

# EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS FROM 1 CORINTHIANS 14

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to add some devotional thoughts to St Paul's statements in this chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian church. The church was in a state of turmoil where the standards of Christian life and worship were falling. St Paul dealt with many matters in this letter, and he acknowledges their repentance in his second letter to that church.

One of the areas of concern was the way they were practicing the gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit. St Paul felt the need to put these things right. Opponents to the Pentecostal churches assert that because things were so wrong in the Corinthian church, Pentecostal doctrines must now be at fault. They use this part of St Paul's letter to debunk the doctrines and practices of the Pentecostal church, making a direct comparison between the Corinthians and present day Pentecostals and Charismatics.

These people fail to appreciate that St Paul's teaching was intended to put things right in the church. This makes the teaching sound and Scriptural. Because of this, it is important to understand exactly what he did teach, because this, as in many other areas of St Paul's writings, is a benchmark of what should be practiced if the church is working up to the standard required of it.

The text under study is from the New American Standard Bible, just because that is the version I have been using for the last 20 years. I think that it deals with some of the translation errors existent in the King James Version. I will also use the Amplified Bible where the Scriptural reference needs more clarity. The Amplified Bible quotes more directly from the Greek, and includes all the possible alternatives in a passage.

My exegesis does not include writings from Bible commentaries or other authors. My purpose is to give observations and analyses

from my own learning and experience. This limits the exegesis to what I think and believe primarily, that is why I have titled my treatise 'Expository Thoughts...' I leave it up to other more scholarly people in the Pentecostal churches to make their judgements concerning what I have written. This is the same as St Paul's instruction about prophecy: Let each one speak and let the others judge. All Christian writing needs to be evaluated by senior, experienced, Bible believing Christians. This is the best insurance against error.

If a person wants to go deeper into Pentecostal doctrine, let them obtain [The Foundations Of Pentecostal Theology](#) (references of which can be found using Google). This is the best work on the doctrines of the Pentecostal theology and practice.

## Exposition

### **1 Corinthians 14: 1-5:**

**Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that we may prophesy. 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. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but one who prophesies edifies the church. Now I wish that you all spoke with 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.**

**Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts** This follows right along from the previous chapter where faith, hope and love are paramount, and will remain after the Second Coming of Christ when the gifts of the Holy Spirit will have passed away. After the Second Coming, spiritual gifts are obsolete, yet love is always a vital attribute of Christian living. So Paul clearly tells us to pursue love above everything else. This speaks of chasing it and not giving up until we have obtained it. Love does not happen automatically in every case; sometimes we have to work hard to obtain it, especially when rubbing shoulders with unloveable people. Not everyone we fellowship with is loveable. This is a reality of Christian life. This is why we should pursue love, and not merely take it for granted.

But we have not yet experienced the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore spiritual gifts are current and vital for the well-being of the church's ministry. Paul's instruction is to desire spiritual gifts earnestly. This means we do not sit around hoping that we will receive spiritual gifts someday. We are to pray and ask God for them, and study how we can operate them correctly in the way that the Holy Spirit would want us to. It is implied that not everyone in the church is desiring spiritual gifts. Perhaps too many are complacent about the spiritual resources they need to build up the church and bring the Gospel to the community around it.

**but especially that you may prophesy** Then Paul specifies the one gift that would benefit the church most: prophecy. He goes on to give his reasons for this.

**For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men**

There is a comparison between prophecy and tongues. To make this clear, Paul starts to give teaching on the nature of tongues. Firstly, tongues are a spoken language. It is a deliberate act, in the same way that we communicate in our native language to our friends and colleagues. But there is a difference. When a person is speaking in tongues, he is not speaking to other people. It is not designed for normal conversation between people. It is not a fellowship activity. There is a practice in some Pentecostal groups for believers to greet each other in tongues. Although this is quaint, and generates some pleasure and joy in fellowship with like-minded believers, it is using the facility in a way different to its original design and purpose. Therefore this practice must be undertaken with much wisdom and discretion, especially when unbelievers or uninitiated people are within earshot.

**but to God** Primarily, tongues is a language directed to God. This makes it a prayer language, a supplement to the believer's normal way of praying. When we pray, we are fellowshiping with God. Therefore the primary purpose of tongues is to fellowship with God in the spirit. It is an expression of a believer's relationship with God. The closer the relationship, the more free and effective is the operation of tongues.

