

Chapter 14

The Need for Edification and Order

After stressing the need and preeminence of love in the use of the Corinthians spiritual gifts, the actual use of the gifts must be employed for edifying one another. In that case, prophecy is to be preferred to uninterpreted tongues

The Need for Edification (14:1-19)

The Priority of Prophecy (verses 1-5)

Verse 1—Here is a summation of what Paul had just written, to *pursue* (Διώκετε, to run swiftly, to run after) *love*, which is also resuming the thought in 12:31.

- The preeminence of love does not mean it should be pursued at the expense of spiritual gifts.
- Instead, *yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts*, not in the sense of deciding which ones to possess, but in the sense of desiring which ones to seek use of in the assembly for edification.
- *But especially that you may prophesy*, due to what we will learn of this gift's ability to edify.

Verse 2—The *one who speaks in a tongue does not* [in the first instance] *speak to men* [for edification] *but to God* because *no one understands*, since it is a uninterpreted foreign language.

- The content of this tongues speech ends up as *speak[ing] mysteries* (μυστήρια, hidden or secret) from the perspective of those who were listening to the tongues or languages.

Verse 3—By contrast, *but one who prophesies speaks to men* speaking in the tongue of the listener which they understand.

- This gift benefited the hearers *for edification and exhortation and consolation* (παραμυθίαν, calming or comfort).
- The point is that the intelligibility of the speech from this gift made it beneficial for the audience.

Verse 4—It is true that the tongues speaker only *edifies himself*, since there was no interpretation that could bring benefit to everyone else who heard the message.

- The gifts were not given for personal enrichment, though this could be a by-product of one's gift, *but one who prophesies edifies the church*, which should be the outcome as these gifts are used when believers assemble.

Verse 5—Paul acknowledged the value of the gift of tongues.

- *Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues*, implying that not all spoke in tongues and so tongues speaking did not determine one's salvation or spirituality.
- *But even more that you* [the Corinthians] *would prophesy*, since the use of this gift benefited those listening.
- The comparative value of speaking in tongues is much lower than prophesying because of its usefulness.
- *Greater is one who prophesies* [with intelligible speech] *than one who speaks in tongues* [unintelligible speech], *unless he interprets*, which apparently was not always the case and so potentially downgraded the use of tongues.

Edification Is Mandatory (verses 6-12)

Verse 6—To highlight the inferiority of unintelligible tongues, Paul used himself as an example.

- *But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, as a possible glance back to his initial ministry in Corinth.*
- He could have come proclaiming an unintelligible message, but *what will I profit you* [the point of spiritual gifts] *unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching* which are all intelligible utterances, including new revelation, insight, edification, and instruction which the Corinthians could understand and from which they would profit.

Verse 7—Paul labored the point of edification that demanded intelligible content, with examples from musical instruments.

- *Yet even lifeless things* [inanimate objects], *either flute or harp, in producing a sound.*
- This elaboration was necessary due to the Corinthians pushing and advancing the superiority of the gift of tongues speaking.
- *If they* [flute or harp] *do not produce a distinction in the tones, then there is no coherent harmony, but just annoying sounds so how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?*

Verse 8—*For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound* is a similar illustration, where a distinct sound of a bugle should elicit obedience, and if not *who will prepare himself for battle?*

- In this case, an unintelligible sound could be devastating, not only annoying.

Verse 9—Understanding another's language *so also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear* is what makes communication possible.

- *How will it be known what is spoken?* Incomprehensible speech may be personally satisfying to the one speaking, but it profits very little to those listening. *For you will* [only] *be speaking into the air.*

Verse 10—Paul did not know how many languages were in the world.

- *There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages* (φωνῶν, a sound or noise used in the context for language) *in the world.* The exact number being immaterial.
- But what is material, is that *no kind is without meaning*, in that human sounds apart from a shared understanding were worthless.

Verse 11—Since understanding is essential to communication, *if then I do not know the meaning of the language, the unintelligibility of tongues speaking made one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian* (βάρβαρος, crude or rough speech—bar bar, similar to blah, blah, blah) *to me.* The speech may have meaning, but no one knows it.

