

The Gifts: Part 2

Play “Jesus Loves Me”

Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and above all that you may prophesy. ² For the person who speaks in another language is not speaking to men but to God, since no one understands him; however, he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. ³ But the person who prophesies speaks to people for edification, encouragement, and consolation. ⁴ The person who speaks in another language builds himself up, but he who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ I wish all of you spoke in other languages, but even more that you prophesied. The person who prophesies is greater than the person who speaks in languages, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up.

⁶ But now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in other languages, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you with a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? ⁷ Even inanimate things 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? ⁸ In fact, if the trumpet makes an unclear sound, who will prepare for battle? ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ There are doubtless many different kinds of languages in the world, and all have meaning. ¹¹ 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. ¹² So also you—since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, seek to excel in building up the church.

¹³ Therefore the person who speaks in another language should pray that he can interpret. ¹⁴ For if I pray in another language, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. ¹⁵ What then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with my understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with my understanding. ¹⁶ Otherwise, if you praise with the spirit, how will the uninformed person say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ For you may very well be giving thanks, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in other languages more than all of you; ¹⁹ yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, in order to teach others also, than 10,000 words in another language.

²⁰ Brothers, don’t be childish in your thinking, but be infants in regard to evil and adult in your thinking. ²¹ It is written in the law:

**I will speak to these people
by people of other languages
and by the lips of foreigners,
and even then, they will not listen to Me, ^d**

says the Lord. ²² It follows that speaking in other languages is intended as a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers. But prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³ Therefore, if the whole church assembles together and all are speaking in other languages and people who are uninformed or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴ But if all are prophesying and some unbeliever or uninformed person comes in, he is convicted by all and is judged by all. ²⁵ 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.” 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Background:

The church didn't sit there with Bibles in their laps... The New Testament was being written and the Old Testament scrolls were expensive and not available to most believers. (Wiersbe)

Let's talk about these gifts...

Tongues –

- Known (earthly) language
 - When Paul spoke in Chapter 13 “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love...” He was speaking in hyperbole.
 - No example of someone miraculously speaking in an “heavenly” tongue is recorded in scripture.
 - But God did use earthly, “foreign” tongues to teach His people. (
 - V. 21 is referring to that in Isaiah where God would use the Babylonian empire to teach the Israelites a lesson.
 - Acts 2 at Pentecost is another example of KNOWN languages being used for God's purpose.
 - Once Peter had their attention he spoke in Aramaic a KNOWN language by all of them.
 - *There are doubtless many different kinds of languages in the world, and all have meaning. ¹¹ 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. V.10-11*
 - Seems to affirm that Paul is referring to “tongues” as a KNOWN earthly language.
- What was the purpose of Tongues?
 - God would use it to get people's attention
 - At Pentecost (Acts 2) they spoke in KNOWN languages so the people from those different regions could clearly understand the Gospel & see that these “Galileans” were speaking in their tongue & listen to the message!
- It only works when there is an interpreter (v.28)
 - EXAMPLE: Me speaking in GREEK right now, what this passage was written in, wouldn't do any of us any good. Can't understand it! 😊

- It edified only the person speaking...
 - *"The person who speaks in another language builds himself up, but he who prophesies builds up the church."* V. 4

Prophecy –

The purpose of prophecy was to build up the Saints & point people to Christ.

But if all are prophesying and some unbeliever or uninformed person comes in, he is convicted by all and is judged by all. ²⁵ 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." V. 24-25

- Prophecy, in this case, is not the foretelling of the future but a forthtelling (proclaiming) of the Word!

Spiritual Gifts are for others, not for ourselves.

The Promotion of SELF

- It was all about me.
 - I can speak in tongues...
 - I can eat whatever food I choose to, no matter how it affects you...
 - I can have sex with whomever I want...
 - I gave money to the church so therefore you should listen to me & do as I say...
 - Just kidding, if that was happening in the church in Corinth Paul didn't mention it in this letter.
- But even today a SERVE ME mentality can still permeate churches.
 - I have heard it called a **Country Club Church**.
 - I give money, I have paid my "dues" so serve me...
 - That's the exact opposite of what Paul is getting at here.

- Our church's Mission statement (the reason we believe we exist)...
 - We at FSBC desire to make disciples who Love God, Love Others, & Serve All.

- My spiritual gift of TEACHING/PREACHING...
 - Not for personal gain
 - But to build up & equip the church (that's you.)
 - So I take seriously my responsibility to teach in such a way that is understandable & applicable to everyday life.
 - When I do a good job, God gets the glory!
 - When I don't, that's my fault. 😊

Spiritual Gifts are for others, not for ourselves.

- What are your Spiritual Gifts?
- What passion has God given you that allow you to Serve Others with?
- There are many wonderful examples of people of faith in the Scriptures but one of the things I find most compelling is the HONESTY that it has. What I mean is the character FLAWS that are pointed out in the people.
 - The people in Corinth had some major flaws.

Are you here to serve others or here for yourself?

- The filling up of our spiritual lives needs to happen during the week
- The Over-flow happens here on Sunday where we love & encourage others!

The world already has enough people in it for themselves. As Believer's we need to be pointing out a different way. The Way of the Lord.

Spiritual Gifts are for others, not for ourselves.