**for no-one understands, but in his spirit he speaks**

**mysteries.** Tongues, except for rare times where the will of God makes it understandable to someone in particular, is unintelligible

to other people. God is the only person who understands what is being said. The believer is speaking directly to God from his spirit. Because what he is saying is only understood by God, what he is speaking is mysterious to himself and anyone else who hears what is being said. This is the same as if a person is speaking in a foreign language in front of people who do not understand. What is being said is a mystery to those hearers until a translator makes what is being said understandable to them.

**But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.** Prophecy is quite different, then, to tongues. When a person prophesies, he is speaking in his language, and that of his listeners. He is speaking things that are clear and understandable to those who hear him. There are three main parts to prophecy: edification or building up, exhortation or instruction, consolation or encouragement. This means that prophecy involves making Christians stronger, wiser and more knowledgeable about the things of God. It also brings teaching, correction and guidance to others; and it encourages those who are depressed, grieving, or sad. Prophecy can come in many forms - verbal or written, but the principle is the same: it is directed toward other believers, individually or as a group.

**One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but one who prophesies edifies the church.** Here is the comparison between tongues and prophecy: Tongues and prophecy have one thing in common: they edify, or build up. The difference is that tongues builds up the individual believer who is speaking it, and prophecy builds up the other believers in the church. Edifying the church is the same as edifying the believers in it, because the church is more than just the systems that govern it. It is made up of the believers who inhabit it. The church and the believers in it are one and the same. The Scripture, at this stage, does not say exactly how this building up is accomplished. We are meant to accept that it does, without trying to figure out the hows and whys at this stage.

**Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues** This is Paul's desire for the Corinthian church. It is implied that this is his desire for all the churches. The fact that there is no Scriptural record that he gave this teaching to any of the other churches does not negate the idea that he would have taught the same principles wherever he ministered and taught. It is that the Corinthian church needed

specific training in the spiritual gifts, and so this part of the letter is his benchmark for how they are practiced. There is every reason to think that the same benchmark applied to the Ephesian, Philippian, Thessalonian, Roman, and Galatian churches as well. There is also the implication that not all Corinthian believers actually spoke in tongues. There may have been the same debates that we have these days; some saying that the gift was essential, others saying that it was not, and still others saying that it was nonsense. Whatever the problems were, there were areas which Paul needed to correct that were not problems in the other churches, or did not seem to be. The truth of this is, if it was a benchmark for all the churches that Paul ministered to then, it would quite definitely be his benchmark for all believers anywhere, including us in this day and age.

**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.** If Paul was enthusiastic about everyone speaking in tongues, he was even more supportive of everyone being able to prophesy. This is because he can see the great value of prophecy to the building up of the church. Any church that does not experience the ministry of prophecy is worse off for the lack of it. Many churches have never had this facility among its believers, so what they never had they do not miss; but just think of how great and effective that church would be if it had believers who regularly prophesied in the Spirit, building up other believers in their congregations? Paul had the vision of this, and he promoted it with all his heart.

He ranks the prophet as being greater in the church than one who limits himself to speaking in tongues, remembering that tongues is a personal devotion language intended for private fellowship with God in the prayer closet. Paul's ranking of ministries and gifts in the church is dependent on how effectively and how much they build up the church. But he gives a way for a tongues speaker to be able to edify the church: the ability to interpret what is being said in the tongues language. Now, at this point, we must define what is meant in Scripture by the word 'interpret'. Some commentators use the term 'translate', suggesting a direct translation of the language; but this is not what the Scripture implies. The Collins English Dictionary meaning of the word 'interpret' is (1) to clarify or explain the

meaning of; (2) to construe the significance or intention of; (3) to convey or represent the spirit or meaning of. It comes from the Latin *interpretari* which means one who explains. The dictionary also notes that an interpreter is a person who translates orally. Although this includes direct translation, it goes so much deeper and wider, giving the interpreter the freedom to use discretion and wisdom to give the correct understanding of the significance and spirit of what is being said.

This enhances the ministry of an interpreter of tongues, extending it from mere translation of the language to clarification and explanation of the will of God expressed through the medium of tongues when expressed in public to a group of believers. For those who cannot see past the direct translation requirement of an interpreter, even a professional interpreter when giving a verbal translation of what is being said, will often use his discretion to clarify the meaning and intention of what is being said. Tongues messages, interpretations, and prophecies are all given in faith when ministered to the church, so the interpreter gives his clarification of the message, believing that what he is saying is the interpretation that the Holy Spirit intends for that group.

