

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: Over 50 years ago Joe Bayly wrote a tongue-in-cheek short story that began:

The idea really began that night several years ago when we were all sitting around in George and Ethel Griscom’s backyard.

We’d just finished eating an outdoor picnic supper (a real spread), and there wasn’t much to do except swat mosquitoes and watch fireflies. Every so often an airplane flew over, high in the sky. You could see the twinkling red and white lights.

I guess that’s what got us started on the Gospel Blimp, or maybe it was George and Ethel’s next-door neighbors, who were playing cards and drinking beer on the porch.

Anyway, we began talking about how to reach people with the Gospel...

Herm motioned toward the house next door.

“Too bad that plane didn’t carry a sign. They looked up from their card playing long enough to have read it if it had carried one.”

“Hey, you know, you may have something there. Any of you seen those blimps with signs trailing on behind? You know, ‘Drink Pepsi Cola’, or ‘Chevrolet Is First?’” ...

“What I mean is this. Why not have a blimp with a Bible verse trailing—something like ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.’?”

Well, the idea expanded into a full-scale outreach effort with a real blimp, a missionary blimp pilot, dropping tiny little firebombs as symbols of revival fire and gospel tracts weighted with bubble gum. Then they added a PA system to broadcast gospel choruses all over town, as well as public service announcements like, “Do not litter.”

Joe Bayly was poking fun at all the outreach schemes churches came up with back then. Not much has changed. If blimps worked they would be all over!

- B. I was trying to write about that challenge a few months ago and was not doing too well. One morning as I prayed about it the Lord suddenly brought to my mind a phrase from a verse where outsiders come into a church and “*fall down and worship God, saying, ‘God is really among you!’*” How did *that* happen, I wondered? So I looked up the verse, which will be our focus today. Turn to **1 Cor 14**.
- C. This is a difficult chapter. Paul is telling the Corinthian church that their focus on speaking in tongues has gotten out of hand, becoming a matter of pride instead of edification. He says that the more important gift of the Holy Spirit is prophecy, not so much telling the future as giving a direct word from God to the people there, always consistent with Scripture. He says in **vv.1-3...** Now look at our focus this morning, **vv.24-26...**

The picture here is of a worship service. It isn’t all planned out. No bulletin! Various Christians took part as prompted by God’s Spirit. I’m sure there was also singing, prayers and the Lord’s Table. Someone—maybe two or three—spoke, beginning something like, “*The Lord is saying...*” And their words “strengthened, encouraged or comforted” the believers. Perhaps one of the speakers said something like, “*The Lord is saying that someone here has been very cruel and he commands them to seek Christ’s forgiveness.*” Or “*God says it is time to stop opposing him and believe in Jesus Christ.*” And among those visitors someone is startled. They *know* that God just spoke to their secret and they went to their knees, exclaiming, “**God is really among you!**”

I. GOD'S MISSION HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO BE AMONG US

A. God has a history among us. Remember that in the Garden of Eden, God walked with **Adam and Eve** in the cool of the day. It was only their sin that brought that idyllic time to an end. When God was about to bring the Israelites into the promised land, **Moses** reminded the people how distinct they were from all others. He told them that obeying God's commands was their national gift. *“Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?”* [Dt 4:6-8] In other words, they would say, **“God is really among you!”**

When Solomon dedicated the temple, he prayed a powerful prayer which included this request:

“As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.” [2 Chron 6:32-33] In other words, they would say, **“God is really among you!”**

This idea runs through all of the Old Testament, and then when Jesus was born one of his God-given names was

Immanuel, which means *God with us*. **John 1:14** says, “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*” “***God is really among you!***”

- B. Since Jesus ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit is in those whose faith is in Christ, and he especially makes his presence known when we’re are gathered together. Jesus said, “*Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*” “***God is really among you!***”
- C. One thing you can be absolutely certain about: when we gather together God wants nothing more than for everyone here to know that he is among us, especially unbelievers and inquirers. As believers, we can rest assured of God’s presence simply by faith. We don’t necessarily need to *feel* anything, though God often blesses that way. But the sense here is that the outsiders are gob smacked, awestruck, by the undeniable presence of God. What was it Paul said? “*So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’*”

Among the pastors I was with earlier this week was one who said that there were some in his church that insisted that in every service he had to give an altar call in an effort to win over lost people. He was frustrated with that because he doesn’t feel that is always God’s intention. In other churches, the approach is almost exactly opposite. Keep the gospel on the down-low. Cater to “unchurched Harry and Mary.” Don’t do anything to make a visitor uncomfortable. But Paul is describing something different from both of those.

