

**1 CORINTHIANS 14:12b-20**  
**G.R.A.C.E. Lutheran Church**

“Strive to excel in building up the church” are the words with which our text begins, and then for almost the entirety of the text Paul talks about what is not building up the church. If we read a few verses past our text we would hear Paul say, “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26).

The main issue Paul is dealing with is tongues, of which there are two types in the Bible: one, being enabled by God to speak in a foreign language of which you had not spoken in before, and two, being enabled by God to speak in a spiritual language that only God understands, unless someone were to interpret that language.

However, that’s not an issue for most churches today. So why even look at such a text about speaking in tongues? The answer is simple. You could substitute tongues with almost any other issue that’s going on in a church, because the real issue is about building up the church. Two weeks ago I preached a sermon from 1 Corinthians about a church that’s divided, and Paul is still dealing with that same church and divisions within that church.

Thus, we can remove the issue about tongues and put in place whatever may concern us, relating to building up, or not building us up as Christians. In our text Paul also mentions praying, singing and praising God, giving thanks, and instructing. In the verse that I jumped ahead to, there Paul mentions hymns, lessons, revelations, tongues and interpretations, and again that however any of these are used in the church they’re to be used for building up of the church.

So for today let’s focus on singing and praising God. Let’s look at the hymns Paul mentions after our text. Some translations say Psalms instead of hymns because the Psalms were the hymnal for the people of the Old and New Testament. For the most part we don’t sing Psalms today, we only read them. Some churches sing Psalms, and some pastors chant them, and of those few some sound beautiful, but for others, honestly, sadly, their attempts at singing the Psalms sounds horrible. Don’t ever expect me to chant a Psalm, because as Paul says that wouldn’t build up the church, but rather it might torture you, and you might not want to come back.

A Psalm is supposed to be helpful; it’s supposed to teach you about God and about how you can pray to God, and that’s why I have us read them back and forth. You can hear me pray, and then you can pray, and back and forth we go, and hopefully you’re learning something about God and how you can pray to God and praise God yourself inside and outside of the church.

As I said, that's the hope. So, think about the Psalm we read today – Psalm 138. What, if anything do you remember about it by now? The Psalm began by saying, “I give You thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing Your praise” (v. 1). For starters it tells us that the Bible acknowledges other gods and spirits, but only One is Holy and deserving of our praise, whether we sing that praise or speak it. This Psalm briefly covers how God blessed David, and so you can reflect on how God has blessed you. It looks at God's love and faithfulness in keeping His promises to David, and so your faith can be strengthened in trusting that God will keep His promises to you.

The Psalm ends by saying, “The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me; Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of Your hands” (v. 8). These are words that you can apply to your lives and prayers. They're very simple understandable words. God has promised to save you to eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which pays for your sins and wins you eternal life. That has been God's purpose from before the foundation of the world. His love towards you in regards to this purpose and promise is never going to change. I tell you about this every Sunday, in slightly different ways, because you may forget or feel forsaken, and so I remind you that God will not forsake you. Whatever life may bring you, the Lord will fulfill His purpose for you.

How might you use this Psalm to pray on your own? Based on this Psalm Luther prayed: “Renewed thanks do we return unto You, O Father of mercy, for all Your loving-kindness toward us; and chiefly, because You have called us into the kingdom of Your Son, our Saviour. Cleanse us from sin by His blood and remember not our transgressions against us. Do not forsake the work of Your own hands that, delivered from our enemies, we may evermore praise You. Amen.”

Now that's today's Psalm, but going back to Paul's list of things to examine to see if we're building up the church Psalms are now mostly translated as hymns, because most churches sing hymns and not Psalms. So, we have to ask if our hymns are building us up. For the last two weeks we opened up with a hymn that we will never use again. I had questions about their singability and asked Tania and Jonah, and it was echoed back to me what I was thinking. Paul's main premise here is that if something isn't helpful for the church, building it up, then don't do it, and so if we come across hymns that we can't sing, I won't use them again.

On that note, pun intended, lets look at the hymns we're using today. The two opening hymns are less familiar to general church usage, and the two closing ones are more familiar, and well sung. If you think a hymn was torturous to sing, let me know. However, for one of our more familiar hymns

“God of Grace and God of Glory”, you might like to sing it, but the point is what did you get out of it? What does it teach you with the words that you sing? We shouldn’t just sing hymns because they have a nice snappy tune. They should also teach us something about God, Jesus and salvation.

What does this hymn teach us? It’s also part prayer asking God to pour His power out on His people, but for what purpose? Is it so that we can all speak in tongues and impress other people? No! The prayer asks for God’s power so that we can face our daily hours here on earth and reach maturity in heaven. We’re asking God to free our hearts from fears and to give us faith so that we might praise Him. We’re asking for God to turn our hearts away from selfish pride so that we don’t turn away from salvation. We’re asking God to free us from any evil force that would hinder our salvation and to turn us towards service and adoration of God and Jesus Christ. And if you didn’t get all that when we sung it earlier, then read it again, or wait, because we’ll likely sing it again soon.

In our text Paul is saying that He “would rather speak five words with his mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Thus if the church Divine Service isn’t achieving it’s purpose of instructing you, then maybe it needs to be shorter, or simpler, or the selection of hymns smaller. From my perspective it’s simple enough, but I’ve had many years of education and experience, and I may come across to you as one who is speaking in tongues and you don’t understand a word that I’m saying as I use all sorts of church jargon and Christianese. So, if you don’t understand me, tell me, and I’ll try to make the message simpler until you do understand, and this church is built up together under our One Head Jesus Christ.

That was the theme of the text from two weeks ago as we looked at an earlier section of this letter to the Corinthians. Did you understand that? Do you understand that Jesus is the Son of God? Is it being conveyed to you simply enough that Jesus died to pay for your sins so that you could be reconciled with God? Do you understand that faith in Jesus is a gift from the Holy Spirit?

Yes, God’s Law tells you about all the things that God wants you to do or not do, and it shows you how you continuously fail God. Yet, God’s Gospel shows you that Jesus has done for you all that God requires of you. He fulfilled the Law for you. He paid the penalty for all that you failed to do by being crucified for you. You don’t do anything in order to be saved. You just believe that Jesus has done it all for you, and then you sing praises to God about what He has done for you. The Christian faith is really that simple, and yes I can boil it down to five words as Paul suggests, but likely not five hymns. The Christian faith is all about Grace: **God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense**. God richly forgives you because Jesus died to pay for your sins. May you remember that, pray and sing about that, and always give thanks for God’s GRACE. Amen.