

## “Strive to Excel in Building Up the Church”

### The Twenty-Sixth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians: 14:1-19; Numbers 11:16-30*

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One of the most divisive theological controversies of my lifetime was the charismatic movement with its stress upon speaking in tongues. Whenever the charismatic renewal spread to a new church, it immediately divided the church into two camps—those who experienced what they claimed was a new work of the Holy Spirit which manifested itself in the speaking with tongues, and those who thought such a thing was demonic and who did everything in their power to stamp out the movement before it could spread. Thankfully, that controversy has long since died down. It amazes me that we now are able to tackle with little if any sense of controversy, what was once considered to be a very controversial biblical text and subject.

As we continue our series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we come to chapter 14 and Paul’s discussion of speaking in tongues and proper behavior in Christian worship. It is clear from the Apostles’ discussion that the Corinthians were greatly divided about the role and purpose of tongue-speaking in public worship, and they wrote a letter to Paul in which they asked him about this very thing. Although we don’t have their letter to Paul, and so we don’t know what exactly the Corinthians asked Paul, we do know that it takes Paul three chapters to answer the Corinthian’s question.

In the opening verses of chapter 12, Paul begins by addressing the Corinthian’s faulty understanding of spiritual things (*pneumatikon*), before taking up a discussion of gifts of the Spirit (the *charismata*) in which Paul uses the metaphor of the human body as an illustration of the church of Jesus Christ. In chapter 13, Paul pointed out that love of our brothers and sisters is the context in which any discussion of spiritual gifts must take place. In chapter 14, Paul turns his focus to the specifics of the controversy causing so much consternation among the Corinthians, speaking in tongues during worship.

It is clear from Paul’s response that certain individuals among the Corinthians who had the gift of tongues, thought themselves to be superior to others who did not. Once he has established the proper categories to discuss such things (“spiritual things” and “spiritual gifts”), Paul can now proceed to the specifics of the controversy plaguing the Corinthians, how to properly exercise the gift of tongues so that this gift strengthens the body and that it is exercised in love.<sup>1</sup> Those who claim to be spiritual, must demonstrate love for others, or else they demonstrate that they are nothing but windbags.

As we work our way through Paul’s answer, we need to keep in mind that Paul is addressing a specific problem in the Corinthian church. Paul is not writing a systematic treatise on what to do in worship. Rather, the Apostle is answering a question put to him in writing by the Corinthians. In his response to their question, Paul must steer between two perilous shoals. On the one hand, he must confirm that tongues is a legitimate gift and that it has its place in the church. We should not see Paul as condemning tongue-speaking with faint praise, when he says it is the least of the spiritual gifts.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Paul must demonstrate that tongues is inferior to the gift of prophecy, and that what is important is that

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<sup>1</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 652.

<sup>2</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 234.

the entire congregation be edified, not divided, because love is the more excellent way and love will abide long after spiritual gifts have passed away.<sup>3</sup>

If love was the theme of chapter 13, the over-arching theme of chapter 14 is the building up of the church, the reason why spiritual gifts are given to the church.<sup>4</sup> In verses 1-5 of chapter 14, Paul continues his theme that love is paramount, and that Christians are to eagerly desire the greater spiritual gifts—the latter point being a corrective to those Corinthians who regarded tongue-speaking as the greatest of gifts. Those tongue-speakers who thought of this gift out of proportion with its true significance, need to be reminded that this gift is inferior to prophecy. And so in verse 1, Paul writes, “*pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.*” Literally, Paul says “pursue love” without stopping. Furthermore, Paul goes on to exhort the Corinthians to eagerly desire “spiritual gifts.” But first on Paul’s list is not tongues, but prophecy (Spirit-inspired utterance or “preaching”).<sup>5</sup> This statement is clearly a gentle rebuke of those who thought too highly of themselves because they spoke in tongues. What gift should the Corinthians desire? Prophecy.

The reason why tongue-speaking is inferior to prophecy is that tongue-speaking is unintelligible to the congregation as a whole. As Paul says in verse 2, “*For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.*” Paul’s point in verse 2 is that someone who speaks in a tongue is not speaking to others, (since no one else in the congregation understands him), but to God. The tongue-speaker utters mysteries—things other people could not know unless God reveals it.

