

## A SURVEY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 12-14

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### Historical background

On the Apostle Paul's second missionary journey, he spent eighteen months planting a church in the city of Corinth, one of the most significant cities of the New Testament world. Corinth was located on a six-kilometre-wide strip of land that connected southern Greece with northern Greece. In that position, Corinth dominated the trade route between the renowned cities of Athens and Sparta.

But controlling that major land route was only part of Corinth's strategic location. Corinth also lay on the major west-east sea route between the city of Rome and the resource-rich eastern third of the Roman Empire. If you wanted to ship goods from Rome to the east, they went through Corinth. If you wanted to ship goods west from Asia or Syria to Rome, Corinth was the funnel through which they flowed.

Corinth was a wealthy trade city, a vibrant, freewheeling, bawdy seaport. In fact, Corinth's reputation for commercial prosperity was exceeded only by her reputation for sexual freedom. So bad was Corinth, the verb "to corinthianise" was added to the Greek language as a slang word denoting unrestrained sexual behaviour.

It's not hard to understand why the Corinthians' morals were so disastrous. Most ancient Greek cities were built around an acropolis, a steep-sided hill that was used as a fortress during times of war. Corinth's acropolis was not crowned with a fort or castle. Instead, it was dominated by the temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Every night nearly a thousand priestesses (prostitutes really) descended from the temple to encourage the worship of Aphrodite through sexual intercourse.<sup>1</sup> Imagine a city in which "church" required participation in sexual immorality, and you can imagine how corrupt Corinth was.

In the midst of all that perversion, God had the Apostle Paul plant a church. Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians to that church about four years after his initial work there, responding to a series of questions and accusations raised by the Corinthians.

The Corinthian church had many problems. They were quarrelling over which famous preacher they liked best (chapters 1-4). They were confused about sexual purity (5-6), marriage (7), and the difference between eating meat from the market place that had been sacrificed to idols and actually eating at the worship feasts held at the idols' temples (8-10). They had made a mess of communion (11), spiritual gifts (12-14), and were denying the resurrection of the dead (15). They desperately needed guidance.

### Attitude with a capital "A"

The Corinthian church also had many bad attitudes.

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<sup>1</sup> This is why Paul had to address the issue of being joined to a prostitute in 1 Cor 6:15-20. Paul's command? "Flee immorality."

The first bad attitude was *competitiveness*. The Corinthian church was permeated by the twin cancers of jealousy and rivalry. The congregation was as united as an egg that has rolled off the kitchen counter and landed on the floor; they were shattered by ungodly competitiveness.

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you...For I have been informed concerning you...that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." (1 Cor 1:10-12)

Cliquish contention over their favourite preachers was the least of it. In chapter 6, their rivalries, driven by a win-at-all-costs attitude, had led to lawsuits and court cases which brought shame on the name of Christ.

Brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? (1 Cor 6:6-7)

The second bad attitude was *arrogance*. Because of their pride Paul had to remind the Corinthians of their lowly beginnings: "not many wise...not many mighty" (1:26). He chided them for thinking they had excelled Paul himself in spiritual wealth and wisdom (4:6-8, 10). Their cupful of Christian knowledge had puffed them up like a bullfrog in full croak (8:1).

The third bad attitude was *selfishness*. How selfish were they? At the communion love feast, some gorged themselves with rich food and drank themselves tipsy on wine, while the poorer members of the congregation sat in a corner and went hungry (1 Cor 11:20-22).

### Spiritual gifts

Perhaps the worst display of the Corinthians' competitive, arrogant, self-promoting attitudes was in the area of spiritual gifts. If Paul's instruction in chapters 12-14 is any indication, every person in the church wanted flashy, attention-drawing gifts like tongues so they would be prominent and envied. Those who had miraculous gifts were misusing them in immature, attention-drawing exhibitions. They looked down on those who lacked such gifts as spiritual peasants. The "peasants" pouted because they didn't have the coveted gifts. The spirit of Christian love—considering others more important than yourself—was completely absent.

As you can imagine, their competitiveness led to chaos in their worship services. If the rules Paul laid down in chapter 14 are any indication, the Corinthian worship service was typified by prophets interrupting each other, shouting each other down with a message from the God of peace. At times a person would pop up and burst out in uninterpreted tongues, drawing attention to himself and drowning out the teaching of God's word. The Corinthian worship service and their use of spiritual gifts was a war for attention. It had to be corrected.

