

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

SERIES: "NOW CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS..."

by Ron Ritchie

A few years ago I was invited by some members of our Discovery International ministry to travel to Bogotá, Colombia to work with them in their prison ministry there. They had arranged a five-day conference to encourage and equip about eighty-five ex-prisoners, who had become Christians in prison, so that they could go back into those hellholes with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We all met in a Catholic convent and had a wonderful week together. But there was one moment I will never forget.

At the beginning of one of my classes I asked them if we could have a word of prayer. I bowed my head, and the moment I said, "Dear Father...." all those men and women broke out saying their own prayers, some loud and some quieter. I looked up in confusion and left my own prayer hanging in the air. Their praying went on for about two minutes, and then it seemed as if an invisible conductor waved his hand over the group, and they all stopped at the same time. It seemed so chaotic at the time, to this day I'm not sure what happened.

I have a feeling that this was the same kind of confusion that the elders of Corinth were facing in their chaotic worship services.

The key to order is love

1 Corinthians 14:1-5:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For 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. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Remember, the Corinthian elders had written Paul, asking him to help them with the root problems of competitiveness and divisions in their church. In this section (chapters 12-14) the apostle has been reviewing spiritual truth he had already taught during the year and a half he was with them: (1) The body of Christ is a unit made up of many parts (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). (2) All the parts are necessary for the good of the whole body (see 12:14-26). (3) Each person's part (gift) is essential to the whole, but no one is the whole body; no one has all the spiritual gifts (see 12:27-31). (4) There is a more excellent way of expressing spiritual gifts: through the love and power of Jesus Christ and his Spirit (see 13:1-13).

Now Paul continues, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts...." Remember, expressing your spiritual gifts without the love of God (agape, sacrificial love) leaves you sounding like so much noise, metal against metal, without meaning or profit on this earth.

Within the context of the love of Jesus Christ, Paul needed to address the problem the church was having over the relative value of the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy. Prophecy and tongues were the two signs from the Old Testament to the contemporary unbelieving Jews that God was moving in judgment against them as a nation, because they rejected God's Messiah Jesus and his gift of salvation. This was also a sign to the Jews that God was opening up the door of salvation to the Gentiles (see Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:17-22; Isaiah 28:11). As an apostle of Jesus Christ and the spiritual father of the Corinthian church, Paul wants to encourage the leaders of the church (this is not addressed to individuals) to eagerly desire spiritual gifts to be expressed

among the saints, especially the gift of prophecy. All the spiritual gifts are valuable, but like the members of one's body, not all are necessary in every situation. Apparently, the leaders were holding back the men and women who had the spiritual gift of prophecy from speaking during a worship service. This left the door open for those with the gift of tongues to take a dominant role, resulting in spiritual chaos. Paul wants to guide them back to the place where they can see that both spiritual gifts are valuable, but prophecy is more valuable within a worship service.

The gift of prophecy is the spiritual ability to speak forth the mind, counsel, and revelation of God. In Greek it is the word *propheteia*, which is derived from *pro* = forth and *phemi* = to speak. Thus it is the ability of men and women to make the word of God shine, to understand the mind of God as revealed in his word and apply it to our daily struggles. This gift is used of God within the body of Christ for (1) edification---to build up a firm foundation of biblical truth under the lives of believers; (2) exhortation---to strengthen, support, and admonish believers; (3) consolation---to seek to identify with their suffering and then offer them hope from the word of God; (4) instruction of the minds of believers (see 14:19); and (5) conviction of unbelievers (see 14:24-25).

The gift of tongues, in Greek *glossa*, is the spiritual ability to speak a foreign language without learning it beforehand, but not understanding it until someone interprets it. Here Paul continues to try to bring order out of chaos. If someone having the spiritual gift of languages wants to speak in a worship service, they must do so in accordance with the purpose of that gift so as not to cause confusion and chaos. (1) The foreign tongue must be used to give a verbal offering of praise and thanksgiving to God, not to direct a message to men and women in the service. (2) The foreign language that is heard must then be translated for the listeners by one with the spiritual gift of interpretation; otherwise, the speaker of the foreign tongue will be speaking mysteries to himself that even he does not understand, and will end up edifying only himself instead of the body.