The critical issue we must address before we go any farther is simply this: “what is the gift of tongues of which Paul is speaking?” There are three prominent views. The traditional view is that tongues refers to a known language which is unknown to the speaker—the Holy Spirit enables someone to speak a human language they do not know. The so-called “charismatic” interpretation is that tongues is either a known language or a heavenly language (i.e., the tongues of angels mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13:1), which the speaker does not know. In this case, the Spirit enables someone to speak a human language they don’t know, or else enables them to speak in a heavenly language. What I am calling the “alternative” view (and the view I hold), is that tongues is a known language (a local dialect) which the speaker knows but the congregation doesn’t (something like “someone’s native language”).

The traditional view is capably set forth by Leon Morris, who believes that this statement from Paul (“*no one understands him*”) means that the gift of tongues operating in 1 Corinthians 14 is different from that in Acts 2 where the audience “understood the tongue.” This, it seems to me, is one of the great weaknesses of both the traditional and charismatic views, and one of the great strengths of the alternative view which contends that speaking in tongues refers to speaking in a language which the speaker himself knows (but others do not), and which, if not translated, does not edify the entire congregation.<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 235.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 186-187.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Zerhusen, “A New Look at Tongues,” originally published in Biblical Theology Journal (1996) Vol. 26, and “The Problem of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14” also published in Biblical Theology

means that the tongues of Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 are the same thing—the speaker knows the language he is speaking. In Acts 2, everyone in the audience understood Greek, which is why the tongue is not interpreted. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 14, the tongue-speaker is speaking his native dialect. If not translated into Greek (through the gift of “interpretation” or “translation”), people who do not speak the speaker’s language cannot possibly understand him and be edified.

The superiority of prophecy derives from the fact that it is intelligible. Because it is understood it strengthens, encourages and comforts all who hear it, unlike an untranslated tongue which people do not understand because it is given in a language they do not know. This is clearly the case in verses 3-4 where we read, *“on the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.”*

As long as the tongue is not translated, the tongue-speaker is speaking only to himself. The speaker alone is edified because he alone understands what he is saying. But Paul says that the one who prophesies (gives a Spirit-inspired utterance on an Old Testament text) edifies the entire church, since the prophesy (a sermon) is intelligible to all. One strong argument in favor of the alternative view is simply this, “if the tongue is unknown to the speaker [the tongue of angels, or tongues as a heavenly language, or a known language], how is the speaker edified, if what he is speaking is unintelligible to him?”

In verse 5, Paul’s words echo Numbers 11 (our Old Testament lesson). The Apostle offers his own perspective on speaking in tongues. *“Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”* Paul does not in any sense depreciate the gift of tongues—the Apostle wishes that all Christians possessed this gift, just as Moses wished that all the Israelites were prophets! But Paul would rather see Christians prophesy because those who do so are greater than those who speak in tongues. The reason for this superiority is the intelligibility of prophesy in light of the lack of intelligibility of tongues. But if the tongue is interpreted (translated) it is now on par with prophesy. Why? Because people understand the tongue and it edifies the entire church, not just the tongue-speaker.

In verses 6-12, Paul argues that when tongues are spoken in worship they need to be understood. The problem with tongues as currently practiced by the Corinthians is that they are unintelligible. When spoken and not interpreted this caused great disruption in the church. Whether the speaker knows the language of the tongue or not, the issue causing so much consternation is that the members of the church do not understand. This becomes clear in verses 6. *“Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?”* Once again, despite the rebuke, Paul speaks to the Corinthians with great affection—“brothers.” Whether Paul is speaking in this verse of an anticipated future visit, or whether he’s offering yet another rhetorical question (typical throughout Paul’s letters) is not clear. If Paul comes to Corinth and speaks in tongues, what good will it be? None. But if Paul comes and brings some revelation, word of knowledge, prophecy or word of instruction (catechesis) then the church will be edified. Why? Because these things are all intelligible, while tongues is not (unless interpreted or translated).