Edification (1 Cor. 14:1–5, 26b)

This was one of Paul's favorite words, borrowed, of course, from architecture. *To edify* means "to build up." This concept is not alien to the "body" image of the church; even today, we speak about "bodybuilding exercises." There is an overlapping of images here, for the body of Christ is also the temple of the living God. Paul's choice of the word *edify* was a wise one.

The mistake the Corinthians were making was to emphasize their own personal edification to the neglect of the church. They wanted to build themselves up, but they did not want to build up their fellow believers. This attitude, of course, not only hurt the other Christians, but it also hurt the believers who were practicing it. After all, if we are all members of the same body, the way we relate to the other members must ultimately affect us personally. "The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee" (1 Cor. 12:21). If one member of the body is weak or infected, it will affect the other members.

Paul detected that the church was neglecting prophecy and giving a wrong emphasis to tongues. We must not think of a New Testament prophet as a person who foretold the future, for even the Old Testament prophets did more than that. Prophets received God's message immediately, through the Holy Spirit, and communicated that message to the church, usually in a tongue, but not always. Prophecy was not the same as our modern-day "preaching," because today's preachers study the Bible and prepare their messages. No preacher today should claim that he has immediate inspiration from God.

Paul explained the supreme value of prophecy over tongues by contrasting the two gifts.

Prophecy speaks to men, tongues to God (vv. 1–3). "If you are zealous for spiritual gifts, at least desire the best gifts," was Paul's counsel. **Prophecy was best because it built up the church. It gave the listeners encouragement and comfort—something that everybody needs.**

It is unfortunate that our translators inserted *unknown* in 1 Corinthians 14:2, because the New Testament knows nothing of an "unknown tongue." From the very beginning of the church, tongues were *known* languages, recognized by the listeners (Acts 2:4, 6, 8, 11). The tongue would be unknown *to the speaker* and to the listeners, but it was not unknown in the world (1 Cor. 14:10–11, 21).

It is also unfortunate that people have the idea that tongues were used to preach the Gospel to the lost. Quite the contrary was true: Paul was afraid that the excessive tongues-speaking in the church would convince the lost that the Christians were crazy! (1 Cor. 14:23) At Pentecost, the believers extolled "the wonderful works of God," but Peter preached the Gospel in the Aramaic language his listeners could all understand.

The believer who speaks in a tongue speaks to God in praise and worship; but the believer who prophesies shares the Word with the church and helps those who listen. This leads to the second contrast.

Prophecy edifies the church, tongues edify only the speaker (vv. 4–5). Paul did not deny the value of tongues to the speaker, but he did place a greater value on building up the church. "Greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues" (1 Cor. 14:5). Unless the tongues are interpreted (1 Cor. 12:10, 30), the message can do the church no good. Paul pointed out that an interpreter must be present before the gift of tongues may be exercised (1 Cor. 14:28).

Keep in mind that the members of the Corinthian church did not sit in the services with Bibles on their laps. **The New Testament was being written and the Old Testament scrolls were expensive and not available to most believers. God spoke to His people directly through the prophets, and the message was sometimes given in a tongue. The three gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues worked together to convey truth to the people (1 Cor. 13:1–2, 8–11).**

Paul emphasized the importance of doctrinal teaching in the church. Our worship must be based on truth, or it may become superstitious emotionalism. Christians need to know what they believe and why they believe it. The prophet shared truth with the church, and thereby edified the assembly. The person speaking in tongues (unless there is an interpreter) is enjoying his worship of God, but he is not edifying the church.

In my own ministry, I have shared in many local church services and conferences, and I have always tried to communicate biblical truth to the people. Sometimes the music has not been edifying, and at other times, the music communicated the Word of God in a powerful way. Whenever all of us as ministers have aimed at edification, and not entertainment, God has blessed and the people have been helped. A ministry that does not build up will tear down, no matter how “spiritual” it may seem. When we explain and apply the Word of God to individual lives, we have a ministry of edification.

Understanding (1 Cor. 14:6–25)

Eight times in this section, Paul used the word *understanding*. It is not enough for the minister to impart information to people; the people must *receive* it if it is to do them any good. The seed that is received in the good ground is the seed that bears fruit, but this means that there must be an *understanding* of the Word of God (Matt. 13:23). If a believer wants to be edified, he must prepare his heart to receive the Word (1 Thes. 2:13). Not everybody who *listens* really *hears*.

The famous Congregationalist minister, Dr. Joseph Parker, preached at an important meeting and afterward was approached by a man who pointed out an error in the sermon. Parker listened patiently to the man’s criticism, and then asked, “And what *else* did you get from the message?” This remark simply withered the critic, who then disappeared into the crowd. Too often we are quick to judge the sermon instead of allowing the Word of God to judge us.

Illustration (vv. 6–11). Paul used three simple illustrations to prove his point that there must be understanding if there is to be an edifying spiritual ministry: musical instruments, a bugle call in battle, and daily conversation.

If a musical instrument does not give a clear and distinct sound, nobody will recognize the music being played. Everyone knows how uncomfortable one feels when a performer *almost* plays the right note because the instrument is defective or out of tune. Large pipe organs must be constantly serviced lest their reeds fail to perform properly. I was in a church service one evening during which the organ pitch gradually changed because of atmospheric conditions, and by the close of the service, the organ could not be played with the piano because of the radical change that had occurred.

If the bugler is not sure whether he is calling “Retreat!” or “Charge!” you can be sure none of the soldiers will know what to do either. Half of them will rush forward, while the other half will run back! The call must be a clear one if it is to be understood.

