

# Gifts Are for Service

## *1 Corinthians 14.1-25*

### Overview

It appears the Corinthian Christians were obsessed with the miraculous gifts of speech ... particularly the gift of tongues. Meanwhile, non-Christians who visited their assembly left frustrated and confused by the unintelligible display of words. Paul urges them to conduct themselves in a way that would build up the church rather than use them as a source of division and discouragement.

### The Bigger Picture

As we read 1 Corinthians 12-14, it is very important to keep the cultural and religious context in mind. The practice of emotional utterances was common in the Greco-Roman religious world. Pagan worshippers would often get drunk and dance themselves into a frenzy. These moments of ecstasy were thought to be the moments where one had the greatest form of communication with the divine. These occasions were also closely associated with sexual perversion. It appears that the Corinthians to some degree, were modeling their Christian assembly to the world around them. Emotionalism reigned. People paraded their gifts on display for everyone else to see. The worship service fell into chaos. Edification had fallen to the wayside.

### The Text

#### NLT

1 Corinthians 14:1–25 (NLT)

<sup>1</sup> Let love be your highest goal! But you should also desire the special abilities the Spirit gives—especially the ability to prophesy. <sup>2</sup> For if you have the ability to speak in tongues, you will be talking only to God, since people won't be able to understand you. You will be speaking by the power of the Spirit, but it will all be mysterious. <sup>3</sup> But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them. <sup>4</sup> A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally, but one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the entire church. <sup>5</sup> I wish you could all speak in tongues, but even more I wish you could all prophesy. For prophecy is greater than speaking in tongues, unless someone interprets what you are saying so that the whole church will be strengthened. <sup>6</sup> Dear brothers and sisters, if I should come to you speaking in an unknown language, how would that help you? But if I bring you a revelation or some special knowledge or prophecy or teaching, that will be helpful. <sup>7</sup> Even lifeless instruments like the flute or the harp must play the notes clearly, or no one will recognize the melody. <sup>8</sup> And if the bugler doesn't sound a clear call, how will the soldiers know they are being called to battle? <sup>9</sup> It's the same for you. If you speak to people in words they don't understand, how will they know what you are saying? You might as well be talking into empty space. <sup>10</sup> There are many different languages in the world, and every language has meaning. <sup>11</sup> But if I don't understand a language, I will be a foreigner to someone who speaks it, and

the one who speaks it will be a foreigner to me.<sup>12</sup> And the same is true for you. Since you are so eager to have the special abilities the Spirit gives, seek those that will strengthen the whole church.<sup>13</sup> So anyone who speaks in tongues should pray also for the ability to interpret what has been said.<sup>14</sup> For if I pray in tongues, my spirit is praying, but I don't understand what I am saying.<sup>15</sup> Well then, what shall I do? I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand. I will sing in the spirit, and I will also sing in words I understand.<sup>16</sup> For if you praise God only in the spirit, how can those who don't understand you praise God along with you? How can they join you in giving thanks when they don't understand what you are saying?<sup>17</sup> You will be giving thanks very well, but it won't strengthen the people who hear you.<sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you.<sup>19</sup> But in a church meeting I would rather speak five understandable words to help others than ten thousand words in an unknown language.<sup>20</sup> Dear brothers and sisters, don't be childish in your understanding of these things. Be innocent as babies when it comes to evil, but be mature in understanding matters of this kind.<sup>21</sup> It is written in the Scriptures: "I will speak to my own people through strange languages and through the lips of foreigners. But even then, they will not listen to me," says the Lord.<sup>22</sup> So you see that speaking in tongues is a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers. Prophecy, however, is for the benefit of believers, not unbelievers.<sup>23</sup> Even so, if unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your church meeting and hear everyone speaking in an unknown language, they will think you are crazy.<sup>24</sup> But if all of you are prophesying, and unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your meeting, they will be convicted of sin and judged by what you say.<sup>25</sup> As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God, declaring, "God is truly here among you."

## CSB

### 1 Corinthians 14:1–25 (CSB)

<sup>1</sup> Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup> For the person who speaks in a tongue is not speaking to people but to God, since no one understands him; he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. <sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the person who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement, and consolation. <sup>4</sup> The person who speaks in a tongue builds himself up, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. <sup>5</sup> I wish all of you spoke in tongues, but even more that you prophesied. The person who prophesies is greater than the person who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up. <sup>6</sup> So now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you with a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? <sup>7</sup> Even lifeless instruments that produce sounds—whether flute or harp—if they don't make a distinction in the notes, how will what is played on the flute or harp be recognized? <sup>8</sup> In fact, if the bugle makes an unclear sound, who will prepare for battle? <sup>9</sup> In the same way, unless you use your tongue for intelligible speech, how will what is spoken be known? For you will be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup> There are doubtless many different kinds of languages in the world, none is without meaning. <sup>11</sup> Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker will be a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup> So also you—since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, seek to excel in building up the church. <sup>13</sup> Therefore the person who speaks in a tongue should pray that he can interpret. <sup>14</sup> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> What then? I will pray with the spirit,

and I will also pray with my understanding. I will sing praise with the spirit, and I will also sing praise with my understanding. <sup>16</sup> Otherwise, if you praise with the spirit, how will the outsider say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? <sup>17</sup> For you may very well be giving thanks, but the other person is not being built up. <sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; <sup>19</sup> yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, in order to teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. <sup>20</sup> Brothers and sisters, don’t be childish in your thinking, but be infants in regard to evil and adult in your thinking. <sup>21</sup> It is written in the law, **I will speak to this people by people of other tongues and by the lips of foreigners, and even then, they will not listen to me**, says the Lord. <sup>22</sup> Speaking in tongues, then, is intended as a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. <sup>23</sup> If, therefore, the whole church assembles together and all are speaking in tongues and people who are outsiders or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your minds? <sup>24</sup> But if all are prophesying and some unbeliever or outsider comes in, he is convicted by all and is called to account by all. <sup>25</sup> The secrets of his heart will be revealed, and as a result he will fall facedown and worship God, proclaiming, “God is really among you.”

