

So That the Church May be Built Up (1 Cor. 14:1–5)

By Jacob Gerber

At the end of 1 Corinthians 12, Paul made a transitional statement to lead from his discussion of spiritual gifts into a careful study of the nature of love as they relate to the exercise of spiritual gifts: “But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). That “still more excellent way” is love, and now that Paul has thoroughly mapped out the way of love, he returns to the subject of the exercise of the spiritual gifts. In these first five verses, Paul lays out his primary argument for governing the exercise of spiritual gifts: *use your gifts for building up, not for boasting.*

Our Love Directs Our Gifts (1 Cor. 14:1)

The first verse of 1 Corinthians 14 is quite similar to the last verse of chapter 12: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1).¹ We should note, for example, that Paul used the same word “eagerly desire” in relation to the gifts in both 1 Corinthians 12:31 and 14:1.² Since Paul says virtually the same thing at the end of chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 14, we learn something significant about his purpose for chapter 13, as well as about the direction Paul intends to go here in 1 Corinthians 14. Namely, Paul wants us to see how the *love* described in chapter 13 must be the basis for the exercise of the spiritual gifts in the church.

So, in regard to love, Paul tells us to “pursue love.” This word for “pursue” is quite strong, as Paul himself uses it elsewhere to describe his former intense pursuit of the church as a persecutor: “I *persecuted* the church” (1 Cor. 15:9).³ We must pursue love as relentlessly as Paul pursued the church: “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3). Paul commonly uses this word “as a metaphor for spiritual effort (cf. Rom. 9:30, 31; 12:13; 14:19; Phil. 3:12, 14; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22).”⁴

Love, however, requires a context for its exercise. So, after urging the Corinthians to pursue love, he tells them that they should *then* earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.⁵ Love must govern the exercise of spiritual gifts, so that an individual Christian may use his spiritual gifts for the sake of

¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 631.

² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 278.

³ Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 252.

⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 631.

⁵ “The little conjunction after *Pursue love* can be translated either as ‘and’ or as ‘but,’ and in my larger commentary I proposed ‘but.’ On further reflection over five more years I conclude that more than a contrast alone is at stake, and follow NRSV’s ‘then,’ to translate: *Pursue love and then be eager for gifts.*” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 236.)

others, and not to benefit himself alone.⁶ R. C. H. Lenski summarizes Paul’s point well: “Gifts are the hands through which love serves.”⁷ As we will see, the key test is whether the exercise of spiritual gifts “builds up” (1 Cor. 14:3, 4 [x2], 5, 12, 17, 26) others in the church.⁸ It is because of this building-up quality that Paul singles out the gift of prophecy as a gift that the Corinthians should *especially* earnestly desire (1 Cor. 14:1).

Before we examine Paul’s reasons for exalting prophecy above the other gifts (and especially above the gift of tongues), we should observe that, while Paul primarily used the word *charismata* (i.e., “grace-gifts”) in 1 Corinthians 12 (v. 4, 9, 28, 30, 31), Paul here uses the word *pneumatika* (i.e., “spiritual things”; 1 Cor. 12:1; 14:1, 37), a word that Paul consistently uses to refer to spiritual gifts related to speech.⁹ Thus, *charismata* may be the broader category (*genus*) that encompasses *all* the gifts that Christ gives to his church, while *pneumatika* contains only one subset of these gifts (*species*), particularly related to inspired speech. Accordingly, the ESV translates *charismata* merely as “gifts,” while translating *pneumatika* as “spiritual gifts.” This distinction helps to see why specific (spiritual, *pneumatika*) gifts expired at the end of the apostolic age, while many of the other (grace, *charismata*) gifts continue in the church throughout all ages. The spiritual gifts were connected with the ministry of the apostles, who interpreted “spiritual things [*pneumatika*] to spiritual people [*pneumatikois*]” (1 Cor. 2:13). Elsewhere, Paul writes that he had the ability to impart “some spiritual gift” (*charisma... pneumatikon*) to a church as a part of his apostolic ministry (Rom. 1:11). Once the apostles died out, many of the *grace-gifts* (broad category; the *genus*) continued, but the *spiritual gifts* (subset of the broader category; i.e., one kind or *species* of *charismata*) could no longer be imparted.