But this fact is also true in everyday conversation. I recall the first time my wife and I visited Great Britain and were confronted with the variety of local dialects there. We asked directions of a friendly gentleman in London and, quite frankly, could understand very little of what he said. (Perhaps he had a difficult time understanding us!)

First Corinthians 14:10 gives us good reason to believe that, when Paul wrote about tongues, he was referring to known languages and not some “heavenly” language. Each language is different and yet each language has its own meaning. No matter how sincere a speaker may be, if I do not understand his language, he cannot communicate with me. To the Greeks, a *barbarian*

was the lowest person on the social or national ladder. In fact, anybody who was not a Greek was considered a barbarian.

The musician, the bugler, and the everyday conversationalist cannot be understood unless their messages are communicated in a manner that is meaningful to the listener. Having illustrated the principle of understanding, Paul then applied it to three different persons.

Application (vv. 12–25). Paul first applied the principle of understanding to the speaker himself (1 Cor. 14:12–15). Again, **he reminded the Corinthians that it is better to be a blessing to the church than to experience some kind of personal “spiritual excitement.”** If the believer speaks in a tongue, his spirit (inner person) may share in the experience, but his mind is not a part of the experience. It is not wrong to pray or sing “in the spirit,” but it is better to include the mind and understand what you are praying or singing. (Note that the word *spirit* in 1 Cor. 14:14–15 does not refer to the Holy Spirit, but to the inner person, as in 1 Cor. 2:11.) If the speaker is to be edified, he must understand what he is saying.

What, then, is the speaker to do? He must ask God for the interpretation of the message. Paul assumed that an interpreter would be present (1 Cor. 14:27–28) or that the speaker himself had the gift of interpreting. Of course, all of this discussion emphasized once again the superiority of prophecy over tongues: **prophecy needs no interpretation and can therefore be a blessing to everybody.**

Paul then applied the principle to other believers in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:16–20). He assumed that they would listen to the message and respond to it. But if they did not understand the message, how could they respond? (Apparently, saying *Amen!* in church was not frowned on in those days.) The “unlearned” person was probably a new believer, or possibly an interested “seeker.” He could not be edified unless he understood what was being said.

Again, it was a matter of priorities. While Paul did not oppose the ministry of tongues, he did try to put it into a right perspective. **The issue was not quantity of words, but quality of communication.** The Corinthians were acting like children playing with toys. When it came to knowing about sin, Paul wanted them to be “babes”; but when it came to spiritual understanding, he wanted them to be mature men (1 Cor. 3:1–4; 13:11–13).

Some people have the idea that speaking in a tongue is an evidence of spiritual maturity, but Paul taught that it is possible to exercise the gift in an unspiritual and immature manner.

Paul’s final application was to the unsaved person who happened to come into the assembly during a time of worship (1 Cor. 14:21–25). Paul made here another point for the superiority of prophecy over tongues: a message in tongues (unless interpreted) could never bring conviction to the heart of a lost sinner. In fact, the unsaved person might leave the service before the interpretation was given, thinking that the whole assembly was crazy. Tongues were not used for evangelism, neither at Pentecost nor in the meetings of the early church.

However, tongues did have a “message” for the lost Jews in particular: they were a sign of God’s judgment. Paul quoted Isaiah 28:11–12, a reference to the invading Assyrian army whose “barbaric” language the Jews would not understand. The presence of this “tongue” was evidence of God’s judgment on the nation. God would rather speak to His people in clear language they could understand, but their repeated sins made this impossible. He *had* spoken to them through His messengers in their own tongue, and the nation would not repent. Now He had to speak in a foreign tongue, and this meant judgment.

As a nation, the Jews were always seeking a sign (Matt. 12:38; 1 Cor. 1:22). At Pentecost, the fact that the Apostles spoke in tongues was a sign to the unbelieving Jews who were there celebrating the feast. **The miracle of tongues aroused their interest, but it did not convict their**

hearts. It took Peter's preaching (in Aramaic, which the people all understood) to bring them to the place of conviction and conversion.

The principle of *edification* encourages us to major on sharing the Word of God so that the church will be strengthened and grow. The principle of *understanding* reminds us that what we share must be understood if it is to do any good. The private use of spiritual gifts may edify the user, but it will not edify the church; and Paul admonished us to “excel to the edifying of the church” (1 Cor. 14:12).

But a third principle must be applied: the principle of order.¹

The effect of prophecy (14:1–5)

Within the broad understanding of prophecy sketched earlier, we have here three helpful words (3) about the results which this gift will bring in the local church when it is properly used: *upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*. Given Paul's concern for the church to be *built up* in the Lord, it is not surprising that he mentions this function first: any purported word of prophecy which undermines or shakes the faith of others is to be rejected. This is a major reason why prophecy must always be received in the fellowship of God's people, not in private conversation. There is a large amount of alleged prophecy which is nothing more than another, rather spiritualized, way of one person manipulating or exercising influence over another. Such tendencies can be checked only as the gift of prophecy is encouraged in the gathered life of God's people. The gift is, in any case, intended for the edification of the whole church, not so much of an individual Christian. What is called by many today ‘personal prophecy’ is highly suspect on these—and other—grounds.

The second word is *encouragement* (*paraklēsis*), the same root as the word used in John to describe the Holy Spirit as Paraclete, Advocate, Counsellor. It literally means ‘to be called in alongside’ to assist and support. The ministry of prophecy has this function, as the Holy Spirit inspires a Christian to speak words which give strength to the life and witness of the local church, perhaps particularly to its witness, because the delight of the Spirit is to enable the church to bear consistent and convincing witness to Jesus as Lord.

Paul's third word to describe how a true word of prophecy will help the church is *consolation* (*paramythia*). This has the sense of whispering in the church's ear, probably in the sense of allaying fear and enabling God's people to be calm under pressure. ‘Consolation ... calms the storms of fear, anxiety and despair. It helps us rest in the presence of Jesus.... It leads us away from the hectic bustle of daily affairs, away from the restlessness of this life, into the great peace of God.’ The regular motif both of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus, the great prophet, is ‘do not fear ...’.

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [The Bible exposition commentary](#) (Vol. 1, pp. 612–614). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

If this is something of the impact prophecy can have on the church, it is no wonder that Paul wants every Christian to desire such a gift.

3. The incompleteness of tongues (14:6–25)

Paul has indicated (5) that, within the sovereign economy of the Lord who distributes gifts as *he* chooses, he (Paul) would like every Christian at Corinth to speak in tongues (for personal edification) and to prophesy (for the edification of the church). At this stage, at any rate, he is far more concerned for the corporate than for the individual, and so he proceeds to underline the limitations of speaking in tongues as far as the building-up of the church is concerned. Paul spells out three major limitations in speaking with tongues: in intelligibility, personal wholeness and impact on outsiders.

a. Limitations in intelligibility (6–11, 16–17, 23). Quite simply, anyone within earshot finds speaking in tongues to be gibberish. Indeed, there is no intelligible content to the speaker. In verse 11, Paul talks of the reaction of those present as being like the relationship between Greeks and barbarians (RSV *foreigner; barbaros*). Greeks were very proud of the beauty of their language and regarded every other language as boorish and grating. To them these languages sounded like a heavy ‘bar-bar-bar’ noise: hence the word ‘barbarian’.

Speaking in tongues may often have a pleasant ring to it, although the phenomenon *per se* does not always sound attractive. Where the life of a local church is concerned, Paul’s central criterion is: can it be understood, by fellow believers, by ‘fringe’ people and by outsiders? If it is unintelligible, it should be restrained. The ministry of the Spirit brings harmony (7) and equips God’s people for spiritual battle (8). Both matters cannot be ‘fudged’, and therefore it is crucial to channel enthusiasm for spiritual gifts in constructive directions: let the innate zeal of the Corinthian Christians be harnessed into *building up the church* (12).

The positive way forward for the person who speaks in tongues, and wants that gift to be used to build up the church, is to *pray for the power to interpret* (13). Paul seems to have no compunctions about the same person being gifted by the Spirit, first to speak in a tongue, and immediately to bring an interpretation of God’s response. When it happens in a gathering of local Christians, we can instinctively feel uneasy, as if some hoodwinking or artificiality is being foisted upon us. Paul’s position is a healthy corrective to such scepticism.

At the same time, Paul insists on the need to avoid the situation where anyone in range of the church at worship feels left out or lost. He seems to include both those uninitiated into the ins and outs of tongues (16), and those being instructed in or enquiring about Christian commitment (23). For this reason Paul has made it his firm resolve to expect the Spirit to use him in ministry to the church along lines which contain something more solid and easy to grasp, whether by *some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching* (6). In one of these ways he will genuinely *benefit* the church, however much (*i.e.* in private prayers) he speaks in tongues (18).

b. Limitations in personal wholeness (13–17, 19–20). Paul has stressed the personal benefits accruing to the Christian who speaks in tongues in his individual prayer-life (4). It has been suggested that these benefits have to do with ‘the constructive building-up of the personality’. Morton Kelsey, who, as a theologian and psychotherapist, has written extensively on the subject, says: ‘There are people who without this experience would never have been able to come to psychological maturity. The experience of speaking in tongues opened them up to the unconscious and to a fuller, though more difficult, life.’ Kelsey quotes a linguist with psychological training who writes: ‘Speaking with tongues is one evidence of the Spirit of God working in the

unconscious and bringing one to a new wholeness, a new integration of the total psyche, a process which the church has traditionally called sanctification.²⁵

In the distinctly emotional and enthusiastic atmosphere of the church at Corinth, with strong influences still hanging over from unregenerate experiences in the mystery-religions, the theme of wholeness needed to be tackled from a different angle. The Corinthian tendency was not to be over-cerebral, but to devalue the importance of the mind. Paul is concerned, therefore, to stress manifestations of the Spirit which do not bypass the mind. Speaking in tongues has real benefit for the individual, but his *mind is unfruitful* (4). Paul wants the Christians at Corinth to be *mature* in their *thinking* (20): that requires exercising their minds through the Spirit to the full extent of their abilities. He mentions five areas of Christian living where this needs to be done: in prayer (15), in singing (15), in thanksgiving (16–17), in catechesis (or ‘instruction’, 19) and in thinking (20).

The Christian who does not allow the Spirit to stretch and renew his mind in these five ways is resisting the work of God in sanctification, in wholeness. There were many believers at Corinth whose experience of the Spirit was confined to manifestations which bypassed the mind entirely. Paul expresses his own firm resolve to pray, sing and give thanks *with the spirit and ... with the mind also* (15). He is so concerned to build up the church, that he would far rather use a few intelligible, wise words to instruct Christians in the faith, than *ten thousand words in a tongue* (19).

On the other hand, the imbalances of the Christians at Corinth led Paul to stress a proper balance between the rational and the non-rational, not to place one over against the other. The plea for maturity in verse 20 seems to hark back to the strong remarks about immaturity at Corinth made towards the beginning of the letter.

c. Limitations in impact on outsiders (16–17, 21–25). Paul has one eye all the time on the way Christian worship affects *any one in the position of an outsider* (16). He obviously expects, not merely that such people will normally be present on such an occasion, but that they will come under conviction by the Spirit’s manifest presence in the midst. Both expectations constitute a challenge to our church life today. Are outsiders present? Do they meet the Lord?

The precise identity of these outsiders is difficult to discover. Two Greek words are used: *idiōtēs* and *apistos* (23). The first word (from which we get the word ‘idiot’) refers to someone who is not part of the group under consideration: for example, it is used of ‘laymen over against priests, private citizens over against those in public life ... , “privates” over against officers’. Some commentators believe that Paul is using the word to describe those not accustomed to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, either in pagan cults or in the Christian church. The most likely explanation of *idiōtēs* is the one given by Morris. Paul uses a rather cumbersome phrase in verse 16, ‘one who fills the place of the *idiōtēs*’, ‘which indicates that [these people] had their place in the Christian assembly. They would be “inquirers”, people who had not committed themselves to Christianity, but who were interested. They had ceased to be simply outsiders, but were not yet Christians.’ Any church with an evangelistic cutting-edge into the local community has people of this kind in its gatherings for worship. They are not yet believers; indeed, they are still ‘unbelievers’. But they are on the verge of commitment. Nothing should be done, especially in a spirit of self-indulgence by a few enthusiastic Christians, to drive them back into an unbelief from which it will then be far more difficult to extricate them.

This sheds light on the apparent contradictions in verses 21–25, where Paul seems unable to decide whether speaking in tongues is intended for believers or unbelievers. Everything he has written so far has stressed that tongues are not simply for Christians, but for Christians in their private devotions—not to be used in public worship except with interpretation. In verse 22, he declares that *tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers*. The text (21) from Isaiah

28:11–12 (and even more the wider context in Isaiah 28 as a whole) indicates what kind of ‘sign’ Paul has in mind. Both there and in verse 23, he is showing that the impact on those without a living faith in God of speaking in unintelligible tongues is to confirm them in their unbelief. The very fact of unintelligibility feeds their unregenerate minds and stubborn wills; they conclude that Christians are *mad* and have nothing new or true to offer.

The Greek words translated *you are mad* (23) do not mean fit for the asylum, but under the influence of some spiritual force on a par with those active in the mystery-cults. In the Corinthian context, Paul means that the net result of believers all speaking in tongues in a time of worship is that the very people they are keen to win become convinced that Christianity is like any other mystery-religion, into which they have to be properly initiated if they want to belong. They have not been initiated into the secret vocabulary and practices; therefore they leave. We find ourselves wondering how many modern inquirers find similar habits equally off-putting in our own churches.

This tragedy is all the more poignant when the positive alternative is studied. Paul describes what can and does happen when believers are sensitive to God’s Spirit, to one another, to apostolic teaching, to interested observers, and even to total unbelievers. The gift of prophecy, which is an unmistakable sign to all believers (22) of the Lord’s personal commitment to his church, makes plain to everybody present that the Lord is in the midst of his people. The inevitable impact, on outsiders and unbelievers, of the reality of God’s presence is that their conscience is stabbed awake and their true spiritual state is laid bare: ‘The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.’³¹ As God speaks with the immediacy of prophetic words, then ‘all are open and laid bare’—believers, outsiders, unbelievers. That is why Paul looks to everyone to be used as a vehicle for God to speak in prophecy.

The quotation from Zechariah in verse 25, *he will ... declare that God is really among you*, emphasizes Paul’s conviction that the gift of prophecy is one of the chief hallmarks of the new covenant, because the relevant passage in Zechariah looks forward to the time when ‘ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”’ In cosmopolitan Corinth, Jews and varied Gentiles had formed a new assembly of God’s people, made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. When the gift of prophecy was in full flow in such an assembly, the Zechariah vision became reality.²

IN CHAPTER 14 Paul climaxes his discussion of spiritual gifts by encouraging the Corinthians to prefer prophecy to tongues. But he acknowledges a place for both, and for the other gifts, if they are made intelligible (vv. 1–25) and exercised in an orderly fashion (vv. 26–40). Verses 1–25 fall into an ABBA pattern. Verses 1–6 supply reasons for preferring prophecy, verses 6–12 outline

² Prior, D. (1985). [*The message of 1 Corinthians: life in the local church*](#) (pp. 243–249). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

some of the problems with tongues, verses 13–19 address a solution to those problems, and verses 20–25 return to reasons for preferring prophecy.

Verse 1 resumes the thread of 12:31, picking up the two themes of that verse (love and desiring the greater gifts) in reverse order. Paul now specifies one of those “greater” gifts, namely, prophecy. Verse 2 makes it reasonably certain that the misuse of tongues was one of the Corinthians’ major problems in the exercise of their spiritual gifts during worship. Apparently they were manifesting glossolalia without interpretation. Verse 5b demonstrates that all of verses 2–5a must be understood as Paul’s criticisms of tongues *when they are not interpreted*. When they *are* interpreted, they, like prophecy, contain a fundamentally instructional and exhortational component (vv. 3, 4b, 5b). For more on the nature of prophecy and tongues, see the discussions under 12:8–10 and 27–31 (pp. 244–45, 247 above).

