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“Paul’s perspective underscores God’s intent that a spiritual gift be used primarily for the building up of the Church.”

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Of all the chapters in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, perhaps this one is the most intriguing. Paul writes in some detail about the strange and mysterious gift of tongues.

As Paul begins the chapter he once again tells his readers to frame their spiritual gifts in Christian love. To be sure, we should desire spiritual gifts. Notice, he doesn’t say we should work towards getting them. He says we should desire them. After all, one doesn’t work for a gift. By definition, a gift is freely given. Christians may pray to the Lord for such gifts, but finally it is His decision to give them. As Paul said in our last chapter: “All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, *just as he determines*” (1 Corinthians 12:11). Nonetheless, we are asked to desire the greater gifts just as a child might desire and hope for certain presents from his father. God’s children are encouraged to pray to their heavenly Father for such spiritual gifts, but whether they receive them or not is God’s decision.

Paul specifically compares the greater gift of prophecy to the lesser gift of speaking in tongues. We can only assume, because of Paul’s great emphasis on the gift of tongues, that the Corinthians were drawn towards this more spectacular gift and that it was somehow obstructing the mission of their congregation. Paul urges the Corinthians to desire the gift of prophecy more than the gift of tongues. He argues that tongue-speaking, or “glossolalia,” is not a viable means of communicating with other people. To other people, the use of tongues sounds like gibberish.

Now, right away we are faced with the question of whether this “glossolalia” is the same as that experienced by the apostles at Pentecost. At Pentecost the languages were known and understood

by the apostles' audience. In Acts 2:7-8, the crowd in Jerusalem listened to the apostles speak in tongues. "Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?'" And yet, there were others who thought the apostles were simply drunk.

In other words, the various languages were understood by most but not all. They were familiar to many of the people at hand. Contrast that to Paul's emphasis on the unintelligible nature of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14. As he says in verse 19: "I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue." It seems no one could understand the sounds expressed by Paul and the Corinthians when they spoke in tongues. So, is this the same miracle as that of Pentecost?

Some would argue that Pentecost involved more than one miracle. Truly, the apostles were speaking in tongues, but the audience was also given the gift of interpretation of tongues, so that when the apostles spoke "glossolalia," it was miraculously interpreted by the audience in their various native languages. If this were the case, then there would be no conflict with the gift of glossolalia evident at Pentecost and that which was given to Paul and the Corinthians.

It is interesting, though, how little importance Paul gives this particular gift. Again and again he emphasizes that the gift of prophecy is much better than that of glossolalia because the words of prophecy can be understood. And because prophecy is understood, others can benefit. Thus, prophecy is a better gift because it focuses on others. By focusing on others, it acts much more effectively as a gift of Christian love. Tongue-speaking builds up

the self. Prophecy builds up others. Glossolalia may personally uplift one's sense of God's presence, but prophecy allows others to know God. So, unless glossolalia can be understood by others through the means of an interpreter, it is useless for God's Church.

Paul's perspective underscores God's intent that a spiritual gift be used primarily for the building up of the Church. If a gift is used for selfish purposes, rather than for the whole community of God's people, it is wasted. And the same is true for tongues. Unless someone has been given the gift of interpretation and can edify the community of believers by explaining that which has been spoken, then there is little use for the gift.

As an example of the potential harm of glossolalia, Paul points to musical instruments. If there is no distinction in the notes, music will sound like a garbled mess (as modern music proves). And the battle trumpet must sound boldly for all to hear, or no one will realize it is signaling the charge to battle. In the same way, words of prophecy are clear and understandable. Words of glossolalia are not. Paul concludes, "So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church" (v. 12). Notice, he isn't saying that the Corinthians should try to achieve greater spiritual gifts, but that they should focus on exercising those gifts which will be most effective at building the Church.

This is an important distinction when we consider the authenticity of glossolalia today. Although I have never spoken in tongues, I am not closed to the possibility of its genuine existence. But I am skeptical of its authenticity when people claim one can work towards attaining the gift or claim that one must speak in tongues as evidence of genuine faith. In some churches, there are directions on how

to acquire this gift, as if it is something one can attain by following a manual. The gift of tongues is not something one “achieves” like some sort of Boy Scout medal. It is a “gift,” that is, something given freely, by God’s Spirit. As Paul wrote in 12:11: “All these are the work of the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.” It is the Spirit’s decision to give this gift. It is not given by the efforts of man.

