

Everything in meetings of the Church must be upbuilding

Everything in meetings of the church must be upbuilding

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 26th June 2005

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. 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? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. 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. 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 foreigners 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!" (1 Corinthians 14:1-25)

Introduction

In this passage the apostle Paul gives instructions for the regulation of the gifts of prophecy and of tongues or languages. I have argued elsewhere that the gifts of prophecy and tongues, in the Biblical sense of those terms, have ceased with the giving of Scripture. This is because they were revelatory gifts. Now that revelation has ceased with the completion of Scripture, there is no longer any need for these gifts.

You might think, if the gifts of prophecy and tongues have ceased, does this passage have anything to say to us? Might we just as well get a pair of scissors and cut the passage out of our Bibles? The answer, of course, is "no", because there are *principles* contained in what the apostle says which are applicable for all time, even if the direct circumstances which led the apostle to lay out these principles are no longer applicable. This is not the only place in 1 Corinthians where we need to approach the letter in this way. For example, in chapter 8 the apostle dealt with the question of what to do about differences of opinion about food that had previously been offered to idols. Now this is simply not an issue in the church today, at least in this country. But there are principles that we can learn from the passage which are very relevant to today. The same thing applies with 1 Corinthians 14. The gifts that led the apostle to lay out the principles that he describes in this passage are no longer in operation in the church, but the principles are still very relevant.

So what is the principle that we learn from this passage? It is quite simply this: everything that takes place in the church must be upbuilding. The apostle again and again uses a word in this passage which is translated in the New International Version (NIV) translation as “to edify”. This word “edify” means “to build up”. The church is likened in the New Testament to a building. It is God’s spiritual temple, where he lives among his people. And it needs to be built up and strengthened. How is this to happen? Three things are essential for this edification, this upbuilding to take:

1. What is spoken or sung must be accurate truth about God and his Word.
2. What is spoken or sung must be understandable.
3. What is spoken or sung should exalt God and humble the sinner

Everything that takes place is to be subjected to the test of whether it is upbuilding. If it is not upbuilding, it is not to be allowed. If it is upbuilding, it is to be encouraged.

In what follows I want us to see how Paul teaches this principle in this passage, and then for us to consider how the principle is to be worked out in the life of the church.

1. The principle taught

Paul urged the believers in Corinth to desire to have the gift of prophecy over and against the gift of tongues or languages. If there is no interpretation, the person who speaks in a language speaks only to God and not to men and no-one understands him. So in verses 1 and 2, the apostle says, “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.” Whereas the person who prophesies “speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (verse 3). The person who prophesies does good to the people who are listening, because he strengthens them with the truth about God, and encourages them and comforts them. So, Paul says, the person “who speaks in a tongue [or language] edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would far rather have you prophesy.” Why does Paul want them to prophesy rather than speaking in tongues? Because prophecy is readily understandable, whereas speaking in

tongues or languages is not unless someone can translate what has been said.

The point the apostle has made is further reinforced in verses 6 to 12. Paul says that if he comes to the church and speaks in tongues, what good will he be unless he brings "some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction" (verse 6)? If there is no understandable word from God, nothing has been gained. The apostle draws an analogy with musical instruments. Unless clear notes are sounded on a musical instrument no-one will be able to make out the tune. "So it is with you," he says in verse 9. "Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will be just speaking into the air." He then draws an analogy with natural languages. If someone speaks a different language and you do not understand it, you are a foreigner to the speaker. There is no communication between the two. "So it is with you," the apostle says in verse 12. "Since you are so eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church."

In verses 13 to 19 the apostle applies what he has said to the matter of praying and singing in tongues or languages, which he also calls praying or singing "with your spirit". He says in verses 16 and 17, "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." As far as he is concerned, in the church it is better to speak five intelligible words than ten thousand in a tongue or language (verses 18 and 19)

Then in verses 20 to 25 Paul speaks about the effect of tongues or languages without translation upon unbelievers. In verse 21 he quotes from the Old Testament where God warned that, as a judgement, he would speak to his people through foreigners whom they would not understand. Tongues are "a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers." By this I think we can take it that Paul means that tongues without interpretation are a sign of judgement on unbelievers, not a means of blessing. So tongues will do no good to unbelievers. "So, if the whole church comes together and everyone is speaking in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind" (verse 24). However, tremendous good can be done to an unbeliever who hears the Word of God from the lips of those in the church. Paul says in verses 24 and 25, "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!'"