Our Location Determines Our Service (1 Cor. 14:2–4)

Paul’s reasons against uninterpreted speaking in tongues will take us through verse 25 of this chapter. Paul begins, though, by contrasting uninterpreted tongues against prophecy according to the audience. The one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men, but to God, since “no one understands him,” while the one who prophesies speaks to people (1 Cor. 14:2–3). Some interpreters see the phrase “no one understands him” as proof that this gift is different from the tongues-speaking

⁶ “Love is to be yoked to the Corinthians’ zeal for spiritual gifts. With love as their aim, it will prevent them from being zealous only for those gifts that will enable them to steal the show and outshine others.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 631–32.)

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 576.

⁸ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 234–35.

⁹ “Paul returns to the Spirit-language (τὰ πνευματικά, *ta pneumatika*) with which he opened this discourse in 12:1, rather than continuing with the grace-gift language he took up in 12:4 and used in 12:9, 28, 30, 31. I agree with the distinction that Ellis (1978: 24) makes that τὰ πνευματικά applies specifically to ‘gifts of inspired perception, verbal proclamation and/or its interpretation.’ It is related to speaking in the Spirit (see the discussion on 12:1). Thiselton (2000: 1083) thinks that the term refers to ‘the gifts of the Spirit for utterance’ within the context of worship (though Thiselton gives the term a completely different meaning in 12:1 [see 2000: 930]). The predominance of the verb ‘to speak’ (λαλεῖν, *lalein*), twenty-four times in chapter 14, makes clear that Paul has in mind gifts of speech: glossolalia and prophecy.” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 632.)

of Acts 2, where people understood what was spoken.¹⁰ This interpretation, however, reads too much into Paul’s words. Paul cannot mean that *absolutely* no one understands the speaker, since Paul will go on in just a few verses to identify someone who *does* understand: the one who interprets (1 Cor. 14:5). The word translated here as “tongues” is a word that refers to human languages, not ecstatic utterances.¹¹ Thus, in context, Paul clearly means that no one *present* could understand the languages that were being spoken, without the help of an interpreter.¹² As for “mysteries,” Paul probably means these “mysteries” in the same sense as he just used the word in 1 Corinthians 13:2: “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge....”¹³ To utter “mysteries” is to prophesy, although in the case of uninterpreted tongues, only God can understand the meaning.

The difference between the situation in Corinth and the situation in Acts 2, then, is critical to understanding Paul’s meaning here in 1 Corinthians 14. In Acts 2, there were a *variety* of people present, who spoke a *great number* of different languages, and each of them heard the gospel in his own, native language: “And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?...we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:8, 11). A bit later, Paul will state that “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers” (1 Cor. 14:22). Taken together, we see the purpose of the gift of tongues in the early church: the supernatural, Spirit-inspired ability to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to new (i.e., unbelieving) people groups in their own, native languages. This gift was used effectively on the Day of Pentecost to great effect, leading three thousand people to faith in Christ (Acts 2:41). The Corinthians, however, were misusing the gift of tongues. They were not seeking to reach new, unbelieving people groups with the gospel. Rather, they were showing off their spiritual eloquence among believers who spoke the same language in the context of a corporate worship service.

In contrast to the uselessness of untranslated tongues in a corporate worship service of believers who all speak the same language, Paul commends prophecy in four ways: its vernacular language, upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation. First, Paul says that “the one who prophesies speaks to people” (1 Cor. 14:3)—that is, he speaks to the people in their own, vernacular language.¹⁴ Second, Paul here uses the word “upbuilding” or “edification,” the first of seven occurrences in this chapter. As we will see, Paul’s concern is toward building up believers in the teaching and doctrine of Christianity, training them “to piety, to faith, to the worship and fear of God, and the duties of holiness and righteousness.”¹⁵ Third, the word “encouragement” reflects a word (*paraklēsis*) that may be translated either along the lines of comfort, or of admonition and exhortation. Since the final word in this sequence touches on the former idea, we should probably understand this more along the latter lines.¹⁶ Indeed, this seems to be the idea when the same word appears in another passage

¹⁰ For example, Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 184.

¹¹ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 286.

¹² Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 279.

¹³ Beale and Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery*, 126.

