

I Believe in the Holy Spirit

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

March 23, 2025 PM Sermon

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1 Corinthians 14:1-25

To get a handle on what Paul is saying about the Spirit here, you have to imagine yourself as a member of a very different church than LaGrave. You have to imagine yourself at the First Christian Reformed Church of Corinth. When you come to worship at First CRC of Corinth, it's not like LaGrave. You don't sit nice and quiet in your chair while the organ plays. You don't have a bulletin with set liturgy for you to follow. You don't have Ken Kruisenga to remind you exactly when to stand up and sit down.

What you do have at First Corinth CRC is a lot of noise: a lot of joyful noise, a lot of strange noise. There are people singing over here, and a group of folk are loudly shouting something over there, and all over the sanctuary there are people with their eyes closed and hands upraised and out of their mouths stream a strange babble. It sounds like a kind of language, but you can't make out a word of it. Eventually you realize that they are speaking in tongues. The service is exuberant and loud and all over the place.

And if you stuck around for coffee after one of these wild services the talk would also be different from what you're used to. You might hear a conversation something like this. "Wow that was a great service, I think I spoke in tongues for almost fifteen minutes straight. I was really in the Spirit." Says one man. Another woman, eager not to be outdone, counters with, "You know just last week I went for a half hour straight and was laid out flat on my back after the whole thing was over." "I've been speaking in tongues for almost ten years now!" says still another man in the circle. Finally, all three turn to a fourth person in the group and say, "What about you Ellen, how long have you been speaking in tongues?" Ellen looks a little embarrassed and says quietly. "Umm. I've never spoken in tongues. I am in the Bible study though and I helped make the coffee this morning." There's a long awkward silence, and finally one of the group offers, "Well keep trying Ellen, hang in there! I'm sure you'll become spiritual eventually." And they all quickly move on to talking about the weather.

First Christian Reformed Church of Corinth thinks of itself as a very spiritual place, and they have a very specific idea of what it means to be spiritual. For them, to be spiritual is to be out of the ordinary. For them, the stranger the phenomenon, the more unconventional the display, the wilder the activity, the more spiritual it is. And clearly for them, the height of spirituality was speaking in tongues. When you spoke in tongues, you really were full of the Spirit. You had spiritually arrived. If you were still messing about with regular church stuff, if you were doing regular old prayer and regular old singing in regular old Greek, well, you were still in spiritual kindergarten.

Paul has a few issues with the way this church measures the Spirit. Paul has used the last three chapters of this letter trying to change the way they think about the Spirit's work. He doesn't dismiss their tongue speaking, he doesn't throw out their wild spiritual behavior, but he does put tongues in their place: "Anyone who speaks in tongues edifies themselves," says Paul, "but the one who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy ... I would rather speak 5 intelligible words to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue." 'Tongues are great,' says Paul, 'they connect you with God, and the person speaking in tongues has an amazing spiritual high, but the really important spiritual gifts, the most helpful spiritual gifts are the gifts that are a benefit to everyone and that can be understood by everyone.'

Where the Corinthians are celebrating the wild and wooly side of the Spirit, Paul holds up for them some slightly more normal gifts for their consideration: In this chapter he holds up prophecy. Prophecy here is not prediction of the future, prophecy is a Spirit led word of advice and counsel given to help other people live as Christians in the world. A prophetic word would remind people of what God says and would encourage them to live God's way. We have a word of prophecy every week in this church service. We call it the sermon.

Every week the ministers go to the Bible, listen to the Spirit, and we try to figure out what the Spirit wants us to say to the church. It's a spiritual gift we are trying to exercise. It looks pretty normal from the outside. It looks like a couple of regular people talking for 20 minutes. But it is every bit as spiritual as speaking in tongues. And in this context, Paul says it is more helpful.

In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul holds up a gift even more unspectacular than sermons. He talks about the gift of administration. Administration is pretty dull. A person carefully taking minutes of a meeting is much less interesting than an ecstatic worshiper speaking in tongues. But Paul is putting them on spiritual par with one another. Have you ever been on a committee or involved in some complicated project and been blessed by a committee clerk who had the gift of administration, someone who didn't need to be talking all the time, but who kept track of everything, who kept things on track, who reminded you of details that needed attention, who knew the answers to the little procedural questions? Don't you thank God for those people? When it is done in the name of Jesus and for the sake of the Kingdom, even something as dull as administration can be a wonderful spiritual gift.