You might well ask at this point, "Don't these verses support what some today call a "private prayer language?" This is in reference to the statements in verse 2, "...he utters mysteries with his spirit," and, "...he...edifies himself..." I don't believe, based on the teachings in 1 Corinthians 12-14, that there is any Biblical basis for claiming to have a private prayer language. What Paul has sought to show the Corinthians is the following: (1) The Spirit gives spiritual gifts for the common good, not the good of the one having the gift (see 1 Corinthians 12:7). (2) The gift of foreign languages is designed for a particular purpose, like all the other gifts. It is to be expressed in public to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. (3) The foreign language must be interpreted in order to edify the body of Christ. And (4) if there is no interpretation, the person doesn't know what he is saying and ends up with only a good feeling in which he is personally edified, when what he was supposed to do was edify the body. These points do not support the use of the gift of tongues as a private prayer language.

Paul says, "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues," but he doesn't mean this literally, for he has just said in 12:30, "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" (No!) He means here that the spiritual gift of tongues is a wonderful gift when used properly among unbelieving Jews or within a worship service. It is used properly if there is someone in the service who has the gift of interpretation. Otherwise, the best spiritual gift for a worship service is prophecy, because everyone listening to the word of God can at least hear the truth of God in their own language.

In order to bring order out of chaos, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the key to order within the body is to allow the love of Christ to be reflected as they express their various spiritual gifts in the worship service and in the world around them. And...

The key to love is truth

1 Corinthians 14:6, 12:

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?...Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

It is not a reflection of the love of God when one uses his spiritual gift of foreign languages without having someone interpret it. Without interpretation, it is just so much noise, because no one is edified. The gifts that build up the members of the body of Christ are the most important ones. Paul illustrates this statement by showing them that if he came with a direct revelation from God, some knowledge from the Old Testament, a prophecy that would give insight into a current problem, or a word of instruction about a certain doctrine, the members of the body would be edified.

In 14:7-12 Paul uses two illustrations to drive home his point that when gifts are used improperly, they cause confusion. Confusion and disorder occur when (1) a musical instrument plays notes that are not distinct, and (2) someone speaks in a foreign language that is not interpreted. "So," he concludes, "since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church."

A few years ago I was teaching at Mount Hermon. At the end of a morning of singing and then studying the word of God together, many of us remained after the session and sat down to talk to each other on the carpeted steps. One delightful woman came up to me and asked me if she could pray over me and then give me a "word of prophecy." I didn't quite know what to say, but in the context of the moment it didn't appear to be improper, so I agreed. She immediately began to speak in a strange, repetitious chant. When she finished that so-called prayer, which had no interpretation, she proceeded to prophesy over me about my future, based on her hopes and dreams for me, but not on anything from the word of God. Unfortunately, that left me with about the same feeling I get when I open up a Chinese fortune cookie. She then thanked me, stood up, and left. To this day I can't biblically justify that experience.

In order to bring order out of chaos, Paul has reminded the Corinthians that the key to love is the truth of God. And...

The key to truth is understanding

1 Corinthians 14:13-19:

For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. 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 mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

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.

Again, Paul's point is that they are to use the spiritual gifts that bring edification and understanding of the truth of God to the members of the body of Christ during a worship service.