Verse 12—In view of this, the Corinthians, *even so you, who were zealous of spiritual gifts, would be better off pursuing gifts that would build up the church, that seek to abound for the edification of the church.*

- They should value these rather than the gifts that gave them some personal satisfaction when they exercised them, but did not edify others.

Stipulations for Tongues Speaking (verses 13-19)

Verse 13—*Therefore, in light of the need for intelligible speech, let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret, due to the importance of edifying the church.*

- The one praying is asking the Lord for the gift of interpretation so that edification is possible.

Verse 14—Interpretation is important, even *if I pray in a tongue, otherwise, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful, not knowing what one was saying without interpretation.*

- The tongues speaker's human spirit may have prayed certain content, but his mind did not understand the language he prayed. Thus, there was no edification.

Verse 15—*What is the outcome then?*

- Paul's conclusion was that enthusiasm without understanding is of no value.
- So Paul advocated praying to God with both the spirit (thinking, emotions) and the mind (understanding), so one is cognitively engaged. *I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also.*
- He included praising God in the same way. *I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.*
- The mind must be engaged in order to be fruitful to the hearers.

Verse 16—*Otherwise, if there is no interpretation, if you bless in the spirit only and the non-tongues speaker does not know what the tongues speaker has said, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks?*

- Making the listener incapable of adding their affirmation to the end of the tongues speaker's prayer, *since he does not know what you are saying?*

Verse 17—The entire point of the passage is now summarized.

- *For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified.*
- Comprehension and understanding with interpretation is required if tongues speaking in the form of prayer or praise is to edify others who hear what is being said.
- Spiritual gifts are not to be self-serving but for the edification of others.

Verse 18—The Corinthians were not to get the idea that Paul did not value the gift of tongues-speaking as a spiritual gift.

- *I thank God; I speak in tongues more than you all* [a factor we would not have known without the circumstances in Corinth as they were].
- When it came to this gift, he could apparently out-talk them all.
- Where did Paul speak in tongues? There is no record of Paul speaking in tongues, but it is possible he did so when evangelizing the Jews as a sign of New Testament truth he related to them.

Verse 19—*However, in strong contrast to Paul's tongues-speaking, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that is, with comprehension and understanding.*

- The purpose for that was *so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.*
- The Corinthians needed to realize that edifying instruction was 10,000 times more important than personal and private self-serving use of unintelligible tongues speaking.

Application

Whatever was the personal and emotional experience the Corinthians associated with tongues speaking, whenever believers assembled, it was a time for being intelligible. Edification in the church depends upon things like understanding, comprehension, and coherence, so that believers can be edified, and the church of Christ can be built-up and be spiritually mature.

The Need for Order (verses 20-40)

Tongues, Prophecies and Unbelievers (verses 20-25)

Verse 20—Beginning with *brethren* was a way to soften the following rebuke.

- *Do not be children* (παιδία an infant or child) *in your thinking*, that tongues speaking demonstrated one's spirituality.

- There is a sense in which it is good for Christians to be childlike, namely, *in evil be infants* so that one is not distracted from maturity.
- *But in your thinking* (φρᾶσιν faculty of perceiving and judging) *be mature*.
- The Corinthians thought of themselves as mature, but an overconcentration on tongues speaking was a mark of immaturity.
- They wanted to measure their maturity by their spiritual experiences, rather than in their thinking and understanding.

Verse 21—Paul cites Isaiah 28:11-12, where Judah refused to accept Isaiah’s warning about the coming Assyrian invasion “*by men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,*” says the Lord.

- God said because they refused to listen to the prophet’s words, He would “teach” them by using an unintelligible foreign-speaking [language] invading enemy as a sign of judgment.

Verse 22—The outcome of Isaiah’s passage for the Corinthians was *that* [unintelligible] *tongues are for a sign* (σημεῖον a mark or signal), specifically *not to those who believe but to unbelievers*, which seemed to be the significance Paul attached to tongues, which would make them useless for edification.

- *But prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe*, whereas prophecy benefitted believers.