It is evident throughout Scripture that the Spirit works when He wills and how He wills. For example, when Saul was anointed king of Israel, a procession of prophets met him. At that moment, the Spirit of the Lord gave Saul the gift of prophecy and his proclamation joined with those of the other prophets. This miraculous demonstration of the Spirit’s power amazed them all (1 Samuel 10:9–12). The same miraculous and unexpected demonstration of the Spirit’s power was given to Moses’ seventy elders in Numbers 11:25. We also see the Spirit of the Lord descend to give courage to some of Israel’s early judges like Gideon (Judges 6:34) or Jephthah (Judges 11:29). After seeing the newborn Jesus, Simeon was moved by the Spirit to prophesy (Luke 2:27–31).

The point is, in each of these cases it is the Spirit working, not the individual. The individual merely becomes a tool of the Spirit’s power. How does this apply to glossolalia? We can pray for the gift but we cannot assume it will be given us. That is the Spirit’s decision, given for His good purposes. We can pray for the gift, but we cannot work for it. We cannot follow a manual which describes “How to Speak in Tongues.” If the Spirit wishes us to possess this gift, He will give it.

Now, this is important when considering those who insist one must be “baptized in the Spirit”

to be saved, the evidence of which is speaking in tongues. As Paul says, there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” (Ephesians 4:4–5), and this one baptism, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12:13, is done “by one Spirit into one body.” Again, Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, one must be born “by water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). Titus says in 3:5: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” And Peter states in Acts 2:38–39, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Looking at all of these passages, we can conclude that God has given us one baptism which involves the use of water by which we receive the Holy Spirit.

Now, there is no promise that the Spirit will bring with Him the gift of tongues at baptism. Surely, the Spirit brings gifts with Him, but such gifts may include administration, hospitality, giving, or any of the others. In the early church, we occasionally see the Holy Spirit bring the gift of tongues to those newly baptized, but this is done for the purpose of manifesting the Spirit’s power among a new group of believers (Acts 8:9–17, 10:44–48, 19:1–6). And there are times when there is no mention at all of the gift of tongues at baptism (Acts 8:26–40, 16:13–34). So those who claim one must demonstrate the ability to speak in tongues through a special “baptism of the spirit” are claiming something unscriptural.

As matter of fact, Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians that those who insist on focusing on the gift of tongues are like children. They are stuck in spiritual infancy and need to “grow up” (v. 20).

Then follows Paul’s final argument about the role of tongues within the congregation.

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Paul believes it is important that sufficient order be maintained in the worship service. Apparently, the Corinthians' worship was growing chaotic, and Paul felt moved to give direction to their actions and behavior.

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Throughout the Bible, God (who is “the Word,” after all) uses babble to judge unbelievers. For those who are not believers, he is no longer “the Word.” He becomes incoherent. We witness this judgment at the Tower of Babel when the peoples of the world were attempting to disobey God by building a tower to heaven. The Lord struck them with an inability to communicate with one another. It was an act of judgment. Or consider Jesus’ use of parables against the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Pharisees accused Jesus of working for the devil (“Beelzebub”). Immediately, Jesus began to speak in parables, confusing many of His believers. When the disciples asked Jesus why He was speaking in parables, He said that it was an act of judgment (Matthew 13:10–15).

Paul argues, then, that the speaking in tongues is a sign against unbelievers. It is an act of judgment. Prophecy, on the other hand, is given for believers to grow in their faith and unbelievers to turn to the Lord. If unbelievers walk into a church where everyone is speaking in tongues, they’re going to think the whole assembly is crazy and they will walk away from the Lord’s grace. Because of such unintelligible

speaking, they will be confirmed in their unbelief and, in effect, judged. On the other hand, if an unbeliever hears a word of prophecy which clearly proclaims sin and grace, they will be moved to repent and so be brought into God’s Kingdom.

Now which is more useful for the up-building of the Church?

Paul believes it is important that sufficient order be maintained in the worship service. Apparently, the Corinthians’ worship was growing chaotic, and Paul felt moved to give direction to their actions and behavior. He suggests that when the Corinthians worship, everyone should sing hymns together, receive some words of instruction or revelation, and then hear some glossolalia, but only if there is someone to interpret. If there is no interpreter, tongue speaking should be reserved for some private place. Prophecies and revelations should be given one at a time, and those who feel moved by the Spirit should refrain until they are given an orderly opportunity to speak. You’ll notice that people have the power to refrain from using their gifts. Spiritual gifts will not burst out and overwhelm us. But, that should come as no surprise. “God is not a God of disorder

but of peace.”