Paul now uses several analogies to make his point about intelligibility in verses 7 and 8. *“If even lifeless*

*instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?"* Again, if the bugle does not sound a clear call and just makes noise, chaos results on the battlefield. If there is no tune, then these instruments are nothing but useless noise makers. The same thing holds true for the Corinthians. *"So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air."* The tongue-speakers in Corinth are like flutes, harps and trumpets making loud sounds, but not playing tunes, and certainly not playing the same tune at the same time. Unless a tongue is interpreted (or translated), no one will know what the speaker is saying, hence the tongue-speaker is speaking to the air and chaos in the church is the result.

In verse 10, Paul adds that *"there are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning."* While this verse is difficult to translate, Paul's point is very simple. There are many different languages in the world, but all of them have meaning to those who speak them. I understand Paul to be saying that tongues is not a heavenly or angelic language, but a known language and therefore capable of translation (which may or may not be known to the speaker).

The reason why unintelligibility is such a problem is now spelled out by Paul in verses 11. *"But if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me."* Both the Greeks and Romans considered people they could not understand to be "barbarians" (foreigners). We know that as a merchant seaport, Corinth would be home to many immigrants, transient laborers and traders who did not speak Greek as their primary language, although virtually everyone engaged in commerce in that period had to know enough Greek or Latin to conduct business. This is the case with the Corinthian tongue-speakers. Unless their tongue is translated, those speaking are like foreigners. The language barrier must be overcome so that people are not treated like barbarians.

In verse 12, Paul zeroes in on the issue. *"So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church."* Since this is case with the Corinthians and the tongue-speaking renders them as foreigners to each other, the Corinthians should continue to desire spiritual gifts as they have been doing, but they should especially desire those gifts that build up the church (i.e. the greater gifts such as prophecy). The problem is not their zeal, but their lack of zeal. The Corinthians should be eager to use their spiritual gifts to build up the church. Instead, they are treating each other like foreigners because they cannot understand the tongue-speaker! In doing so, they are behaving like the pagans they once were.

On a practical level, what does it mean to desire the greater gifts so as to build each other up. Paul will now tell us in verses 13-19. Because an untranslated tongue is unintelligible (and therefore unable to edify those who do not understand it), people who pray in tongues should likewise pray that they be able to interpret that tongue. In verse 13, Paul writes, *"therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret."* This text is problematic for the alternative view which sees tongues as a language known to the tongue-speaker but unknown to the congregation. Why would someone who understood the language he was speaking need to pray for the gift of interpretation?

This objection can be answered by observing how tongues were to be used in the churches.<sup>7</sup> First, according to the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28, not all of the gifts of the Spirit mentioned

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Zerhusen, "The Problem of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14" also published in Biblical Theology Journal (1997) Vol. 27, (page number not indicated).

require a dramatic supernatural manifestation—i.e., gifts of administration and helping others (for example). The translation (interpretation) of tongues does not necessarily require a miraculous ability. But someone with this gift (the ability to translate a local dialect into clear and intelligible Greek), would have been of great value to the church in the edification of others. The same thing can be said of those who were good at administration and helping the poor.

Second, verse 28 provides, in part, an explanation of verse 13. If the tongue-speaker is competent in his own language as well as in Greek, then he should go ahead and interpret his own tongue, so that the entire church can be edified. But if he's not competent to translate his own tongue into Greek, (that is, his Greek is not good enough) then the rule set forth by Paul in verse 28 applies: *“But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.”* In the case in which the tongue-speaker is not competent in Greek, the tongue-speaker should pray to acquire the language skills needed to be able to translate his own tongue (language) into Greek.

Finally, if speaking in tongues is a miraculous ability, then the situation described in verse 28 theoretically should never occur—are we really to believe that God gives the tongue-speaker the supernatural ability to speak a language he does not know, but the Holy Spirit then fails to provide the church with someone able to interpret the tongue the Spirit just uttered? That makes no sense. And this is why I think the alternative view makes the best sense of all the issues raised in this passage.

In verses 14-15, Paul goes on to describe his own practice regarding speaking in tongues. *“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.”* Up to this point, Paul has been speaking of the Corinthian situation, but now speaks of his own personal practice. When Paul prays in a tongue his spirit prays, but his mind (*nous*) remains “unfruitful.”

