BUIILD UP THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 14:1–40

Key Verse: 14:12

“So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.”

Why do you attend church? Some people do it because they think it’s good for them—it’ll help them not to be lonely, to connect with good people, or even to be a better person. Some say they go to church to worship God. Some go to church, honestly, to keep a certain person off their back—especially their mom! There might be many good reasons. But in today’s chapter Paul teaches what our main motivation should be: we should attend church to build up the church. Wait! It’s not about *me*? And can *I* really build up *the church*? Especially with all my limitations, weaknesses and sins? How? Paul tells us to use our God-given gifts, and especially to focus on the ones that can best help others. So what does it mean to build up the church? Which gifts really do that? And how can we “excel” in those gifts? May God speak to each of us through his living word today.

Read verse 1. Paul is transitioning here from describing “the way of love” in chapter 13 back to the topic of gifts of the Spirit he introduced in chapter 12. The Corinthians thought it was most spiritual to speak in tongues, and everyone should be doing it. So Paul taught that not everyone speaks in tongues, that God, through his Spirit, gives his people various kinds of gifts (12:4–11,29,30). He also put prophecy at the top of the list of gifts, and tongues at the bottom (12:28). At the beginning and the end of chapter 14 he urges people to be most eager for the gift of prophecy. And throughout this chapter he explains why.

Read verse 2. Paul begins by describing what speaking in tongues is all about. In Acts 2 God gave the gift of tongues to the early church, and in that case all 120 people were doing it. But it was different from what Paul is describing here. The tongues of Acts 2 were different spoken *languages*. People from various countries were shocked to hear the believers speaking in their own native languages. But here, tongues isn’t a language anybody on earth can understand. It says here that tongues are spoken not to *people* but to *God*. Of course God can understand any human language. But God gives people the gift of tongues to communicate in a special language with him alone. What kind of communication is it? In verse 14 Paul says it’s prayer. In verse 16 he says it’s also praise. Here he describes it as “mysteries by the Spirit.” God already knows all mysteries, but through the Spirit a believer speaks these mysteries back to God. Why? In verse 4 Paul says it’s to edify oneself. The gift of tongues doesn’t make us better than anybody else or any closer to God. It just helps those to whom God gives it to experience more of his love and healing (cf. 8:1b).

Read verse 3. Here Paul draws a sharp contrast between speaking in tongues and prophesying. There seem to be two main differences. First, Paul says prophecy is spoken not to God but to people. God doesn’t need prophecy because he already knows all about the future. In verse 22 Paul adds that prophecy is especially for our fellow believers, not unbelievers. Usually we think of prophecy as predicting the future. But in Paul’s mind there’s more to prophecy than that. In verse 6b he uses the expression “some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction.” Prophecy helps people understand what God wants to reveal, what God wants people to know, what God wants people to do.

Second, the purpose of prophecy, Paul says in verse 3, is to strengthen, encourage and comfort our fellow believers. In Greek the word “strengthening” is “oikodomen.” This Greek word is repeated here in some form seven times. In English it’s also translated as “builds up” or “edifies.” In this chapter it’s Paul’s main point. He wants us to be thinking about it the most. Today some people are called “bodybuilders.” Actually human beings can be built up in various ways—emotionally, intellectually and socially. But Paul is talking about building up our fellow believers spiritually. It’s about helping one another becoming stronger and more mature in Christ. It’s fascinating that we can actually do that. We can be helping others get stronger and more mature in Christ. Our natural tendency is to be self-interested. But God wants us to get genuinely interested in, and focused on, others’ spiritual growth. Paul tells us to “eagerly desire” the gift of prophecy (1,39). Why? Read verse 4. In verses 5 and 6 he repeatedly says that the gift of prophecy is greater than the gift of tongues. Why? Because it edifies the church.

Like the Corinthians, we can get focused on having certain good gifts in life. Some people are eager for certain things because they think they can use them to impress others. It might be their appearance, or what or who they know, where they’ve been, their careers or possessions. Others might just like certain things, like learning how to cook, manage finances, build things, or how to be a good parent. But we can get so engrossed in these things that we have no idea about what we could be doing to build up God’s church. Some people think the church will grow spontaneously, all by itself, or only through the work of skilled people like pastors or others. But churches are built up, we learn here, simply through the individual believers in it who become eager to do so. So, is that our focus? Are we eager to find out how we can be building up God’s church?