# 1 Corinthians 12

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Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.  
(1 Cor 12:1)

Paul's purpose in these chapters was to correct the Corinthians' ignorance regarding spiritual gifts. Paul began his instruction in verses 2-3 with a surprising warning.

A warning against paganism: 12:2-3

You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led. (1 Cor 12:2)

Many of the Corinthian Christians had been idol-worshippers before they were converted. Why did Paul remind them of that in 12:2? Apparently their pagan past ("when you were pagans") was causing them to abuse spiritual gifts. How? Historical research shows that Greek worship included demonic rivals of Christian spiritual gifts. For example, the Greek mystery cults had their own version of tongues (unstoppable speaking in a rush of meaningless sounds) and of prophecy (the oracle at Delphi being the best known). When the demons behind the idols intervened, the worshippers of the Greek gods often went into trances, fell to the floor, spoke in highly emotional, unintelligible babblings, and prophesied.

In verses 2-3, Paul warned the Corinthians not to continue those pagan practices, under the illusion that they were exercising *Christian* spiritual gifts. In verse 3, Paul gave an example of someone who had done just that. While claiming to speak from God, a "prophet" had stood up in the church and made a shocking, doctrinally inaccurate statement about Jesus Christ.

Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor 12:3)

Apparently the Corinthians had rejected this "prophecy," and Paul was merely confirming that they had been correct to do so. However, it was clear that the Corinthians had carried some pagan baggage past the gate of conversion. When their "prophecies" had been messages from mute idols, they had been free to say anything they wanted—a mute idol can't correct you. As Christians, speaking for *God* was another matter all together. Accuracy (in this case doctrinal accuracy) was critical.

All for one, one for all? 1 Corinthians 12:4-31

Perhaps you are familiar with the motto of the Three Musketeers: All for one, one for all. When it came to spiritual gifts, the Corinthians had a different slogan: All for one, one for one. The body of Christ is supposed to be a place where Spirit-indwelt people consider *others* more important than themselves. In Corinth, everyone considered *himself* more important than others. This selfish, competitive, attention-grabbing attitude was evident throughout the letter, but especially in their

use and abuse of spiritual gifts. To counteract this, Paul taught them five principles about spiritual gifts.

1. the source of spiritual gifts
2. the recipients of spiritual gifts
3. the purpose of spiritual gifts
4. the appointment of spiritual gifts
5. the unity and diversity of spiritual gifts

#### The source

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. (1 Cor 12:4-6)

No spiritual gift was more divine than another. All the gifts had their source in the Godhead—the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ, and God the Father.

#### The recipients, the purpose

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:7)

Paul included two important points in this verse. First, "each one" or every Christian has a spiritual gift or gifts (see also 1 Peter 4:10). Second, spiritual gifts are given *for serving others*, not oneself. They are "for the common good." This was an important correction of the Corinthians' competitive, self-serving attitudes. The gifts were not to be used for personal glory or personal edification. They were not self-directed. Spiritual gifts are for the *common good*.

This is confirmed by the other New Testament passages that speak of spiritual gifts. Ephesians 4:11-12 says the gifts are for the building up of the body. 1 Peter 4:10 says, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it *in serving one another*" (emphasis added). In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul said the love that guides the gifts does not seek its own (13:5). Seven times in chapter 14, Paul emphasised that spiritual gifts were given by God to edify or build up *others*: "So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification *of the church*," (1 Cor 14:12, emphasis added. See also 14:3, 4, 5, 17, 19, 26).

#### Divine appointment

In verses 8-10, Paul listed nine gifts, a sampling of the great variety of spiritual gifts the Spirit gave in Corinth for the common good. In verse 11, Paul summarised.

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually *just as He wills*. (1 Cor 12:11, emphasis added)

The Holy Spirit appoints spiritual gifts "just as He wills." The Corinthians were lusting after what they believed were the glamorous, attractive gifts. It only

disclosed their ignorance. The Spirit sovereignly assigns gifts to each believer, and each one should be content with what the Spirit has ordained.

### The unity of spiritual gifts

Rather than embrace the variety of gifts assigned by the Holy Spirit, the Corinthians allowed that diversity to divide them. They were divided into two distinct camps: the *haves* and the *have-nots*. Those who had prominent gifts such as prophecy and tongues were the *haves*. They enjoyed the recognition their gifts won them, and disdained church members who didn't have such gifts, going so far as to consider such members unnecessary baggage. The *have-nots* mourned their lack of prestige, and like a pot on a stove, bubbled with resentful jealousy, endlessly wishing they had the spectacular, public gifts possessed by others.

