

Last week we explored the truth that the Holy Spirit has given each of us spiritual gifts—not to make much of ourselves, but to build up the body of Christ and to magnify the name of Jesus. These gifts are not something we earn, and they’re certainly not something we control. They are given by the Spirit, and they are empowered by the Spirit.

Today, we’re stepping into a gift that often causes confusion, even division: the gift of tongues. Some of us have questions about it. Some of us have concerns. Some of us may have witnessed it used in ways that seemed strange or chaotic. Some of us may use it. So with all the questions surrounding the gift we should ask what does the Bible actually say? And then we should look! So, if you would, grab your bibles and turn with me to 1 Corinthians 14.

Our goal today is not to elevate personal experiences, nor to dismiss the supernatural. It is to listen carefully to the Word of God and to allow the Spirit to align our understanding and practice with His truth. Because here’s the core idea that the Apostle Paul drives home in 1 Corinthians 14: when spiritual gifts—tongues included—are expressed in an orderly, Spirit-led way, the church is encouraged, strengthened, and unified. As scripture says, “for God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Now before we dive into the passage, I think it’s helpful to pause and acknowledge that Christians throughout history—and even in this room—have held a range of views on the gift of tongues. This isn’t a new debate. It’s been around for centuries, and faithful, Bible-believing Christians have landed in very different places.

So, Let me briefly sketch out the three most common positions:

First, there's the cessationist view. This view teaches that the miraculous or sign gifts—like tongues, prophecy, and healing—ceased after the apostolic era. Meaning, once the Church was launched and the Apostles had died out, these miraculous gifts ceased. The idea is that once the New Testament was completed and the foundation of the church was laid, those gifts were no longer needed. Many in this camp deeply love Scripture and emphasize the sufficiency of God's Word and so do not see the need for these "signs" today. They're cautious about subjective experiences, especially ones that seem to be emotionally driven, or contradict or distract from the authority of the Bible.

Next, you have the Pentecostal/Charismatic view. This position sees the sign gifts, like tongues as not only active but central to the Christian experience. Many Pentecostals believe that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of being filled with the Spirit. For them, tongues function both as a private prayer language and as a public sign of God's presence. This view has brought revival and hunger for God around the world, it has also, at times, been misused or disconnected from biblical boundaries and I would even say considerably abused.

Then, there's the continuationist view. This is where I personally land—and where many within our church tradition land. Continuationists believe that all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament—including tongues—are still present and available today, but they are not normative or necessary for salvation, and they must be used in accordance with Scripture. They are given by the Spirit as He wills, to who He wills and always for the building up of the body.

Now, there are some more nuanced positions on the gift of tongues, some more controversial, for instance there are those who believe that if you do not speak in tongues then you are not saved. But, for the sake of time today we're not going to be unpacking all of the various stances on

tongues, but instead we're going to go to the Scripture and see what we have been provided with by God.

So, wherever you are on that spectrum, here's what I want you to hear: this is a family discussion. This is not a salvation issue. This is not a test of whether or not you're "spiritual enough." But it is a biblical issue, and it deserves our attention, because Paul spends an entire chapter—actually, three chapters—helping the church in Corinth—and us—understand how to think about spiritual gifts, especially tongues, in a healthy, Spirit-led way.

So a little background as to why Paul spends so much time on this topic. The Corinthian church—this young, vibrant, gifted church—was misusing the gifts of the Spirit. They were speaking in tongues loudly and frequently in worship, often without interpretation. People were trying to outdo one another. It was chaotic, disorderly, and confusing—especially for new believers and visitors. Worship gatherings had become spiritual talent shows instead of places of edification and unity. And Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, writes to lovingly—but firmly—correct them.

He's not shutting down the supernatural. He's not telling them to stop using the gifts. But he is calling them to order. He is calling them to love. To edification. Because the Spirit of God is not a God of disorder, but of peace.

That's why this message matters. Because when we understand the gift of tongues rightly—and when we use it as God intended—it builds up the church. But when it is used selfishly, recklessly, as source of pride for feeling more spiritual, or without love, it breeds confusion and division.

So let's walk through what Scripture actually says and conform our lives and use of all the gifts accordingly.

So let's start in 1 Corinthians 14:1, "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." ² For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up."

"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (v. 1). That phrase "pursue love" brings us straight back to the heartbeat of the previous chapter. It's as if Paul is saying, "Look, gifts are important. But if you don't have love, you're missing the point entirely." And then he says, "Desire the spiritual gifts." In other words, these gifts are good. They're to be wanted. But they are not earned. They are not signs of spiritual superiority. They are not proof that someone is more "anointed" than someone else. They are spiritual gifts. And as we talked about last week, gifts come from a giver and in the case of the Spiritual gifts, they are given completely at the will of the Father for whom He feels they need it and then the Spirit is the one who empowers the gift to be used. Not the person, and definitely not based on the person's spiritual maturity or sensitivity.

In verse 2, Paul zeroes in on the gift of tongues. He says, "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit." Now that's really important. What Paul is describing here isn't gibberish or some sort of emotional hype. He's not talking about people working themselves up into a frenzy. He's talking about a real, Spirit-empowered gift that enables someone to speak to God in a way that's unintelligible to others—but deeply meaningful to the one praying. And who is doing the empowering? Notice the end of verse 2, "He utters mysteries in the

Spirit.” It’s the Holy Spirit that initiates, sustains, and empowers the gift. Not the person. Not the person’s emotions.

And Paul doesn’t rebuke the person for doing this. He doesn’t say, “Stop praying in tongues.” He simply makes a distinction: when you pray in a tongue, it builds up you. But when you prophesy—meaning clearly communicate God’s Word, the Gospel, others can understand and apply it—that builds up the church.

That’s why, Paul says in verse 5, “I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.” He’s not shutting down the gift. He’s setting it in context. It’s better to clearly communicate God’s Word than to speak in an unintelligible way that only benefits you and not others.

Here’s what we have to hear clearly: the gift of tongues is not something you or I can force, fake, or fabricate. It is not something we learn, like a skill. It is not something we master, like a tool. Or something that we practice. This is really common right now in some churches. Let’s practice our prophecy and practice speaking in tongues. NO! We talked about this last week, this is in’t something you can manufacture or muster up. It is given by the Spirit. And it is empowered by the Spirit. The same Holy Spirit who regenerates our hearts, who intercedes for us with groans too deep for words, who convicts and comforts and sanctifies—that same Spirit gives gifts to the people of God as He sees fit. And He doesn’t give every person the same gift.

Now if that’s true, then that changes our posture. It means that if you’ve received the gift of tongues, you shouldn’t be prideful or apologetic—you should be grateful. And if you haven’t received it, you shouldn’t feel inferior, or less spiritual, or that you’re missing something. Because all gifts come from the same Spirit, and all of them are for the good of the church, not the glory of the individual.

I love what A.W. Tozer once said: “The Holy Spirit never enters a man and lets him live like the world. You can be sure of that.” And that applies to

the gifts too. When the Spirit gives a gift, He empowers it for a purpose. And that purpose is always, always, the building up of the body of Christ in love.

Now that Paul has affirmed the gift of tongues and reminded us that it is empowered by the Spirit—not by us—it’s time to consider how it should function within the gathered church. Because while this gift is real and personal, it’s not meant to operate in isolation or confusion. Paul now shifts the focus from the private to the public, from personal edification to corporate encouragement, and shows us how tongues must be used in a way that builds others up.

Paul continues in verse 6 by asking a very practical question: “Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?” In other words, even if I show up full of the Spirit, passionately speaking in tongues, if no one understands what I’m saying, how does that help anyone? It may be sincere. It may be spiritually significant to me. But it’s not useful for the body.

Paul’s concern here is not the legitimacy of the gift—it’s the clarity and usefulness of the gift in corporate worship. He then uses two everyday illustrations to drive this home: a musical instrument and a military trumpet. If you pick up a flute or a harp and just start playing random, disconnected notes, no one will recognize the tune. And if a trumpet gives an uncertain sound, how will the soldiers know to prepare for battle? The point is simple, if there’s no intelligibility, there’s no impact.

He applies this to tongues directly in verse 9: “So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said?”

Confusion is not the goal of the gifts. Confusion doesn’t help. Confusion doesn’t build up. Clarity does. Edification does. And Paul is saying that if the gift of tongues is used without interpretation, it actually undermines

the very reason the Spirit gives gifts in the first place—which is to encourage, instruct, and strengthen the church.

That's why, in verse 12, Paul says, "Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church." In other words, don't just seek to feel spiritual—seek to be useful to others. If you really want to see the Spirit move, don't just look for signs and wonders—look for edification. Edification, this is sort of a christianese word, so let me explain that, edification is the process of strengthening, encouraging, and someone growing or maturing in their faith. So, if we really want to see the Spirit move, we need to not just be looking for signs and wonders, we need to be looking for edification, looking for what helps someone grow in Christ.

The pursuit of "signs and wonders" have become such as distraction and so abused in our day. In fact, honestly, for many people signs and wonders have replaced Jesus. They're chasing after signs and wonders like prophecy, healing, and deliverance more than they chase after Jesus. We have to understand that in both the Old and New Testaments, signs and wonders just function as divine validation. They simply confirm that the messenger is from God and that the message being proclaimed is truly of God.

They're not random supernatural displays or to feed some emotional desire, or to be pursued—they're tied to revelation and authority. And today, signs and wonders, including the use of tongues have become a golden calf that people elevate and have distracted people from what actually matters.

And Paul is saying, you wanna see manifestations of the Spirit, you wanna see visible expressions of the Spirit...then strive to build up the church! Look for what helps someone grow in Christ.

This is why Paul immediately connects tongues with interpretation. In verse 13, he says, "Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray

that he may interpret.” Because interpretation turns a private experience into a public blessing. It bridges the gap between personal prayer and communal worship. Without interpretation, the gift of tongues remains unintelligible to everyone else and, therefore, is unhelpful to anyone else, let alone in the gathered assembly of believers.

In verse 14, Paul offers some insight into his own practice. He says, “If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.” That’s a fascinating statement. Again, Paul’s not rejecting the experience—he’s acknowledging that it doesn’t engage his mind in the same way. So what does he do? Verse 15 says, “I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also.” Paul is not anti-emotion. He’s not anti-spiritual experience. But he insists that true Christian worship is both spirit and mind. We worship in the fullness of who we are—informed, engaged, and clear. He applies this again to singing. “I will sing praise with my spirit,” he says, “but I will sing with my mind also.” That means that biblical worship is not about losing control or chasing an emotional high repeating words over and over and swaying and stumbling around. It’s about drawing near to God in truth, with reverence and clarity and joy. And it’s about doing that in a way that others can participate in.

That’s why Paul is so strong in verse 19. He says, “In church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” That’s not exaggeration—that’s a pastoral heart. Paul is showing us that God is after spiritual maturity and unity.

Five clear words that instruct are worth more than ten thousand unintelligible ones. Because God is not after emotional chaos—He is after spiritual maturity and unity. What matters most in the use of spiritual gifts during gathered worship is not how powerful something feels, but how clearly it builds up the people of God.

The gifts are about being constructive, effective, and productive for building up the body. So the principle is simple: the gift of tongues, while real and valuable, must be interpreted in corporate worship if it’s going

to edify the church. If it's not interpreted, it's not helpful. And if it's not helpful, it's not loving. And if it's not loving, it's not Spirit-led. Because the Spirit of God is always working toward building up the body of Christ in love.

Paul closes this section by calling the Corinthians to maturity. He says in verse 20, "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature." In other words, stop chasing spiritual experiences like kids running after the next shiny object. Grow up. Be discerning. Then he quotes Isaiah 28, reminding them that tongues were originally a sign of God's judgment on Israel—a foreign language they didn't understand. And he says in verse 22 that tongues are still primarily a sign, often to unbelievers, but that prophecy—clear, intelligible teaching—is what truly builds up the church.

This is why Paul gives such clear instructions about how tongues and other gifts are to function in worship. He says in verses 27–28 that if anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be two or at most three, and each in turn, and someone must interpret. If there is no one to interpret, then the person should remain silent in the church and speak only to himself and to God. That's order. That's clarity. That's maturity.

And Paul applies the same principle to prophecy in verses 29–31—one at a time, so that everyone can learn and be encouraged. Because "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (v. 33).

Here's the principle Paul is driving home: the Spirit doesn't just inspire the gifts—He governs them. The Holy Spirit never leads people to act in ways that contradict His own Word. And He never leads people to disrupt or divide the body of Christ. Worship gatherings should not be chaotic, confusing, emotionally driven, or self-focused. They should be orderly, Spirit-filled, and Christ-exalting. Because that's what edifies the church and glorifies God.

So, how are we to respond to all of this? First, if you have the gift of tongues, be grateful—but be careful. Use it as the Spirit leads, but use it in a way that serves others and aligns with Scripture. Tongues are not a badge of honor, nor are they a measure of your spiritual maturity. They're a gift—given by God, empowered by God, for the glory of God.

Next, if you don't have the gift of tongues, don't feel like you're missing out on some deeper level of Christianity. Pursue love. Pursue edification. Paul doesn't say, "Earnestly desire to speak in tongues." He says in verse 12, "Earnestly desire to build up the church." And that happens in countless ways—through encouragement, hospitality, teaching, service, generosity, prayer, teaching, leadership, so on.

And finally, Church, Christians, please hear me, we need to remember that all the gifts—tongues included—are not the point. Jesus is the point.

The Holy Spirit's role is to glorify Jesus and to build up His church. So let's not chase experiences. Let's chase Him. Let's pursue Jesus with all our hearts and allow the Spirit to use us—however He chooses—to strengthen His people and reach the lost.

And from last week remember, for the glory of Jesus and the growth of His Church.