

Public Worship and the Gift of Tongues

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 14 by Nathan Nettleton, 23 February 2020

© LaughingBird.net

Message

The gift of tongues can be a valuable part of our private spirituality, but the needs of public worship require something more than the private intimacies of our spirituality.

Sermon

Despite having been the pastor here for over quarter of a century, I'm pretty sure that this will be the first time I've ever preached on the gift of tongues. I have preached on the story of the day of Pentecost when the disciples were miraculously heard preaching in various foreign languages, but miraculously becoming a multilingual preacher is not the same thing as praying in an intimate prayer language that is known only to God and the angels.

This gift of tongues is mentioned a few times by the Apostle Paul, but the only real teaching about it occurs in the fourteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians which we heard part of last week and more of tonight. And since it is not included in the cycle of Bible readings we usually follow, I haven't ever addressed it before.

I want to start with a story that has nothing to do with the gift of tongues. It does however have to do with the broader point that Paul is making, a point which must be understood in order to make sense of what he says about the gift of tongues.

The story comes from the time, about twenty years ago, when this style of worship which we enjoy here was first being introduced as our main Sunday service. Before that, it had existed for a couple of years as a very small alternative Wednesday night service held in the prayer chapel out the back.

A couple of months after it shifted to Sunday to become our main service, a young woman, who for the sake of anonymity I will call "Trish", stood up in a church meeting, angrily denounced me as a treacherous liar, and stormed out of the church never to return. Trish had been one of the most regular and enthusiastic participants in the Wednesday night Eucharist, and the guts of her objection was that I had promised her that the change wouldn't significantly change the basic ethos and spirit of that service, but that in her opinion, it had changed it so totally that everything that mattered to her about it was lost. I had lied and let her down.

I was completely bewildered at the time because, I was quite sure that we had been true to that promise. Later, on reflection, I formed a conclusion about what had happened. Now please be aware that it is only my opinion. Trish has never spoken to me again, and my theory may be entirely self-justifying and out of touch with what she was thinking and feeling. But even if my theory is completely wrong about Trish, I'm pretty sure it is true and relevant to what the Apostle Paul is talking about in the passage we heard read.

My theory is that when Trish and I talked about that Wednesday night service and the essential experience of it that needed to be preserved, we thought we were talking about the same thing, but we were actually on completely different trams.

I think that what she most valued was the way that the meditative repetition of the prayers in a beautiful quiet reflective atmosphere drew her into a sense of intimacy with the Spirit of God. In other words, the liturgy, although shared with others, was experienced as a vehicle for her own personal prayerful intimate relationship with God.

Meanwhile, I was interpreting it in a communal way. I understood the exact same participation in the liturgy as a vehicle for gathering the congregation into a united action of presenting our gathered selves to God as an act of public witness and worship. For me, whether I or anyone else felt a personal connection with God during worship was less important than whether we felt that we were connecting with one another in order to collectively offer something to God. In my opinion, personal intimacy with God is something you seek in private; its not the point of the public worship service, even if it is often a nice byproduct.

Now, whether or not I am right about Trish, let me come back to our Bible reading about the gift of tongues, and explain why I'm telling this story and offering my speculative interpretation of it.

In this chapter, Paul speaks to the Corinthian church about the use of spiritual gifts in their public worship service, and to make his point, he singles out two of the gifts – tongues and prophecy – and contrasts the contributions they make to public worship and to private personal prayer. And in a nutshell, he says that the gift of prophecy makes a valuable contribution to public worship because everyone present can understand it and so the whole congregation is built up by it, but that the gift of tongues which involves praying personal prayers in an intimate heart language that no one else can understand is therefore something that is best practiced in private because it is really only of any benefit to the individual who is exercising it.

I'd better clarify some terms here. You can get plenty of debate about what both these gifts are. The gift of prophecy is essentially the ability to communicate a message from God to the community. That's basically what I'm doing right now. Elsewhere, the word "prophecy" often means predicting the future, but that's not the essential meaning in the Bible. Biblical prophecy sometimes includes foretelling the future, but just as often it is interpreting the past or present. Biblically speaking, the prophet is one who is able to discern what God wants to communicate to the people and communicate it.

Some Christians, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, want to distinguish between preaching and prophecy, and see prophecy as something that is less organised and more spontaneous. Prophecy can be that, but there is no reason to limit it to that. The fact that we have whole books of prophecy in the Bible should make it clear that the biblical idea of prophecy is not limited to spontaneous utterances but can include the prayerfully thought through and carefully written.

Whichever side of that debate you fall on, you can still see Paul's point. The one who prophesies communicates a message from God in language that the people can understand and benefit from.

What then is the gift of tongues? Well, what did the Apostle say in our reading? Firstly (verse 2), he says that "those who speak in tongues do not speak to other people but to God; for

nobody else understands them”. So while prophesy communicates from God to the people, tongues communicates from a person to God. It is a form of personal prayer. Secondly (verse 14), he says that “if I pray in tongues, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive.” So tongues is a form of prayer that bypasses the intellectual processes.

