

11/2/25

God's Design for Tongues and Worship

1 Corinthians 14:20–28

Read: 1 Corinthians 14:20–28

Sermon Introduction

I asked John Marc to read from Ephesians 4:1–6 this morning because my desire is that we would all be reminded of the unity we share in Christ, and that we would be eager to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As elders, we regularly pray for that unity here at Cornerstone, and the Lord has been gracious to answer those prayers in many ways.

I mention this because we also recognize that 1 Corinthians 12–14 can bring up differing perspectives within the church. The topic of spiritual gifts (specifically whether or not certain gifts continue today) is one that has been debated among faithful believers.

Yet as elders, we have sought to humbly stand on what we believe the Word of God teaches. We do so not with self-righteousness or arrogance, but with humility, love, and an earnest desire to honor Christ and His Word.

That being said, wherever you personally land on this issue, my hope this morning is that as we look together at this passage, you will see that what unites us in Christ far outweighs what might differ between us.

We are one body, called to one hope, serving one Lord. My prayer is that we would all agree that God's Word is our final authority, and because of that, we can preserve the unity of Christ's church. Even when we disagree, may we still love one another, as we have been called to do (1 Corinthians).

Main Point: In 1 Corinthians 14:20–28, there are three assertions related to the gift of tongues that we must know so that we understand God's purpose for this gift and worship Him in the way He intends.

Outline:

I. The Purpose of the Gift of Tongues (20–22)

II. The Preeminence of the Gift of Prophecy (23–25)

III. The Procedure for God's Gathered People (26–28)

I. The Purpose of the Gift of Tongues (20–22)

This passage opens with a rebuke. Look at verse 20 **“Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.”**

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This is the third time Paul has addressed the theme of childishness and maturity (3:1; 13:11–12). He addresses them as **Brethren**, which is a reminder of his love and care for them. Then he instructs them to stop **thinking** like **children**.

Children are often ignorant, inexperienced, and self-centered. They have not lived long enough to gain a lot of wisdom or perspective, and by nature tend to think only of themselves.

Think of a toddler's reaction when you take away something dangerous (like a pair scissors) and they scream, "No! Mine!"

The Corinthians were immature in their thinking. They lacked understanding and perspective and had selfish attitudes. Because of their childish mindset, they valued the spectacular or miraculous over what was truly valuable and useful for the body.

Paul exhorts them to be innocent regarding **evil** but **mature** in their **thinking**. He wants them to think and act in ways consistent with the gospel. To value others above themselves and to understand that the purpose of spiritual gifts is to lovingly build up the church.

This rebuke then leads into an explanation of the purpose of the gift of tongues. Look at verse **21 "In the Law it is written, "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."**

The gift of **tongues** was the Holy Spirit empowered ability for a person to speak in a real, identifiable human language that was previously unknown and unlearned by the speaker. The content of such speech consisted of praise and thanksgiving to God (14:13–17), the proclamation of God's mighty works (Acts 2:11), and praise of His greatness (Acts 10:46).

The gift of **tongues** served three purposes. First, it confirmed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the arrival of the New Covenant (Acts 2:14–21). Second, when tongues were interpreted, they served a function similar to prophecy by edifying the church (14:5). Now the third purpose is what Paul explains here in our passage this morning.

Paul is quoting Isaiah 28:11–12 and making a point from this moment in Israel's history. This is an amazing chapter in the book of Isaiah. I know that Steven Schouten and Steve Mills have been teaching through the book of Isaiah on Tuesday mornings at the Men's Bible Study.

There are two aspects we find here. First, we need to see how Paul is directly using these verses from Isaiah to explain the purpose of the gift of tongues. Second, we are going to see an indirect implication of the gift of tongues.

A Sign of Unbelief

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As John Marc mentioned last week, Isaiah 28 opens with God's indictment of Ephraim (the northern kingdom of Israel). The leaders were characterized by pride and drunkenness (1–8). They scoffed at God's Word and rejected His message of repentance through Isaiah (9–10).

Because they refused to listen to God's clear and direct message in their own language, they would now "hear" God's message, through the foreign language of the Assyrians as they were taken into exile (11–12). The foreign language spoken before Israel was a sign of their unbelief and judgment.

This is the point that is made in Verse 22 **"So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe."**

A **sign** is often a technical term in Scripture used to describe a supernatural act or significant event that serves as a visible testimony from God. Think of the rainbow in the Noahic covenant (Genesis 9:13, 17), the plagues in Egypt (Exodus 7:3), Gideon's fleece (Judges 6:17), or the miraculous signs of Jesus' deity recorded in the Gospel of John (John 20:30–31).