Using spiritual gifts to divide the church was tragically wrong. Paul said the Spirit's work is intended to unify the body, not divide it.

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.  
(1 Cor 12:13)

God didn't intend every believer to have or to strive for one gift. Instead, the church is to be a group of Spirit-united people each using his or her very different spiritual gifts to serve one another. Using the human body as an illustration, Paul pointed out to the *have-nots* that their discontent with their place in the body of Christ was wrong.

If the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. (1 Cor 12:16)

Paul also told the haughty *haves*, so proud of their prophecy and speaking in tongues, not to consider those with "lesser" gifts to be second-rate Christians.

And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.  
(1 Cor 12:22)

The Holy Spirit has assembled the body of Christ with an interdependence similar to that of the human body. For example, while the eyes receive more attention than most other body parts (let's face it, there's nothing romantic about looking deep into your wife's ears), the glamorous eyes still need ears to do the hearing, feet to do the walking, and hands to do the grasping. In the same way, every person in the Corinthian church needed the spiritual gifts of the other members to complement their own. No one in Corinth was to think that they were second rate because they didn't have a certain gift, and no one was to think that they were superior because they did.

Paul closed the chapter pointing out that since the body of Christ needs variety, there is no one spiritual gift that all believers should strive for.

All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? (1 Cor 12:29-30)

In Greek, there was a way of indicating that a question should have a negative answer (use of the negative particle *me*, rather than *ou*). All seven questions in verses 29-30 begin with the Greek word *me*, indicating they expect negative answers. For example, the required answer to "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" was, "No, not all speak in tongues."

Enthusiasm for spiritual gifts: 12:31

The Corinthians were infatuated with spiritual gifts. However, in their ignorance, they were infatuated with the wrong ones. In 12:31, Paul told them, "Earnestly desire the greater gifts." The word translated "earnestly desire" (*zeloo*) meant to be enthusiastic, to be excited about something. It didn't mean they were all to seek to have those gifts; the whole point of this section is that the body needs a diversity of gifts. Which of the eight gifts listed in 12:28 were the "greater gifts" the Corinthians were to be enthusiastic about (but not all to try to manifest)? Miracles? Healing? Tongues? None of those. The greater gifts must be the first three in Paul's list, the three he numbered: "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers."

All the gifts were important, but those that Paul wanted the Corinthians to be especially excited about were the truth-communicating gifts of apostle, prophet, and teacher. In their ignorance, the Corinthians were infatuated with tongues. Paul told them to shift their sights to the instructional, truth-teaching gifts instead.

## 1 Corinthians 13

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1 Corinthians 13 really begins in the second half of 12:31 with Paul's words, "I show you a still more excellent way." Rather than have wrestling matches over whose gifts were more important, the Paul wanted the Corinthians to use *selfless Christian love* to govern their spiritual gifts. Unfortunately, selfless Christian love was as common in Corinth as snow skiing in the Congo. Paul wrote chapter 13 to remind them that spiritual gifts from the God of love must be used with love.

Noise and nothing: 13:1-7

The first reason that selfless Christian love was to dominate the Corinthians' use of spiritual gifts was this: without love, the most spectacular spiritual gifts or acts of Christian service are noise and nothing.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of

prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (1 Cor 13:1-3)

In Corinth, the noxious weeds of self-promotion and rivalry had to be replaced by the thornless rose of Christian love. The rose of Christian love was made up of fifteen beautiful petals (vv. 4-7). One can easily see how the fifteen characteristics of love that Paul listed would have radically changed the Corinthians' practice of spiritual gifts. Here's a sampling:

- Love is patient: prophets and tongues speakers would have waited their turn, no longer interrupting each other during the worship service (14:27, 30-31a).
- Love is not jealous: there would have been no lusting after someone else's gifts or prominence (12:15).
- Love is not arrogant: the *haves* wouldn't have peered down their noses at the *have nots* (12:21-22).
- Love does not seek its own: rather than self-promotion or self-edification, the Corinthians would have used their gifts as God intended, for the common good (12:7).

