VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023
The Book of I Corinthians
Lesson #10
Answers to Their Letter (IV)
Chapter 14

The 3rd Abuse

14: 1 What to Pursue? What to Desire?

"Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy."

Since Paul just compared Agape love with faith and hope, [and faith was listed as one of the gifts back in the 1st list of gifts (12:9)], one would assume that these three are the greater gifts that he urges the Corinthians to desire (12:30), However, after his conclusion that Agape love is the greatest of all (obviously not just among faith and hope, but of all gifts of the Holy Spirit), he urges the Corinthians to desire the greater gifts, especially that of prophesy.

If greater gifts are what Paul refers to, they obviously do not refer to or include love, faith and hope, but the top three of gifts that he has already laid out, namely, Apostles, Prophets and Teachers (12:28). Since Apostles are appointed, then next in line is the gift of prophecy, in terms of importance as explained previously.

However, Paul irritates and explains:

(1) As important as the gift of prophesy is, clearly it has to be exercised with Agape love, or we gain nothing with its use, and we are nothing even if we can make use of it; and

(2) Why this gift is superior to the gift of tongue-speaking which, undoubtedly the Corinthians covet and prefer over all other gifts as a sign of their "approval by God" (11:19) which has led to divisions in the church.

Two things are worth noting:

- The word used by Paul to urge them to "follow" the way of Agape love. The word in Greek is "*dioket*e" which is a forceful word meaning to "pursue" or "press on". While "desire" refers to one's wish, "*diokete*" is one of determination, will and action. Therefore, the priority is clear, focus your will to pursue Agape love, and

- The word used by Paul to describe what he urges them to desire (which is also an imperative) is not "spiritual gifts", but the "spiritual", followed immediately by saying, "But I rather you may prophesy" which is quite different in meaning from the NIV translation.

As I explained earlier that Paul is likely being sarcastic in saying, "**But eagerly desire the greater gifts"** in 12:31, this serves to further point out their wrong-headed desire: they do not really desire living in the Spirit (*the spiritual*), but the manifestation of the Spirit in them in terms of gifts.

o Since what they really desire is only His manifestation, desire then the gift of prophesy.

14: 2-5 Superiority of Prophecy over Tongue—Understanding and Edification (I)

"2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. 3 But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. 4 Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone (original is "he") interprets, so that the church may be edified."

Nature of each:

- Tongue is certainly a supernatural gift in that the person "speaks to God" on one's spirit, but is primarily for private edification;
- Prophecy is for edification of the church for the purposes of strengthening, encouraging and comfort.

As such, Prophesy is thus greater

- Because it is understood by the church and it edifies the church,
- Unless Tongue is also interpreted which is not a given, and in the church in Corinth, it is obvious that it is often not the case.

Paul's qualifying his arguments:

- Paul adds that he otherwise is not against tongue-speaking, because he, too, "would like every one of you to speak in tongues", and
- If the person also interprets so that the message is clear, then that will be an exception
    - By saying if "he" interprets it means that there are cases when the person who speaks in tongue can also interpret, and
    - If he cannot interpret, the onus is one him to make sure that someone else could interpret (hence the NIV"s translation of he into "someone").

A Word about "tongue"

About the meaning of "tongues": Two words are used for tongues in the NT, and both are used at the incident at Pentecost (Acts 2). Some commentaries like to highlight the differences between these two Greek words for "tongue": one is *dielekto* (S1258) and one is *glossa* (S1100). Right away, you will associate the former with "dialect" and the latter with "glossary" in English, and you are correct. However, within the event described by Luke at Pentecost, the two words are both used and used interchangeably. The word "glossa" is being used by Paul as "tongues" throughout his arguments in these three chapters of I Corinthians.

14: 6-12 Superiority of Prophecy over Tongue—Understanding and Edification (II)—Common Sense.

"**6 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? 7 Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? 8 Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? 9 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. 10 Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. 11 If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. 12 So it is with you. Since you are eager for the spiritual (gifts), try to excel in those that build up the church.**"

Having asserted that prophecy is a greater gift than tongue-speaking, Paul admonishes them to focus on the use of gifts to "build up" the church which he has already established as the purpose of gift-giving by the Holy Spirit in 12:7 (for the "common good"). Now gives another common-sense reason for his assertion:

Edification only through a message that can be understood

- Paul uses musical instruments like pipe (flute), harp and trumpets as examples
    - In each case, the expression in distinct and different notes or sounds is a must to pass on a tune that can be appreciated or a meaning that can be understood (as in a trumpet call for battle)
- Then Paul also uses the examples of foreign languages (*phone*) to show that if spoken without being understood, it is futile [hence, the meaningless gesture of inviting someone to pray in their native language without translation should not be encouraged or it would be nothing more than a show].