II. OUR WORSHIP TOGETHER MUST MAKE GOD'S PRESENCE AMONG US UNMISTAKABLE, EVEN TO UNBELIEVERS

A. **V.26** described Paul's expectation for the worship services in Corinth: "*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.*" He doesn't mean that every person had something to sing or say individually, but that all were engaged. "*A word of instruction,*" I assume, is explaining Scripture. "*A revelation*" was a message, given by the Holy Spirit, that opened people's eyes to God's truth.

"*A tongue,*" if you've never heard speaking in tongues, is an unintelligible language given by the Holy Spirit. When someone speaks in tongues alone—a private tongue—it is communication directly from the believer's spirit to the Lord, absent known language. But when it happens in church where everyone hears it must be interpreted, which again must be provided directly by the Holy Spirit. So here's someone who stands and speaks, perhaps a paragraph, in an unknown language. Then someone else stands who wouldn't normally understand that language but who, in this case does, and can tell the church what God has spoken. One effect is that this must be a message from God because what happened is hard to fake. When I've heard this phenomenon, the message was a word of specific encouragement to the church. It wasn't some new revelation about God or his will, but simply a direct word to strengthen or challenge the believers there.

So imagine coming into a service like that as a nonchristian. Nothing about it is familiar to you. It isn't just that there is some kind of unfamiliar liturgy or songs. There is clearly Someone present who is supernaturally

prompting all these things that people sing and say. And remember, everything they hear is about Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, and the forgiveness and life he's given these people.

And then in the course of things, God speaks through one of these messages right into the heart of these “unbelievers and inquirers.” *“The secrets of their hearts are laid bare.”* I don't think that means that one of the Christians points at some guy and blurts out, *“Hey you! Lucius, God says to stop stealing from your boss.”* Other people may not have even realized what was happening. But God laid bare a secret through what they heard—maybe something they didn't realize themselves, like the real motive, ugly and small, behind some behavior. Or a deep hunger that no one knew about. God would somehow convict them of sin and need, as surely as if a gavel fell, because till person faces their sin they have no real use for Jesus the Savior.

Honestly, I don't know all that is intended to work today. I've thought about this often and my sense is that God simply works in different ways in different times, places, and churches. I read of an atheistic professor who went to church and was brought to Christ through Communion. I knew of someone who turned to Jesus simply by hearing the closing song. We had a guy here who walked out during the sermon because he couldn't sit still, but only a week or two later he came up to me with his Christian friend and said, *“I want to convert.”* I've heard people say of VCL, *“I just knew God was there.”* One thing is undeniable: **Every time we gather to worship and learn, God wants his presence to be undeniably obvious. He wants people to realize, “God is really among you!”**

- B. Notice something else here because this gets lost in church culture today. Those congregations weren't tailoring their services for outsiders. They weren't trying to attract nor entertain people. They didn't need special effects to heighten the sense of worship. Not when God's presence was palpable! Not when God was so real that some unbelievers fell to their knees in worship!
- C. But while God was whispering secrets to unbelievers the believers had one God-given goal: to be built up. A worship service is not intended to make a church get bigger. The purpose of a worship service is that Christians are strengthened. In order for *us* to be strengthened—built up—we need to hear God's Spirit speaking through one another—through our songs, testimonies, words of encouragement, prayers, and sermons.

In the course of doing that, “unbelievers and inquirers” are drawn to the Lord because, at least for some, it becomes clear that ***“God is really among you!”***

Conclusion

This is why I'm setting before you the challenge to pray several times each week, in advance of our time together, that God's presence would be so evident among us that even visitors might say, ***“God is really among you!”***

Praying this way will help us each be more mindful of our approach to this service. **Is. 57:15**, *“For this is what the high and exalted One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”* How do we welcome God's presence? By being humble and contrite—sensitive to and sorry for our sin.

James tells us that we need to repent of our friendship with the world, and that our pride offends God.

We pray, too, because we have this promise from **Is. 55:6**, *“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”* And Jesus’ own promise, *“Those who seek will find.”*

Praying like this also sharpens our thirst for God. **Ps. 42:1**, *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.”*

And for all of us, but especially those who have a part in our services, singing, reading Scripture, praying, decorating, it is our duty to prepare by being with and listening to the Holy Spirit as to our part. What does he want to say through us, and how does he want us to present ourselves to his people? Ushers and greeters, be filled with the Spirit. All of us who sing, be “Spirit-ed” in your singing.

God is not reluctant to be known. **God is not reclusive.** But he will not come at our casual invitation, nor to people who are sitting up to high. But there is no question that he wants those who are with us on any Sunday to be able to say, *“God is really among you!”*

Will you agree to pray for this every week?

The prophet Zechariah brought a tantalizing word from the Lord to his people in **Zech 8:20-23**,

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.’ And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”