Love is eternal: 13:8-13

Besides the fact that spiritual gifts are nothing without love, Paul gave a second reason selfless Christian love must guide the use of spiritual gifts. Love is eternal; spiritual gifts are not. Paul opened this section saying, "Love never fails" (v. 8). He closed it with the familiar words, "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (v. 13). In between those declarations of the eternity of love, Paul addressed the temporary nature of spiritual gifts.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. (1 Cor 13:8)

Prophecy and knowledge will be shut off like water when you close a tap. Tongues will dry up like a stream in a desert. The spiritual gifts the Corinthians so coveted would disappear some day. What was appropriate at one time in God's working ("When I was a child..."), would not be appropriate as His plan matured ("When I became a man..." v. 11). Eternal love must control the temporary gifts.

## 1 Corinthians 14

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The priority of understanding: 14:1-5

As he opened chapter 14, Paul again encouraged the Corinthians to be enthusiastic about spiritual gifts, especially about prophecy (14:1). But Paul was not merely

promoting the gift of prophecy; he was promoting prophecy (understandable truth) as superior to *uninterpreted* tongues.

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.

(1 Cor 14:5)

Prophecy, which was spoken in the language of the prophet and the church members, was of greater value than tongues. Why? Tongues required a second step (interpretation) before they edified the church. Starting in verse 2, Paul listed three reasons that prophecy—immediately understandable truth—was always preferable to speaking in uninterpreted tongues.

- 1) only God understands uninterpreted tongues
- 2) prophecy succeeds in the goal of edifying the church
- 3) uninterpreted tongues fail in the purpose of edifying the church

1) *Only God understands uninterpreted tongues:*

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. (1 Cor 14:2)

In the end, the Corinthians' habit of speaking in uninterpreted tongues in the church service benefited no one. The one who spoke in tongues didn't understand what he was saying ("in his spirit he speaks mysteries"). The other worshipers didn't understand what he said; to them it was meaningless babble. God understands all languages, so He received no special benefit by being spoken to in tongues rather than the language of the worshipers. In the end, no one benefited from the uninterpreted tongues in Corinth; it was a wasteful distraction.

2) *Prophecy succeeds in the goal of edifying the church:*

But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation...but one who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Cor 14:3, 4b)

In contrast to a message in tongues that only God understood, prophecy was immediately understandable to the whole congregation, fulfilling the purpose of the gifts, the edification of others.

3) *Uninterpreted tongues fail in the purpose of edifying the church:*

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

Paul was not approving the Corinthians' uninterpreted tongues with the statement, "One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself." He was actually condemning their selfish misuse of tongues. Speaking in tongues without interpretation showed a lack of concern for others, and that wasn't loving ("love does not seek its own"). In fact,



interpretation was the only thing that made tongues useful in the church, for without interpretation, there was no contribution to the common good.

Greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying. (1 Cor 14:5)

The uselessness of uninterpreted tongues: 14:6-17

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

For tongues to be of use in edifying others, it had to contain a message—a divine revelation or a sermon. But why deliver that message in a language no one understood? Giving the message in tongues added an unnecessary, frustrating step (as anyone who has listened to a sermon through a translator knows) to the process of edifying the church. Why not deliver the sermon or prophecy in the language of the congregation?

The only reason for the Corinthians to deliver the message in tongues was so that those with the gift of tongues could broadcast the fact that they had it. But the love that governed the use of the gifts was a love that "does not brag" (13:4). Paul considered tongues useless for instructing the church because it added an unnecessary, self-promoting, "I can speak in tongues, and you can't" step to the teaching process.

Meaningless sound is useless

Why were uninterpreted tongues of no use for instructing and edifying the church? Sound is useful only if it communicates an understandable message. Music illustrates this perfectly:

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...? (1 Cor 14:7)

When I pick up a guitar, people leave the room. Why? They can't stand to listen to my untrained plinking and plunking. When one of the members of our music team picks up a guitar, people gather around to listen. Why the different responses? The sounds the trained guitarist produces have organized, coherent meaning. Mine don't.

For sound to be of value, it must communicate an understandable message. Besides musical instruments (v. 7), Paul used three other illustrations in verses 7-11 to point this out. The bugler must blow a clear note so the army knows whether to retreat or advance (v. 8). A speaker who mumbles into his beard might have a profound message, but unless he enunciates clearly, his words vanish into thin air (v. 9). The unfamiliar jumble of vowels and consonants of a foreign language sound barbaric to the uninitiated ear (v. 10-11). In short, sounds your mind can't understand are useless.

