

# WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

1 Corinthians 14:1-4

April 11, 2010

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## INTRODUCTION

Someone recently was overheard saying, “Why are so many sermons dealing with issues like speaking in tongues?” I understand the question. You’d think one message on the subject would do the trick. So let me answer why for another couple of weeks, we will still be dealing with the subject of speaking in tongues.

When it comes to preaching the Bible there are two main methods practiced in the church, which are often called “topical” and “expository.” Topical preaching is when sermons are based on a topic, and the preacher declares what the Bible says about that topic. For example, a series on marriage, or on sin, or on communication, or on time management, or on any topic you choose. The preacher picks a topic, searches out the scripture, and then preaches what he finds.

Expository preaching takes the approach that the preacher normally should choose only books of the Bible to preach from, not topics. Then beginning with the first verse of that book, preach through the book in order. The goal is to not set the agenda for what topics are covered, but to let the Bible speak for itself.

The advantage of topical preaching is that it gives the preacher the ability to address issues he perceives are needed by the people. The danger of topical preaching is it allows the preacher, and therefore the congregation to ignore most of the teachings of the scripture. We are to preach the “whole counsel of God” and that is hard to do that in a topical manner. Topical preaching, at its worst, degenerates into either the same few issues that are important to the preacher, or to a simple formula that is designed to entertain or please the people’s wants and desires. Often the preacher stops teaching what the scripture says and starts using scripture to support what he says instead. The advantage of expository preaching is that it exposes more of the Bible to the people, and the method of going through books makes it inevitable that the Bible’s doctrines are preached more thoroughly, and the preacher himself is being led by it. The disadvantage of expository preaching is it can become tedious, as preachers try to fit everything they learn in their study into the sermon. The people can grow weary of seemingly endless time spent in one book, or even one chapter.

Here at Harvest, we lean heavily towards expository preaching, trusting the Bible to lead us into all the areas that we need to consider. But we also use topical preaching and seek to do them in an expository manner. What that means is we might want to teach a particular doctrine, like the cross of Christ. So we will go into the Bible and find a text or two that speaks to the issue. Then the goal is not to get the text to support our view, but then let the text say what it will. When we do go through books, we work very hard to keep the preaching event one that urges people to apply what they have learned, to change and go further with Christ. Therefore, we don’t want Sunday mornings to become an in depth Bible study.

With this in mind, I began the book of 1 Corinthians last year. The Elders saw fit to ask that I preach a topical series on the central truths of Christianity. It was my pleasure to do so.

Then, all set to return to 1 Corinthians, Christmas and Easter both came along, and, obviously, both events demand attention for they are the birth and the death and resurrection of our King! These are topics that should be addressed in season! So, in between the holidays, we have been working our way through 1 Corinthians. We begin chapter 14 today. But when studying a book, it is not just a collection one-verse truths. It is unified and coherent. 1 Corinthians 14 is part of a section that begins in chapter 12. At the beginning of chapter 12, Paul signals that he wants to deal with a specific subject, but he does not finish that subject until chapter 14 ends. That subject is centered on the disorderly worship the Corinthians were having, caused by confusion over speaking in tongues. That's why we are talking about this subject so much. Taking the Bible in an expository approach, working through the book of 1 Corinthians, we have to deal with it as it comes up in the scripture.

That said, and now looking at chapter 14, I have a problem. Reading through this chapter several times I am convinced that its meaning is very simple to tell, and that the first century Corinthians had no trouble getting what Paul was saying. However, because of our evangelical experience and culture, to fly through this chapter quickly will cause us to leave a lot of needed teaching on the table. What do I mean? I mean this. Chapter 14 can be summed up to the Corinthians like this: stop speaking words people don't understand in your assembly. That's the bottom line. He settles the matter of what the Corinthians do in worship by saying, "if you speak in a tongue, don't do it when everyone gathers because speaking words no one understands doesn't do anyone any good. What you do in the church should be good for everybody." That's it. No doubt, when this chapter was read to the Corinthians, they quickly got the meaning.

