

## PREFACE

From the beginning of this letter, the apostle Paul has made it his primary purpose to restore in the Corinthians the practice of proper, God-honoring worship. He has labored in this letter to get the Corinthians to get their focus off themselves and on, first, Christ Jesus and, second, on their brothers and sisters in Christ. Throughout the various topics addressed, this has been his purpose. For example,

- At the outset, in Chapter One, he addresses the injurious divisions in the church; instead of edifying the assembly, they were tearing it apart.
- In Chapters One and Two Paul speaks against the earthly and fleshly wisdom seeping like a poison into the church—the worldly, individual-exalting wisdom that stood in opposition to the wisdom of the Spirit of God.
- In Chapter Five he raises a painful topic that has been reported to him: that “someone has his father’s wife.” They were apparently praising themselves for their “grace” in allowing this in their midst (v5:2). Thus they were actually sanctioning behavior that was undermining the integrity of the body of Christ. Paul’s judgment and command? “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (v5:13).
- Paul addresses another way they were undermining the integrity of the church in Chapter Six: certain individuals in the church were suing their brothers in Christ in the civil courts—before unbelievers.
- Later in that chapter he speaks to the sexual and marital corruption that was taking place—not just doing harm to the unity of the church, but harm to the unity of those who were married, and he continues this into Chapter Seven.
- In Chapters Eight through Ten the apostle supplies a detailed treatise on food sacrificed to idols—that is, there were some who saw no harm in this, but by their public actions were doing great harm to the faith of others in the body.

All of these bad practices cause harm to the assembly as a whole, as well as individuals in the assembly. These sinful practices, by extension, harm and dilute their *worship* because of the resulting corruption to the body. They destroy the necessary unity of the church. These practices exalt the *worshiper* rather than the God who is being (supposedly) worshiped.

So far, for the most part, Paul’s counsel and commands have been related to proper worship by extension; in Chapter Eleven he begins to address it head-on.

- In the first part of Chapter Eleven Paul speaks to the concept of “headship,” the hierarchy of authority in the kingdom—God the Father is the head of Christ, Christ the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman—and how the manner in which we physically present ourselves impacts the integrity of worship in the assembly.
- In the second part of Chapter Eleven he moves to a critique of their observance of the Lord’s Supper, and how cultural, societal, and economic strata were dividing the church during this most solemn occasion.
- In Chapter Twelve Paul gets specific regarding the apportionment of Spirit-gifts in the church, but this is presented, still, from the angle of church unity. His goal is to reorient the Corinthians from seeing their Spirit-gifts as something which exalts *themselves*, to seeing them for what they truly are: gifts distributed by God for the edification of the church—the body of Christ. He bookends this emphasis, first, in v27: “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Then, near the end of Chapter Twelve, he adds the second bookend.

### Read 1 Corinthians 12:24b-27.

- Finally, in Chapter Thirteen, Paul emphasizes the importance—and permanence—of love over *all* the Spirit-gifts—not romantic love or brotherly love, but *agape*, the active, eternal, sacrificial love that God through Christ has for the church. This is the binding love that sets the body of Christ apart from every other institution on earth. It is in the sphere of this love that the local assembly comes together as a unified whole before the throne of God.

Now, in Chapter Fourteen, Paul presents an in-depth comparison of the *least* important gift for the edification of the church (tongues), to the *most* important gift for the edification of the church (prophecy). And, once again, before the end of the chapter he will tie this into its role in corporate instruction and worship.

### Read 1 Corinthians 14:23-25.

Now let’s read our first passage in Chapter Fourteen.

### Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-4.

*Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.*

The first thing we should note is that there is a difference between the verbs “pursuing” and “desire”—even “desire earnestly.” Regarding the first, once again the NIVs disappoint, along with the KJV, with the anemic “follow.” Because *agape* is an active form of love, our pursuit of it is likewise to be active, imperative. *Diokete*—a word that is typically used in the negative (such as chasing after someone to do them harm), but one that Paul likes to use in a positive way—means to strive for, seek after, hunt, drive on. The verb tense means that we are *to commit to a long term pursuit of agape, we are to keep on doing this as a general habit or lifestyle.*

Though still active and imperative, *zeloute* (“desire earnestly”) is slightly less active than *diokete*. Paul here is emphasizing the pursuit of love. The word that ties them together, *de*, can be adversative (but, or the NASB “yet”) but all the rest of our common translations make it “and,” which I think is the best. The idea here is that we are to take all of what Paul has been saying about *agape* and *live* that form of love as we actively desire Spirit-gifts—especially the Spirit-gift of prophecy. Desire Spirit-gifts with *agape*. Use your Spirit-gifts with *agape*. Then in vv2-4 Paul fleshes out the statement in v1.

Perhaps this would be a good time to refresh our understanding of what Paul means by the Spirit-gift of prophecy. He is going to be spending most of this chapter telling the Corinthians—and us—that it is the superior gift in the church, so we had better understand what it is.

We know that prophecy was an integral part of the early church; for the apostle Paul it was a desired and preferred gift of the Spirit, for it was instrumental—perhaps even essential—in the “edification and exhortation and consolation” of the church.

The primary commentators I have been using for this study (David Garland, Gordon Fee, and John MacArthur) all agree that the Spirit-gift of prophecy remains in effect today. But we need to clearly define it, and define the differences between it and the gifts of the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge (teaching and preaching). When I prepare these lessons, I prepare to teach by reading, studying, and praying; as I am doing this I write down in my notes what I will be teaching. In other words, when a teacher teaches and a pastor preaches there is *preparation beforehand*, and, more often than not, some form of written notes to guide his or her thoughts. With *prophetic* utterances there is none of that. The individual just speaks, for the benefit of others, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (from [Session 120](#))

The main difference between tongues and prophecy is that tongues are in an unintelligible language, while prophecy is in the language of the speaker.

v2

*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.*

Speaking in tongues stands in stark contrast to prophecy, for on a human—and especially human *senses*—level, it is utterly meaningless. Speaking in tongues is simply the audible manifestation of the believer’s spirit speaking to God by means of spirit language—I contend, the language of heaven, as it were. It is unintelligible and meaningless to anyone who hears it. It can gloriously profit the believer in his or her prayer closet, but has marginal use in the assembly of the church.

For one example, there are moments in private prayer when the Spirit overwhelms, often in a time of spiritual crisis. We desperately need communion with our God—solace, encouragement, perhaps even rebuke. The world and its ways have become too much for us; we have seemingly lost touch with our Lord. In His mercy and grace He reaches down and reattaches the severed cord; we are lifted up and out of the clutches of this fallen world, and we once again exult in His presence. On occasion this mystical revival might even become supernaturally *verbal*; the believer may not even be aware that he is speaking the language of heaven.

But none of this edifies the church, only the individual.

v3

*But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.*

**Question:** In v2, regarding tongues, who is the recipient? (Answer: God.)

**Question:** In v3, regarding prophecy, who is the recipient? (Answer: people.)

And the *reasons* are different, as well. No actual purpose is stated in v2 for speaking to God in tongues—implied, that is part of the “mysteries” (*mysteria*)—although the speaker undoubtedly receives some benefit, as in the example above. But in v3 Paul states at least three reasons for prophecy: edification, exhortation, and consolation.

Paul reiterates his position in v4.

v4

*One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.*

Some like to use this verse to prove that Paul *denigrates* the gift of speaking in tongues—*you're just edifying yourself, you self-centered lout!*—in contrast to church edifying prophecy. If that be the case, then Paul should have had a better proofreader, for he is then talking out of both sides of his mouth.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 12:28.**

If in Chapter Twelve Paul told us that “tongues” is one of the gifts appointed by God, then why would he then deem it bad in 14:4? [Look at the end of this chapter.](#)

### **Read 1 Corinthians 14:39.**

Here he concludes the comparison of the two gifts by stating flat-out: “Do not forbid to speak in tongues.”

The apostle is teaching not the *elimination* of tongues, but for placing this Spirit-gift in the proper context. There is nothing wrong with edifying—building up—our own faith and sanctification in Christ, so long as we also participate, through the use of our Spirit-gifts, in the edification of others.