

God in Our Midst

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Isaiah 28:5-16 NIV



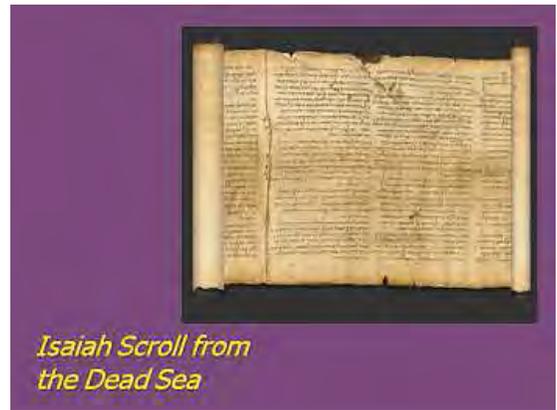
In that day the LORD Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people. He will be a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, a source of strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate. And these also stagger from wine and reel from beer: Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine; they reel from beer, they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions. All the tables are covered with vomit and there is not a spot without filth.

“Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast? For it is: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there.”

Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will

speak to this people, to whom he said, “This is the resting place, let the weary rest”; and, “This is the place of repose”— but they would not listen. So then, the word of the LORD to them will become: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there — so that they will go and fall backward, be injured and snared and captured.

Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem. You boast, “We have entered into a covenant with death, with the grave we have made an agreement. When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us, for we have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place.” So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.”



1 Corinthians 14:21-33 NIV

In the Law it is written: “Through men of strange 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.



Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two — or at the most three — should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

At the Board meeting earlier this month, we were considering the future outlook for this church. How can the witness of this congregation be revived and strengthened, so that people in this community will come to understand their need for the Lord and enter into the fellowship of the body of Christ — either our particular slice of it here, or in some other congregation? Of course, that issue is always a topic for discussion at Board meetings, and it's likely to be a topic for discussion at our annual meeting coming up next month. But we had an unusual discussion of this question at the last Board meeting, unusual in that we continued to converse about it for about ten minutes after the meeting was officially adjourned. Nobody seemed to want to get up and leave, because for our Board members — and, really, for all of us — the future of this church is a burning issue. As we stand today, we're an ageing congregation (and I'm 76 myself); and we wonder whether, say ten years from now, "Will there be enough people here to sustain this ministry?"



When this topic comes up, one item often mentioned is the things that have been tried in the past to interest people in our community in participation in the church. Events like suppers, vacation Bible school, movie nights, or special programs have occasionally drawn people into the building. But the hope that those people will then begin to attend Sunday worship has just never seemed to materialize. Then we can consider the plans your former pastor had for starting a contemporary-style worship service, and publicizing those plans throughout the community in the hope that younger people would be drawn in. It was a frustration for him that this congregation just didn't have the resources, or perhaps the inclination, to pursue that idea. I guess he felt that, in order to fulfill his call to ministry, he had to move on and look for another opportunity — and that's why I'm here in this pulpit today, instead.

As I look about our community, I see a great need. My guess is that about 80% of the people of Hamilton, or the Tri-State area as a whole, have no relation to a church, because they see no need, and no possibility, for God to be involved in their life. Since the 17th century, when the philosophy of materialism began to take hold in earnest, the whole of Western culture has been moving in the direction of ruling "spiritual" influences completely out of consideration when making decisions at both the societal and personal levels. That movement seems to be reaching a peak in the environment we live in today — and I don't have to rehearse for you the evidence for that claim. Therefore, many of your friends and neighbors, and even perhaps your family members, are living in a godless world. And despite the various challenges they may encounter in life, they appear to be quite contented with a perspective that's limited to the four dimensions of space-time, with no thought of dimensions of reality that may lie beyond their immediate vision.



I have in my mind a picture of the people I'm talking about. As I sat on our front porch one day recently, two young men roared by on their motorcycles, their caps turned backwards and their arms covered with tattoos. That image has stayed with me as a picture of the element in our community that is probably the hardest to reach. Another image was supplied by a young woman ahead of me in the checkout line at Dollar General, a woman with a hard look on her face (what I could see of it, for she was wearing dark glasses); and I was reminded of so many young women you meet who seem to be hardened to life — women who use crude language when talking on their cell phones, and judging from the quality of their voices are

probably frequenters of the local bar or liquor store. Those are the people of our community, the ones who will be here after you and I are gone. Is there any hope for them, as far as their getting connected with Jesus is concerned?

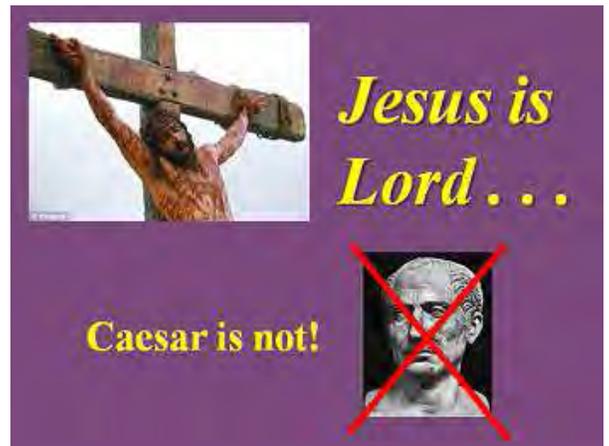
And then, as we were discussing at the Board meeting, suppose one of those people I'm describing did — by some odd circumstance — come into our worship gathering on a Sunday morning. What might they encounter *here* that would create the desire, and open up the possibility, of uniting with Jesus, becoming part of his body, and sharing in the hope of the resurrection from the dead? Would God be more real to them as a result of being exposed to the worship of God in this church, or *any* church in this community?