Verse 23—Paul painted a picture of the Corinthian believers assembled and engaged in a frenzy of unintelligible tongues speaking, *therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues*, not necessarily every single individual simultaneously, but everyone who participated.

- While thus engaged, two types of people enter the gathering, an *ungifted* (uninformed, unskilled, unlearned) possibly newcomers or outsider’s *men or other unbelievers enter*.
- Since the reason for meeting is edification, *will they not say that you are mad* (μαίνεσθε raving mad, out of one’s right mind)?

Verse 24—On the other hand, *but if all prophesy* (not everyone present but everyone who did), *and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters* the assembly, then there can be communication and understanding.

- The result of the instruction they understand is that *he is convicted by all* that he hears, making prophecy more desirable rather than the chaotic atmosphere of tongues speaking.
- *He is also called to account* (ἀνακρίνεται interrogated or examined) *by all* that he hears and understands.
- The use of the gift of prophecy could result in the conviction and examination of visiting unbelievers, but tongues-speaking would not.

Verse 25—The unbeliever came in and overheard and comprehended what was going on in the assembly of believers where *the secrets of his heart are disclosed* by the prophesying of God’s revelation.

- Brought to the recognition of his need, *he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you*, which contrasted with the unresponsiveness of the Israelites to messages God sent them in foreign languages.
- The issue of intelligibility even applies with reference to unbelievers.

Order when You Assemble (verses 26-35)

Verse 26—The question, *what is the outcome then, brethren?*, sets up the discussion about who may prophesy.

- When believers gathered, they were free to participate, *each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation*.

- Many believers could make a variety of contributions to the general spiritual welfare of the assembly.
- The structure of the assembly was to *let all things be done for edification* (οικοδομῆν strengthening or building up, a constant refrain in the verses 3, 5, and 12).

Verse 27—Paul permitted the use of tongues *if anyone speaks in a tongue*, but not their exclusive use and only if someone provided an interpretation.

- He gave three guidelines for the use of tongues speaking in the Corinthian gatherings:
 - (1) Only two or three at most, *it should be by two or at the most three*.
 - (2) They should speak consecutively not simultaneously *and each in turn*.
 - (3) There must be interpretation *and one must interpret*.

Verse 28—The point of the rules being, *if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church* since there is no potential for edifying the people hearing the message, which is significant for the purpose of assembling.

- The person who spoke in foreign languages was to keep his message to himself if there was no translator present *let him speak to himself and to God*, since his spiritual gift is of no benefit for the believers if not interpreted.

Verse 29—The same orderly approach in the Corinthian assemblies applied to those with the gift of prophecy, *let two or three prophets speak*.

- The others hearing the revelation should pay attention to what was said, since they would not need an interpreter *and let the others pass judgment* (διακρινέτωσαν to discern or discriminate) evaluating the prophecy carefully as to its veracity.
- This could have been done by those with the gift of distinguishing between spirits or possibly done by the entire assembly of believers as a whole.
- This process was to provide a controlling feature, a sort of check and balance process, in the Corinthian gatherings, for evaluating revelation as legitimate or not.

Verse 30—Apparently, prophets brought prior revelation with them into the assembly, which they would need to defer and give preference to any prophecy another received during the time of the assembly, *but if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent*.

- This was another regulation to keep order in place whenever the Corinthians assembled. The prophet Agabas, seemed to be an example of such a practice (Acts 11:28 and 21:10-11).

Verse 31—Here again the regulations continue for the gift of prophecy in the assembly, *for you can all prophesy one by one each one in order*.

- The purpose being *so that all may learn* (μανθάνωσιν increase one's knowledge) *and all may be exhorted* (παρακαλῶνται to call alongside, to console or comfort).
- Here are two potential outcomes of the use of intelligible prophetic revelation:
 - (1) It provided instruction for edification, and
 - (2) It provided spiritual strengthening.

Verse 32—The gift or prophecy was not to be allowed to overwhelm the prophet *and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets*, in the sense of getting carried away in some sort of revelatory frenzy.

- Prophets must keep their spiritual gift under control so that its usefulness is not overcome, similar to the regulations given to those with the gift of tongues speaking (verse 28).

