

First Corinthians
Chapter Fourteen
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The Proper use of Tongues and Prophecy

1Cor 14:1 “Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.”

As we saw in the previous chapter, we must strive at all times to show forth the love of God for:

1John 4:16 “And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”

But while we are here we need the gifts of the Holy Spirit and we specially need the ability to understand and apply the Word of God. The phrase about prophesy is in a plural form and that means that we should desire earnestly that such a gift be used in the church and not that each individual would have such a gift. Prophecy is critical for the function of a spiritually healthy church.

1Cor 14:2 “For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.”

The main problem people seem to have had in the use of “tongues” is that the pagan religions of the area commonly used utterances that nobody could understand in their worship of their false gods. They thought that the more a person uttered such meaningless sounds the more religious the person. In this section Paul is telling them how useless such tongues are. When he says that they are speaking only to God, the word should probably be translated “a god” because the Greek writing has no definite article and such are usually interpreted with an indefinite article. The Greek construction is the same as used in Acts 17:23 (For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO AN UNKNOWN GOD). When he says that nobody understands he is clearly speaking of a different “tongue” than in the second chapter of Acts. In that chapter the people understood the disciples speaking in their known languages. The spirit here is the human spirit and not the Holy Spirit and the mysteries here are the pagan religious mysteries that nobody can understand and not the mysteries of God that He explains. The pagan religions often referred to mysteries that only their spiritually elite could understand. When the Bible speaks of God’s mysteries they are always revelations of things previously hidden. It is clear how this sentence has been so misunderstood by many people. It is often used by Practitioners of “tongues” today as a proof-positive verse for the Bible giving its stamp of approval on the use of Christians speaking in glossolalia.

1Cor 14:3 “But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.

1Cor 14:4 One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.”

God means for the elaboration of Scripture to result in a person knowing more about Him and His plans for His children. When His children know more about His love and His work in the lives of His children then the result is consolation in all times and a building up of the people in the family of God. Certainly an elaboration of the wonderful verse below has been of tremendous comfort, edification, exhortation, and consolation for me.

Rom 8:28 “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

Some translations leave out “God causes” and that is a shame for that fact is extremely important in our understanding of His great love for us. I can rest knowing that **all** things are used by God to work together in my life for good. I may not ever see some of those good things but I know that God is true to His word and that the result of even what seems like bad “stuff” will result in good for His children.

Gen 50:20 “And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

Matt 7:9 “Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone?”

Matt 7:10 Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?”

My wife and I kid around sometime because sometimes it seems like the fish is a snake or the loaf is a stone. But we trust the Lord in all four of the above verses which give us comfort, edification, exhortation, and consolation.

Most teachers believe Paul is being sarcastic about tongues edifying the speaker for tongues are meaningless unless interpreted and so cannot edify anyone, much less the person using them. Paul is again teaching that the tongues used by the false teachers and the cults are meaningless and he is playing on the concept that such tongues are of great spiritual value. People can build up their own emotions and think that they are receiving some self-satisfaction but the feelings are coming from their prideful emotions and they can easily fool someone. He is teaching that we must not be a recipient of our own self-deception.

1Cor 14:5 “Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.”

Most interpreters agree that Paul is being very sarcastic again here for he cannot really wish that everyone spoke in tongues for he has already taught that all people do not have each gift.

1Cor 12:30 "All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?"

Paul was putting the gifts in perspective. A gift of tongues could have had some real value in the early church but it is much more important that the gift of prophecy be used in every church group. He knew that everyone would also not be able to prophesy but he knew that the gift of prophecy would be used long after the gift of tongues was gone and that such a gift was of superior use in building up the church for the work ahead. Many interpreters believe that Paul used the singular tense (verses 2 and 4) for the tongues usage that was false and the plural tense (verses 6, 18, 22, 23, and 39) for the true gift.

1Cor 14:6 "But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?"

1Cor 14:7 Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?

1Cor 14:8 For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

1Cor 14:9 So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

1Cor 14:10 There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning.

1Cor 14:11 If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me."

I could, with difficulty, be writing this in Swedish but it would have absolutely no meaning to you. Here is a famous Bible verse in Swedish:

"För Gud älskade människorna så mycket att han gav dem sin ende Son, för att de som tror på honom inte ska gå under utan ha evigt liv."