To get a handle on this question, I looked into the apostle Paul's description of the worship gathering in the church at Corinth, a portion of which I read from 1 Corinthians, chapter 14. Paul relates some striking things about the worship of these earliest Christians, and has some pointed advice about how that worship ought to be conducted. But, to me, the most striking thing he has to say in this passage is found in verses 23 to 25:

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

Set aside, for the moment, the practices of prophesying and speaking in tongues that Paul refers to here. (I will get back to them.) For me, the most striking thing about this passage is that *unbelievers did come into the worship gathering* of the New Testament church, and when they did, they realized that *God was there!*

To be a Christian was costly in the ancient Roman world. Yes, it's costly in today's world, too. Owners of a bakery in Oregon have been fined \$135,000 for refusing to bake a wedding cake for a lesbian "couple." But in New Testament times being a Christian was not only costly in terms of finances or social acceptance; it was in many cases *life-threatening*. When we declare, "Jesus is Lord," we're also saying, "the State is *not* Lord, the President is *not* lord, the Supreme Court is *not* lord." When the early Christians said, "Jesus is Lord," they were declaring that "Caesar is *not* Lord." By refusing to worship Caesar's image, or to sacrifice to the other local gods, they put themselves at odds with public policy in their cities. And yet, *unbelievers still visited their assemblies*, running the risk of being associated with a subversive group the authorities were determined to eliminate. And when these unbelievers came into the Christian gathering they were struck by the reality of the living God, a reality evident in *the way these Christians were worshiping*.



How were these Christians worshiping? From several ancient sources we get a glimpse of the order, or *sequence*, of worship: singing of hymns to Jesus, teaching from the Scriptures, gathering at the Lord's Table followed by thanksgiving. But here, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul gives us a picture of the "flavor" of early Christian worship, at least in that particular church. He mentions, especially, prophecy and speaking in tongues. Since I read through that part of Paul's discussion, I owe it to you to at least touch upon those phenomena. Please bear with me; this could get a little complicated.

Paul begins this portion of his discussion with a quotation from Isaiah 28:10, "'Through men of strange 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." He then states, "Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers" (14:22). Here we have two phenomena that occurred during worship at Corinth: utterance in tongues, or unknown languages (similar to what the apostles experienced at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon them); and prophecy, or the speaking forth of a word from the Lord but in the language people understood. In Corinth these things had gotten a bit out of hand, so Paul in

this passage is issuing a corrective. At the end of the chapter he states, "Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (14:39-40).

These practices — prophecy and tongues — are *signs*, Paul says. In other words, they're evidence of God's presence and activity, which is what a sign is in the Bible. A sign isn't necessarily a "positive" thing for the people receiving it; when the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple, the aged Simeon told Mary that Jesus would be "a sign that is spoken against" (Luke 2:34). In this sense, you and I, as believers in Jesus, are negative "signs" for those 80% of our neighbors who have no place for God in their lives. Paul says that tongues are a sign for unbelievers; that is, if an unbeliever hears a Christian worshiper praying in tongues he will be put off by it because the evidence of God's presence is strange to him. On the other hand, when Christian worshipers speak out the word of God in prophecy, Paul says, that's a sign for believers that God is working with them, and the unbeliever who hears the word will be convicted and declare, "God is surely among you."

But let me back up to the question of tongues. Speaking in tongues is not a regular worship practice in this congregation, as it might be in some churches that call themselves "Pentecostal" or "charismatic." Nevertheless, since tongues are a "sign" for the apostle Paul, we need to understand what they involve and why he quotes that verse from Isaiah. Let me read part of the passage from Isaiah again:

Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people, to whom he said, "This is the resting place, let the weary rest"; and, "This is the place of repose"— but they would not listen. So then, the word of the LORD to them will become: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there — so that they will go and fall backward, be injured and snared and captured (Isaiah 28:11-13).

Isaiah seems to be warning his unfaithful Judean listeners that they won't respond to the word of the Lord. But why? The usual translation of this passage is, "The word of the LORD will be to them precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." That sounds like careful, step-by-step instruction in the teachings of Scripture, doesn't it? But let me read that line in Hebrew: *tzav letzav, tzav letzav, qav leqav, qav leqav, ze'er sham, ze'er sham*. That sounds like nonsense syllables, something like baby talk, and Isaiah seems to be saying that the word of God will sound like nonsense to the unbeliever, so they will reject it and suffer the consequences. That's what Paul is picking up here. In other words, Isaiah has

actually quoted an utterance in unknown tongues, just as Paul implies when he cites him in our passage from 1 Corinthians: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people." Speaking in tongues is a sign, and the word of the Lord is a sign; they both seem like nonsense to the unfaithful, the unbeliever. But they are still evidence of the mysterious working of God in the life of the body of Christ.