The Amplified Bible defines the person prophesying as one who preaches and teaches in an inspired way. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones in his book [Preaching in the Spirit](#) deals with this principle in depth, combining prophecy and preaching in a very effective way. The traditional Pentecostal view of prophecy is that a person in the group stands up and gives a short message prefixed by something like 'thus saith the Lord' that is intended as exhortation or encouragement to the rest of the group. This is evaluated by the senior members of the group and endorsed if there is consensus that God is speaking to them through the particular person giving the prophecy. But the basic Greek gives a further understanding that it can involve any sort of preaching and teaching in the church service or meeting.

Therefore, a minister preaching in the normal Sunday service of any church could be using the gift of prophecy, especially if his preaching and teaching is having a positive spiritual impact on the congregation. If we accept this other interpretation of the passage, it means that many preachers have manifested the gift of prophecy without knowing it; especially in churches that may

not have embraced the Pentecostal way of worshipping. It can happen in an altar call inviting people to come to the front of the church to accept Christ as Saviour. It has been the experience of some to be thinking of excuses why they should not go up to the front, and at the same time having those very excuses answered by the person giving the invitation. There is nothing to say that this is not a form of prophecy. In fact, prophecy can take place in any situation where one believer speaks to another by way of instruction, exhortation or guidance; where the other believer senses that God is speaking to him through the person.

The passage also supports the notion that a believer can speak out in tongues to a group of believers, and then interpret the message himself. It shows that there is no fixed procedure for tongues and interpretation; one person can speak out in tongues and he can interpret himself, or another person can interpret for him. Or no-one speaks in tongues but speakers prophesy instead. In all these cases, the church is built up.

**Verses 6-12: But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching? 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 on the flute or on the harp? For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me. So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.**

**But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?** Paul now begs the question - what profit is gained by speaking in tongues, unless there is an interpretation that imparts revelation, knowledge, prophecy or teaching to the group? The short answer to that question is: none. There has to be an interpretation that everyone in the group can understand

and appreciate. Paul gives an indication of the attributes of the interpretation. It would be helpful to define the four components that can make up part of an interpretation of a tongues message.

The Collins Dictionary is again helpful to us. *Revelation* generally is the act or process of disclosing something previously secret or obscure. In a particular Christian context it is God's disclosure of His own nature and purpose for mankind. *Knowledge* is the facts, feelings or experiences known by a person, or a group of people. In the Christian context it can include specific information about what is happening among the group, or with individuals, in order to assist others resolve difficulties or problems, for example. *Prophecy* is defined as a message of divine truth revealing God's will. *Teaching* is to give instructions or lessons in a subject. These definitions cover the breadth of interpretation, and correctly administered, can greatly build up a group of believers. This is why, in the context of public worship, tongues come far short of achieving the purpose of building up the church.

**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 on the flute or on the harp?** Music has a language of its own, and it needs an instrument to express itself; but even that needs a distinctive set of sounds to make it intelligible to hearers. Paul uses this example to give strength to his argument about tongues in the church.

**For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?** This is a further extension of Paul's argument. He uses practical examples that all his listeners know about. He is appealing to his listeners' common sense.

**So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.** Paul then turns his argument back to his listeners. He compares the musical instruments and the military bugle to their own voices and words. He firmly outlines the futility of speaking in a language that no-one can understand. They will end up speaking to no-one in particular. Because Paul is spending some time putting forward the argument it could be suggesting that possibly this was going on in the Corinthian church at the time, causing confusion and discouragement. So the important

thing during a public meeting of the church is that everyone should be speaking in terms that can be understood by all, otherwise it is a waste of time speaking.

**There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning.** Paul acknowledges that there is a wide range of language in the world and each one has meaning to those who understand it. He would have experienced a lot of them in his missionary journeys around the then known world. When language split up into many diverse types at the Tower of Babel, every one of them had meaning, and after a time, groups of people formed who spoke and understood the same language. They then migrated into different parts of the world - some to China, others to India, others to Africa, and others stayed in the Middle East. This was how different nations, foreign to each other, were formed. The foreign nature of these is mainly attributed to the differences in language. It is interesting to note that as more and more people in the world understand the same language, for example, English, the world is becoming more globalised with greater ease of communication among the countries which have common understanding of language.