To persuade them, Paul says in verse 6 that he would be of no use if he came to visit them only speaking in tongues, without imparting to them any revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction. In verses 7,8 he uses the illustrations of musical instruments that communicate a certain meaning through their music. Read verse 9. Here Paul stresses “intelligible words.” It means words that people can understand. If people can’t understand what we’re saying, we’re speaking into the air, meaning it’s of no use. In verses 10,11 Paul emphasizes the importance of communicating with meaning. It’s great to grow as a good communicator, no matter what our occupation is. But it’s especially important in building up others spiritually. We need to grow in being good communicators of God’s word. Let’s read our key verse, verse 12. As the word of God enriches us, we grow and our church grows.

But honestly it’s not easy to understand the Bible. First of all, it’s a big book. It was written in ancient times by various people with different situations and messages. The Bible contains all kinds of people and places and all kinds of teachings. Some parts of it no longer apply to us, while much of it still does, in various ways. But how? What does it all mean? How can we properly understand what God has revealed to us? How can we know what he wants us to know, believe what he wants us to believe, live how he wants us to live? Actually, the whole Bible points to Jesus to help us believe in him (Jn5:39). But what does that really mean? In Acts 8 there’s the story of an Ethiopian eunuch. He was the treasury secretary for the Ethiopian queen. He was trying to read the Bible on his own, but couldn’t understand it. Philip the evangelist happened to be near and overheard him. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” “How can I?” the eunuch asked, “unless someone explains it to me?” The specific Bible passage was Isaiah 53. It’s not an easy passage for someone unfamiliar with the Bible to understand. But with the Holy Spirit’s help Philip could explain to this eunuch in the most relatable way how it portrays Jesus as our personal Messiah.

Apostle Paul taught his spiritual son Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2Ti2:15). So many people know “about” the Bible, to a limited degree. So many *misunderstand* or *distort* various parts of it and get turned off or led in a wrong way (2Pe3:16). Too many try to use the Bible to push their own agenda or their church’s. But God’s church is best built up through deep and meaningful Bible study that has no agenda but God’s, that allows God to work in his own way through his word. Paul the missionary was so aware of how all the people of this world, no matter who they are, really need the good news of Jesus, and that all they need to do is believe in him. He wrote, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Ro10:14). Here “preaching” means explaining in a meaningful way how the Bible points to Jesus. It helps non-believers, but it also helps people in the church. Our Lord Jesus himself said, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt4:4). The Apostle Peter said that God’s word is like pure spiritual milk that enables us to grow up in our salvation (1Pe2:2). Paul wrote, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2Ti3:16,17). He gave Timothy a solemn charge: “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2Ti4:1,2). He wrote to Christians elsewhere, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom…” (Col3:16a). How can we excel in this gift of helping others with God’s word? As with anything else, we need to give our hearts to it. We need to study hard. We need to persevere in it. We also need to grow in the genuine kind of love Paul mentioned, so that we really *want* to communicate what God wants people to believe and know.

In verses 13–19 Paul again stresses the importance of communicating meaningfully in the church. In verse 20 he admonishes us to think not like children but like adults. He means to get out of our tendency to think from a self-centered point of view and learn how to really understand and help others. In verse 21 he quotes the prophecy of Isaiah to show the limitation of tongues. In verse 23 he describes a church where everybody is just speaking in tongues, without trying to explain the meaning. If an inquirer or unbeliever comes in, that person will think everybody there is absolutely crazy. It’s sad to have such a negative church experience. In contrast, in verses 24,25 Paul describes a church where everybody is a most meaningful Bible teacher. When an outsider comes in, Paul says that person will be quickly convicted of their own sin, realize the reality of God’s presence, and begin to humbly worship him. It’s a powerful thing. Perhaps people convert so slowly because the church they attend has too many things never really explained and too many people dull about the word of God.

In verses 26–40 Paul goes on to emphasize that in order for people to be built up and strengthened, church services need order as well as meaning. Speaking in tongues needs to be orderly and meaningfully interpreted, or otherwise, not done at all. Prophecy also should be done in an orderly way so that people can have time to carefully consider everything they hear and be instructed and encouraged. God uses order to help people learn and grow. Paul knew some women in the Corinthian church who were being disruptive, so he taught them not to allow it. We need to recognize that God gives his word not just to us but to all kinds of people, and learn to humbly listen to one another.

Read verse 12 again. In light of this study, may God inspire us with a new purpose and genuine desire to build up his church. May God help us all to really do our best to grow as those who excel at explaining his word meaningfully.