

**Video: German Coastguard** Understanding what someone else is saying is really important! Even a small miscommunication can have serious impact.

That's why learning another language is so difficult, especially for someone like me who is terrible at it. But this can be an issue, even when we're speaking the same language.

When we came to Enniscorthy at first there was a local Irish couple who came to one of our Bible studies. After a few weeks the guy apologised to Lorna because he really couldn't understand most of what she said. But that was ok, because Lorna really couldn't understand anything he said either!

God doesn't want that to happen in church. And so in the next section of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul taught them to be careful in their use of spiritual gifts, because God wants them to understand.

1 Corinthians 14:1-25: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. <sup>4</sup> He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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? <sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup> Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

<sup>13</sup> For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. <sup>14</sup> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

<sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. <sup>19</sup> But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

<sup>20</sup> Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. <sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.

<sup>23</sup> 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? <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> 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. All gifts are Valuable

As we've seen over the past few weeks, each gift that the Holy Spirit gives to believers in Jesus is valuable. So we're not surprised that Paul wrote here: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts." 1 Corinthians 14:1. They are precious gifts given by God that empower and equip us to lovingly serve God's people.

And in this passage Paul focusses mainly on two of these spiritual gifts: the gift of prophecy and of tongues.

### a) Prophecy

We often think of prophecy as foretelling something that's going to happen in the future. But that doesn't seem to be the focus of this New Testament gift. Instead this is a message from the Lord that comes through a member of a church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and given to build up the church.

And Paul clearly valued prophecy. He wrote to the Thessalonians: **“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt.”** 1 Thessalonians 18-19

## b) Tongues

The second gift is the gift of tongues or other languages as it can be translated. This gift enables someone to speak in a language that they haven’t learned the usual way. But there’s some controversy about what this language is.

Some people think this is always another human language – like what happened at Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and all spoke in tongues and so all those in Jerusalem were bewildered **“because each one heard them speaking in his own language.”** Acts 2:6

And Paul does talk about different human languages in this passage: **“There are all sorts of languages in the world.”** 1 Corinthians 14:10

But some people think this also might refer to a heavenly language that would be unrecognisable to anyone on earth. Paul spoke about **“the tongues of men and of angels.”** in 1 Corinthians 13:1.

But whatever this gift is, Paul highly valued it. **“I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.”** 1 Corinthians 14:18

So both prophecy and tongues were valuable gifts from God to his church.

## 2. But Some Are More Desirable

But if that is true, how then could Paul write in v1 to eagerly desire spiritual gifts, **“Especially the gift of prophecy.”** 1 Corinthians 14:1? If all the spiritual gifts are valuable, why are some more desirable?

And how could Paul say, **“I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy?”** 1 Corinthians 14:5 Of course we know that not everyone will do either. Paul said this at the end of chapter 12. None of the spiritual gifts are given to every believer. But why, if both gifts are valuable, could Paul say that he’d prefer them to have the gift of prophecy than tongues?

Well it is because of the fundamental differences between these two gifts.

### a) Prophecy speaks to people, tongues to God

First of all, it is because prophecy speaks to people, but tongues speak to God. **“Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.”** 1 Corinthians 12:2

The gift of tongues does not directly equip someone to communicate with other people. Instead, in some way it enables the person to communicate more intimately with God. It enables them to praise and worship God unrestricted by the confines of their language.

This is what happened at Pentecost. The international crowd in Jerusalem reported, **“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”** Acts 2:11

That’s an amazing gift. But prophecy is more desirable because it equips people to share that truth about God with others. **“Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.”** 1 Corinthians 14:3

Prophecy is better because it enables people to share truth from God, truth that will build others up in their faith in God, come alongside and encourage them to follow God, and to console and comfort them to help them put their hope in God.

### b) Prophecy edifies the church, tongues edify the speaker

And because of this, secondly, prophecy edifies the church, whereas tongues edify only the speaker. **“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.”** 1 Corinthians 14:4

It is a good thing when a person uses their gift of tongues to worship God and as a result they’re encouraged and built up in their faith. But it is an even better thing when someone uses the gift of prophecy to encourage and build up the church in their faith!

In that case, it is an expression of the way of love that we were looking at last week – the unconditional, self-giving, sacrificial love that God sees as a priority in our lives.

And that is what Paul wanted this church to make a priority in their lives. “Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.” 1 Corinthians 14:12 Instead of getting excited about those gifts that looked spectacular and impressive, Paul wanted them to focus on the gifts that encouraged the church to grow.

