

“The Primacy of the Intellect”

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

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Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

Remember, we are in a long section dealing with abuses of spiritual gifts in the worship of the Corinthian church. The great statement on love we considered last time was made in this specific context. The general argument of the verses we are about to read is this: If love should motivate and control the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church, then clearly the gift of prophecy which edifies the whole church is to be considered superior to the gift of tongues, which only sometimes and to a lesser degree is for and achieves the edification of the congregation.

- v.2 Now, we have already taken the view that “tongues” in the Bible refers to the supernatural ability to speak in a human language one has never learned. That is certainly what tongues was in the only instance in which it is actually described in the NT, in Acts 2. It is interesting, by the way, that Luke mentions tongues-speaking twice more in Acts, once, in chapter 10, in the house of Cornelius and once, in chapter 19, among some men in Ephesus. It is very unlikely that we are to suppose that Luke meant something entirely different in those two later instances of tongues-speaking than he had in chapter 2 in the more complete description of the gift given in his account of Pentecost. Some would have us believe, however, that tongues was a very different thing in Corinth than in these other three instances. They think it was some kind of ecstatic utterance unlike human language. All I can say is that the burden of proof certainly rests very heavily on the one who wishes to make that case. We know what tongues were in Acts, in Jerusalem, at Caesarea, and at Ephesus. On what basis are we to believe that tongues was a different kind of gift in Corinth? Anyway, the tongues speaker was carried along in ecstasy by the Holy Spirit and though, apparently, that was a wonderful experience of communion with God, a sense of being overtaken by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, he or she did not know what it was that was being said and no one else who didn’t know that language would have understood it either. In that sense, the words are being spoken to God alone while the individual is taken up in this magnificent experience of communion with God.
- v.5 Paul admits that if what the tongues-speaker says is interpreted or translated, then it *can* edify the congregation.
- v.8 Just like an instrument that plays only one note or notes at random, tongues-speaking that is not translated conveys nothing to others, however splendid the experience of ecstasy may be for the one who is overcome by the Spirit and whose voice is taken over by the power of God.
- v.9 Once again, the contrast he is developing is between a spiritual gift that does not edify the congregation and one that does.

- v.11 The simple implication of this text is that Paul understood tongues speaking to be the speaking of real human languages as at Pentecost. At Pentecost “foreigners” heard the gospel in their own language. The miracle was that the gospel was being spoken in those languages by people who didn’t know and had never learned those languages. There was no interpretation or translation necessary at Pentecost because there were people present who knew the languages that were being spoken. However, no one else present at the time would have understood what was being said.
- v.19 That Paul should speak of “words” here further confirms that Paul is speaking about actual human languages, with grammar and vocabulary, when he speaks of what is spoken by tongues-speakers. Intelligibility comes from the interpretation or translation of those words. This way of speaking makes it still more doubtful that Paul thought that what was spoken by a tongues-speaker was some angelic language that bears no relation to the languages of this world. All through this passage he speaks of the utterance of the tongues-speaker in terms that suggest an ordinary language, the sort of ordinary languages that were spoken miraculously by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This, of course, is a very important conclusion because it is admitted on all sides today that the sounds made by people who are now claiming to speak in tongues is not a human language, such a language as people now speak in some other part of the world: Arabic or Japanese or Swahili for example.
- v.22 The point of Isa. 28:11-12, which Paul cites, is that the foreign language of the Assyrian invaders represented a judgment on the people of Israel. God was, as it were, speaking to them in a foreign language, because they would not hear the truth in their own language.
- V. 22 is a difficult verse, widely regarded to be one of the most difficult to interpret in the entire letter. How are tongues a sign to unbelievers. However, Paul’s meaning may not be that difficult. Building on the citation of Isa. 28, where God speaking to Israel in the Assyrian tongue was a sign of their unbelief, we take Paul to mean simply that tongues without translation leaves the unbeliever just where he was. It does not help him. He can’t understand what is being said to him. Whereas prophecy brings him a message he can understand and by which he can be saved. As Bengel put it centuries ago, “prophecy makes believers out of unbelievers, but speaking in a tongue leaves the unbeliever to himself.”
- v.24 Prophecy, of course, was not simply the prediction of the future. It was rarely that in OT or NT. It was the authoritative deliverance of the word of God concerning sin, grace, judgment and salvation. And, apparently it included some demonstration of its supernatural origin, such as disclosing the secrets of a person’s life so that he would *know* God was speaking and speaking to him.