For us, however, the issues are more complicated because of our context. There is stuff here about prophesy. There is stuff here about women and men. There is stuff here that churches surrounding us interpret in many ways that need to be explained. This chapter is filled with help for us in many ways. Here's my problem, in order to teach all the details we need in our present time would require me to take 5 or 6 weeks on this chapter. I don't want to do that as it will become tedious and hard to tie together. So, here is what I am going to do. I am going to preach this week, and probably next week on passages that I think will capture the heart of 1 Corinthians 14, and then move on to chapters 15 and 16 so that we can be finished with this book by Summer. Then, when the summer comes, I will teach more in depth on this chapter and any other unfinished business I have left behind from 1 Corinthians –but not on a Sunday morning. I'll do it probably on a week night, perhaps a Tuesday, for several weeks so that all who want to come out and enjoy these details can, and we'll record it for all.

This gives me a chance to remind us all how we are approaching discipleship here at Harvest. We believe in the preached word for changing lives. So we hope that all who attend will be here on Sundays for the common celebration of worship and to hear the word together. Next we believe that everyone in Harvest needs community, relationships, support. So we have formed community groups. These groups now meet in three 10 week semesters a year. We hope that everyone who is serious about Christ here can join one. These groups are sermon based, and will go further into the content of the sermons, but they are also the place where we can know one another, pray for one another, enjoy one another, etc. Then, we have educational pieces that are outside of that. Among those, first is our new membership class, which covers basic Christian doctrine as well as details of the theology of the church itself. If you are new to the church or

have not joined a membership class, let me urge you to do this when the opportunity comes your way. After that we have HCCI which offers Bible College and Seminary level courses on the Bible and theology for almost free. Then we have various studies that might occur, like women's Bible studies, individual men's discipleship opportunities, etc. After that we have conferences and simulcasts. We realize that there are many ways to teach in our age, and we must use them all.

So after the community groups break for the Summer, and the HCCI course for this semester ends, I will schedule a series of classes, perhaps 3 or 4 weeks, where we will go into depth on some things I look forward to teaching on from 1 Corinthians.

Now, let's get to our text for today.

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 14:1- 4

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. 2 For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. 3 On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their up building and encouragement and consolation. 4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.

#### OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT

##### 1. Love is the goal, gifts are a means.

The last couple of sermons have been on love, so I will not rehearse that again here. But note this: the purpose of the gifting God gives you is that you may use it to love. You have gifts given to you by God. He has made you with certain strengths, and gives you certain opportunities in life. He desires that you not run from having these gifts, but that you desire to have them –but not so that you can prove yourself better than other people. Rather, so that you can pursue love. The love takes a specific expression here where he points out that people who speak in tongues don't help anyone but themselves. But those who prophesy, speaking in words everyone understands, they build up, encourage, and comfort others with their words. He is applying a principle here: the gifts you have are to be used to love other people.

You have a place in the church and the goal is not to help yourself as much as to build up, encourage and comfort others. In other words, you are to use whatever gifts God gives you so that other people are encouraged to do good works, so that others feel stronger, so that others are comforted. And if you need to be more gifted in order to love the people in your life, ask God for more ability and more gifting, so that you can love more. As Paul says a few sentences later:

1 Corinthians 14:12 12 So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

##### 2. Understanding with the mind has first place in worship

Paul wants all the words spoken in worship to make sense to the mind. He doesn't dispute the value to oneself of having a communication with the Spirit of God that includes speaking in a

tongue, but he points out that this benefit is private and of no value to anyone else (unless they can interpret the language that you are speaking, then it will help). A few sentences later he says this:

1 Corinthians 14:19 19 Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

So the immediate application for the Corinthians was, stop speaking in tongues in your gathered services unless you have someone there who can interpret the language. Words only matter if you understand their meaning. This principle that understand words comes first in worship is needed today, because people in our culture want what I call, “drug” worship. You know what I mean? We want to “experience” God. When you take a drug, you don’t have to engage, the experience comes to you. People drink the booze, they smoke the joint, they shoot the heroin, they drop the acid, the snort the coke, they smoke the crack, the pop the pills. What do all these have in common except that they are lazy paths to satisfaction? You put the drug in the system, and sit back and let it give you an experience. That’s what people want from their worship too. They want to go to a church that can zing them so that they don’t have to engage their brains.