If one feels led by the Holy Spirit to praise God publicly in a foreign language that he does not understand, he should pray "that he may interpret...." Some think that the person with the gift of tongues could also have the spiritual gift of interpretation, and when they felt led of the Spirit to praise God in a tongue they had never learned, they were to pray to God that he would give them understanding to interpret, so that all those in the worship service would be spiritually edified with his prayer of praise to God. Other biblical scholars believe that if a Corinthian believer with the gift of tongues were attending a worship service and then were led of the Spirit to praise God in a foreign language, they should at the same time pray that there would be someone in that same service with the gift of interpretation, so that all might be edified. The Holy Spirit would never lead a believer to express his spiritual gift mindlessly. It must be expressed in such a way that all who are listening to that person's praise of God will be able to understand what has been said and say, "Amen, we agree!" "Praying and singing with the spirit must be accompanied by praying and singing with the mind also" (J. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, "1 Corinthians," p. 377).

"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you." On the Day of Pentecost (33 AD), 16 different languages were spoken by the 120 disciples, and they were all understood by the foreign visitors (see Acts 2:4-11). Paul reminds the Corinthian church that he was given the spiritual gift of languages to aid him in his evangelistic ministries to the many different nations of the Roman Empire. Each time he went into a city he would visit a Jewish synagogue, and regardless of the language they spoke, he was enabled by the Spirit of God to offer a prayer of praise in a language he had never learned, and those who heard understood as on the day of Pentecost. There was a real purpose behind Paul's being able to speak a foreign language in those synagogues, as we shall see in a moment. "But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue [if it is not interpreted]."

In order to bring order out of chaos, Paul has reminded the Corinthians that the key to truth is understanding. And...

The key to understanding is growth

1 Corinthians 14:20-25:

Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. In the Law it is written:

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

Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced 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!"

The Corinthians were acting like excited children who were getting carried away by their emotions rather than acting out of their minds. Their immature thinking was causing them to express their spiritual gift of tongues with a loveless attitude, without interpretation, resulting in selfishness, pride, competition, and confusion. Some of their speaking in tongues may have been the false tongues they had learned before they became Christians, in the rites of the mystery religions. So Paul says, "If you want to live like innocent babes, do so in the realm of evil, but be spiritually mature when it comes to understanding the gifts of the Spirit, especially the biblical purpose of the gift of tongues."

Paul then gives them an amazing insight from the Scriptures to help them distinguish between the true gift of tongues and a false gift of tongues. He reminds the Corinthians that Isaiah prophesied in 700 BC (Isaiah 28:11) that one day the Lord would use foreign nations to discipline his people because of their sin of idolatry, and would turn to the Gentiles with the message of salvation.

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

This was a prophecy that had a double fulfillment: (1) It was partially fulfilled when God allowed the Assyrians (who spoke with a strange tongue) to invade the northern tribes of Israel (722 BC) and take them into captivity because of their idolatry. The Assyrians then moved south into Judea and surrounded the city of Jerusalem. Those in Jerusalem would have all gone into captivity but for the righteous prayers and obedient

heart of King Hezekiah. God stepped in on behalf of his people as he had many times before and defeated the Assyrians (see 2 Kings 18-19). However, 136 years later the people of God went into idolatry once again. (2) Isaiah's prophecy was finally fulfilled when God allowed the Babylonians (who also spoke with a strange tongue) to invade Judah (586 BC) and take the Jews into captivity for seventy years. These invasions of Judea by foreigners were a sign of God's displeasure in and judgment against his people as he removed them from their privileged position.

Now, some seven hundred years later, Paul, moved by the Holy Spirit, has chosen this passage in Isaiah to demonstrate to the Corinthian church that the spiritual gift of tongues was given to some men and women within the body of Christ to be used as a sign for the unbelieving Jewish community, to show them that once again God was turning toward the Gentiles with the gospel of salvation, because the Jews rejected his Messiah. When the unbelieving Jews would hear those foreign tongues spoken by the Christian Jews and Gentiles in a worship service or in their community, it would either drive them to repentance (change their minds about Jesus) as it did on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:14-41) or harden their hearts (see Acts 2:13).

