

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Edifying Prophecy

How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets is subject unto the prophets. (1 Corinthians 14:26-32)

Imagine a multi-cultural church such as the Corinthian church to which Paul wrote this letter. People from many cultures and dialects migrated to Corinth and were converted to the gospel while there. They all gathered in one body for public worship and fellowship. Often in the New Testament era a church might have in its membership more than one minister, though Revelation chapters 1-3 strongly indicate that a church has only one pastor. Based on the lessons in Revelation 1-3, I am inclined to reject the idea of assistant-pastor or co-pastor. The Spirit never directed John to write to the "angels" of each church, but to the "angel." Each church had one "angel" or messenger, which I view as their pastor, their official messenger from God to feed them and to take responsibility for their spiritual oversight by example. (1 Peter 5:13) Some positions may be shared in a church, but no spiritual gift is shared. When anyone usurps the role of the pastor, or any other office or gift in the church for that matter, confusion and schism surely follow. A dissident member should not set up his private quasi-pulpit in the church lunch room, over the phone, or internet, or any other means with the intent of contradicting the pastor's teachings or drawing members away from the church to his private ideas.

Imagine a Sunday morning gathering in your church. You are all English speaking; most of you likely are not fluent in any other language. A stranger visits you on this day. He speaks in broken English, but you immediately recognize his name as a respected elder from another country. In this case, you have a simple example of Paul's teaching. How do you apply it? If the visiting elder can speak fluent English so that the congregation can understand his teaching and be edified, praise God. No problem. However, if he cannot speak fluently in our English language, how do you deal with the situation? You know the man's sound faith and godly life by reputation. You certainly want to show him due respect and encouragement. Yet if he speaks in his native language in which he is fluent, no one in the church will understand what he says. Paul directs our course in this situation. In

some of our evangelistic work in Africa and in the Philippines, our elders have preached to the people through a translator. In the case of the man visiting us, we would likewise need a translator to understand his message and receive edification through it.

Let all things be done unto edifying. If any activity in a church does not yield edification, it should not be considered, much less practiced. This instruction covers every word, deed, or activity to be practiced in a church's public gathering. No exceptions, "all things," in the context all things related to the public activity of a gathered church.

...hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation." Five activities may be considered under the broad heading of edification and under the heading of a church's public activity.

Following this list, Paul gives very precise details regarding how a church should conduct its activities.

1. *If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three.* How many preachers should be asked to preach in a given church service? Although Paul is dealing with men speaking in a foreign language with a translator, these words might wisely apply to preaching in general. People in the pews can only absorb so much preaching with edifying retention at one sitting. Paul defines "...two or three." On a few occasions over the years, I've attended special three-day or other extended meetings where the pastor tried to preach every preacher in attendance. In some services as many as four or even five men were asked to preach in one service. By the end of those services, the congregation was mentally and physically exhausted. How much edification did they receive? In many cases, a week later they could hardly remember all the men who spoke, much less their topic or points they made.
2. *...and that by course.* "...by course" means one at a time. Don't allow two men to preach at the

same time. Only confusion results when more than one man preaches or speaks at a time.

3. *...and let one interpret.* In the Corinthian culture, people from many cultures and dialects attended the church, so understandably preachers might be given to the church to edify the whole assembly. However, Paul imposes a specific filter onto the activity. If a preacher cannot speak the dominant language, the church should ask an interpreter to translate the sermon into the common language. Likewise, when a preacher who speaks the dominant language preaches, the church should provide a translator for those folks of a different dialect who cannot understand the dominant language of the church. Edification to all members is Paul's emphasized teaching here. Edify the whole church, including age and culture or language.
4. *But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church.* Paul leaves no option whatever. No interpreter no preaching. In our preachers' evangelistic efforts, several of them have described preaching through a translator. It is quite an adjustment compared to our normal preaching style. We might do a great service to this "Edification" requirement if we simplified our preaching to our English speaking congregations. I've heard a few sermons in English that almost needed a translator because of various speech patterns or brimmed with complex technical terms that demolished clear, understandable communication, the foundation for all edification. My wife wisely occasionally nudges me to avoid "Preaching to preachers," preaching with such excessive technicality or complication that the congregation struggles to understand anything the man says. A quality, well-prepared filet mignon is delicious, but a three month old baby can't digest it. Feed the child what the child can digest. Likewise in preaching, feed the congregation what they can understand and use for edification. Never preach "Over their heads."