“Mysteries” (v. 2) simply refer to that which “no one understands.” Grammatically, the NIV footnote (“by the Spirit”) is somewhat more likely than the text (“with his spirit”), since there is no word in Greek corresponding to “his.”

Unlike uninterpreted tongues, prophecy edifies the whole assembly, not just the individual speaker (vv. 3–4). Paul thus isolates two reasons why prophecy is greater: people, not just God, are addressed, and they can be more positively affected. Verse 5 does not contradict 12:30. Paul is not clandestinely commanding all the Corinthians to seek tongues, merely admitting that it would be nice if all could speak in them. But given their abuse, he is “dramatically contrasting the importance of seeking gifts which are better suited to edification (like prophecy)” with “those which are more dramatic but less edifying (like tongues).”

Verse 6 presents the thesis of the next paragraph (vv. 6–12), repeating the need for intelligibility. The four elements of verse 6b (“revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction”) all share this attribute, as over against uninterpreted tongues. “Word of instruction” is literally “teaching,” so it seems that Paul is lumping more and less miraculous gifts together here to stress the importance of clear communication.

Verses 7–11 then give three illustrations of this principle. In order to be understood or appreciated, musical instruments must play a discernible melody (v. 7). Trumpet calls to battle must be clear enough for soldiers to distinguish “Advance!” from “Retreat!” (v. 8). And foreign languages remain unintelligible to those who have not learned them (vv. 9–11). “Foreigner” in verse 11 is *barbaros* (from which we get “barbarian”), originally a scornful term for someone who was not a Greek or Roman, and it may carry a pejorative connotation here too.

Verse 12 concludes by repeating the point with which the first paragraph of this chapter ended (v. 5). The NIV misleads us here; “Excel in gifts that build up the church” reads as if some gifts do not build up the church! But the Greek merely says, “Seek that you abound towards the edification of the church.”

So what must a person do if God *has* given him or her the gift of tongues? Verses 13–19 address this problem. Verse 13 applies to this situation the encouragement of 12:31 on seeking certain gifts. The tongues speaker should pray for the ability to interpret his or her tongue. Verses 14–15 show that receiving the gift of interpretation benefits oneself first of all. Without it, the tongues-speaker has no way of personally knowing the meaning of the message he or she has just uttered (v. 14). Praying with one’s spirit versus praying with one’s mind (v. 15a) is probably equivalent to the distinction in verses 13–14 of speaking in tongues versus interpretation. Tongues and their interpretation might also come in song form too (v. 15b). It is also possible that praying and singing “with my mind” include more ordinary worship as well.

In verses 16–17, Paul turns to the effect on others present. Again, interpretation is crucial if the rest of the congregation is to be able to agree. “Amen” (v. 16) is a Hebrew interjection roughly equivalent to “this is most certainly true.” “Those who do not understand” translates one Greek word that refers to someone who is not an expert or not initiated into a given sphere of activity; hence, the alternate translation in the NIV footnote (“inquirer”). In some pagan circles, such a person was a “catechumen,” one being instructed in a given religion or philosophy prior to fully committing to it. But in this context, the NIV text makes more sense (cf. the REB’s “ordinary person”). Even mature Christians play the role of the uninitiated when they hear uninterpreted tongues. They have no idea what the message means.

Verses 18–19 probably surprised Paul’s original readers, who may even have been criticizing him for not using glossolalia. If Paul refrains almost entirely from its public exercise, these verses surely substantiate his extensive private use of tongues as a “prayer language.” “Intelligible” (v. 19) is more literally “with my mind.” “Ten thousand” could also be translated “a myriad”; 5/10,000 does not represent a precise ratio! In verse 27 Paul certainly permits a few tongues in each service, which shows that he doesn’t expect every one to refrain quite as much as he does.

Verse 20 forms the transition to the last paragraph of this first section of chapter 14. A preoccupation with tongues without concern for their effect on oneself and others is childish. There are ways Christians should be childlike (e.g., being innocent of evil—cf. Matt. 10:16) but not in their use of spiritual gifts. Mature faith never stresses the noncognitive at the expense of the cognitive. “Thinking” translates a word (*phren*) which means “the psychological faculty of thoughtful planning, often with the implication of being wise and provident.”

Verses 21–25 proceed further to justify Paul’s appeal to prefer prophecy to tongues. Paul begins by citing parts of Isaiah 28:11–12, a passage in which God pronounces judgment against rebellious Israel at the hands of the foreign empire of Assyria (v. 21). The verses that bracket this quotation in Isaiah use Hebrew syllables that resemble nonsense sounds (vv. 10, 13—Hebrew: *sav lasav sav lasav; kav lakav kav lakav*). So Paul may have been inspired by that context to apply Isaiah’s prophecy to the similar impression that glossolalia created.

To make any sense of verse 22, the sign to which Paul refers must again be a sign of judgment. Verse 23 thus explains verse 22a: tongues are a sign of judgment for unbelievers. Like the unbelieving Israelites, non-Christians in Corinth will wind up being condemned (even if inadvertently) by those who speak in undecipherable languages. They will remain lost in their sins because they will reject the gospel as the product of insane babblers.