In the same way, Paul said tongues are useless to instruct, motivate, and edify others unless they are interpreted.

So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church. Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. (1 Cor 14:12-13)

Useless for prayer: 14:14-17

Another of the Corinthians' uninformed practices was praying in uninterpreted tongues in the worship service. "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful" (v. 14). If a person prayed in tongues, but there was no interpretation, the person didn't understand what he was praying, "the mind is unfruitful." Was it acceptable Christian practice for the Corinthians to pray with words they didn't understand? No. In fact, Paul told the Corinthians that he didn't pray that way. He only prayed with words his mind understood.

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.  
(1 Cor 14:15)

Paul was not establishing two different categories of prayer (prayer with the spirit as opposed to prayer with the mind). He was saying that God-honouring prayer and God-honouring singing always include *both* the spirit and the mind. Worship is worship only when the mind understands what the lips are saying.

This agrees with Jesus' instruction on prayer: "When you are praying, do not use *meaningless repetition*" (Matt 6:7, emphasis added). Paul rejected praying with repeated, meaningless, incomprehensible sounds; so did Jesus.

Prayer and understanding

Besides the fact that the one praying in uninterpreted tongues didn't understand the prayer, there was still the issue of the common good.

I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also...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? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. (1 Cor 14:15, 16-17)

The New Testament gift of tongues was present in Corinth; therefore, thanks given in tongues was a real thanks in a real human language (Acts 2:6-11). However, if it wasn't interpreted, the one praying in tongues didn't understand what he was saying, and neither did those around him. The fact that other worshipers couldn't understand an uninterpreted tongues prayer, led Paul to condemn it: "The other person is not edified" (v. 17).

## Immature thinking about tongues: 14:18-25

The Corinthians regularly spoke in uninterpreted tongues in the worship service. Paul said this was useless. Tongues had to be interpreted. Or, better yet, they weren't to be used in the worship service at all. Speaking (or praying or singing) in a language the other worshipers understood was far better than speaking in tongues.

I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue. (1 Cor 14:18-19)

But if tongues were not to be used in the worship service, then where were they to be used?

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

This was not a general instruction to the Corinthians to "grow up" spiritually. It was an instruction given in the context of the gift of tongues. How was their use of tongues childish and immature? Both *how* they used them (without interpretation and for prayer, vv. 2-17) and *where* they used them. Paul told the Corinthians that tongues were not intended for use in the church service. "In the church I desire to speak five words with my mind...rather than ten thousand words in a tongue" (v. 19).<sup>2</sup>

The third way the Corinthians' thinking was immature was in regard to *whom* tongues were to benefit. The Corinthians assumed tongues were for the benefit of believers. In verses 21-25, Paul corrected their ignorance, explaining that tongues, in fact, were not given by God to impact believers. They were primarily designed to impact *unbelievers*.

### Tongues as a sign for unbelievers

Paul started by quoting from Isaiah 28:11, a verse which referred to the Assyrian occupation of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. When Israel heard the Assyrian conquerors speaking in strange tongues (i.e., Akaddian), the unbelieving Israelites were to realise that God's judgement was upon them. In the same way, the New Testament gift of tongues was to be a sign to unbelievers in the Roman world.

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.  
(1 Cor 14:22)

This was a startling discovery for the Corinthians (not to mention many Christians today). Tongues were not given to influence Christians; they were meant to impact unbelievers. The sign gifts (such as tongues and healing) were a God-given,

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<sup>2</sup> Paul did not go so far as to forbid the use of interpreted tongues in the worship service, but he clearly considered it a childish misuse of the gift.

miraculous booster shot in the arm of evangelism. They were evident miracles, testifying that the one doing them was God's messenger (Acts 2:22, of Jesus; Heb 2:4, of the apostles). They were evident miracles, gathering a crowd for the purpose of evangelism (Acts 2:6, 14, 37-38, of tongues; Acts 3:11-12, of healing). In fact, other than their misuse in Corinth, the only occasions during which tongues were spoken in the New Testament were in public, evangelistic settings (Acts 2:4-15, 37-38; 10:43-46; 19:4-6).

Having established that tongues were a sign gift given to impact unbelievers in evangelistic settings, in verses 23-25, Paul again emphasised the superior place of prophecy in the worship service. Prophecy—truth in understandable language—convicted the hearts of sinners and drew them to repentance (v. 25). On the other hand, the disorder of the Corinthians' tongues served only to make people think Christians were crazy babblers: "If the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?" (v. 23).