Paul feels that these two simple analogies should be enough to discourage the prideful Corinthians, and so he ends the analogies with, again, a rather sarcastic note:
"**So it is with you. Since you are eager (zealous) for the spiritual (gifts), try to excel in those that build up the church.**" (v.12)

- I think Paul still feels leery about "being zealots you are" in the guise of the "spiritual" while "gifts" are what they really covet
- If their attitude is changed to that of the "common good", this should what they be desiring.

Note: Paul begins this reminder of "common good" contrasting tongue with "**revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction (i.e. teaching)"** and we need not try to analyze each, as Paul simply lumps them together as being gifts that carry a clear message "there is a general lack of precision in Paul with regard to these various terms." (Fee, 663)

14: 13-20 Superiority of Prophecy over Tongue—Understanding and Edification (III): Importance of the mind!

"[13] For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. [14] For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. [15] So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. [16] Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer,[*or one without understanding*] say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? [17] You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified. [18] I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. [19] But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. [20] Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults (or be ye mature). "

As much as Greek philosophers treated mind and spirit, kind of, as a whole, it appears that the Corinthians Christians, while pride themselves over the "mind", somehow, see "spiritual manifestations" as a more definitive proof of "God's approval". But Paul asserts that without the mind (i.e. understanding), edification is impossible in the public setting. Thus, he admonishes them of the "must" of understanding, applying it to tongue-speaking in the context of praying, singing, praising, and thanksgiving.

In particular,

- In praying in spirit only
    - Which doe not even benefit the mind of the speaker, how else can others be edified!
- In praising and giving thanks to God in spirit only
    - Without understanding, no one can say, "Amen", making such public thanksgiving meaningless and thus not edifying!

Therefore, Paul's admonition is:

- "**should pray that he may interpret what he says**" (v.13)
    - The word "pray" means exactly that (not "wish") meaning that if one "desires" that the Spirit would enable him to speak in tongue at a particular service, he should first "pray" to God in advance that he or someone else could interpret if it happens.
- And if they do not agree with Paul's arguments (and thus his admonition), they are really "childish" in their thinking. Yes, these are words of sarcasm as Paul basically goes on to say in essence, "If you wish to remain as infants, do so when it comes to evil, but in the exercise of your mind, grow up!"

I am sure, some of these prideful Corinthians would feel ridiculed, if not insulted, but Paul does not mince with words and says:

- "**I speak in tongue more than all of you",** meaning I am qualified to say what I said, and
- In the church (i.e. in public setting), "**I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue." (v.19)**

<u>14: 21-25 Superiority of Prophecy over Tongue—Understanding and Edification (IV): For Whose Benefits?</u>

"[21] In the Law it is written: 'With other 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.'[Isa. 28: 11-12]
[22] Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers. [23] So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?
[24] But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, [25] as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'"

Still within the context of speaking in public, Paul further argues the "must" of understanding by pointing out the different purposes of prophesy and tongue-speaking, quoting from part of Isaiah 28: 11-12.

Isaiah 28: 11-12

In the original passage, Isaiah was ridiculing the priests and leaders of Israel that whatever message the Lord was giving them, to them it all sounded like foreign languages, of not use to them. Since foreign languages, by nature, would not be of any benefit to God's people, Paul applies it to differentiate God's use of tongue-speaking (which is basically a foreign tongue) from prophecy in terms of their purposes or functions in public worship:

- Using Acts 2 as an obvious example, the purpose of tongues is for unbelievers as a "sign" to convince and convict unbelievers into believing in the gospel message;
    - However, if "everyone (in the meeting) speaks in tongues" without interpretation, it will do no good even for unbelievers as they (the inquirers, i.e. seekers or unbelievers) would think that the speaker is out of his mind!
    - (Perhaps, English readers might get a kick out of it to know that the Greek word for "inquirers" is the word, "*idiotes*". So, one wonders who the real "idiots" in this case are!)
- While prophecy is for believers, as previously mentioned, strengthening, encouragement and comfort (14:3).

One more advantage of Prophecy over Tongue:

- Although prophecy is for believers, it can benefit non-believers if the message is understandable, and it can even bring them to repentance and belief!
- Again, this demonstrates the superiority of prophecy over tongue as a gift.

14: 26-40 Orderliness Service Must be Maintained

14: 26-33 Talking turn to speak

"[26] What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. [27] If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—

should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. [28] If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God. [29] Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. [30] And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. [31] For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. [32] The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. [33] For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people."