Verses 24–25 go on to elucidate verse 22b. Prophecy is a sign of judgment for believers in the positive sense that it creates Christians by convicting unbelievers of their sins and bringing them to repentance (v. 25b echoes Isa. 45:14). Verses 23–24 again use the term that some would translate as “inquirer” (see NIV footnote), and it makes a bit more sense in this context. But in light of its use in verse 16, it is probably best to translate it consistently, as the NIV text does. Non-Christians are certainly one important class of people who do not understand tongues. “All” in the expressions “convinced by all” and “judged by all” (v. 24) more naturally refers to “all that is said,” not “all the people.” And verses 24–25 do not guarantee that all who hear prophecy rather than tongues will be saved. They simply stress that an intelligible proclamation of the gospel stands a far better chance of convicting unsaved people and regenerating their hearts.³

³ Blomberg, C. (1994). *1 Corinthians* (pp. 268–271). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Bridging Context

AS IN CHAPTER 11, successful application of the more controversial parts of chapter 14 hinges in large measure on successfully defining terms and choosing from a wealth of competing interpretations. If prophecy referred only to expository preaching or only to sudden spontaneous revelation, then churches that do not regularly experience one or the other of those practices would have little to heed here. If tongues were the same phenomenon as at Pentecost, then all Paul's talk about interpretation would be rendered superfluous. But if prophecy and tongues are the types of spiritual gifts that we have described, then contemporary applications abound.

If prophecy is the proclamation of a message given by God, irrespective of the amount of prayer or preparation preceding it, then chapter 14 applies in significant ways to both charismatic and non-charismatic circles. Those who typically preach only after extensive study and preparation should also make sure that they preach only that which God has first applied to themselves. Those accustomed to speaking on the sudden impulse of the Spirit should concentrate on communicating their message in the clearest possible way to benefit those present. Neither kind of preacher should assume that their words automatically constitute prophecy, unless these guidelines are followed. Both should take great pains to see that their messages "strengthen, encourage, and comfort" (v. 3).

Verse 6 supports the conclusion that Paul is concerned with intelligibility of Spirit-inspired utterances, however they are obtained. Thus he can combine supernatural "revelation" with more ordinary "teaching," tossing in prophecy and knowledge, to span the spectrum in between. The illustrations concerning music and foreign languages in verses 7–11 reinforce this call for clarity. Indeed, many Christian speakers will attest that the boundaries are very fluid between saying what one has planned to say in advance and deviating from one's prepared speech on the basis of the actual audience present and one's flow of thought as one speaks.

Charismatics and noncharismatics alike can and should consider thoughtfully what God wants to say to a particular congregation at a particular time but be sensitive enough to the Spirit to say what seems most appropriate and lucid for that audience as they speak. In fact, preparation can actually function to aid spontaneity, as one chooses "on the spot" from a wealth of previously considered thoughts. Lack of preparation, conversely, can often hinder successful articulation of a message, as one simply becomes at a loss for words or a logical flow of thought and lapses into a disconnected "stream of consciousness."

Verse 5b provides an important qualification for Paul's disparaging of tongues. When an interpretation is given, then tongues plus their interpretation closely resemble prophecy in function. Why then does Paul still relativize tongues so much, particularly in his own practice, which is not limited to the troubled context of Corinth (vv. 18–19)? Presumably verse 23 answers this question. Even with an interpretation, the phenomenon of tongues seems so bizarre to some that it prevents them from giving the gospel a serious hearing. Yet even with this observation, Paul refuses to prohibit tongues, but only regulates them so that they do not get out of hand (vv. 27–28).

Verse 10 does not imply that Paul recognized glossolalia as actual foreign languages spoken by people somewhere on earth, or even that they have a comparable linguistic structure, any more than verses 7–8 imply that tongues actually sounded like or employed flutes, harps, or trumpets. Rather, in both instances, he is using an analogy to make one central point of comparison which may not be pressed to include subordinate details. Like musical instruments and human languages, glossolalia must be understandable to be effective. Various Greco-Roman religions were well-known for their outbursts of ecstatic speech and unintelligible repetition of “nonsense” syllables. This is precisely what Paul wanted to avoid.

As noted above (pp. 269–70), verses 14–19 highlight a key role for tongues in prayer and praise, rather than instructing the congregation in the way prophecy does. These verses do not preclude tongues communicating a more didactic message, but Paul does not emphasize that aspect of their use. Verses 18–19 stress the value of tongues as a private prayer language, in which instruction of others by definition cannot come into play. It is not clear whether Paul would distinguish this use of tongues from the “spiritual gift” of glossolalia. One suspects he might, since the gifts must be used for public edification of the church.

Yet, under whatever label, a private prayer language can prove very beneficial and therapeutic to those who use it. Indeed using tongues in this manner may provide one illustration of the way in which “the Spirit helps us in our weakness,” when “we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Rom. 8:26). Throughout history, and especially in the last hundred years, where Christians have spoken in tongues in prayer, they have consistently testified to the sense of a spiritual “breakthrough,” as God has overcome their growing frustration with the confines of merely cognitive worship.