Now, obviously, if we felt that the same gifts of tongues-speaking, interpretation or translation, and prophecy with which the Holy Spirit had endowed the Corinthian church in Paul’s day were present in the church or should be present in the church today, we would look at this text with a different interest. Obviously Paul was concerned to regulate the use of supernatural gifts that had created a set of problems, fueled by pride and exacerbated by already existing divisions in

the church. The worship service had become, as we will see when we tackle the next paragraph next Lord's Day morning, a cacophony of Christians competing for what we today call "airtime."

Now if we thought those gifts were abroad in this congregation or others, our first interest would be to be sure that their exercise was regulated according to the principles laid down here by the Apostle Paul. We would ourselves be interested in avoiding the abuses that had bedeviled worship in the Corinthian church.

But, as you know, the fact is we do not believe that these same gifts are being exercised in the church today. Nor do we believe that they have been exercised in the church over these nearly 2,000 years that have passed since the age of the apostles. Nor do we believe that Holy Scripture teaches that we should have expected the exercise of such gifts to have been commonplace in Christian history. According to the Bible, the miracles belonged to a few foundational moments in the history of salvation. That means, of course, that we look to 1 Corinthians 14 with a different purpose, as indeed Christian preachers have these 2,000 years. Clearly there is a general principle that is taught here, one that applies in all times and in all spiritual situations. There are perhaps several such principles, but I want to pay attention to the one that lies on the face of Paul's argument in this chapter. I mean the primacy of the intellect in the life and the worship of God's people, *or better, the primacy of understanding!*

It is an important principle in our day, a day in which *experience or feeling* has often taken the first place, in which spiritual life is judged in many circles more by what spiritual experiences a person has than by what he believes and how he lives. The Christian life is very often nowadays taught in terms of experience, or emotional states, or feelings one has, and so on. Many Christians, without perhaps realizing what they are doing, now are much more likely to make religious statements using the phrase "I feel..." rather than "I believe..." Common experiences of the so-called spiritual gifts or of inner or emotional healing or, contrarily, emotional pain and suffering are made the basis of entire Christian movements or associations or even churches. And very often nowadays the gospel is preached as a power that brings for those who receive it certain kinds of powerful and happy experiences.

Now, at first, we may resist the idea that the intellect comes first. After all we have grown up in the church hearing about the barrenness of mere "head-knowledge" and the greater worth of "heart-knowledge." And, of course, we get a lot of "experience" in the Bible. We are told about the spiritual experiences of godly people in the Bible. We certainly do not advocate an emotionless Christianity, David said that the Lord loves a broken heart and Paul himself says that the kingdom of God is, among other things, "joy in the Holy Spirit."

But, the fact of the matter is that wise men have long known that, as Lloyd Jones once put it: "Emotionalism [which, for our purposes is simply another word for "experience"] is ever the most real, because the most subtle, enemy of evangelicalism."

One problem with too great an emphasis on experience is that *experience is an unreliable guide to spiritual realities*. This is the point that Paul has been making. The supernatural spiritual gifts, especially tongues, bequeathed powerful spiritual experiences upon people who were selfish, proud, arrogant, and indifferent to their brethren. Paul is not impressed with their

giftedness because they have used their gifts so selfishly. It could be still worse. Judas no doubt had enjoyed powerful spiritual experiences when the Lord Jesus sent him out with the rest of the twelve on a preaching tour and he healed the sick and drove out demons and preached the gospel with terrible power. What days those must have been for Judas! But those experiences, remarkable as they were, demonstrated nothing about the true state of his heart. The same might be said of Simon Magus in Acts 8. There have been multitudes of people who had what was thought to be powerful experiences of conversion and of conviction or ecstasy through faith in Christ, who were not long after back in the world living as pagan a life as they ever did before. Their experiences were not real; they were pseudo-experiences, but it was impossible to tell that at the time.