So we see the apostle saying again and again that everything that happens in the church must be edifying, upbuilding. And for it to be edifying it must be true to God's Word, and it must be understandable. And it should produce the result in unbelievers of convicting of sin and leading them to faith in God.

2. How the principle is to be applied

As I said earlier, we do not have to have the gifts of prophecy and tongues in the church today to see that what the apostle says is highly relevant to church life. Let us think about a number of areas:

1) What is taught

First of all, what the apostle says in this passage has great relevance to what is taught in the church. What is taught in church must be based upon the Bible. The preacher is not at liberty to talk about his own opinions, or the news, or the latest gossip about celebrities. He is God's spokesman to deliver God's word to the people.

And what is taught must be faithful to Scripture. It must be what the Scriptures actually say, rather than what the preacher wants them to say. It should also be honouring to God. The preacher needs to be careful with humour, as it can undermine the seriousness of the message that he is bringing to the people.

What is taught must also be clear. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells the story of a famous preacher who went to speak at a large church in Scotland. Sitting in the congregation was a humble maid who worked in a large house. She was asked afterwards what she thought of the sermon. "Oh!" she said, "It was wonderful." She was then asked if she understood what it was about. Her reply was, "Oh, Mr So and So is such a great preacher that an ordinary person like me could never presume to understand what he says." Preaching that cannot be understood by ordinary people is not great preaching. It is not preaching at all, according to the apostle Paul.

So there is a clear lesson for those who teach in the church. We must be accurate and above all understandable. Paul asked the believers in Colossae to

pray that he would make the message clear (Colossians 4.4.). Pray for those preach that God will help them to be clear. Give feedback as well. Let them know if you cannot understand what they are saying, so that they can work on making things clearer.

2) What is sung

There is considerable controversy in the church today about what is to be sung in meetings. Some would say that only Old Testament Psalms should be sung. Others would say that hymns may be sung as well as Psalms, as long as the hymns were written at least 100 years ago. Others would say that we should only sing songs that have been written recently, and that old hymns and songs are outmoded and do not reflect the way that the Holy Spirit is working today.

This passage is directly relevant to this controversy, because it tells us that the great test for all that takes place in the church is "Does it build up?" If it does build up, then it is permissible and right, whether it is based on the Old Testament or the New Testament, whether it was written a thousand years ago or one year ago.

But we do need to be discerning, because there are a lot of songs and hymns that have been written which, it must be frankly admitted, are of very dubious value. Here are some questions we need to ask about a song or and hymn that it is suggested we sing:

1. Is it true in what it says about God? Sometimes we say about a song "That's a brilliant song", but it may be that we like the song because it has a good tune rather than because of what it says about God. We need to look at the content of the song, and see if what it actually says about God and about us is true.

2. Is the song actually about God at all? Some songs are more about how we feel than about what God has done. They are really a form of self-congratulation, a bit like the Pharisee who prayed "Lord I thank you that I am not like other men..." (Luke 18.11). This is not worship but narcissism. Narcissus was a mythological figure who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. There is a great deal of narcissism in our world today, and it has made its way into the church. Let's make sure that our singing is about what God has done, not about how well we are doing.

3. Does the song or hymn exalt God, or does it undermine him, for example by being trivial?

4. Is it understandable? There are some hymns which are, for the average church member, incomprehensible. Such hymns should not be sung in the church.

What is important as well is not just the song or hymn, but the way that music for that song or hymn is played in the meeting. Music is a very powerful thing, and it is possible to create an "atmosphere" through having it a certain volume and through using a strong rhythm and by using the technique of repetition. Those who lead services need to be aware of this, and not allow the music to dominate. It is possible to get a "buzz" from music which has nothing whatsoever to do with the Holy Spirit. You will experience the same thing at a rock concert. A sensation that comes simply as a result of music does not build up God's people. It will do more harm than good. Those who lead meetings need to be careful that they do not deliberately or inadvertently create such a sensation.

3) What is prayed

Until quite recently the Roman Catholic "Church" had its prayers in Latin, and there is a movement in some quarters to have this restored. This passage shows us quite clearly that to pray in a language which is foreign to most of the people in the congregation is absurd and unhelpful.