You may be asking, are the spiritual gifts of foreign languages and interpretation valid today? Paul was never opposed to the proper use of the authentic gifts of tongues and interpretation. Since they were and are sign gifts for the Jewish people, it seems that they can best be used in synagogues or Christian worship services with unbelieving Jews in the audience. But if unbelieving Jews came to a Christian worship service and heard many strange languages without an interpretation of praise to God, they would think the believers were out of their minds.

You may well ask the question at this point: Is the repetitive chanting some of our brothers and sisters are using in the private devotions and public worship services the authentic spiritual gift of of foreign language? I would have to say no, based on the context of 1 Corinthians 12-14. We have already shown that all gifts were given to the members of the body of Christ for the common good, not our private good (12:7). We have already seen from this study that the original meaning of the word translated tongues is foreign language (12:28, 14:10,11). What is the source of this repetitive chanting? Those scholars who have had an opportunity to study this psychological phenomenon which occurs in some Christian circles have found the same repetitive chanting in pagan religions, especially during times of great religious excitement. Scholars of ancient religions tells of the same phenomena occurring during the ceremonies of the many mystery religions during the Greek and Roman period. Is the source of this psychological phenomena within the Christian community evil? I find no evidence to support that conclusion. But I do believe we need to go back to our original translation of the meanings of tongues: a known language used somewhere in this world.

If unbelieving Jews or Gentiles came into a worship service and heard someone using the spiritual gift of prophecy, they would be listening to the word of God. "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12-13). Some of these unbelievers would understand the message from God and become convicted of their sins and personally accept Jesus as their Messiah, Lord, and Savior. And then they would shout out, "God is really among you!"

In order to bring order out of chaos, Paul has reminded the Corinthians that the key to understanding is growth. And finally...

The key to growth is worship

1 Corinthians 14:26-33, 39-40:

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. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two---or at the most three---should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace....

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.

God is a God of peace and order, and our times of worship should reflect his character. At the same time, the worship service includes participation from many members of the body of Christ. A person may come with a new hymn they wrote and want to teach it to their spiritual family. Another member may have a word of instruction leading the spiritual family toward godly living. A person may come to the meeting with a revelation, either directly from God or from his word. But all of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

"The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets." Prophets can't just break out in a service and say something like, "I feel in my spirit that God is telling me to tell you to do such-and-such," without being accountable to the other prophets. This is God's safeguard against self-appointed false prophets. Prophets are to listen to one another and, based on their understanding of the word and will of God, to clarify or correct one another. There continues to be a need for accountability among all of them.

In 1 Corinthians 14:33-40 Paul addresses three final problems. The first is the place of women in the worship services. In essence Paul has already addressed the issue of headship and the relationship of men and women under that headship in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. Every godly woman who submitted to the spiritual headship of Jesus Christ and of their husbands, or if single, of their fathers or the elders of their local church, could pray and prophesy in an orderly manner in the Christian community or in a worship service (see 1 Corinthians 11:3-6; Acts 2:17-18). However, if while attending a worship service they carried on conversations with each other while others were expressing their gifts, thus becoming a source of disorder, they were to save those questions or conversations until they returned home, where they could talk to their husband (or their father or an elder) about it.

The second problem Paul addresses here is apostolic authority. Paul came at this problem of disorder from the authority of an apostle; thus the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The third is whether the spiritual gifts of prophecy and tongues were to be expressed in a worship service. "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 summary, the key to order is love, the key to love is truth, the key to truth is understanding, the key to understanding is spiritual growth, and the key to spiritual growth is orderly worship.

We have come full circle on the subject of spiritual gifts: (1) We began with the encouragement of Peter to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us (see 1 Peter 4:10-11). (2) Then Paul told us of the benefits of the gifts to the body of Christ and the world around us (see Roman 12:1-8). (3) He also showed us the joy that is ours when we are equipped to use our gifts (see Ephesians 4:7-10); and (4) he taught us about the body of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit, which (5) should be wrapped in the love of Christ and (6) presented to the body and the world in an orderly fashion (see 1 Corinthians 12-14).

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 4:10-11).

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