Another problem with making experience the measure of much of anything in a Christian's life is that *spiritual experiences vary from person to person*. People are different and their experiences of God and of salvation and of sanctification are different also. But whenever experience is put first, inevitably the experiences of some are made the measure of others. Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards' father-in-law came to the assurance of his salvation while presiding at the Lord's Table. Perhaps understandably he came to think of the Lord's Supper as a means of bringing people to Christ rather than, as his son-in-law would later argue, a rite appropriate only for those who were already Christians. See how experience trumps theology. It often does today.

We know, of course, that there are many Christians who experienced conversion as a result of a revival service and expect everyone else to have had the same kind of sudden and dramatic experience of coming to faith in Christ that they had. They are suspicious of Christians like myself who grew up in believing homes and cannot point to a time when we stepped out of darkness into light. Nowadays in our circles, we hear a great deal about the "experience of brokenness" and people are judged better or worse Christians by how "broken" they claim to be or seem to be to others. I confess to be somewhat troubled by this language, because too often it seems a style of humility suspiciously like its opposite: "O Lord, I am so humbled that you would choose a person so broken, so unworthy as I am, to accomplish such great things in your kingdom!" Or, the "broken" are heard passing judgment on those they consider "unbroken." [Cf. James Neuchterlein, *First Things*, (Oct. 2001), 8.] Experience, can too often, as it was in Corinth, be a mask behind which we hide the distempers of our soul.

The fact is people are different. The logical and more remote John Calvin was personally quite different from the tempestuous Martin Luther. And their experiences of God's grace and Christ's presence were not the same as a result. The fastidious and methodical John Wesley – raised as he was in a quite rigid High Church household, where children were summoned by the ringing of a bell and taught to cry silently – was quite different a personality than the more free-spirited George Whitefield who had been raised by unbelievers in a tavern. And their inner experiences as Christians were not the same as a result. It is no surprise that it was Wesley who believed in the possibility of Christian perfection in this world and Whitefield did not. And, as the Bible itself indicates, God deals with people differently and gives to one experiences that he does not give to others. Problems come when we codify our experience and demand it of others and judge others by the measure in which their experience resembles our own. [Montagu Barker, "Psychological Aspects of Inner Healing," *Pulpit and People*, 92-93.]

Fact is, in the Bible from beginning to end, it is not the particular *experience* of conversion or sanctification that proves that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives, but the *fact* that we have turned to Christ, believe in him, and are living lives committed to him.

It was the problem created, as in Corinth, by people judging godliness and usefulness and using their own spiritual experiences as a measuring stick, that led Martin Luther once to pray, “God give us the experience of being freed from experience.” [Barker, 95]

As the always perceptive Rabbi Duncan wrote,

“There are innumerable moulds in God’s world. Why do we coop up God’s grace in narrow man-made channels, and say this is the way God has worked and will work? His greatness is no-ways displayed more illustriously than in the spreading out of His gifts in a thousand different ways. There is a manifoldness in his operation that surely proclaims the beauty of his holiness.” [Colloquia Peripatetica, 111]

Certainly there is nothing wrong with *feeling* good, but it is *being* good that is the true mark of godliness and Christian faithfulness. Many of these Corinthian Christians were *feeling* very good as the result of the terrific gifts the Holy Spirit had lavished on them, but they were not *being* very good at all.

And so it is that Paul lays his stress first and foremost on the intellect, not the heart as the organ of spiritual experience. A person who falls under the sway of the Holy Spirit and experiences ecstasy while speaking in a tongue has, as Paul himself admits in v. 18, a wonderful experience of communion with God. We all wonder what that experience was and, understandably, long for something like it for ourselves. But, it is better to understand. It is better to come to a clear view of one’s own sin, to have Christ and his salvation presented clearly and persuasively to your mind, and to believe in and worship the living God. Doctrine and obedience are the true measure of a Christian’s life. The fact is, very faithful Christians in large numbers labor on in their life of faith with relatively little joy, or peace, or excitement, and many who seem to have more than their rightful share of experiences strike more discerning believers as worldly and immature. It is good to *feel* your sin and guilt, it better, however, to know it, really understand it, and repent of it and put on new obedience. The contemporary church is creating a generation who say they *feel* their sin and its pain, but they do not do much repenting. Paul is after true godliness, godliness that in the Bible is always faith working through love, obedience and service that comes from faith in Christ. And John in his first letter is like Paul here. When he is answering the question as to how we may know that we have passed from death to life, he says nothing about any particular experience – of conversion, or of sanctification, or of spiritual gifts, of ecstasy or brokenness – but lays all his emphasis on the testing of our commitments: what do we believe and how do we live.