Verse 20 balances this emphasis, however, by reminding believers that the cognitive aspect always must continue to play an important role in the Christian life, even if it must also be supplemented by more affective elements. One thinks of Romans 12:2 with its foundational command for Christians to “be transformed by the renewing of their mind,” and of Paul’s later words to the Corinthians that “we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4c–5).

Cognitive psychology has since recovered Paul’s emphasis on the mind: dysfunctional behavior often stems from warped thinking. If one learns to think correctly, godly behavior often follows. If this is the case, then one can scarcely overestimate the value of thoughtful prayer, study, and Christian education, both formal and informal, in conversation with wise and mature believers, past and present. A lesson thus comes through this first half of chapter 14 “with startling force. Whatever the place for profound, personal experience and corporate emotional experience, the assembled church is a place for intelligibility. Our God is a thinking, speaking God; and if we will know him, we must learn to think his thoughts after him.”

Verses 21–25 remind us that Christian worship must at least periodically relate directly to the unbeliever. This in turn presupposes that non-Christians will regularly be present at Christian worship, most commonly no doubt because Christian friends have invited them. Without denying the central scandal of the cross (1:18–2:5), worship leaders and participants must reflect on how they can best “package” their ministry and message so as to make Christianity attractive rather than repulsive to interested outsiders. Then they can expect people to come to Christ as a result of their services, though how many and how often depends entirely on the Spirit’s sovereign hand in convicting men and women and regenerating human hearts. And if tongues are signs of

judgment for unbelievers (v. 22), then we cannot apply this paragraph, as some Pentecostals do, to claim that tongues-speaking is designed to convert unbelievers.⁴

Contemporary Application

CHRISTIANS SOMETIMES STRUGGLE to find relevant passages of Scripture that speak directly and in detail to contemporary problems. Such is the case, for example, with abortion, ecology, and nuclear war. In chapter 14, however, we find remarkably clear and detailed teaching that bears directly on one of the most divisive issues in the church today—the debate over the so-called charismatic or more supernatural gifts.

The charismatic movement is known for emphasizing the value of speaking in tongues. To many in that movement, Paul would surely say today that greater emphasis is needed on the more immediately intelligible and more cognitive gifts. Many sermons in charismatic or Pentecostal circles lack consistent, clear exposition of texts of Scripture. The recent neo-prophetic movement has heralded something of a shift away from tongues to prophecy. But it tends to conceive of the latter in a very narrow, highly supernatural sense and often does not submit its revelations from the Lord to the evaluation of a congregation and a duly recognized group of church leaders. Decision-making in the charismatic world often seems highly subjective, as people explain their actions with little more than the rationale, “The Lord told me to do such-and-such.” But how do they know for sure what they heard was from the Lord or, if it was, that they interpreted it entirely correctly? Authoritarian leaders within this movement can at times rule ruthlessly and without fear of contradiction because those under them believe everything spoken “in the name of the Lord.” It would probably be good if no Christian today ever said, “The Lord told me . . .” lest God get blamed for human error, but rather preface their remarks with, “I *believe* the Lord has told me . . .”

Noncharismatic churches too are increasingly moving away from solid instructional messages based on biblical content. Many favor a more entertainment-oriented style of worship, and “seeker-sensitive” messages, often with the worthy motive of attracting the unbeliever or church-hopper who judges local congregations on the value of many services they provide other than preaching. Such churches recognize the need to avoid Christian “jargon,” in-house or theological language that outsiders find strange and difficult to comprehend. But if large-group worship services take this form, then it becomes crucial that the church stress that its members become involved in additional activities that provide detailed instruction in the Bible, Christian doctrine, ethics, and the like. These can take the form of Sunday School, special seminars, or small groups.

The value in both charismatic and noncharismatic circles of a clear proclamation of God’s Word over and above more unusual phenomena like tongues remains indisputable. In Paul’s world, at least the more exotic phenomena reminded people of analogous practices in other religions, so that they were not entirely foreign. In our modern day, many unbelievers seeing

⁴ Blomberg, C. (1994). [*1 Corinthians*](#) (pp. 271–274). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

glossolalia for the first time will be all the more convinced that Christians are “out of their mind” (v. 23). Indeed, the excesses of the charismatic movement, especially through televangelism, are one of the major reasons all conservative Christianity has been caricatured, stereotyped, and rejected as weird and out-of-touch with reality by many contemporary Westerners, especially in the media.

When the charismatic church experiences large numbers trusting in Christ, it is more often in spite of their more exotic phenomena than because of them, since, to its credit, this movement has done more than any other wing of the church in modern times to recover the patterns of worship and fellowship outlined in 14:26, often accompanied by sincerely warm and loving interpersonal relationships. Some of the fastest-growing charismatic churches today have caught on and play down the role of tongues to such an extent that most services do not contain them, and a majority of members have never spoken in tongues in public.

A much more positive use of tongues continues to appear in Christians discovering a private prayer language. Testimony after testimony describes how the Spirit intervened to liberate some frustrated individual from his or her fruitless quiet time, lifeless worship, or inconsistent walk with the Lord. Indeed, the winds of the charismatic movement seem to have blown freshest and most purely in the middle of dead, formal, traditional churches, where it has given to congregations such “radical” ideas, by no means distinctively charismatic, as singing choruses, using musical instruments besides piano or organ, clapping or raising hands, sharing praise items and prayer requests, and conversational prayer.⁵

⁵ Blomberg, C. (1994). [1 Corinthians](#) (pp. 275–276). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.