Paul points out that the gift of tongues functioned as a **sign** to Israel of their unbelief. In a similar way that Israel's unbelief brought God's message through foreign languages in Isaiah's time; Now, Israel's unbelief in their Messiah brought the message through foreign languages in the gift of tongues in Paul's time.

A Sign of Grace

After warning Ephraim, God turns to Judah, the southern kingdom (14–15). He tells them not to make the same mistake by rejecting His warning and trusting in falsehood. Then, in verse 16, we have this glorious prophecy:

Isaiah 28:16 "Therefore thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed."

This prophecy in Isaiah 28 looks forward to Christ, the tested and costly Cornerstone. In the middle of the judgment of Israel for their unbelief, God promises salvation to all who look to Christ and believe in Him. While unbelieving Israel hears judgment through the gift of tongues, the gift of tongues also serves as the evidence of God's grace to the Gentiles!

Let this truth sink in. From the days of Abraham until the birth of the church in Acts 2, God's Word, His mighty deeds, His praises, and thanksgiving to His name, were primarily expressed through the Hebrew language. But at Pentecost, everything changed.

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The glories of God were now being declared in the languages of the nations. Formerly unbelieving, pagan Gentile tongues were redeemed and sanctified to proclaim the glory of the risen Christ. This was the unfolding of God's good and gracious plan of redemption in Christ.

The mercy and grace of God is seen in the truth that His salvation extends to every tribe, every nation, and every language.

Revelation 5:9–10 “And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; **FOR YOU WERE SLAIN, AND PURCHASED FOR GOD WITH YOUR BLOOD MEN FROM EVERY TRIBE AND TONGUE AND PEOPLE AND NATION.** ¹⁰ “You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

Revelation 7:9–10 “After these things I looked, and behold, **A GREAT MULTITUDE WHICH NO ONE COULD COUNT, FROM EVERY NATION AND ALL TRIBES AND PEOPLES AND TONGUES,** standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches *were* in their hands; ¹⁰ and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

Brothers and sisters, never take for granted the mercy that we, who are Gentiles by birth, have been graciously welcomed into God's family through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Knowing the purpose for something helps you to use it the way it was intended. I love working with my boys on home projects or on the car. As soon as I open my toolbox they eagerly reach in and start grabbing tools and trying to get to work.

One might grab a piece of sandpaper and start buffing the car paint. Another might take the drill and start trying to bore holes into the refrigerator. And another might grab a utility knife and head outside to trim the bushes with it.

When I'm doing projects with my boys, I really have three jobs. First, keep them alive. Second, keep them from destroying things. And third, teach them the purpose of each tool so they can use it properly and in a way that actually helps us accomplish our goal.

That's exactly the point Paul is making here. The Corinthians didn't understand God's purposes for the gift of tongues. They failed to see that it served as a sign of Israel's unbelief. They didn't understand that as incredible as it was that believers were given the ability to speak in previously unknown human languages that the gift needed to be used in a way that built up the church.

They were just fixated on the spectacular demonstration of a person being able to speak in a language they had never learned. For them just the display of the gift with no real benefit for

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anyone was enough. But Paul tells them that such thinking is childish. They needed to grow in maturity and view the gift as God intended.

Having explained the true purpose of tongues, Paul now moves on to show the practical implications, particularly the superiority of prophecy in edifying the body of Christ.

II. The Preeminence of the Gift of Prophecy (23–25)

Let's look at verse **23** **“Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?”**

The scene Paul describes is that of the entire church gathered for corporate worship. Somewhat like our Sunday morning worship services. Then he uses hyperbolic language (exaggerating for emphasis) to present this picture of everyone speaking in tongues at once. Each person at the gathering speaking different foreign languages all at the same time.

Then he mentions two kinds of individuals visiting, the **ungifted** and the **unbeliever**. These two terms refer to people outside the fellowship, people without knowledge or experience with the church. They are individuals who have not yet come to saving faith in Christ.

Now imagine that setting, someone comes to the corporate worship of the church and every believer speaking in different foreign languages all at once. Paul says the inevitable response of these visitors would be, “You are all out of your mind!”

The result of the chaos and confusion is rejection and unbelief. Paul is pointing out that when someone visits a church and sees this kind of activity that it doesn't adorn the gospel it actually hinders them from receiving and understanding the gospel.

I want to pause here and get a little personal with you.

