

Seek God, Not His Blessings

‘Rev. Allen Stuart, pastor of North Bay Community Church in Clearwater, Florida, was approached by a parishioner who announced that he had visited a charismatic church. “The choir sang in tongues”, he said. “It was beautiful”. “Nothing remarkable about that”, Stuart replied. “We can’t understand what our choir is saying either”.’ (No comments from Chris are needed!)

And so we bring up the subject of tongues, rather the speaking in tongues. Basically, the entirety of chapter 14 of I Corinthians deals with this topic. Because the Church of Corinth had been very blessed with this particular gift of Holy Spirit, they, perhaps more so than most other churches of the time, so reveled in this gift, took such pride in it, that word had gotten back to Paul that it was disrupting and derailing their worship services. And it wasn’t just that. Earlier in the letter, Paul chides them for the way they partook of the Lord’s Supper. In the context of a communal meal, like a weekly Sunday luncheon, they were in great need of some order and self-control. For many rushed to the tables to load up on their favorites, while pushing the poorer members out of their way, to say nothing of putting the less-wealthy folks down. Which is why we now have, at Paul’s hand, I Corinthians 13, the love chapter, which tells all believers explicitly, and the Corinthi-

ans specifically, how we're supposed to treat each other—in the same way that Christ Jesus has treated us and the whole of creation that can be redeemed. With true, Christ-like love.

But in chapter 14, Paul's not addressing table manners, or the lack thereof, but rather the liturgy, the order of the service, the sanctity of worship, and how a faithful body of believers should assemble to worship God. The Corinthians lived in a prideful, utterly pagan city. Worse even than our Las Vegas. It was not the only such city of sin in the empire, but it was probably the largest and most prominent. Corinth was a major city, one of the most important in all of the Roman realm, and as city dwellers are wont to do, they saw themselves as better, more cultured, more intelligent, higher up in social status, than the people who lived in the hinterlands, who farmed and herded, who did the menial work upon which the whole of society depended, and if such work was not done, society itself would collapse. Forgetting that, and knowing themselves to be better than the others, especially the poorer, less fortunate folks who were also part of their membership, the richer Corinthian believers were puffed up and convinced that their way was the correct way. Paul saw things differently.

They were proud that so many of them, practically all, spoke in tongues, or prophesied, or interpreted, or all three. These supernatural gifts of Holy Spirit in their midst were impressive and so it was *human nature* that many would resort to making a show of it. The result was usually cacophony. The holy service of wor-

ship would essentially be interrupted by a din of voices saying and shouting things that nobody could understand. A visitor to such a service would, after the initial amazement wore off, decide that that church was a collection of loonies at worst, or a disordered group of adults acting like children at best. It's not likely such a visitor would be drawn to the saving love of the Lord.

As Paul took pains to explain, there is definitely nothing wrong with speaking and praying in tongues. On the contrary, all believers should pray to be given these special, visible gifts of Holy Spirit, for they are most valuable in elevating and strengthening our faith and devotion to God. But only when used appropriately. Here at Corinth, some were practically competing with each other to prove to others how spiritual, how blessed they were, that they could speak and pray in tongues for long periods, loudly talking over others trying to make the same point. Talk about interrupting each other! If the contrast were not so glaring, it's all too similar to what's been going on in the Senate where President Trump's cabinet nominees are being hounded by irate, mindless democrats and a few RINOs, talking over each other, not even allowing the nominees to respond. Grandstanding at its finest! The former exalted reputation of the Senate as the world's most cultured, deliberative body has been utterly trashed and destroyed.

So Paul here devotes an entire chapter to deal with this problem. Sure, the gift of tongues is from Holy Spirit. Sure, it is supernatural. Sure, it is beautiful and vitally important for our walk

with God. But, as he plainly states in verse 32: “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets”. In other words, we always have control over the gifts. We can and should use them properly and in order. No grandstanding. And unless there is someone else there who has been given the gift of interpretation, that is one who can understand by Holy Spirit’s gifting, what another person is praying about or speaking about, or prophesying about in a tongue, unless such a person is there to interpret, to let everyone else there know what has just been said in a tongue, then the people are to use their gift of tongues and prophecy quietly, even in private, all so as to not detract from the sanctity and solemnity of the worship service. Also doing so expresses charity, compassion and love for each other there. For even though we can receive special gifts from Holy Spirit, they can be abused, because we are sinful people. Even forgiven, repentant believers still sin every day in more ways than we can even imagine. We’re far, far from our Savior’s perfect standard of sinless living.

Probably few of us have ever visited a charismatic or pentecostal church. Most of us have probably been raised as Lutherans, and have no experience with these gifts that Paul here speaks of. Indeed, the main body of the universal Church from the last several centuries, has not only lacked the evidence of Holy Spirit’s gifts, there’s been little of God’s supernatural power working in the western church, or the eastern, for that matter. Of course there were isolated individuals mightily used of God in

specific times and places, who are often given the title of “saint” to recognize their particular gifting. But as a whole, the church had become stale, all but lifeless, fixated on a rational, logical approach to all the things of faith. The faith of the church was mystical, mysterious, all but incomprehensible, to all but the clergy. For only the clergy had access to the Holy Bible. Until God intervened and began raising up men who were truly born again and started, in direct contradiction to the commands of the Roman church, translating and then publishing the Bible into the common languages of their people. These pioneers were martyred for their faith, many by being burned at the stake. They gave their lives that others might be able to read the Bible for themselves. And so the unholy power that the Vatican wielded over the people began to be broken. And finally, with Martin Luther, it snapped. And the Protestant churches were born.

But even then, though there were “flareups” of Holy Spirit giftings in certain people here and there, the bulk of believers did not experience these supernatural manifestations of Holy Spirit in their worship services. Indeed, even centuries prior, as the fervor of the early Christians began to wane, as persecution ended and Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, as the tables turned and suddenly the Christians became the favored ones, great numbers of people came, seeking not God, but seeking to enhance their social standing, and joined the churches and diluted the faith of many over the centuries. To such an extent

that a new “doctrine”, cessationism, was contrived to explain why the Holy Spirit, supernatural manifestations, were no longer occurring. The erroneous teaching declared that since the church councils had determined all the books that should be included in the Holy Bible, “perfection” had arrived, and therefore, the incomplete gifts of tongues, words of knowledge, proclamations of prophecy and interpretation, even miracles of healing and of amazing faith, had ceased. And with that determination, believers no longer thought such supernatural experiences were necessary or even to be expected, relegating generations to a stunted faith.

So God intervened again. As the End Times approached, God, as He promised in Joel 2, began to pour out His Spirit again. Revivals and awakenings broke out in America, and elsewhere. And suddenly, Israel was reborn as a nation. In a single day, as Isaiah 66:8 prophesied thousands of years before. Things began to accelerate and more and more people today are experiencing and receiving the gifts of Holy Spirit again, as the end of this age requires His church to be fully equipped and empowered to combat the current and coming onslaughts and deceit of the devil seeking to entrap the entire world in opposition to God.

So though we, too, should seek the gifts of Holy Spirit, most especially the gift of prophecy, it must always be secondary to knowing our Savior and God more and more deeply. For we are always to seek God first. Then all these other things that we need will be given to us as well. Stay faith-full! The times require it.