**If then, I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks a barbarian to me.** This actually happened at the Tower of Babel. As soon as language diversified, people became foreigners to each other. This is the difficulty that migrants from countries that do not speak English who move to English speaking countries have in being able to integrate themselves with the new culture. It is not until they become fluent in English, that they become comfortable and accepted in the community of their adopted country. This is why a Christian missionary must be fluent in the language of the country he is going to, before he can have the confidence that his ministry is going to be effective there.

**So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.** So while Paul is fully supporting zealousness in desiring spiritual gifts, the important thing is that in doing so, we are making ourselves useful to others in the group. There is absolutely nothing wrong in praying, asking, desiring, asking for prayer from others, attending seminars and training courses in order to receive spiritual gifts,

but the over-riding factor is that the purpose for it is to build up others. Perhaps the Corinthians were selfish in their zealousness and desire, and operated in ways that did not build up others. Some Christians can be so egocentric in their attitude to ministry that they do it for the personal satisfaction and pleasure of it more than the effects that it would have on the other members of the group. The principle that Paul promotes is 'by love serve one another.'

#### Verses 13-19:

**Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also: I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing 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 our giving of thanks since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all: however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.**

**Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.** Paul now gives the practical instruction that culminates from the general principles he has given before. This was what he was leading up to: if a person speaks out in tongues for all to hear, he is to pray that he may give an interpretation of the tongue. Some critics say that an interpretation should be given any time a person speaks in tongues, whether public or private. Of course, that is absurd. Paul makes a clear distinction between public and private speaking in tongues. In the prayer closet, the only listener is God, and He understands it already and does not need an interpreter. It is then clear what Paul is talking about here: public speaking in tongues requires an interpreter if it is to mean anything at all.

**For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.** This is the reason why an interpreter is vital when speaking tongues publicly. The mind is bypassed, and the believer's spirit communicates directly to God on the spiritual level. Because God is a spirit, He is the only person who understands the medium.

**What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also: I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing 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 our giving of thanks since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.** Paul gives what he does in the light of the recognition that when a person prays in tongues, the mind is bypassed (not turned off, as some would have it). This is what he practices. He uses both mediums, in public and in private. He does not make a distinction here. He does not state a specific rule that a person should never speak in tongues in front of others. He states that he does both: he speaks in tongues and with the mind. He includes singing as well. This supports the idea that Paul sang in tongues as well as in the languages he had learned.

He gives the reason for speaking both in tongues and in the learned language. It is for the benefit of people who do not have the gift of interpreting tongues, that they can understand, appreciate, and say Amen to what is being said. Paul acknowledges clearly that a person who is speaking in tongues, privately or in public, is giving thanks to God appropriately enough. God does not withdraw His Spirit from the believer if he speaks publicly in tongues. He still understands and appreciates it. This denies the right of some to say that if a person speaks in public they are babbling meaningless noises. Whatever the context, if it is expressed in faith, a prayer in tongues is still an authentic prayer to God. But it is the equivalent of a person praying in private if the tongues statement is not interpreted and the listener is not built up by the message.

It is important to note here that there are contexts where public tongues are perfectly acceptable. For example, in a group prayer meeting when everyone is individually praying out loud in tongues. In this context, they are not speaking to others, but to God, so there is no intention of giving another person a specific message. Usually, there is a mixture of tongues and understandable language, flowing together in an acceptable way to all those who are present. This is not the same type of public meeting as the morning or evening church service, so anyone who attends the prayer meeting would have the understanding

that there is going to be a mixture of tongues and learned language.

Therefore, uninitiated people would be prepared for it. Often such people go to these prayer meetings to learn more about the walk in the Spirit, and are not going to be offended or 'spooked out' in the same way that a person right off the street would be in a public meeting where tongues are spoken freely. [My personal experience of walking into a Pentecostal evening service for the first time, where tongues were spoken, prophecies given, demons cast out, etc., was one of fascination and interest. I enjoyed every minute of it; and nearly 40 years later, still have vivid, happy memories of it.]