...and let him speak to himself, and to God. God knows all languages. No one can speak to him in a foreign language. The "Prophet" who does not speak the dominant language of a church needs a translator to speak to them. However, he needs no translator to speak to God. He can speak from his heart to God's heart freely.

Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. This point requires a thorough knowledge and communication from both speaker and hearer. Men who "Prophecy" must do so one speaker at a time, and they must speak so that the people in the congregation clearly understand what they say. And the hearers in the pews need to hear with knowledge and understanding, judgment of

what they hear. The word translated "judge" in this verse is defined.

(CWSB Dictionary) "it means to distinguish, discern clearly, note accurately."

The preacher speaks so that the congregation can hear with "distinction," not with confusion, to "discern clearly," not catch every few words and be confused or bewildered, and to "note accurately," not get the basic idea because the details were presented in a way that confused or overwhelmed the hearer's senses.

If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. When speaking, I strive to make eye contact with every person in the congregation. Admittedly, this is a struggle for me, as it is for most preachers. As you scan the audience, you will notice some people who hang on your words with attentive hunger for what you are teaching. They are primed for true edification. You'll see others who are present bodily, but their mind is clearly somewhere else, somewhere far away. As the speaker, you naturally direct your attention to the attentive hearer. In fact, you need to work to get the distracted hearer's mind back on task if at all possible. As a speaker/teacher, your eye contact migrates to the people who are engaged with you in your thoughts, but we need to reach out to those dislinked folks and try to bring them back. Sometimes a tasteful "Shock value" point or a suitable humorous point might serve to accomplish that need. The preacher who ventures to use either of these attention strategies must exercise extreme caution and wise judgment not to overstep good Christian manners. I recall many years ago hearing about a preacher who made the unqualified statement from the pulpit, "Jesus was the biggest loser of all time." No explanation or clarification, just that comment. Had he spoken those words in the pulpit of the church where I pastor, I'd have interrupted his sermon and sat him down immediately. The comment was far beyond either Biblical truth or Christian manners. Likewise, I've heard of men using humorous stories told from the pulpit that were so out of the realm of good Christian ethics as to give the true gospel a bad reputation. To the preacher considering these strategies, I say, go there if you will, but go there with great caution and reserve.

By Paul's description of the Corinthian preaching service, it seems that a far more informal setting was the norm contrasted to our very formal monologue preaching climate. When Jesus preached, with only a few exceptions (Sermon on the Mount, Olivet Discourse, and His final sermon before crucifixion), his sermons comfortably allowed for His hearers to ask questions during His teaching, and He responded directly to those questions. Paul's description of the preaching

service in these verses fits more this informal setting than our formal one. One man is preaching, he makes good, soul stirring points, and they touch someone in the congregation, so much so that he wants to speak up and affirm the good thoughts he had. By all means do so, but do not interrupt the speaker or talk over him. Wait for the polite and proper time to speak so that your words, like his, serve to the general edification of the whole church. One of the wisest most spiritual deacons I ever knew would occasionally demonstrate this edifying ability. His pastor, with all good intentions, would occasionally preach a tedious, dry as dust sermon that lasted an hour and a half. Though he preached the truth, there was little or no true edification in his preaching. This godly wise deacon would often ask to speak at the end of the service when general announcements were made, but his "Announcements" were five minutes or less of rich spiritual encouragement to the congregation, words that edified them and sent them home rejoicing in the gospel.

"...that all may learn, and all may be comforted."

Once again Paul expands our inspired Biblical definition of what edification means. The objective of every sound and Biblical sermon should be these two words. We should strive to teach our congregation, help them to "learn" more about the truth of the gospel than they knew when they walked into the church this morning. And we should work in our preaching to give them "comfort" in the form of sound and hopeful words that show them sense and wisdom for the problems they face in life six days a week when they are not in church.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor