

Building Up the Body: The Priority of Understanding in Worship

(Edify the Church: Love, Clarity, and the Greater Gift)

1 Corinthians 14:1-19

BIG IDEA: *The Church should pursue love and the Spirit's gifts—especially prophecy (proclaiming the Message of God)—so that everything in gathered worship is understandable and upbuilding. Tongues have a place (with interpretation), but intelligible speech that edifies the church is biblically prioritized. The desire of the whole church should be that the gift of prophecy (declaring God's Word) be used in their gatherings by those having that gift.*

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND: It seems that some believers in Corinth had elevated the “flashier” spiritual gifts—particularly speaking in tongues—as marks of being truly spiritual, while others felt sidelined or inferior. Paul addresses this disorder in chapters 11–14 by setting gifts in their proper place. In chapter 12, he reminds them that the Spirit gives a variety of gifts for the common good, and no member is unnecessary. In chapter 13, he shows that love is the “more excellent way,” the essential motive and measure of all ministry. And now, in chapter 14, Paul applies love directly to corporate worship, insisting that what matters most is not dazzling utterances but intelligible, Spirit-empowered speech that actually builds people up. Prophecy—*Spirit-given, understandable words that directly strengthen, encourage, and comfort*—edifies the church, while tongues, though Spirit-enabled, must be interpreted first. Paul is clear: *worship should exalt Christ and build up His body.*

1. Pursue Love; Prioritize Building Up of the Body (vv. 14:1–5)

- A. Love remains as the engine (v. 1a)
 - “Pursue love” links ch. 13 to ch. 14. Gifts without love misfire.
- B. Desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy (v. 1b)
 - The corporate aim is strengthening and encouraging spiritual maturity, so we ought to desire the gifts that build up the church most directly.
- C. Why prophecy is greater than uninterpreted tongues (vv. 2–5)
 - **Tongues (uninterpreted):** speaks to God, not men; “no one understands,” and it benefits the speaker.
 - **Prophecy:** intelligible; strengthens, encourages, and consoles the church
 - **Paul's balance:** “I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy” (v. 5). Tongues + interpretation can edify like prophecy; without interpretation, it can't.

2. Clarity Over Spectacle (vv. 14:6–12)

- A. The “So what?” test (v. 6)
 - If Paul visited but spoke in ways they couldn't understand, “What good would I be?” Spoken content must be understandable.
- B. Everyday analogies for intelligibility (vv. 7–9)
 - **Musical instruments:** sound must have distinct notes to form a melody.
 - **Battle trumpet:** unclear sound = no one prepares for battle.
 - **Speech:** “If speech is not intelligible, how will you know what is said?”
- C. Languages are meaningful—but only when understood (vv. 10–12)

- Many languages exist; if I don't understand, I'm a foreigner to the speaker. **Point:** “*Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church*” (v. 12).

3. Pray and Speak With Spirit and Mind (vv. 14:13–19)

- A. If you speak in a tongue, pray to interpret (v. 13)
 - The goal is that others understand and are edified.
- B. Spirit and mind together (vv. 14–15)
 - Pray/sing in the spirit *and* with the mind; Christian worship isn't mindless.
- C. Consider the outsider and the unlearned (vv. 16–17)
 - If you bless in a tongue, how can others say “Amen” if they don't understand? You may be “built up,” but they are not.
- D. Paul's personal example (vv. 18–19)
 - Paul speaks in tongues “more than all of you,” yet in church, he'd rather speak five intelligible words to instruct than “ten thousand” in a tongue.

APPLICATION:

- In corporate settings, prioritize what others can follow and affirm. It's good to desire gifts (v. 14:1), but desire the ones that best build others up.
- Our public worship must be intelligible (for believers and seekers present).
- Teachers and musicians: ask, *Will this help people understand, believe, and obey?* Cut fog. Explain terms. Aim for hearts through clear minds.
- Evaluate everything by: *Does it help people hear Christ and grow in Him?*

Understanding Prophecy and Tongues

1. What is Prophecy?

In the New Testament, prophecy is not mainly about predicting the future. It is Spirit-empowered speech that strengthens, encourages, and comforts God's people (1 Cor. 14:3). Today, this happens whenever God's truth is faithfully proclaimed and applied, especially through preaching and teaching His Word.

2. Tongues Are Not Normative for the Established Church Today

Tongues (speaking in a language unknown to the speaker) was a gift of the Spirit in the early church. But Paul makes clear it was never meant to be the primary marker of spirituality, nor was it given to every believer (1 Cor. 12:30). Even in Corinth, Paul downplayed tongues when compared to prophecy because tongues without interpretation did not strengthen others spiritually in Christ.

3. Tongues Are Most Often Foreign Languages

When we see tongues in Scripture (e.g., Acts 2), they are recognizable human languages unknown to the speaker but understood by others. This shows that tongues were not random syllables or ecstatic nonsense but Spirit-enabled speech with real meaning, pointing people to the mighty works of God.

✓ Why This Matters

God cares deeply about order, clarity, and faithfulness in worship. That's why He gave guidelines through Paul: *whatever is spoken must be intelligible and aligned with His revealed Word* (1 Cor. 14:6–12, 26–33). Spiritual gifts are never meant to confuse or distract, but to build up the church in truth and love.

Bottom Line: *The Holy Spirit doesn't bypass the mind—He speaks through God's Word.* Scripture is our safeguard, ensuring that what is said in the church truly comes from God and builds up His people.