Rules for worship: 14:26-35

The Corinthian church was so divided by selfishness, it might have been better if they had cancelled their worship services. They came together, "not for better but for the worse" (11:17). To set the church back on track, Paul laid down a series of rules to govern the use of spiritual gifts in the worship service. In their idol-worshipping days, uncontrolled outbursts of ecstatic speaking had been acceptable. No longer. Such outbursts were pagan practices; the Christian God was different than idols: "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (v. 33).

In 14:26, Paul gave the overarching, peacekeeping rule of Christian worship: whatever is done in the worship service has to be done for the good of others.

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. (1 Cor 14:26)

Paul was confident the Corinthians would misapply that rule without more detailed instructions. Therefore, he gave a series of specific rules in verses 27-35. First, he addressed the gift of tongues. Paul did not consider tongues a gift to be used in the worship service (14:19, 22-23), but if the Corinthians immaturely insisted on doing so, the rules were as follows:

- 1) Two, at the most three, were to speak in tongues in a service (v. 27a).
- 2) Love is patient, therefore, the two or three were to wait their turn to speak (v. 27b).
- 3) If tongues were spoken, they always had to be interpreted (v. 27c).
- 4) If there was no one with the gift of interpretation present, tongues were not to be spoken in the worship service at all (v. 28).

Paul gave the rules for prophecy in verses 29-32.

- 1) Two, at the most three, could prophecy in a service (v. 29a).
- 2) Each prophecy had to be evaluated so that false prophets could not mislead the church (v. 29b).
- 3) The two or three who prophesied had to take turns (love is patient). The ecstatic, uncontrolled outbursts of pagan prophets were not acceptable in Christianity. A Christian prophet's spirit (inner man) was subject to him, therefore, God's messages did not come in the form of unstoppable outbursts (vv. 30-32)

The rules for the contribution of women in the worship service were found in verses 34-35.

- 1) Women were not permitted to speak in tongues or prophecy in the church service (v. 34). Presumably this was because men were present (1 Tim 2:11).
- 2) Women were not to interrupt the worship service with questions. Instead, they were to encourage their husband's spiritual leadership by asking him questions at home (v. 35).

Who makes the rules? 14:36-38

Because of their arrogance and immaturity, Paul knew that not everyone in Corinth would accept the God-given rules for spiritual gifts. In fact, some would grind their teeth in anger, searching for any justification to continue their self-styled practice of tongues and prophecy. Paul anticipated their arguments. They would claim that a fresh word from God supported their unbiblical practice. They would claim to be led by the Spirit, making them free to ignore Paul's instructions. Like a man swatting a fly, Paul brushed aside those arguments with a declaration of his apostolic authority.

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

The Corinthians wanted to dictate to Paul what was and was not Christian practice. But who was the source of Christian teaching, they or Paul? The Corinthians had not been eyewitnesses of Christ's resurrection as Paul had. They had not been appointed by Christ to establish the church as Paul had. The Corinthians had not proclaimed the word of God to Paul; he had proclaimed it to them.

Paul was reminding the Corinthians of his apostolic authority. They were not free to overturn Paul's God-inspired instructions with claims of new revelation that came only to them (v. 36), or by claims of super-spirituality that licensed them to ignore God's word.

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. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Cor 14:37-38)

Those who failed to recognise that Paul's commands were from God would, in fact, not be acknowledged by God.

Summary: 14:39-40

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

Verses 39-40 were a short summary. Paul started with a reminder that prophecy—truth in understandable words—was to be preferred to tongues. The end of verse 39 indicates that the abuse of tongues was so bad in the Corinthian church that some were suggesting they ban tongues altogether. Paul rejected that option: in a context where biblical tongues were present, the gift should be allowed to operate, as long as the rules were followed. To conclude, Paul offered one last exhortation: "But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner" (v. 40).

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This paper is intended to supplement the booklet, *Questions and Answers about Healing, Tongues, and Prophecy*, by Joel James. This booklet covers in detail all the questions 1 Corinthians 12-14 raises about healing, prophecy, tongues, Spirit-baptism, and whether sign gifts are present today. You can order *Questions and Answers about Healing, Tongues, and Prophecy* from Word of the Cross.

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