What matters, says Paul here in 1 Corinthians 14, what matters in our worship and matters in our life, is the faith we place in Jesus Christ and the loving obedience and service that flows from

that faith. And crucial to the creation of that faith in the first place and its cultivation afterward is that instruction of the mind and heart that comes from the Word of God rightly communicated and properly understood. Five words of *that* instruction are worth more than 10,000 words that create only a terrific experience!

This was an important part of the recovery of the truth at the time of the Reformation and was a major insight of the second reformation movements, such as English and Scottish Puritanism. Those men understood, as they were accustomed to saying, that “all grace enters by the understanding.” God does not move hearts by some kind of invisible violence. He addresses their minds with words and summons them to respond with intelligent faith and obedience. The first duty of man is to understand what God is saying to him and then to act in conformity with that understanding. The only way to the heart the preacher is authorized to take is that way that runs through the head. [Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 281] Or, as Richard Baxter once put it, “Ignorance is almost every error. First light – then heat!” [*Ibid*, 69-70]

Satan understands this principle very well. He knows that he can undo everything by putting the wrong *thinking* in a Christian mind. Or, as Calvin put it, “Satan is an acute theologian.” And so when he came to Adam and Eve in the Garden and when he came to our Savior, to tempt them, to derail them from that obedience to God in which true life is found, he used arguments and sought to convince their minds that they had been thinking incorrectly.

Oh, no, 1 Corinthians 14 is not some text of merely antique interest. We do not read it only to find out what things happened long ago when the apostles were in the church and the foundation of the new epoch was being laid down. We read it to find out what comes first in Christian life and Christian worship. We read it to discover, even in the miracles that no longer occur, what principles are to govern our life, our worship still today.

Do you want to know why the sermon takes more time in our worship than any other part of it? Well, here is the answer. There are other answers, but here is the first one. God deals with us through the understanding. He communicates to us through words. He calls unbelievers to faith in that way and he builds up and encourages and sanctifies his children in that same way. Hymns are important, but no where does the Bible give us the impression that hymns are as important to our Christian life as the right understanding of and a full hearted submission to the Word of God. That is why we don't sing more than we hear the Word. Prayers are very important. But you cannot pray aright, no one can, who does not first know the truth about God, about his will for our lives, about prayer itself. The understanding comes first. It must.

Prophecy in those days was the powerful, authoritative deliverance of the Word of God. It's equivalent in our day is the Bible itself. But its equivalent effect – or if not equivalent, its like effect – is produced when the Bible is read and heard with honest minds and hearts and understood. That is what preaching is for. And that is why there is a sermon in a Christian worship service, as, no doubt there was even in Paul's day, when there were also prophets and tongues-speakers.

The prominent visual place occupied by this pulpit in this sanctuary is the witness we bear to the role of God's Word in our lives and our hunger and thirst to know his Word, to understand it, to

believe it, and to obey it. And nothing those Corinthian prophets said under direct inspiration of the Spirit of God amounts to any different message than that which is contained in this holy book and proclaimed to you Lord's Day after Lord's Day.

Some of you have one kind of spiritual experience and others have another. Some of you are richer in the happier experiences than others. Others in the darker experiences. That is God's doing and no one can explain that. But, at the last, your particular experience is not the measure of your life. Rather, your life as a Christian, as a human being, will be measured by how firmly you believed what God told you and how earnestly and faithfully you obeyed God's commands. Trust and Obey, as the old song had it. Feel by all means, as God gives you to feel, but first, and last, trust and obey. And to do that you need to understand, you need to know, you need to have your mind instructed in the truth of God.