In the modern church, there is still a tendency in us to think that the stranger something is, the more spiritual it is. My favorite story here is one you've heard. A Christian Reformed Church was looking for a pastor. They had been doing that in the regular way. Forming a search committee. Soliciting names. Making contacts. Listening to sermon tapes. Setting up interviews. Contacting references. They had done the hard work that accompanies a pastoral search. In the middle of this process a tape came in by an unconventional method. A member of the committee had been sitting on a plane and had happened to mention to the person sitting beside her that she was on a committee looking for a pastor. That person just happened to have a tape in her purse of a pastor she liked very much and she gave that tape to the search committee member. It was an unusual turn of events and because it was unusual, everyone on the search committee said: This is the Holy Spirit at work. And as a result this name rose to the top of the search committee list. They called the guy. Now I have no doubt that this strange coincidence on the plane might well be the work of the Spirit. But I also have no doubt that all those other tapes they had collected based on ordinary reflection, and ordinary use of the mind were no less the work of the Spirit!

There is something in us that wants to say: if something is normal and involves ordinary human process, that's human. If something has a whiff of the paranormal; that's the Holy Spirit. But Paul is holding up a different standard for whether or not something is spiritual. Paul doesn't ask, 'is it normal?' He asks, is it intelligible, does it edify, does it build up, does it bless others, does it lift up believers and draw unbelievers? Does it help people? Can someone walk in off the street and understand and be blest by what they hear? That's the standard for Paul.

But now let's turn this sermon upside down. So far I've been preaching to the choir. Paul wrote this chapter to a congregation struggling with certain kinds of excesses and distortions in the way they viewed the work of the Spirit. But are the distortions of the Corinthian church the same as the distortions of LaGrave? Are our services in any danger of getting out of control? Do we speak in tongues here? Do we want to? If anyone at LaGrave has ever spoken in tongues I've never heard about it, and I imagine that the reason I've not heard about it is that someone who had spoken in tongues might be a little bit unsure how people might react if they mentioned it. If anything, we have the opposite of the Corinthian problem.

There are two errors possible in thinking about the Holy Spirit. There is the error of the Corinthians. Thinking too much about the wild power and not enough about small ordinary ways the Spirit works. But there is also an error which focuses too much on the normal and the ordinary and forgets the wild power. In his one of his writings John Witvliet talks about these two errors. He uses two biblical words to describe each of these errors. We can grieve the Spirit or we can quench it: We can grieve the Spirit by focusing too much on the more spectacular and experiential stuff like tongues. Or we can quench the Spirit by ignoring his active power in our lives. The Corinthians were clearly in danger of grieving the Spirit. That is not our problem. If anything I would say that we flirt with the danger of quenching the Spirit, in danger of putting out the Spirit's fire.

In our passage Paul wants to de-emphasize the gift of tongues and the more ecstatic spiritual displays for the Corinthians, but he certainly doesn't want to quench them. "I wish all of you could speak in tongues." He says in verse 5, and later in verse 15 he tells the Corinthians the spiritual approach he is taking: "What shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind." Paul wants both the "normal" displays of the Spirit like prophecy and administration as part of the church's life, but he also wants the tongues and the ecstatic singing.

Why does Paul want these gifts around? Why does he still want to keep the paranormal in the picture instead of ushering them all the way out the door? It's because paranormal phenomenon like tongues and miraculous healings remind us who is really running the show here. When we lose touch with these sorts of gifts, when they are missing from the body, and when the body even gets a little suspicious of these wilder gifts, we run the risk of thinking that this work of helping others and changing the world and becoming better people, it's really our work. God has given us instructions of what he wants his world to look like, but now it's up to us to make it so. When we lose track of the wilder Spiritual gifts, we lose track of the wild power of God, and pretty soon all we're left with is ordinary human power and ordinary human expectations. I don't know about you, but that's the spiritual error I struggle with more than too many tongues.

The good news is, when we get too focused on our own power and plans, the Wild Spirit will make himself known. Here's a story a congregation member shared with me a few years back. It was about his grandfather whom he called Opa. Opa, whose given name was Hendrik, was echte Christian Reformed. Straight-shooting. No Nonsense. Practical. Not a man given to flights of fancy. A man for whom his Lord and his family were everything. At 92, Opa suffered a massive stroke. The event left him speechless. After the stroke he lingered in his bed for a few days while his family gathered around him to say their good-byes. After days without talking, at the very end, Opa suddenly and unexpectedly raised his head from his bed and exclaimed in a clear voice: "I see a bright light!" Shortly afterwards he died. Now it was the family's turn to be speechless as they pondered what they just saw. What they saw was a wild movement of the Spirit. They saw an inbreaking of the power of God. They saw God saying, this man belongs to me and my Spirit has always been in charge of his life.

I believe in the Holy Spirit! When you came to worship today, whether you knew it or not, the Holy Spirit drew you here. Since you got to this place, the Holy Spirit has been at work in you here in the service whether or not you actually feel that. And when you go out from here into all your normal weekly anxieties the power of the Holy Spirit goes ahead of you and is working to make you and this whole world new. So tonight I'm not asking you to be a more spiritual person. I'm not telling you to go out and work harder on making the Spirit work for you. I'm telling you that the Spirit is all around you. I'm telling you that the Spirit is in you. I'm telling you that you are not doing this alone.

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