

**PREFACE**

It is clear from this letter that the apostle Paul recognized the potential of those in the Corinth church.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-7.**

The Corinth church was well-endowed by God in *charismati*—i.e., Spirit-gifts. In our passage today he reveals that not only had God, in His *charis*, been generous to them, they remained “zealous” for more.

**Read 1 Corinthians 14:12.**

Even so—even with the abundance of Spirit-gifts that they had from God, they remained immature.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.**

Paul recognized their great potential; they had been thoroughly equipped by God for not just the edification of each other, but perhaps beyond their precincts—yet time and again they had veered off-course, taken a left turn in their faith-lives. In just the first thirteen chapters of this letter we have seen plenty of evidence for this—especially in their coarse and un-brotherly behavior toward each other.

What was in tatters was not just their fellowship with each other, but their fellowship with God—the one who, in His grace, had generously equipped them for good (12:7). Their corporate worship had degenerated into a madhouse of competing tongues without interpretation, and disorganized teaching, prophesying, and psalms.

In our passage today Paul continues leading the church in Corinth toward the goal of more clarity—clarity in both their speaking to each other, and in their worship of God. Acknowledging their wealth of Spirit-gifts, as well as their zeal for them (or was it really just fascination?), the apostle nonetheless continues to refocus their use of these *charisma* for the benefit of the church.

**Read 1 Corinthians 14:10-14.**

## v10

*There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning.*

Some have used this verse to claim, *See, Paul is saying that “speaking in tongues” refers to different foreign, but known languages.* Actually this analogy proves just the opposite.

Throughout his discussion of this *charisma* Paul has been using the Greek *glossa*, translated “tongue.” Here, however, he switches to *phōnōn*, translated “languages” or “voices,” because this is just an analogy; he is saying that—like public speaking in tongues—all these foreign tongues in the world have meaning for the one who knows the language, but no meaning at all for the one who does not know the language.

## v11

*If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.*

I have pointed out before that the word transliterated “barbarian,” the Greek *barbaros*, was originally onomatopoeic—that is, a word that imitates the sound associated with an object or person. For example, we refer to a certain bird as a “bob white,” because its call sounds like that; same with the whippoorwill. Likewise, to the Greeks, some foreign tongues sounded like gibberish: bar-bar-bar-bar. Hence, *barbaros*. It was common to use this term in a derogatory way, but Paul is not using it so. A barbarian was simply someone who spoke a language one did not understand.

## v12

*So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.*

You can’t say it much clearer than that: *You are a people eager for things of the Spirit. Great. Wonderful. Now, let’s just utilize those gifts to build up the church, rather than building up your individual reputations as “spiritual” people.*

Paul uses the Greek *pneumatōn*; this is translated in our versions “spiritual gifts,” “manifestations of the Spirit” (ESV), and “gifts of the Spirit.” It is commonly understood that this refers to a zeal the Corinthians had for all things spiritual—*charisma* in general. Gordon Fee proposes a more focused interpretation.

*Fee:* More likely this refers especially to their desire for one particular manifestation of the Spirit, the gift of speaking in tongues, which was for them the sure evidence of their being *pneumatikos* (a person of the Spirit, hence “spiritual”).

Let's broaden this out for a moment, to look at the condition of the forest rather than the disease in just one tree. Let's consider for a moment the possibility that the apostle's use of the word "barbarian," or "foreigner" was meant to have a sharper impact on the Corinthians than we might first imagine.

Paul opened this letter with a criticism of the factionalism that was taking place in the Corinth church, how the body was being subdivided because of different belief systems as the result of one group following one teacher while other groups followed others (1:11-13). Thus instead of unity, lines were being drawn to alienate one group in the church from another. Paul draws the topic to a close at the end of Chapter Three, calling for unity under Christ.

### Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

Now fast-forward to Chapter Fourteen. How ironic that in their abundance of Spirit-gifts, the one they most prized, and had the greatest zeal to obtain, was the Spirit-gift of speaking in tongues. This gift more than any other would separate the haves from the have-nots—in fact, would separate even the haves from other haves! Their most prized gift, used in the corporate assembly without interpretation glorified only the speaker, and edified no one else. But worse than that, it was fashioning an increasingly bizarre congregation of *foreigners*. This casts into shade the situation addressed by Paul in the earlier chapters.

In corporate worship they were speaking in languages no one else understood—effectively *reversing* the situation in Acts 2. Instead of bringing *together* disparate groups under the gospel by the supernatural use of foreign tongues, the Corinthians were employing, as Paul puts it, "barbarian" tongues that served only to subdivide the church even further. How pertinent then the command of v13.

v13

*Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.*

A Lampel Paraphrase: *Therefore—for this reason: the importance of building up the church in spite of the use of unintelligible tongues—pray that even you yourself would translate into intelligible language what you have spoken.*

Interpretation of tongues is a Spirit-gift as well (12:10), and need not be carried out by a different person. How might this play out in a worship service? The Holy Spirit might move mightily in an individual in the congregation to bring forth prophecy, but in the language of heaven (tongues). The individual, sensing this, would quickly pray, "Lord God, if You choose to speak through me in Your own language, please grant me as well the gift of interpretation, so that in this act You and Your Son are glorified, and the church is edified."

*For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.*

There is considerable disagreement on precisely what Paul is saying here. We will broach the subject here, but further enlightenment must wait till we examine what Paul writes in the subsequent verses. He himself will help explain what he writes here.

There are principally two problem areas in this sentence. First, what does Paul mean by “my spirit,” and second, is he saying that when one prays in the spirit the mind checks out altogether (*arkapos*: unfruitful, barren, unproductive, fallow ground)? David Garland cites R. Collins, who writes something that gets us headed in the right direction.

The spirit is the faculty by which one is in communion with the deity. The mind is an organ of thought that allows for ordinary communication among human beings.

I like to think of this in terms of the contradiction with which all believers must struggle: being, in Christ, converted to a spiritual being, yet still residing in fallen flesh. I don’t believe Paul is saying that when his spirit prays (e.g., tongues), his mind is 100% dead in the water, nor would he say that the reverse is true. He touches on this in the next verse.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 14:15.**

Nevertheless there are times when one is predominate. If you are sitting in a classroom, making every effort to understand and learn advanced calculus, your mind is predominate and your spirit is not. But the study of calculus cannot sever the connection between your spirit and God’s Spirit. In our next session we will continue into this. But I want to conclude with something Gordon Fee writes about the personal and the corporate.

In times when Charismatic utterances experience something of a revival in the church, this paragraph [vv6-13] is especially important to those in such a renewal. The point of everything in corporate worship is not personal experience in the Spirit, but building up the church itself. Much that comes under the banner of charismatic or pentecostal worship seems very often to fail right at this point. However, it is not so much that what goes on is not understood by the others, but that it fails to have Paul’s concluding sentence (v12) as its basic urgency. The building up of the community is the basic reason for corporate settings of worship; they should probably not be turned into a corporate gathering for a thousand individual experiences of worship, although the end result will include that as well.