While Paul is addressing the abuse of tongue-speaking at their public worship, it is certainly the main source of abuse, but not the only one. It appears that the worship service in the church at Corinth is so chaotic that many people would not wait for their turns but try to speak at the same time, not just in tongue without interpretation, but also in prophesying and in "**a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation…or an interpretation**." So Paul "puts down his feet" as it were, and sets out clear instructions for their public worship in that:

- At most three can speak (during the service);
- As they speak, they should speak one at a time;
    - That applies even to the greater gift of prophecy, except that the listeners should use their "discernment" (obviously referring to judging what one hears with the teachings of the Word.)
    - And for those who speak in tongue and find no interpreters, they should stop and keep quiet (and go home to do so privately.)
- Also, they should practice deference and self-control
    - while a person is in the course of speaking, when someone else as a "revelation" (as inspired by the Holy Spirit), the person speaking should stop and defer to one with the revelation—the assumption is that the first one is simply exercising his gift in the ordinary sense, but the other one is "inspired" to speak as moved by the Holy Spirit.
    - Even if one is inspired (and Paul is using prophesying as an example), one cannot abuse the orderliness of the service using being "inspired" as an excuse, because Paul insists that prophet's own spirit is subject to the prophet's own control.

Thus, the maxim is: "**For God is not a God of disorder but of peace"**

- Orderliness and peace must prevail at church services!

14: 34-40 Women and the Disruption at Worship

"34 **Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.**

36 Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? 37 If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. 38 But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored.

39 Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

14: 34-35 Women speaking at Public Worship

To understand this concluding remark by Paul, we have to put it within the context of the immediate instructions beginning with v.26 which have the orderliness of the public worship in mind. Thus, the last of the issues that deal with "abuse" in worship has to be with the issue of women speaking at the worship service and we need to settle the issue by asking:

1. Since women are definitely allowed to speak, even to prophesy and pray as Paul makes clear in 11:5. The only prohibition is the covering of their head as they speak. So, what then does Paul seek to address?
2. Paul invokes the "law" to give his instruction. The "law" obviously refers to the OT, but the "law" so invoked is not necessarily about "silence", but about "submission" which Paul uses to apply to "silence" at the public worship. So which part(s) of the Law is Paul referring to. Commentators differ in their opinions. "(M)ost think he has in mind Genesis 3:16 (though, as elsewhere, he may be thinking of Gn. 1:26ff ; 2:21ff.)" (Morris, 197) However, without tying this to a particular law in OT, the teaching of the submission of a woman to her husband in OT is quite obvious, and Paul's teaching in Eph. 5:21 is more an affirmation of its fact.
3. What then is being prohibited by Paul in the context of stopping its abuse? V.35 actually gives us the explanation: It is in the matter of a wife wanting to inquire of things (likely of a spiritual or biblical nature) at the public worship services.
    a. As much as the church is located in a city of learning like Corinth, "We must bear in mind that in the first century women were uneducated. The Jews regarded it as a sin to teach a woman, and the position was not much better elsewhere." (Morris, 198)
    b. It should be the logical practice for the believing woman to ask her more learned husband about things in the Bible, and such questions would normally be pretty basic biblical issues that the husband should be able to answer. If not, he should be the one to consult the more knowledgeable teachers, elders or pastors and answer his wife accordingly.
    c. Therefore, for the wife to bypass her husband would naturally be a sign of disrespect and would be a disgrace both to the wife and the husband.
    d. The raising of questions by a woman, in such as case, would definitely add to the already chaotic situation in public worship in the church in Corinth.

14: 36-40 Concluding Remark by Paul

Now, Paul sums up the core problem of all the abuses they have permitted to happen at their worship services, whether it is the prophesying and praying by women with heads uncovered, the lack of respect for one another in observing the Lord's Table and the abuse of the use of the

gifts of tongue-speaking coupled with the competition in teaching, prophesying or praying at church worship service, or the latest issue of women raising questions during the worship, the core problem is their pride:

- As if the word of God originated with them: i.e. they are so proud of their knowledge that they are the ones most qualified to interpret the Scriptures, and
- As if they are the only people the word of God has reached: i.e. no one outside of the church of Corinth can interfere with how the operate within their church.

Paul has earlier praised them for not lacking any spiritual gift (1:7), but now he wants them to prove that his praise is justified, in that, if that were true—"**If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit"—**then

- they would acknowledge that "**what I am writing to you is the Lord's command"** (v.37)
- That is, all his instructions concerning the abuse should be heeded, as they are the Lor's command.
- If they do not, (I prefer the older AV's rendering), "**but if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant**" (v.38), meaning let him be ignorant at his own perils.

Paul's final words end in a conciliatory and positive note:
"**Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way**." (vv. 39-40)

- As much as the Corinthians have abused the use of these gifts, nonetheless, they are gifts of the Holy Spirit meant to be used for the "common good" of the body of Christ, and
- As such, should be encouraged to be used, as long as it is done "in a fitting and orderly way" which then would be
    - a reflection that they have humbled themselves to need Paul's instruction, and
    - a reflection that they are practicing their gifts in Agape love!