the church is strong, God is glorified, God’s people grow in love, and the whole world is blessed. When the church is strong, North America can become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We want to build up our Chicago UBF church. We want to build up the UBF ministry worldwide through the upcoming Purdue Conference. How can we do so?

In chapter 14, Paul focuses on how to use spiritual gifts to build up the church. Simply having spiritual gifts is not a guarantee that a strong church will be built up. These gifts must be fanned into flame and used. Not only so, but they must be used in the wisdom of God. Then the church can become strong. Today, let’s learn how to use our spiritual gifts to build up the church.

I.  Prophecy is better than tongues (1-25)

Look at verse 1. “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.” As Paul explained, love is absolutely essential and most important. Without love, nothing else matters. So God’s people must grow in love. To hear about the love of God is wonderful. It makes us feel that we are in paradise already. But to practice the love of God is not easy. It requires sacrifice. Last Sunday, right after worship service, many of us attended the first Springfield UBF Sunday worship service. For the sake of four pioneering members, around 100 UBF people attended from IIT, U of I, Lincoln Park, Peoria, and Chicago chapters, sacrificing time and money, especially gas money. The practice of God’s love created an atmosphere of great joy and hope for the new ministry. I believe that it was pleasing to God. Though it is costly, we must follow the way of love.

In addition, we must eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. Eager desire is not passive or merely wishful thinking. It is intense longing for spiritual gifts. God blesses such eager spiritual desire. When Billy Graham was beginning his ministry, he noticed that his preaching was not so powerful compared to a young Welshman named Stephen Olford. With an eager desire, Billy asked Olford’s advice and spent time with him, even staying one night, to somehow attain the same gift of fullness of the Holy Spirit. Then the Holy Spirit came upon him and transformed him into a more dynamic preacher.1 God blesses those who eagerly desire his gifts.

Paul mentions especially the gift of prophecy. What is this? Prophets are God’s messengers. They speak God’s words to people as God’s representatives. In the Old Testament the test for a prophet was very strict. Whatever he spoke in the name of the Lord should come true. If not, he would be called a false prophet and stoned to death (Dt 18:20). The words of true Old Testament prophets were regarded as the very word of God and were written down in the Bible in books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel.

In the New Testament, the concept of a prophet is different. Through the coming of the Holy Spirit on all people, the gift of prophecy has been poured out in abundance (Ac 2:17,18). Men and women, sons and daughters can all have the gift of prophecy and share God’s word with others. However, they do not introduce extra-Biblical truths. They expound on what is already in the Bible. Therefore, those who can teach Genesis and John’s gospel and other books of the Bible with spiritual insight can be compared to prophets in this limited sense. A prophet may be compared to a fruitful Bible teacher through whom the Holy Spirit works to change people.

In verses 2-5, Paul compares the gifts of prophecy and tongues. The word for tongues is “glossolalia” in Greek. Here, it refers primarily to the gift of speaking in a heavenly language directly to God (2). This leads one to enjoy rapture and the assurance that he has the Holy Spirit living in him. Apparently, many Corinthians spoke in tongues during worship service. In their ecstasy, they looked very spiritual.

Look at verse 3. “But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.” Paul encourages them to prophesy in church rather than speaking in tongues. To prophesy is to communicate God’s truth in words that others can understand. Then others are strengthened by the word of God. They receive God’s life and love and wisdom in their souls. They gain the power to do what God wants them to do. They find true comfort in God’s word even though they face many hardships in this world. In verse 5, Paul clearly says that one who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may be edified.

It is likely that we all want fantastic spiritual experiences through participating in worship service. We really want to meet God and feel his presence. This is good. However, there is a danger that we can become self-centered, even in worshiping God. We must be concerned about our fellow Christians during worship service. We must want them to experienced God’s presence together with us. Corporate worship is the time for the whole church to meet God as a body; it is not merely for personal satisfaction. So we should come to worship service ready to use our spiritual gifts for the good of others. Paul really wanted the Corinthian believers to change their focus from themselves to the church.

To help them understand his point, Paul gave several illustrations. First, he used his own example. When he pioneered the church at Corinth, Paul did not spend his time speaking in tongues. Paul diligently taught the word of God for the benefit of others. Now, he wanted to visit them again. When he went there, it would not be to speak in tongues all by himself. He wanted to give them some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction. Second, Paul mentioned musical instruments. When a trumpet sounds the call for charge in battle, all of the soldiers know it means they should go forward with courage and fight. The same trumpet can also sound retreat, which means to go in the opposite direction. The trumpet sound has a meaning that others recognize and follow depending on how it is played. But if someone just starts blowing the trumpet at random, it does nothing but irritate others. In the summer in Chicago, when the ice cream truck comes around, it plays a song. To children it is magical. It means that ice cream is near. To play random notes would be foolish and meaningless. Third, Paul talked about the various human languages in the world. When we hear our own native language spoken, we can easily understand everything the speaker is saying. We can connect with the speaker and share our minds and hearts and work together without any problem. But when we hear a foreign language, the effect is quite the opposite. It gives a sense of isolation and alienation. We feel distant and uncomfortable. When Corinthian believers spoke in tongues publicly, they might have experienced personal rapture. But the effect on the church was alienation and division.

So Paul concludes in verse 12, “So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.” Paul was happy that the Corinthians had eager spiritual desire. He did not want to dampen their desire. He could have told them to stop using their spiritual gifts altogether because it was too chaotic and hard to manage. This would have been an easy solution to the problem. It would also have killed the church. Spiritual desire should be overflowing in the church of Jesus Christ. However, it should be focused in the right direction. Spiritual gifts should be used to build up the church.