Some other churches read very long and complicated prayers out of a prayer book. These prayers use archaic language and it can be very difficult, especially for someone who is not highly educated, to follow such prayers.

Some "non-conformist" churches have a tradition of very long and complicated "pulpit prayers". The preacher prays in an apparently extempore fashion a great long prayer with all sorts of quotations from Scripture and hymns woven into the prayer.

We can see from this passage that prayers should be clear and understandable for all the members of the congregation. There is no need to make things difficult for "ordinary" members by using archaic language or very complicated sentence structures. As Jesus said, God is not impressed by such performances

(Matthew 6.7).

4) What is shared

This chapter in 1 Corinthians contains a number of encouragements, explicitly and implicitly, for different members to bring contributions to meetings. However, the principle that all things should build up applies to what is shared as well. We do not gather together as the people of God to have just a good old natter about the news or gossip. We are gathered to meet with God and hear from him, and to help each other to know him and serve him better. So as we share together we need to share what will build others up. What will be most helpful is if we share things that we have learned from the Scriptures. Other helpful things to share are testimonies of answers to prayer, and needs for others to pray about.

5) Performed songs

The passage also has relevance to the issue of whether or not to have performed songs in meetings. We cannot say that the Scriptures would forbid all performed songs in meetings. Again the question is, "Is the performed song upbuilding? Is it true to God's Word? Is it understandable?"

In some churches there will be a choir who will sing an anthem which sounds wonderful. The only problem is that no-one understands what it is about because it is in Latin! But even performed songs that are sung in English can be difficult to understand. It can be very hard to make out the words that are being sung. If there is to be a performed song in a meeting, it would probably be a good idea to have the words written out on a sheet that was given to people in the congregation.

We also need to be very careful about the danger of pandering to people's desire to be entertained. We are gathered in church not to be entertained but to be confronted with the true and living God. There are dangers too for those who perform such songs, in that they can be tempted to become overly self-conscious, and to be proud if they think they have "done well."

Conclusion

In conclusion, what are we aiming at when we are met together? Surely it is that

what the apostle describes in verses 24 and 25 of this chapter might be a common occurrence in the church. "But if an unbeliever 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 on and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you.'"

The present day equivalent of prophecy is a believer reading or speaking from the Word of God, the Bible. When the Bible is read, God is speaking. As God's Word is spoken in the church, we can have every expectation that God will speak to convict people in the way that Paul describes in this passage. "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

We need to pray that the Word of God will be so richly and strongly among us when we are gathered together, and the Holy Spirit will be so powerfully at work through his Word, that anyone who is an unbeliever or backslider who comes in will be convicted of sin and drawn to Christ.

This has been the great characteristic through the ages of churches where the Holy Spirit is at work. To give just one example, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives an account of the way in which God dealt with a man who had backslidden terribly. He was a Christian, but he had committed adultery and had squandered his money. Eventually his money ran out and the woman he had been with deserted him. He was utterly miserable and ashamed, and felt that the only thing he could do was to commit suicide. One Sunday evening he went to Westminster Bridge, intending to throw himself off. But as he arrived at the bridge he heard Big Ben strike six-thirty. Suddenly the thought flashed into his mind that Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whom he had heard before, would be entering his pulpit. He decided he would go and listen to the preacher one last time before he ended his life. He made his way to Westminster Chapel, and as he went in he heard the preacher say in prayer "God have mercy upon the backslider." He was immediately restored. He went on to become an elder in a church where he served well for a number of years. (*Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder 1971, Pages 302 and 303).

May God graciously pour his Spirit out upon the church and cause his Word to be powerfully proclaimed by preachers, and also to be effectively and clearly shared by different members of congregations, so that this sort of occurrence

becomes frequent. May believers be built up strong in the Word, may backsliders be restored, and may the unconverted be convicted of sin and brought to Christ.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission, International Bible Society.

This typed up sermon is copyright © Henry Dixon 2008, Poplar Baptist Church, 2 Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, United Kingdom. It may be reproduced without permission, provided:

- It is reproduced in full,
- The author is stated and this copyright notice is reproduced exactly
- No charge is made for copies.

All other reproduction can only be with permission of the copyright holder.