First, if you're here this morning and you hold to a continuationist view (that is, you believe the gift of tongues and other miraculous sign gifts are still active in the church today) I want you to know that I don't stand in judgment over you.

The first church I ever served in was a Foursquare church, and I myself once held the continuationist view before studying the subject in depth. If you are a true believer in Christ, I love you as a brother or sister in the Lord, even though we disagree on this issue.

Here at Cornerstone, as we've said throughout our study of 1 Corinthians 12–14, we believe that the miraculous, revelatory, sign gifts ceased with the ministry of the apostles.

That doesn't mean God no longer does miraculous things. He is the God and He does all that He pleases in heaven and on earth. The miraculous still happens today because God still does incredible things to glorify Christ, advance the gospel, and bless His people.

But it does mean that we believe that the specific gifts of apostleship, prophecy, miracle working, healings, and tongues are no longer given by the Spirit to specific gifted individuals in the church today.

With that said, can we all humbly acknowledge something? While Paul's illustration here is hyperbolic, sadly, it's not far from what often happens in some charismatic gatherings today.

I remember being invited by a friend to a local “revival” where Ashley and I used to live. It was at a charismatic church whose leaders had recently traveled to Florida to receive a “blessing” from a man named Todd Bentley. He was an immoral false teacher in that movement.

What I witnessed that night was absolute chaos. Several people were shouting loudly in “tongues.” A pastor on the microphone was “prophesying” and declaring “healings” for things like back pain, migraines, upset stomachs, etc.

People were waving flags and running around the room. There was even a “Holy Spirit tunnel,” (think football game) where people ran through this tunnel the Holy Spirit would “burn off” the unsanctified parts of their lives.

You can imagine my reaction as a visitor, I thought “These people are out of their minds.” And yet, for that congregation, this was considered a normal night of revival.

I don't share that story to mock or belittle anyone. My heart truly breaks that things like that are done in the name of Christ and the gospel. I share it because that kind of behavior clearly contradicts what God's Word says here and in the verses that follow.

What saddens me most is that sometimes people seem more offended by the idea of cessationism than they are by practices like this in the charismatic/continuationist churches, even though that behavior blatantly goes against Scripture.

God's desire for His church is not chaos or confusion but clarity and the true power of the Spirit which comes through His Word. That's exactly what Paul goes on to emphasize in the next verses.

Look at verse **24–25 “But if all prophecy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.”**

In these verses, once again, the whole church is gathered together, but instead of everyone speaking in tongues, everyone is **prophesying**. This change has a radical impact on the outcome.

As John Marc mentioned last week, the gift of prophecy in Scripture can be both predictive (foretelling future events) and declarative (forth telling the Word of God). Here, Paul clearly has the declarative (or proclaiming) sense in view.

The truth of God, proclaimed and applied directly to the hearts of those listening, has a profound effect on the hearers. It not only edifies believers but, as this illustration shows, also powerfully impacts unbelievers.

In this hypothetical scenario, rather than accusations of the church being crazy, there is **conviction**. This occurs because, instead of everyone speaking in different foreign languages that no one can understand, the Word of God is being proclaimed clearly and intelligibly.

The visitor is confronted with the reality of their sin and becomes aware of their accountability before a holy God. The Word of God penetrates their heart and exposes what is hidden, revealing their thoughts and motives.

Hebrews 4:12–13 “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”

The subsequent result to all of this is that the visitor **falls on his face** in humble repentance and **worship**, confessing that **“God is certainly among you.”**

This is the powerful effect of the Word of God. When Scripture is proclaimed, the Spirit of God uses it to convict the conscience, reveal hidden sin within, produce faith, and bring people to humble and contrite worship of God.

This is what true spiritual power looks like. The Corinthians thought that the miraculous display of gift of tongues was the best evidence of a church with spiritual power.

But here Paul is showing them that the best evidence of spiritual power is the inward work of the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the living and active Word of God.

Brothers and sisters, be encouraged, the most spiritually powerful churches are the most Scripture saturated churches. Wherever the Word of God is clearly and accurately proclaimed and wherever it is humbly, faithfully and lovingly lived out, that is the place where you see the true spiritual power of the gospel. That is where you see the true power of the Holy Spirit.

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To that end... **Revelation 19:10** tells us that **“The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”** In other words, at the heart of all true prophecy, of all true proclamation of God’s Word, is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Everything in Scripture ultimately points to Him.

But if you are sitting there now and you don’t yet know Christ. You need to know that you are a sinner. You have rebelled against the God who made you. **Isaiah 53:6 “All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way.”** And Romans 6:23 tell us that what we all earn from God for our sin is death and eternal judgment.