Paul could also be writing in a language unknown to most of the readers and such would have had no meaning to them. But when Paul speaks to reveal either general revelations of God or some specific revelation of Scripture to an individual then that person is greatly enriched. Similarly when Paul brings knowledge, prophecy, and teaching to the people, then they are edified. He compares such useless speaking with random clanging on some instrument. If you have had a son or daughter learning how to play a musical instrument you can better understand this reference to clanging on an instrument! When I first started learning to play clarinet my parents put me out in the garage (a separate building from the house) to practice. Later I became very good at it and even had a scholarship to play in a university band. But in the beginning it was loud noise!

In verses ten and eleven he then recognizes that tongues can be a known language of the world and each of those languages has specific meanings. But if the person hearing the language does not understand the language then the speaking is of no use. A barbarian could mean someone not of that area but the word actually is onomatopoeic so it means someone whose language makes no sense and sounds like “bar-bar”. Paul is really pointing out how silly this speaking in unknown tongues can be.

1Cor 14:12 “So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.”

The people had shown zeal to be seen as very spiritual by trying out the unknown tongues thing but he is saying to them that if they really are zealous of spiritual gifts then they should be making sure that all edification gifts were being properly used in the church so that it could grow as a unit. Someone pointed out that an unknown tongue (glossolalia) could be made evident by three sources: the human spirit, a demon spirit, or the Holy Spirit. Since it seems that the gift has stopped with the Apostolic age then the origin could be of either one of the other sources – not good!

1Cor 14:13 “Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

1Cor 14:14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

1Cor 14:15 What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also.

1Cor 14:16 Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?

1Cor 14:17 For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

1Cor 14:18 I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all;

1Cor 14:19 however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

We know that the authentic gift of speaking in tongues was given so that the Gospel message could be understood by people of all languages.

Acts 2:8 “And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?”

So if anyone is speaking in a language not understood by anyone present then the message is not being given in the manner specified by God. Paul certainly was fluent in several languages and that ability was of great value as seen in the study of the book of Acts. But when he was in the church he endeavored to instruct others rather than just speaking to God in his mind. In verses 14 and 15 he talks of praying and singing. In both efforts he proclaims that we must use our mind and our spirit. He is again referring to the general edification of the congregation for the people present must be able to understand what is being said or sung so that they can be edified and that they can say “amen” at the proper time.

He then tells us that when people are gathered to hear the Word of God it is imperative that the proclamation be done in a language understood by the people there. When we say “church” we mean a building but at this time there were no church buildings. Note also that in the entire New Testament there is no instruction for building such a “church”. When Paul uses the word for ten thousand he is using the Greek word for the largest number with a specific connotation. But this word is sometimes translated “myriad” and really means just a very large number. As far as I know, the largest number for which we have a name is googolplex, which is $(10^{100})^{100}$. So we could substitute this name for ten thousand to have a corresponding meaning.

In this last sentence he uses the word “tongue” in the singular meaning an incomprehensible uttering of words. He emphasizes again the imperative that the Gospel must be communicated in a known language.

1Cor 14:20 “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature.

1Cor 14:21 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.”

These Corinthians had been acting as children by seeking to speak in unknown tongues like the pagans in their area. By trying to imitate those pagans they were participating in evil and thus advancing in evil thinking. But Paul tells them to be wise in their thinking and not to participate in evil. He reminds them that many years ago God had warned the Jews that He would speak to them in unknown tongues as was done at Pentecost and they still would not listen. This verse has been used by people to justify the use of tongues today but that is certainly using this verse incorrectly. This reference to unknown tongues was when such was used as a sign of judgment on Israel and Judah. The time was about 800 years before the time of Isaiah when God warned Israel of impending judgment by a people who did not speak their language.

Deut 28:49 “The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, Deut 28:50 a nation of fierce countenance who shall have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young.”

About 100 years after the time of Isaiah, God also warned them through Jeremiah:

Jer 5:15 “Behold, I am bringing a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel,” declares the Lord. “It is an enduring nation, It is an ancient nation, A nation whose language you do not know, Nor can you understand what they say.

Jer 5:16 Their quiver is like an open grave, All of them are mighty men.

Jer 5:17 And they will devour your harvest and your food; They will devour your sons and your daughters; They will devour your flocks and your herds; They will devour your vines and your fig trees; They will demolish with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust.”

Again the Bible is consistent in that tongues were a language used by existing people but not necessarily understood by the Jews. When the disciples spoke in tongues at Pentecost the Jews should have suspected that judgment was impending again. God's judgment had fallen on Israel and then on Judah and now it was coming again because of the crucifixion and rejection by the Jews of the Son of God. This judgment did come on the Jews in 70 AD when over one million Jews were slaughtered, thousands more were imprisoned, the Temple was destroyed, and the rest of the city was burned to the ground.