You all know that feeling of trying to express some deep emotional response and struggling to find the right words to communicate it, don't you? Well, it seems that the gift of tongues allows you to skip that roadblock in prayer, and communicate with God from your heart without having to worry about your mind trying to figure out which words would be best.

So here's my second speculative theory for the night. Based on my own experience of praying in tongues, and the experiences of other people I've spoken to, and my reading of this passage from the Apostle Paul, I think that the gift of tongues is actually more or less the same thing as baby talk. And I don't mean that negatively at all; it's a perfectly good thing.

When a baby wants to express things, it just opens its mouth and babbles away. What comes out of its mouth is a perfectly appropriate expression of what the baby is feeling and wanting to express. Perfectly good that is, unless they need everyone else to understand them. Then there are problems. But if they just want to express it, baby talk works perfectly, and no doubt God understands it. So do mothers quite often, but probably not as consistently as God!

Later, as the child's mind develops and acquires language skills, the mind starts getting involved and trying to find proper words for everything. But until the child gets really good at this after years of practice, it can be quite frustrating for the child, because feelings and emotions that they used to be able to express quite freely are not able to flow nearly as freely when they have to go through the budding language processor in the mind.

So I think that the gift of tongues is a recovery of an ability we all used to have. The spiritually miraculous element is not so much in the acquisition of some unknown language, but in the overcoming of our grown-up inhibitions to allow ourselves to talk like babies again. Grown-up inhibitions are often so powerful that they tightly constrain us even when we pray in private with no one but God hearing us. But when the gift frees us, we are able to express the deepest love and gratitude of our hearts to God in an ecstatic outpouring that doesn't need to go through the often clumsy and limited language processor of our minds.

And as the Apostle Paul says, the person who benefits from a prayer offered in tongues is the person who prays. No one else. And that's not a bad thing. Giving attention to developing our own personal love relationship with God is a good thing. Paul is quite clear that he himself prays in tongues a lot, perhaps more than all the people at Corinth who were making a big show of it (verse 18).

And while he is trying to calm down the Corinthians' over enthusiasm for these ecstatic gifts, I suspect that in many of today's churches, probably including this one, he'd be talking up these gifts and gently needling us for being far too reserved and prim and proper. A good injection of passion and ecstasy would more than likely be his prescription for us. The fact that we are not guilty of the same excesses as the Corinthians is no cause for feeling all superior if, in fact, we have fallen off the other end of the spectrum.

Here's the thing: Paul doesn't disparage the use of any of these gifts, only the misuse of them. Nor is he asking us to prioritise the needs of public worship over the exercise and development of our private spirituality. He wants us to value both. He says (verse 15), "What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also." It's not either/or, it's both/and.

If we return to my story about the falling out between me and Trish, while I was thinking about the liturgy in terms of its public impact on a whole congregation, I think she was thinking about how it nourished her own spirit. Neither of us were seeking something inappropriate, just different. The only question is whether sometimes the pursuit of the personal ecstatic encounter with God becomes the be all and end all and is allowed to blind us to the different needs of public worship. As the pastor, I had more responsibility than Trish to make sure attention was given to the public dimension. We need to give proper attention to both, but they have different needs.

So the Apostle advocates decency and order in public worship (verse 40), at least when he is talking to the Corinthians who were so excited about the personal spiritual gifts that their worship had become chaotic and incomprehensible as everyone did their own thing and tried to outdo one another in their unbridled passion and ecstatic behaviour. Paul doesn't tell them to stop praying in tongues. He tells them to take it home and do it in their private prayer behind closed doors. It's the liturgical equivalent of telling an amorous couple who are making out in public to get a room! Your expression of passion is a wonderful thing, but it's not supposed to be on display to your neighbours. Get a room!

As I said, I suspect that the Apostle might think we've fallen off the opposite end of the spectrum, but even though he might want to stir up our passion a bit, I'm sure he'd still be encouraging us to think carefully about how what we do in the Sunday worship service impacts on others who might walk through the door.

I sometimes hear pastors talk disparagingly about people who only ever think about what they personally get out of worship. But for my part, I think you have every right to expect to get something out of worship. If you don't, we are doing something very wrong. But ensuring that everyone gets something of value out of worship doesn't come about by encouraging everyone to use the liturgy as a way into their own private experience of God. It happens by coordinating a public and communal approach to God, and that requires a measure of decency and order and conscious awareness of one another's needs. That's a good thing, and it is and has been the focus of both my pastoral ministry and my academic study.

But, with the Apostle, I want to urge you not to let the experience of public worship, however wonderful it might be, be the be all and end all of your relationship with God. Get a room! And in that prayer room, ask God to set you free of all that overly grown-up need for decency and order, and just surrender yourself to the love and gratitude and passion that ignites when your heart and God's heart reach out to one another without being policed by your pesky interfering self-conscious mind!