### c) Prophecy is understood, tongues are not

And the reason why prophecy does that better than tongues is because prophecy is understood, but tongues are not. “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?” 1 Corinthians 14:6

We can’t be encouraged or built up or comforted if we don’t understand what is being said. Paul illustrated this in three ways:

- First of all with music: “How will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes?” 1 Corinthians 14:7 We can only recognize and enjoy a piece of music if the notes are accurately played in an understandable way. If not, the result is unpleasant.
- Secondly, with the military: “If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” 1 Corinthians 14:8. A trumpet or bugle was used to instruct an army to prepare for battle, but if its’ sound is not clear, then how will the soldiers understand what to do?
- And thirdly, with conversation: “Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?” 1 Corinthians 14:9 If we are not speaking the same language, then we’re like foreigners to each other and there’s no benefit to our communication!

And so it is with the gift of tongues – unless it is interpreted. Unless someone hears what is being said and explains the meaning of this to all the rest then it cannot be understood. That’s why Paul said, “Anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.” 1 Corinthians 14:13

And so this is why, although every gift is valuable, the gift of prophecy is more desirable for a church: It speaks to people, it build up the church, because it can be understood.

## 3. So Focus on the Intelligible

So what can we learn from this to apply to our church today? Well, it teaches us that when we meet as a church we need to focus on the intelligible, on what is clear and able to be understood.

### a) God wants to engage our minds

Yes, it is great when we feel God’s presence, when we are stirred up in our hearts or spirit to praise and worship and glorify God. But God also wants to engage our minds.

“If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> 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.” 1 Corinthians 14:14-15

Paul valued this gift of tongues. He knew the personal benefit of this gift as it enabled him to connect with God in a way that was unrestricted by his vocabulary.

But he also knew the value of prayer and worship that fully engaged his mind, that was based on his understanding of who God is and what he has done, his knowledge of Scripture, his language ability. He wanted to connect with God with every aspect of who he was.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Matthew 22:37

And he said that “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.” John 4:23

Spirit and truth! Love with our heart and our mind. So as a church we need to sing songs of worship that will engage both our heart and our head, that will touch our emotions and stretch our minds.

And we need to continue to study God’s Word together, even wrestling with difficult to understand passages like we’ve been doing in this letter – so that we will both learn to grow deeper in love for God as well as our understanding of him!

### b) God wants to involve the whole church

But as we do this, we need to try and be clear and as understandable as we can because God wants to involve all of us in our times together. “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?” 1 Corinthians 14:16

Amen is a statement that something is true, correct. When we say Amen when someone is praying or preaching then we are declaring that we agree with them. We’re saying Yes, or I agree, Absolutely, Me too Lord, I want that as well, please Lord let it be! .

And God wants us all to do this in church. He doesn’t want our church gatherings to be times when one or two people are speaking and the rest are all passively listening. He wants us all to actively engage in this. To speak out our amens when we are impacted by what is said, when we are encouraged by a truth that is shared, when we agree wholeheartedly with a prayer.

So please do that. Enthusiastically and confidently if you can. Or quietly and subtly if you must. But God wants us all to be involved and engaged in this time together. We are all here as a kingdom of priests this morning with equal and direct access to God through our faith in Jesus!

But for that to be possible, we need to understand what is being said. We need to speak in plain and simple language. We need to jettison any jargon that might confuse or hide what we are really saying.

It is why I use a more modern version of the Bible. It is why we typically sing more modern songs, or at least revised versions of old songs that have more understandable language. We’re not trying to dumb down church. We’re still called to engage in the mind-blowing truths of the Bible. But we want to do it in a way so that as many as possible can understand.

### c) God wants to impact those who visit

But lastly, this passage also teaches us that God wants to impact those who visit our church. “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?” 1 Corinthians 14:23

We love to see new people come to church, and especially those who’ve not yet put their trust in Jesus. But if we don’t speak, sing and share in an understandable way, then we’ll just be raising additional barriers to them coming to faith. We’ll be making it harder for them to hear God’s truth.

“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, <sup>25</sup> 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 14:24-25

Have you ever had that experience? You’re in church and what is being shared sounds like it was just for you, almost as if God was speaking directly to you! This is what we want visitors to experience: To hear God’s voice speaking clearly into their hearts so that they can understand the gospel. So that they can see their guilt before God, they can grasp the meaning and power of the cross, and they can reach out in faith to Jesus for salvation.

So we need to present the gospel each Sunday as clearly, understandably and attractively as possible, because this is the way of love. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

And we are called to love this world so much that we will do everything we can to clearly and compassionately point people to this Saviour!

### Conclusion

So clear communication is important in many different aspects of life. But it is absolutely vital in church. We are dealing not just with matters of life and death here, but with eternal life and eternal death. How we speak and function as a church can help other people to trust in Jesus and to live for him, or be a barrier to that.

So let’s be committed to use the spiritual gifts God has given us to build up his church and to point people to Christ.

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Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship October 24<sup>th</sup> 2021