And interestingly, in the setting of public worship, women are called upon to remain silent. In the context of the public worship about which Paul is speaking, women are to show their submission to men by not being part of the public proclamation or prophecy of God’s Word. The reason for that submission, Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:11–15, is to remind us that Adam was created before Eve, and that Eve was the first deceived by the devil.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, in its attempt to use Scripture as its basis for faith and action, believes these verses from Corinthians and 1 Timothy prohibit women from the office of the ministry. It is true, as we saw in 1 Corinthians 11:5, that women were able to pray and prophesy. But as far as their role in the public proclamation, it seems as if Paul has forbidden it. And it isn’t as if we can excuse his command as being culturally determined because he continues: “Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (14:36–37).

To be sure, it is unpopular in this day of gender equality to suggest that women

should be prohibited from the public proclamation of prophecy within the congregation’s worship, but any church body which ascribes to the Word of God for its belief and practice has to come to terms with this command. The Lutheran Church is not attempting to oppress women by its conclusions. It is sincerely attempting to apply God’s Word to the life of faith.

But one last thing. At the end of this chapter, Paul encourages the Corinthians to view prophecy as the greatest of spiritual gifts and to welcome its presence among them. He also asks them not to forbid speaking in tongues. It is this author’s opinion that we take his words to heart. It is a dangerous thing to deny the Spirit’s work, and if He currently chooses to manifest Himself in the speaking of tongues, then no one should attempt to restrain Him. But let it be done scripturally and in good order, understanding that it is the lesser of the spiritual gifts and that it is not a sign of some special “baptism of the Spirit.” It is merely one of a number of gifts which God has given His children for their edification. So, let it be confined to a place where it will not disturb the congregation or offend visitors and “unbelievers.” In other words, if individuals wish to speak in tongues, let them do so in the privacy of their homes.

PERSONAL APPLICATION*1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-16:24*

Father in heaven, we thank You for Paul's writings to the Corinthians because through them we are granted greater insight into Your will for the local church. We pray Your Spirit would keep us from doubting the promise of the resurrection. We look forward to the day on which You come with the sound of a trumpet to take us to our heavenly home.

Until that day, always be our source of love and grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Why do you think Jesus appeared to so many different people at so many different times after His resurrection? (15:5-8; 2 Peter 1:16)

 2. In 15:6, how does Paul suggest his story about the Resurrection could be easily confirmed?

 3. In what way is Paul's description of being "abnormally born" accurate? (15:8-10; Acts 7:54- 8:1, 9:1-9, 22:14-16)

 4. Explain the important reason given in each verse for believing in our own resurrection.
 - 15:13

 - 15:14

 - 15:15

 - 15:17

 - 15:18

- Who else besides some of the Corinthians denied the possibility of a resurrection? (Matthew 22:23; Acts 17:16-34, 23:6-8)
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5. Explain in your own words the “exchange” or “substitution” which Paul describes between mankind and Jesus. (15:21–22; Romans 5:12, 15)

6. On what day and how often were the Corinthians to take an offering for the church in Jerusalem? (16:2)

How is this scriptural precedent followed in your church?

7. Despite all the problems within the Corinthian church, what does Paul express to them at the end? (16:24)

Why is this important? (Proverbs 10:12; 1 Peter 4:8)

8. When Christ comes again, why do we know there will still be Christians left in the world? (15:51; also Matthew 24:38–41; Mark 13:26–27)

How quickly will this apocalyptic event occur? (15:52)

What will announce His coming? (15:52; Isaiah 27:12–13; Matthew 24:31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17; Revelation 11:15)

9. Read verses 15:42–44 and fill in the blanks which describe the new bodies we will enjoy in heaven:

The perishable body becomes

The natural body is raised a

The earthly body which is dishonorable will be raised in

body.

Who will we be like in heaven? (15:49)

The weak body is raised in

What can you describe about Jesus' body after His resurrection? (Luke 24:13–31, 36–43; John 20:19, 26)

What does Paul's description of the seed growing into the plant suggest about the superiority of our heavenly bodies? (15:37–38)

10. Where was the Christian church meeting in Ephesus? (16:19)

In Rome? (Romans 16:3–5)

In Laodicea? (Colossians 4:15)

In Colossae where Philemon lived? (Philemon verse 2)

12. Do you think the Christian Church could survive today if we were forced to meet in homes? Why?