This passage is very important because in it, Paul assigns a quite prominent role to the intellectual life of a Christian—i.e. “the mind.” Some Pentecostals and charismatics have argued that speaking in tongues is a good thing because in it we by-pass the mind (the rational) so that our spirits speak to God directly apart from human rationality. This view is certainly not in line with what Paul describes here and is more akin to ancient Gnosticism. Paul desires to pray and sing with his spirit and mind on the same page. Prayer and worship are to be intellectual activities, with mind and heart focused upon the same things. Where the mind goes, the heart will follow.

On their face, these two verses also seem to mitigate against the alternative view I am articulating. If Paul says that his mind is unfruitful (*akarpos*) when he sings, prays or speaks in a tongue, how then can he understand the tongue he is speaking? But as one writer points out, it is a mistake to think of “unfruitful” as passive (“inactive”). Rather the term is active and has the sense that “my spirit prays but my mind does not produce fruit in others.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, Paul says nothing about whether he himself understands the words, only that they do not bear fruit in others if they are not intelligible.

In verses 16-19, Paul now turns to the practice of tongue-speaking. In verse 16, he writes, *“Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?”* The key to understanding this verse is the

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Zerhusen, “The Problem of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14” also published in Biblical Theology Journal (1997) Vol. 27, (page number not indicated).

meaning of the word *idiotai* (one who does not know). How can people give agreement (say “Amen”) when they don’t understand what is said? Some think of this as a reference to unbelievers who are in the midst of believers, but it is probably better to think of this as people who are new Christians or inquirers, and who do not yet fully understand what is going on (whether they be new converts, or unbelievers going through the process of conversion).

Regardless of the nuances of the word, Paul is saying that those who do not understand the tongue (because it is unintelligible), will say “Amen,” but they don’t fully understand what is going on. This is because an untranslated (i.e., uninterpreted tongue) is unintelligible. But such people don’t know what is going on, so they just say “Amen!” like everyone else is doing. Thus in verse 17, we read, “*for you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.*”

If you give thanks for what God has done, so be it. But those who don’t understand the tongue remain unedified. They are saying “amen” to something they don’t fully understand. This is why Paul goes on to say in verses 18-19, “*I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*” While the gift of tongues has a very important role to play, if a tongue is uninterpreted, no one in the church is edified.

Paul is thankful he speaks in tongues. According to the alternative view, this is a reference to Paul’s private worship, or to his preaching the gospel and participating in worship in a number of contexts where Greek was not spoken. There is much evidence for this throughout the Book of Acts. According to the traditional and charismatic views, this is Paul’s speaking an ecstatic utterance in private worship. But, in the public assembly which has gathered for worship, how much better for everything to be understood! Each of the three views agree on this point! Five words which are understood are better than ten-thousand words in a tongue which is not translated.

**H**ow does Paul discussion of tongues apply to us today? Throughout his answer to the Corinthian’s question, Paul repeatedly focuses upon the work of the Spirit in giving gifts for the common good, equipping officers in the church (where the greater gifts are to be exercised) and reminding us that love is the more excellent way. While there were many good things associated with the charismatic renewal, it is hard to read these chapters and come away believing that a genuine work of the Holy Spirit would immediately divide Christ’s church into two factions—those who speak in tongues and those who do not.

The problem in Corinth was that people were misusing the gifts (including tongues) and the result was chaos and division during worship and that certain individuals were proud that they had been given gifts of the Spirit. The application for us is that we too must seek the greater gifts for the common good, while at the same time do everything in light of the more excellent way, which is love. And this love for our brothers and sisters will only arise within us as we look to the love of God in Jesus Christ, when we consider Jesus’ suffering and dying for all of our sins.

Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians—“Strive to excel in building up the church”—applies to us. We do this by grounding everything we do in our confession that Jesus is Lord. We proclaim the finished work of Christ on behalf of sinners to everyone who will listen. We earnestly desire the higher gifts because we know this strengthens our church and helps us withstand the pagan temptations all around us. In light of the cross of Christ, we pursue the more excellent way of love, because love abides long after the gift of tongues is gone. We do this by focusing upon the clear proclamation of the word of God (prophecy) in

which we proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. And in do so, the message of the gospel is intelligible to all and Christ's church will grow strong.