Verse 33—The reason for these regulations is *God is not a God of confusion but of peace*, since confusion and disorder in Christian gatherings are not in keeping with the character of God and so dishonor Him.

- That kind of commotion, chaos, and hysteria has no role or place in the edification of God's people.
- Order was the standard operating procedure in other assemblies of believers as *well as in all the churches of the saints*, establishing this precedent as the normal standard.

Verse 34—Women were active participants in prayer and prophesying in the Corinthian gatherings with apostolic qualifications, such as submission to male headship, and wearing of head coverings.

- Here is further refinement to that discussion as it relates to women carefully weighing the prophecies presented by others in their assemblies (verses 28-29).
- *The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak*, the point seemed to be that women may not participate in the oral weighing of such prophecies.
- *But are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says*, an apparent allusion to the creation order of Genesis 2:20-24, which Paul also alluded to as the same reason for women wearing a head covering as a symbol of authority in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9.

Verse 35—Since the assembly is to come together for edification, *if they* [women] *desire to learn anything* and are married *let them ask their own husbands at home*, and in this way express their submission to God's order when gathering with believers, and so assume responsibility for their own edification in the process.

- Presumably, unmarried women, who were questioning, challenging, or verifying a prophecy, could ask other men afterward or on some other occasion.
- The reason for these qualifications was that *it is improper for a woman to speak in church* in the sense of evaluating revelatory prophecies, which were men's responsibility.

Conclusion and Warning (verses 36-40)

Verse 36—The Corinthians did not set the standard for how their gatherings should proceed.

- *Was it from you that the word of God first* [originally] *went forth?* This expects a 'no' answer.
- The Corinthian church did not possess unique revelation to itself.
- Paul then asked, *or has it come to you only?* The Corinthian church was not the mother church nor was it the only church to which the gospel had come.
- It was their arrogance that may have earned them this warning.

Verse 37—Anyone in the Corinthian church could validate their claim to be *a prophet or spiritual* (πνευματικός one who is a spiritual person, not fleshly).

- The way to do that was *let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment*, by submitting to Paul's teaching because they are *the Lord's commandment*.
- Paul had written the authoritative record of the teaching about spiritual gifts, and their use in the assembly of believers.

Verse 38—*But if anyone does not recognize* (ἀγνοεῖ to be ignorant or to ignore) *this*, the Corinthians should not acknowledge anyone who refused to submit to Paul's apostolic authority and teaching.

- Otherwise, *he is not recognized* in the sense of not being approved or regarded with approval by the apostle, the church, or the Lord.
- Rejecting Paul's authority left no further appeal to be made.

Verse 39—Summarizing the entire discourse on spiritual gifts, *therefore, my brethren*, Paul repeated the imperative he began with in verse 1—*desire earnestly to prophesy*, which emphasized the superiority of the gift of prophecy over tongues because of their edifying nature.

- *And do not forbid to speak in tongues*, provided they followed the rules Paul had given.

- This allowance conceded the legitimacy of the Corinthians favorite spiritual gift, albeit with stipulations, regulations, and qualifiers.

Verse 40—The bottom line was that *all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner*, as long as those gifts were essential to the life of the church.

- As time passed, God no longer gave prophets and prophetic revelations, and the Apostle John was evidently the last person to function as one.
- We can even see the diminishing effect of these gifts during the history of the church in the book of the Acts.
- These gifts were foundational to the establishment of the universal church and eventually had ceased.
- Until then, the regulations relating to the use of these gifts were to be performed.

Application

1. This passage does not describe everything we might want to know about how, when, and where Christian assemblies gather together. There are many things not even discussed that are significant to a gathering of believers so we should not force the issue.
2. The aim of the passage is to insist on the need for an orderly experience, even with creative expressions, when believers assemble so that the primary function of edification is accomplished. If one believes that the gifts of prophesy and tongues speaking are still in play, then the apostolic rules must be diligently followed.
3. Spiritual gifts are special God-given abilities to serve the needs of one another, which may transpire whenever the need arises, not solely when believers gather. When they do assemble, there may be opportunity for some gifts to function more than others, like teachers or leadership.