¹⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 280.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 436. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xxi.i.html>>

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 578.

about spiritual gifts: “...the one who *exhorts*, in his *exhortation*...” (Rom. 12:8). Fourth, the precise word for “consolation” appears only here in the New Testament, but the word appears in another form to describe the consolation given to the bereaved (John 11:19, 31).¹⁷ Thus, this word seems to get at the idea of giving comfort and encouragement in the midst of suffering and persecution.¹⁸

Taken together, Paul sees the work of prophecy as directly aimed at the hearers (i.e., in their own language), and set to accomplish a broad range of objectives. For upbuilding, we may see the work of a *teacher*. For encouragement and consolation, we may see the work of a *pastor*. Paul teaches that these two roles must go together when he speaks of the office of the “pastor-teacher” (Eph. 4:11). There is a sense, then, in which a pastor does the work of prophecy; however, the work that Paul describes here refers to the first generation work in the early church of receiving revelations from God directly. Pastors today do not receive new revelations directly from the Lord. Nevertheless, as pastors teach, exhort, and console the church today, they continue to put God’s once-for-all revelation to use in the same way as prophets did in the early church, as they were originally receiving it.

So, Paul observes that the one who speaks in a language unknown to the congregation “builds up” himself alone, while the one who prophesies (i.e., in the language of the people) “builds up” the whole church (1 Cor. 14:4). This phrase may suggest that the one speaking in tongues understood what he was saying, even when he was not able to translate it.¹⁹ On the other hand, this may mean that the upbuilding for the speaker could have taken place apart from the mind (1 Cor. 14:14). Even here, though, Paul seems to understand that the speaker has some control over whether or not his mind will be involved in understanding what he is saying (1 Cor. 14:15).

Our Language Distinguishes Prophecy from Tongues (1 Cor. 14:5)

All of this does not mean that Paul devalues or denigrates the gift of speaking in tongues. To correct any misunderstanding, Paul insists that he wants *all* the Corinthians to speak in tongues (1 Cor. 14:5a; cf. Num. 11:29).²⁰ More than this, however, Paul wants all the Corinthians to prophesy (1 Cor. 14:5b). Although both gifts are valuable in the church, there is a clear priority to the gift of prophecy: “the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues...” (1 Cor. 14:5c). Of course, Paul is saying that the gift of prophecy is *functionally* greater, not that the prophet is *essentially* greater than the one gifted in tongues (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–30).²¹ God does not give any gifts in vain to his church.²²

Indeed, the functional superiority of prophecy over tongues does not have to do with the *content* of the message, but of the *comprehensibility* of the message. To those who understand the language being spoken, the gift of tongues carries great value (cf. Acts 2). Even for those who do not

¹⁷ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 184.

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 578.

¹⁹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 281.

²⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 634–35.

²¹ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 287.

²² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 437. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xxi.i.html>>

understand the language being spoken, the message spoken in tongues can *become* edifying if translated: “...unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up” (1 Cor. 14:5d). In other words, if someone interprets whatever is spoken in another language, this interpretation “had the effect of turning tongues into prophecy.”²³ This is a critical point, since it demonstrates that speaking in tongues and prophecy were essentially the same thing, but only in different languages. Speaking in tongues articulated prophecy to *unbelievers* in foreign languages to the speakers, but native languages to the hearers (Acts 2:8–11; 1 Cor. 14:22), while prophecy articulated prophecy to *believers* in the common language of the speaker *and* the hearers (1 Cor. 14:22). Whether the interpreter is the same person as the speaker, or a different person, is impossible to determine from the grammar of this verse.²⁴

Discussion Questions

1. How does Paul understand the relationship between *love* and *gifts* (1 Cor. 14:1)? What is the difference between *pursuing* love and *earnestly desiring* the spiritual gifts? Why does Paul put such a priority on love? Why does he relegate gifts to a secondary role, in relationship to love? What should we make of the distinction Paul makes between the broader category of *gifts* (*charismata*), compared with the smaller subcategory of *spiritual gifts* (*pneumatika*)?
2. What do Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 teach us about the gifts of tongues? In the exercise of the gift of tongues, does the speaker naturally understand the language (Acts 2:7; 1 Cor. 14:2)? In what circumstances do the hearers of the one speaking in tongues understand the tongue (Acts 2:8–11; 1 Cor. 14:22)? In what circumstances would the hearers of the one speaking in tongues *not* understand the speaker (1 Cor. 14:2)? What does this suggest about the motives of the Corinthians for speaking in tongues during corporate worship of believers who spoke a common language (1 Cor. 14:4)?
3. What benefits does prophecy have (1 Cor. 14:3)? What does Paul mean by *upbuilding*? What does Paul mean by *encouragement*? What does Paul mean by *consolation*? How might have prophecy have conferred those benefits during corporate worship in the early church, as prophets received new, direct revelations from God? How do we receive these benefits during corporate worship today, now that we no longer receive new revelations from God? Which situation do you think is better? Why?

²³ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 316.

²⁴ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 238.