I told you this could be a bit complicated, and I bring it up only to do justice to the larger passages that I read. I guess the point is that, in the early Christian worship Paul is

describing, *something was happening* that made the presence of the Lord evident to whomever was there, including a visiting unbeliever. In Corinth, people were giving utterances in tongues, which Paul seems to regard not as messages *from* God but prayers *to* God, because earlier in the same chapter 14 he says, "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. If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified" (14:15-17). In Corinth, also, worshipers were speaking forth words of prophecy, which Paul also qualifies when he states, "But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort" (14:3). Prophecy, in the church, isn't for the purpose of adding to the word of God we have in the Scriptures; it is for the edification, the building up, of the

body of Christ and for helping each worshiper to grow and develop in his practice of the faith. Whatever form we use, in our worship we certainly need both thanksgiving to God and encouragement in Christian living.

We don't know enough about early Christian worship to be sure that the phenomena Paul describes at Corinth occurred in other congregations. But we can suggest that prophecy and speaking in tongues are, to a degree, matters of *worship style*. As I mentioned, we associate those practices with churches we call "Pentecostal" or "charismatic," although you might be surprised to learn that people in other churches sometimes observe these same practices — including, as we recently learned, dignified bishops in the Church of England. Our worship style at First Christian is different from the style Paul describes at Corinth; our pattern of worship developed from the evangelistic gatherings and revivals of the American frontier, which featured a musical "warm-up" followed by preaching and an "altar call." To this, the "Christian church" movement added the regular observance of Holy Communion, in the desire to restore that central element of New Testament worship, the gathering about the Table of the Lord.

But when it comes to whether the unbelieving visitor will sense the presence of the risen Lord Jesus in our gathering, *worship style doesn't matter*. I know churches that worship using the Anglican Prayer Book or the Lutheran service book, with their written prayers and set ceremonies, and these churches are filled with young families. I know churches that worship with the pipe organ and standard, stately hymns that are attracting young men and women, as well as older people. Of course, we know about mega-churches, congregations of thousands, with a contemporary worship style. But worship style doesn't matter. The important factor isn't the type of worship, but the *type of worshiper*. Wherever, as in Corinth, the worshipers are *on fire*, invested in their devotion to the Lord and willing to express that devotion freely and enthusiastically — then the unbeliever who enters is more likely to say, "Surely God is in your midst!"



We're concerned about the future of this ministry, and we'd like to see revival not only in this congregation but in all churches in our area. How can we reach out to our neighbors, our friends, our family members, or even people we don't know, to help them understand that God is real? I would suggest that revival doesn't begin with outreach into the community. We probably can't do much to change the minds of the 80% for whom God has no reality, and who have no concept of the life Jesus offers. That's what repentance is, by the way — *metanoia*, change of mind, coming to look at reality in a different way, developing a different *worldview* as sociologists call it. We certainly can't argue, or cajole, or entice people into repentance and belief, when they perceive no problem with their unbelief.

We would like to see revival begin as new people do start showing up in church, as the result of *believing prayer* in their behalf, or because life circumstances cause them to question their own worldview that excludes God. *But revival of faith can't begin with people who have no faith to revive*. Revival has to begin somewhere else, and to my mind it has to begin with the people who are already in church, faithful to the family of God and regularly attending our gathering. If you and I can "get revived," there will be something here for the unbeliever to see, and respond to, if and when they do trickle in. Otherwise, if they do show up, they may just shrug their shoulders and exclaim, as they exit, "What's the point?"

What can you and I do, *supported by believing prayer*, to become the kind of worshipers about whom the visitor might be moved to exclaim, "God is really among you"? Could we ask ourselves a few questions?

- Can I be more steadfast in my attendance at Sunday worship, not diverted by other pastimes or events?
- Can I be more enthusiastic in my singing — or begin to sing, in the first place?
- Can I allow my attention to be more firmly riveted upon the reading and exposition of the word of God, and not be distracted by stray thoughts or interruptions?

- Can I invest myself more intensively in the praise of the Lord, making it clear that my entire being is involved and not just my mouth?
- Can I sit a few rows closer to the front, to demonstrate my involvement?
- Can I be more proactive in greeting the occasional newcomer or infrequent attendee, as well as those I see regularly?
- Can I respond more readily when the offer is made to receive personal prayer during the service?
- Can I more eagerly receive the elements that represent the body and blood of the living Jesus, feeding inwardly upon his presence?
- Could I be more of a participant, and less of a spectator, in the worship of Almighty God? Could I, just generally, behave during worship in a way that reveals that I sense the very life of God in our midst?



Can we say, with the Psalmist whose words we recited earlier, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? . . . Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me. . . . Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight"? (Psalms 42-43) If so, then we're on our way to revival, and on our way to being the kind of congregation about whom the unbelieving visitor might say, "Surely God is in your midst."

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