Have you ever wondered about things like the laughter movement? Have you heard of that? It’s this experience that began at a Vineyard church in Toronto where the Holy Spirit supposedly came and manifested Himself by causing everyone to laugh uncontrollably. They laughed so much that they were holding onto poles to keep from falling down. They laughed so much that they had to lie on the floor. Some of them began to do other things like bark like dogs and such. And there are many churches today where each week must end with a trip to the altar where someone “ministers” to him or her. This ministry normally ends with uncontrollable shaking or falling to the ground shaking, etc.

People gather to hear healing preachers who hit them and knock them over with a hand. Why does this sort of thing appeal to so many? Because it is lazy and drug like. You don’t have to think, you don’t have to reason, you don’t have to even believe in truths. You just go and religion is done to you and you let it happen as you lay back. These kinds of experiences are unknown in the Bible. And Paul says, “I’d rather have a worship service that had only five intelligible words spoken than to gather and have manifestations disconnected to reason.”

We are humans, not animals. We want emotional experiences, and should have them. But the positive emotional experiences that are most satisfying, most sustained, do not come from being zapped, but they come from the mind being grounded in on truth. People who seek that zap from the Spirit are often the most unstable people you meet emotionally, as they are dependent on the zapping powers of others to find meaning and joy, just like the junkie who is dependent on the enzymes secreted by the injection of a chemical to find meaning. As soon as the enzyme stops, the meaninglessness and emptiness invades again. I think this kind of drug-worship experience is what Paul was warning the Colossians against when he wrote:

Colossians 2:18 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

This sensuous mind is not talking about sexuality, but about how you can experience God better if you follow the visions some leader claims God gave him. He is thinking and preaching that if you follow this system of fasting or talking to angels or listening to the visions of so-called prophets of the modern day, you will get closer to God. This is not so. Instead, we worship God based on truths He has revealed in His scripture. We have good experiences that grow on the foundation of thinking, knowing the truths declared by God.

Romans 12:2 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Did you know that it is possible to have a positive and peaceful experience that lasts for days, weeks, months? Did you know that is possible to have a sense of peace that attends you for days at a time? It is. And from time to time, I enjoy that (not always!). My emotional joy comes from a foundation of peace that is based on truths from God's word, and the vision of God that it gives me.

## CONCLUSION

Some of you no doubt noticed that I have not defined the word "prophecy" as used by Paul in this text. And I won't be going into any detail today except to say this;

First, it is intelligible language that could be understood, in contrast to speaking in another language as a tongue is. Second, the Corinthians knew exactly what Paul meant when he used this term, but we do not know exactly. In other words, when the Corinthians heard Paul use the term prophecy, they didn't say, "I wonder what he's talking about." No, it was a term that corresponded to a practice they were familiar with. But as for us, if I say prophecy, in our context, 2000 years later, some people think of someone standing up saying, "Thus saith the Lord..." and some people think of the foretelling of future events, and some people think it is the forth telling of truths already known, and some people think it is the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit to speak a word of encouragement to the church. Paul doesn't define it, but we must take a stab at it. I'm going to do that on my next and probably last sermon on 1 Corinthians 14.

But let me end today with some understandable truth: God wants to know you and be known by you. He is a communicating God who knows how human beings think and talk and He talks to us in a language we can understand. Some people say, "God is too great for any human mind to understand." That's true to a point. I mean, you and I cannot understand all of God. But that doesn't mean we can't understand what God wants us to. I want you today to think of the grace that is in the truth that God wants to know you and be known by you, and that's why He communicates through the prophets of the Old Testament, and through His Son in the New Testament. One way to look at reality that is correct is like this: God is trying to talk to you, to love you, to be loved by you, and the devil is trying to stop that communication. Jesus died to "reconcile" you to God. That means to bring you two together. Do you feel distant from Him? Do you feel as if He wouldn't want you around? Not so. He wants to know you and be known by you. Believe in Jesus who died to reconcile you to God by paying for your sins on the cross.