## Explore the Text

1. What were the Corinthians told to pursue? Why?
2. Why was the gift of prophecy something to be preferred over the gift of tongues?
3. Read the end of v. 3, 5, 12, and 17. What seems to be Paul’s primary concern for the members of the church?
4. Why was an interpreter so vital in accompanying tongue speaking?
5. What was the purpose of tongues? (v. 22)

## About the Text

After explaining the *more excellent* way, now Paul deals head on with the problem in Corinth. It appears tongue speaking inside the congregational assembly had come to resemble the common pagan practices of the day, where emotionalism and self-exhibition dominated. From the text we can gather that the worship service had devolved into chaos where every person wanted to display their gift simultaneously. Worship and the building up of others had been forgotten or discarded.

### I. 14.1-19: Prophecy is Greater than Tongues

- A. 14.1 – *Pursue* love. They were to chase after it with intensity. Their lack of love for each other was their greatest problem – and one could trace all the other problems addressed in the epistle to this.
  - i. *Desire* spiritual gifts. Being motivated by love, they should have desired these gifts with the thinking of how they could edify others. Their gifts were not for the purpose of show or public display ... but to be employed in spiritual service.
  - ii. The gift of prophecy should have been desired over tongues so that others could be strengthened, encouraged, and consoled. Spiritual gifts have a purpose and are intended for the benefit of believers and unbelievers.
  - iii. Tongue speakers were told not to speak unless they could interpret what they were saying, or if another person was present who could interpret. What good would they be if they could not be understood?
- B. 14.6-12 – Paul uses musical instruments as an illustration. For music to not be noise, it must fall within the parameters of rhythm, structure, and harmony. Likewise, if tongue speaking were offered without the communication being understood, of what benefit would it be? Language without meaning is meaningless.
  - 1. Tongues were given for the purpose of understanding ... either directly (think of the impact of tongues at Pentecost where many people of different nations heard Peter preaching in their own tongue), or indirectly through an interpreter.
- C. 14.13-19 – Tongue speaking stirred up the emotions ... not the mind. Edification cannot happen apart from the mind.

### II. 14.20-25 – The Purpose of Tongues.

- A. Paul calls for their maturity. Their lack of love and carnality were behind all their problems – including the way they were misusing their spiritual gifts.
  - i. They exalted emotion, feeling, and experience over truth, doctrine, and righteous living. If something seemed right, they did it.
  - ii. Tongues were given as a sign *to unbelievers*. Isaiah 28.11-12 is quoted. Tongues were especially for unbelieving Jews ... who even with this great power displayed would still not believe.
- B. Prophecy was given for believers so that they would have their minds stimulated for truth. The power to convict hearts and motivate people to participate with God in salvation/transformation is found in teaching/words spoken that make an impact on the heart.

## Reaction

1. With what type of effort should the Christian follow after love? Why is it so important?
2. Reading through this section, why do you think Paul mentions edification, building up, and strengthening so much? What can we learn and apply to our own time?
3. According to Isaiah 28.11-12, who were tongues specifically designed for?
4. What exactly was the gift of prophecy?
5. What exactly was the gift of tongues?

## For Today's Christian

**We must use our gifts to build up the church.** If you remember what Paul said in 12.11 (and Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4.10-11), every member of the church has been given a gift. These gifts could be in administration, organization, and leadership. Or they might consist of hospitality and counseling. Others are great at preaching and teaching. No gift is greater or more important than any other gift, 1 Corinthians 12.7. Each member and his or her particular gift is indispensable, 12.22. Building on the fact that spiritual gifts are for the common good – for the building up of the church – love should motivate us to move for the upbuilding of others. A gift has never been given for the purpose for tearing others down. We must strive to excel in building up the church, 14.12.

**The power of the gospel is clearly seen when we use our gifts as God intends.** In verses 24-25, Paul envisions a place and time where the chaos has ended and the gifts are being used as God designed. When we use our gifts properly, the result is the message of the gospel shining forth in a clear and unmistakable way. God's word is declared ... both to the unbeliever and believer ... and hearts are convicted and changed. Those present will come away proclaiming that God is truly among us. Our

purpose and importance is not that we have a particular gift ... or a prominent place in the church because of that gift, it is that those gifts are being employed in a skillful way to communicate the gospel so that others can see the reality of what Christ has done.

## **Journal**

What three things can you do in the coming weeks to use your spiritual gift to build someone else up in the church? Be specific.

## **For Further Study**

Read Ephesians 2.19-22. What does this passage teach us about the bigger picture of the church? Who is the cornerstone? How does this passage teach us about the relevance, importance, and connectedness we have with other members of the local church?