After the destruction of the Temple, the sign of tongues as a judgment was past.

1Cor 14:22 “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 points toward an event or location. As stated above, one use of tongues was as a sign for impending doom. The second use of tongues as a sign was for a blessing. God is now saying that He will not work His plan through just one race of people but all will be included (Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, men, women). The sign of tongues as a blessing was repeated when the Gentiles were included in the church:

Acts 10:44 “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.

Acts 10:45 And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also.

Acts 10:46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,”

The third use of tongues as a sign was as a sign of authority. It seems very meaningful that not a single record exists in Scripture of a specific quotation of tongues; all mentions are general. The tongues were not used to give new revelations but to simply state the mighty deeds of God (Acts 2:11) and to designate the authority of the one speaking. Since the destruction of the Temple there is no need for the sign of tongues for the three-fold use has passed:

- 1.) Israel has been set aside.
- 2.) The Gentiles have been brought into the kingdom.
- 3.) The Apostles have delivered the complete Word of God to His people.

1Cor 14:23 If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?

1Cor 14:24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;

1Cor 14:25 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.”

He now makes his statements very clear. Tongues are for a sign and specifically for unbelievers so that they would know the utterances were from God. But prophecy is for the believers so that they would be edified. Many years ago I was trying to make sure that I was properly behaving as a child of God and I was studying the concept of “tongues”. During that time I tuned in the TV to a church service and everyone was speaking in an unknown tongue. Although the sounds were melodious I was sure something was wrong because I did not understand what was happening in this group. It seemed wrong and here Paul tells us that my reaction was as predicted. But when I tuned into a broadcast where the preacher was teaching the Word of God in English I was edified just as Paul tells us in this section he penned two thousand years ago.

1Cor 14:26 “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.

1Cor 14:27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret;

1Cor 14:28 but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

1Cor 14:29 And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

1Cor 14:30 But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent.

1Cor 14:31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted;

1Cor 14:32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets;

1Cor 14:33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”

Paul now outlines the proper worship service. He maintains that such is very orderly and he concludes this section by saying that God is not the author of confusion but of peace. Note also in verse 29 that he says that all who do not speak are to be discerning if the message is indeed from God by testing any speaking by the Word of God. The point of his discussion of this worship service is that all of God’s children may be properly educated and edified in the Word of God.

1Cor 14:34 “Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

1Cor 14:35 And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.”

Certainly this section is not popular in our time but it is the order mandated by God in our worship services. People today have argued that we must take such verses in the context of the time when women were uneducated and did not have much social status. Certainly it is true that women were “second class” citizens then but Christianity lifted up women spiritually to the same level as men.

Gal 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

It is part of the curse that women will want to exercise authority over the men:

Gen 3:16 To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you shall bring forth children; Yet your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

Although men and women are now equal spiritually they have different functional roles. In general women tend to lead with their emotions rather than with their intellect. Such is, of course, not always true and my wife is an exception! There are numerous examples in Scripture where women have become emotionally involved in issues and then used their influence with their husbands to make them do their bidding. It was because of their lower social status that they had to use their husbands in this manner but the same tendency exists today.

Acts 13:50 "But the Jews aroused the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district."

The Following Was Written by Carol Combs

Godly Women under Authority Contributed by Carol Combs

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 "Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church."

These verses are often debated and under attack due in part to a historical abuse of women in society as well as the impact of the feminist movement. In order to rightly understand what Paul is telling the church at Corinth, we must see what else Scripture has to say about the roles and ministries of women. Christianity brought a radical change in the way women are treated in the community of believers and elevated women above what was practiced by the Jews or in the secular world. We see that women prayed in church gatherings and prophesied as well. (Acts 1:14, 21:9) Widows were cared for (Acts 6:1-4) and women were instrumental in supporting the establishment of new churches and the ministries of the apostles (Acts 16:14-15, 40; Rom. 16:1).

Galatians 3:28 states, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul states that those who are in Christ are *equally* in Christ. There are no second class citizens; there is no social strata, no hierarchy of believers. We are united even in our diversity of spiritual gifts and ministries (See 1 Cor. 12-14). These roles and ministries within the body of

Christ are given directly by God and each is essential. Women's roles in the church are never inferior in nature or effectiveness.