**I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all: however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.** Paul is making sure that his readers know the high value he places on the gift of tongues. He sets the example in his personal life. He is not going to expect others to do what he is not going to practice himself. Just because he puts a limitation on the personal use of tongues in the church context, he is not saying that believers should further limit the use of tongues overall. He makes a definite connection between his thankfulness to God for the gift and the freedom of operating it. He would not have that attitude to a resource which is an optional thing of little value. Paul wanted to make that quite clear to his readers, and it should be very clear to us as well.

There are three places where he exhorts his disciples to be followers of him, as he is of Christ: 1 Cor 4:16. 'I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me.'; 1 Cor 11:1: 'Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.'; and Phil 3:17, 'Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us'. These Scriptures give us the complete freedom to practice everything that Paul practiced, including the gift of tongues. There are many Christians who set great store on imitating his directions on personal holiness, church practices, role of women, etc, but they seem ignore the gift of tongues, when Paul placed such value on it in his personal life.

Yet in the public church context, he places a strong limitation on the free use of tongues without interpretation. The reason is that when we are all gathered together in church, the important thing is to work toward building each other up. The way to do this is to speak in understandable language to each other. It is in this public context that personal tongues has to take second place to prophecy, preaching, testifying, etc.

**Verses 20-25: Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me." says the Lord. 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. If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.**

**Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature.** Here is a link between how spiritual gifts are practiced in the church and the maturity of thinking that is required of Christians who aspire to ministry. There are babes in Christ who are yet novices in the Christian life. These ones are not yet ready to minister to others. They are still requiring training, guidance and assistance to master the elementary principles of the Christian life. You would expect these ones to be children in their thinking until they show signs of maturity. The implication as well is that believers who have not sorted out the appropriateness of limiting personal tongues in public meetings are still children in their thinking. Paul's exhortation is that believers grow up and be mature in their thinking, and that includes having an attitude that everything is done to build up others in the public church meetings. Yet, in the practice of evil, they remain as little children and babies. The characteristic of little children about many things is that they are too young to take an interest in sophisticated matters; they are too intent on their personal play activities to worry about grown-up matters. This is the type of attitude that is advised for

Christian believers; to be so involved in activities which bring them closer to God and to build up their fellow believers, that they do not bother to gather knowledge about sinful practices.

**In the Law it is written, By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me." says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers;** In some ways, this statement has been difficult to fully understand. Some have maintained that tongues are to be applied to unbelievers in some way, but have not been able to specify how that was to be achieved. There seems to be a contradiction with Paul saying that tongues were not to be spoken where unbelievers were present, and yet he is saying that tongues is a sign to unbelievers. a sign is a display showing the significance of something. It is an indicator of a principle of learning that God wants to show to a group of people.

There are a number of interpretations which will be set out for consideration. Firstly, we will examine the Scriptural source. Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11,12: 'Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue...but they would not listen'. Some have said that this prophecy was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost when the 120 disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and came out onto the street speaking in tongues which were understood by people from all over the region. But the rendering was 'but they would not listen', which does not match with the Pentecost account with Peter standing up, preaching, and three thousand people accepting Christ as Saviour. So, many people listened to the messages that came from the 120 believers at Pentecost. It would take some stretching to apply the words of Isaiah to that experience.

In Isaiah's time, the Jews had rebelled against the Lord, and they were taken over and brought into subjection by the Assyrians. But instead of repenting and allowing God to restore the nation's sovereignty, they adopted the ways of the Assyrians. Therefore the Lord said to them through Isaiah that He would speak to them through the foreign Assyrian language, which they would not have understood. The fact that this was happening was a sign that the Jews were under the judgement of God.

Paul uses this prophecy as an example to show that under the New Covenant, the presence of the gift of tongues shows unbelievers, on the point of believing, that they are under the judgement of God. It also shows that the only way to achieve peace with God is to believe the Gospel of Christ and give their lives to Jesus, making Him their personal Saviour.

Isaiah's prophecy was never meant to be a prophecy about the gift of tongues. When Isaiah mentions 'this people', he is talking about the Jews who lived during his own time. He was not prophesying about the Jews under the New Covenant.

This signals to unbelievers that the Gospel of Christ is the current way that God is now speaking to the world, that individuals need to accept Jesus as Saviour. Isaiah prophesied that the nation of Israel of his day would hear the voice of God speaking to them in the foreign Assyrian language, and they would not be able to understand it. The fact that they were in the presence of people who spoke the foreign language signalled to them that the judgement of God was upon them .