We in the United States live in what may be the most individualistic society in history. Individualism has its good side, as it was developed from the Reformation theology that emphasized the importance of personal faith, decision, and responsibility. However, as our society becomes increasingly secular, the good side disappears and individualism turns into selfishness. Many view their church experience as something that should satisfy them as though their gratification was the point. We cannot exercise spiritual gifts in a proper way with this attitude. We must seek to build up the church.

To build up the church, we must excel in our spiritual gifts. God gives us the gifts free of charge as his expression of love and blessing. However, to excel in using them is our responsibility. One who has the gift of prophecy must do his best to make the most of his gift. He should study the Bible deeply to increase his spiritual insight and knowlege. He must read broadly to know what is going on in the world. He must study language and culture in order to learn how to communicate most meaningfully. He must make study materials that he can use effectively, even when there is little time to prepare. Finally he can become excellent in using his spiritual gift to build up the church. This pleases God. In the next couple of weeks we must prepare group Bible study for the Purdue Conference. Many of us will be group Bible study leaders. We must do our best to prepare our materials and pray to be used by God to build up the church for his glory.

Paul encouraged those who speak in tongues to pray that they may interpret what they say (13). If they can interpret, their gift of tongues can work like the gift of prophecy. They can share a meaningful message with others, and even with themselves. Otherwise, their minds are unfruitful. The balance of the passage suggests that not engaging their minds in worship was a cause of spiritual immaturity among the Corinthians. Jesus told us that loving God with our minds is part of the greatest commandment in the Bible (Mk 12:30). So we must worship God with our minds.

Paul did not disparage speaking in tongues. In fact, Paul spoke in tongues more than the Corinthians did (18). But he did so in private. In the church Paul was eager to speak intelligible words to build up others (19).

Verses 20-25 can be difficult to understand. But two points are clear. First, Paul emphasizes that speaking in tongues is inferior to prophecy. Those who insist on speaking in tongues publicly are like immature children (20). In verse 21, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11,12. The strange tongues in these verses refer to the foreign language spoken by the Assyrian invaders who came against Israel as part of God’s divine judgment when they would not repent. Prior to that, God had spoken to them in intelligible words through the prophets, urging them to repent. But they ignored God’s message. So he spoke his message of judgment to them through the Assyrians. On that basis Paul calls tongues a sign for unbelievers, that is, for stubborn people who don’t listen and who don’t want to obey intelligible words (22). Instead of being proud of speaking in tongues, the Corinthians should eagerly desire to grow up and communicate in intelligible words with God and with others.

Second, Paul urges prophecy as a means to evangelize unbelievers through the worship service. Paul suggests two scenarios to demonstrate the desirability of prophecy in public worship as opposed to tongues. If an inquirer or an unbeliever sees everyone speaking in a different tongue at the same time, he will think that Christians are irrational and even crazy (23). But if he hears meaningful words of prophecy which expose sin and bring about conviction in his soul, he will realize that the living God is present in the church and fall down in worship (24-25). We must pray that this may happen at the Purdue Conference through the messages that are delivered. Here we learn that evangelism in worship is not done through degrading the worship service to the level of unbelievers. Evangelism in worship is done when sincere believers honor the word of God and repent before God.

II.  Worship in an orderly way (26-40)

This part teaches us the right order in worship. First, there should be order in the way the service is conducted. Look at verse 26. “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.” One of the beautiful things about the Corinthian worship service was the enthusiasm for worship that the members had. They all wanted to participate whether it be in singing or speaking or testimony sharing. The problem seems to be that they did not have a proper order for doing so and the worship service became somewhat chaotic. So Paul gave them several simple rules to guide them. The number of those who spoke in tongues should be limited to two or three and they should speak one at a time; interpretation was necessary. Two or three prophets should speak, one at a time. While they spoke, the members of the church should listen carefully to the message and discern the meaning as a body. If one speaker seemed to be going on and on with no point, and the Holy Spirit moved another to speak, the first one should sit down. In this way their meeting could be orderly and finish on time. Then everyone could share the gift that God had given him to build up the body in all the richness of the gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit (31). Look at verse 33a. “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.” God likes orderly, peaceful worship.

Second, there should not be unnecessary talking which distracts others from the worship experience. Some people have interpreted verses 33b-35 as a prohibition against women speaking in church. But in the context of this passage, the focus seems to be more on unnecessary talk. It seems that church leaders weighed what was said when prophets spoke during the worship service and commented on the message. Perhaps they helped the speaker synthesize his prophecy with the written Scriptures and to apply the message in various ways. As they were doing so, some people began to talk about things they did not understand and to ask all kinds of questions that distracted the rest of the members from discerning the meaning of God’s message to the church. In that setting it was women doing this. Men often do the same thing. Corporate worship should be a time of the whole body hearing the voice of God and putting into practice what they hear. Those who do not grasp a basic understanding or follow the flow of the worship service should not burden everyone with their personal questions. They should ask their one-to-one Bible teacher and pray to understand the worship service message better.

Given the tendency toward chaos and division in the Corinthian church, it was a time of spiritual crisis for them. Paul gave the most excellent guidance and direction that would bring order and beauty and power to their worship service. Paul was serious about making these needed changes. So he warned them in verses 36-38 that he was speaking to them with apostolic authority.

Paul summarizes his main points in verses 39-40. Let’s read these verses: “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

In this passage we learn that when we meet together we must have a clear purpose to build up the church. We must do our best to prepare our special songs, sing hymns wholeheartedly, and prepare and deliver messages and Bible testimonies that build others up. This applies to our Sunday worship service, fellowship meetings, elders meetings, women’s meetings, campus meetings, and even our one-to-one Bible studies. God has given us many gifts. Let’s pray to do our best to develop these gifts and build up the church until God makes our nation a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.