Ephesians 5:22-24 states, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in every thing." God designed marriage to be a picture of Christ and the church. Verses following these describe the husband's relationship with his wife in this regard. A woman's testimony to the world that she is submitted to Christ is that she is submitted to her husband (v. 22). Be careful to note that this is the *wife's* action; no where in Scripture is a husband told to dominate his wife!

1 Tim. 2:9-15 elaborates, "Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness. Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression. But women shall be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint."

Well, there is a LOT in these verses. Certainly we should agree that a woman's appearance and behavior should always reflect her desire for godliness followed by an admonition to be teachable. So far that is pretty clear. The next verse cautions against women exercising authority over men. This instruction cannot be based on status within the faith or on ability as we have discussed above, and Paul goes on to explain that it has to do with the basic nature of women (more easily deceived) and with the order of creation which determined an order of authority.

Regarding the "more easily deceived" part of this verse, we acknowledge that Eve was deceived by Satan (although Adam sinned deliberately which may be considered even worse), and women are more inclined to emotional decision making. 2 Tim. 3:5-7 speaks of men who have only a form of godliness, denying its power, who captivate weak women, weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of truth. How susceptible we become when we stray into sin. It has long been observed that female thinking processes differ from men's, with men described as having "straight line" logic and women as thinking in multi-faceted processes. Perhaps this can be easily understood by observing shopping practices of the two genders . . . admittedly very different. Of course, these are generalizations with a few exceptions, and no one would claim that men are not gullible to some degree (often exploited by feminine wiles). However, we women are vulnerable and are blessed by that umbrella of protection in the family by their father or by their husbands in a marriage relationship (See Eph. 5:25-31). Women who are single or widowed are under the protection of the church leadership.

This authority is continued in the church structure where women are not to exercise spiritual authority or teach men. For this reason, some denominations will not ordain women in any role. Women's ministries are varied and vast, however, in teaching other women (Titus 2:3-5) and in the nurture and instruction of children as a delegated authority from the father who is given primary responsibility (Deut. 6:4-9, 5:16; Eph. 6:1-4).

Perhaps a preceding verse to instructions about women in 1 Corinthians can shed some light on this: 1 Cor. 14:33: "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." All authority in the Godhead and in the church and the family is established by God. 1 Cor. 11:3 states, "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ." Jesus receives His authority from the Father (Matt. 28:18, John 5:26-27, 10:18). So, Jesus is under authority, a man is under authority, and a woman is under authority. Even the Holy Spirit is called a Helper (John 14:26) and it is no insult to a woman to be called man's "helper" (Gen. 2:20-21). A woman's resistance to authority resulted from sin, but God decreed that man would rule (Gen. 3:16).

Although Scripture clearly defines the role and authority of women in the family and in the church, the Bible does not prohibit women from holding positions of authority in a secular setting. The virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 had her own business as did Lydia (Acts 16:14). However, women must always have their responsibilities in their family and in their church as a priority. Men's vocations should never detract from their godly responsibilities either for 1 Tim. 5:8 states, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever."

Some observations: It requires Divine help for women to be content under authority. Fulfilling one's role as a child of God, a wife and a mother is challenging enough without trying to rebel against that calling. A strong family has a godly father as its head (Adrian Rodgers says that anything with two heads is a monster and anything with no head is dead!), and a strong church has strong male leadership. It is not that women are not capable for there are many women who must bear the responsibility of being a single parent, and often it seems that in the church if women don't do the job it just won't get done. I suggest that perhaps those jobs God gave to men in the church should remain undone until they assume their responsibilities. If women will do the work, men just won't fight them for it. A strong church has strong male leadership. My understanding of Scriptural instructions regarding leadership and authority ensure a strong church and a strong family. What woman would not want that?

1Cor 14:36 "Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?"

1Cor 14:37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.

1Cor 14:38 But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

1Cor 14:39 Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.

1Cor 14:40 But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.”

It seems that in verse 36 Paul is putting people in their place. He is saying that they were not the first people to be given the Gospel and they were not the only ones given the Gospel. Paul now makes himself very clear in that he is an Apostle of Jesus Christ and that his teachings are to be so recognized and obeyed. He clearly says that if someone does not accept his teachings in this light then that person is not recognized as a member of God’s family! He then concludes with his mandate that tongues are below prophesy but still to be used in God’s worship. His emphasis then is that God is orderly and that all of our worship must be reflective of His character.

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