The Scriptures reveal God’s merciful and gracious plan to save sinners through His Son. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, took on human flesh, lived a perfect and sinless life, and willingly went to the cross to bear the wrath of God that we deserved.

On that cross, He paid the full penalty for sin. Three days later, He rose from the grave, conquering sin and death, and now offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who repent and trust in Him.

If you are here this morning and do not yet know Christ, this is the message you need to hear. God’s Word calls you to turn from your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). He alone can reconcile you to God and give you a new heart that delights in His truth.

Christ and His Word are the foundation of our faith.

In these verses we find that the ministry of the Word of God is the foundation of the church. And this emphasis carries over into our last point for this morning.

III. The Procedure for God’s Gathered People (26–28)

Let’s look at verse **26 “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”**

Here Paul moves from correction to application. After clarifying the purpose of tongues and preeminence of prophecy, he now gives the procedures (or principles) that are to guide the worship of God’s gathered people.

Paul’s instruction here gives us a picture of the elements that should be present in the corporate worship. This list is not exhaustive, as other passages make clear that the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13), prayer (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 2:1), and the observance of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–26) are also essential parts of the church’s worship.

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The purpose in giving this brief list is to emphasize his central point that everything done when God's people gather must be done in a way that builds up the body of Christ. It should be able to enlighten and instruct the mind so that in turn it can shape and cultivate the heart.

Paul notes that singing praise through psalms, teaching, and other proclamations of God's truth through prophetic revelation and interpreted tongues were all part of the gathering. What is striking about this list is how thoroughly Word-centered it is.

The singing of psalms is the singing of God's Word, teaching is the explanation of God's Word, and prophetic revelation and interpreted tongues were likewise the communication of God's Word.

Clearly, the ministry of the Word was to be at the heart of the church's worship. There is something essential and irreplaceable about the Word of God being the central focus whenever God's people gather together.

This makes perfect sense because where the Scripture is sung, taught, explained, proclaimed, and applied, it has a building up effect. A key point Paul is making throughout this chapter is: **Let all things be done for edification.**

The word edification is a term related to construction. Yet, in almost every occurrence in the New Testament, whenever the word is used it speaks of building up of the mind through intelligible speech, through truthful instruction, through the Word of God.

Glance down at verse 27–28 **“If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.”**

Here Paul gives clearly gives the Holy Spirit's inspired instruction regarding the gift of tongues in the church. There is an orderliness and a structure to how the gift should be exercised. It wasn't supposed to be just a free for all. Two to three at most and each in the turn.

But notice Paul's main emphasis. He says **and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church.** This is huge because even if someone had the gift of tongues in that time in the church, they couldn't even exercise it in the church unless someone could interpret.

This places such a high emphasis again on the fact that true ministry must engage the mind. There must be right understanding. Some think that Paul's closing words in our passage give way to tongues as a private prayer language **and let him speak to himself and to God.**

But consider the context of the whole chapter. **1 Corinthians 14:13–15** says, **“Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my**

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spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ What is *the outcome* then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.”

And even further, if you go home and read this chapter, underline and highlight how many times Paul expresses the ideas of understanding, on things being known, on clarity, on meaning, on thinking, on learning, on edification (7x), and on the mind (5x).

You will see that the main emphasis throughout the entire context is that things spoken must be understood, they must be profitable, they must have a benefit to ones thinking in order to have power to transform their life. The idea that God bypasses our minds in order to minister to transform our hearts and souls is foreign to Scripture.

Romans 12:2 “And do not be conformed to this world, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Ephesians 4:22–24 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, ²³ AND THAT YOU BE RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND, ²⁴ and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

In love, I would gently admonish anyone here this morning that claims to have the gift of tongues and exercise it as a private prayer language, do you hear the emphasis God’s Word puts on the need to understand things that we speak?

In summary, the procedure for God’s gathered people is that there would be purposeful orderly edification centered on God’s Word. Every song, every teaching, every act of service should aim at the building up of Christ’s church for the glory of God. True spiritual worship is measured by how clearly it exalts Christ and strengthens His people.

This morning we have seen: The Purpose of the Gift of Tongues (20–22), The Preeminence of the Gift of Prophecy (23–25), and The Procedure for God’s Gathered People (26–28) my hope is that we understand God’s purpose for this gift and worship Him in the way He intends.

Let’s pray.

Benediction: 2 Corinthians 13:14 “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”

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