It is not the actual tongues that are significant; it is the general fact that the evangelists who are bringing the Gospel are noted for speaking in foreign languages (ie, tongues). Once people start believing the Gospel, the example of Isaiah's prophecy does not apply to them anymore, because they have listened to the voice of God inviting them to accept Jesus as Saviour. Tongues is no longer a sign, as such, to them; it becomes a facility in the Spirit that they can use to enjoy close spiritual fellowship with God.

**If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?** So, having established the significance of tongues to unbelievers, Paul is now describing the reaction to those same unbelievers when they hear tongues being spoken around them without any interpretation that would make them understand what is being said. Paul knows that it is unlikely that the whole church would be like this, but he presents the worse-case scenario to exemplify the idiocy of having a whole congregation speaking in foreign languages in front of uninitiated people. It would akin to the Tower of Babel, and sink the church service into utter confusion. Intelligent

people want intelligent things spoken to them. Seekers and inquirers come to church to hear things they understand. Critics of Pentecostalism describe tongues as meaningless babble; and they are most correct in their thinking, because that is what it sounds like to them. They have never been taught the principles behind the gift of tongues.

**But if all prophecy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.** But here is the difference in reaction from those who come into the church service and hear preaching, teaching and prophecies that they understand. When he is surrounded by the sounds of the Gospel in words he can understand, he cannot help but be convicted, and feel compelled to have to give account of his life. For an unbeliever entering a church where the whole group of Christians are committed and dedicated, and who are quick in speaking up for Christ, it is a very unsettling experience. The Holy Spirit is working through those believers to expose the true state of his heart before God. There is no place to hide. No more excuses. There's only two things he really can do: walk out the door back into the world, or fall on his face and worship God. There is not one unbeliever who walks into a church service full of real Christians worshipping God and does not have a strong sense of the presence of God in that place. They may not admit it, and we may not see the outward signs of it; but nevertheless, conviction will certainly be there in his heart. This is the miracle about prophecy: believers stand and speak them out in absolute faith, and yet the words apply themselves to the hearts of people in very powerful ways. The reason why so many unbelievers attend our churches and then walk out unaffected is that too many groups do not believe in the saving power of prophecy.

**Verses 26-33: 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. If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgement. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. For you can all**

prophecy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

**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.** After each statement of general principle, Paul seeks to bring the practical application of it. So, in the light of what has now been taught about tongues and prophecy, how are the general principles going to be worked out in practice? What will happen in the church service? What should happen? Paul specifies: each person has a contribution to make to the service. This is quite different to a lot of traditional church services where there is one minister up the front doing everything. Of course, in the New Testament churches they had times where everyone listened to a speaker, but there were other times when the group came together and there was no one person who dominated the ministry.

However, we have to remember that the young church had many more members of equal status in its midst. They had a more sharing type of culture, where there was not such a division between ministry and laity. Actually the concept was foreign to the early church. As time passed, and especially when the church became mixed up with pagan customs and evolved resultingly into the Roman Catholic Church, ministers became more elevated and the priesthood developed. This brought about the division of classes in the church; of the minister or priesthood class, and the lay class made up of people who were not encouraged to have ministries, but to passively accept what was served up to them.

This made it that the 'revelation', 'interpretation', and teaching came from a trained professional, and the concept of body ministry was lost for a long time. But the early church pattern involved a group of believers sharing the ministry of the local church service, unless they had a special speaker like Paul to minister to them. There were people specially recognised as having particular ministries, for example, the Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, and Teachers, who may have taken the leadership positions in churches. However there was ample scope for any believer who felt they had a song or word from God to have the freedom and opportunity to share it. Whatever we believe today,

this was Paul's model for the church. The overriding factor was that everything was to be done to build up other believers.

**If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.** Here now is the practical use of tongues in the church services. It is not mandatory that people do speak in tongues, but if they do, here is how they should do it. There should be no more than three people getting up and giving a tongues message to the congregation. They should do it in turn, and not all together, for obvious reasons. One of the speakers needs to have the interpretation of it. It may be very well if there are two speakers in tongues, and the third speaker is the interpreter. It is implied that this should be planned beforehand. Much current use of tongues and interpretation is done spontaneously, as if God has suddenly spoken within the flow of the service.

Of course that can and should happen, and space should be given for it; but there should be times where God has spoken to a person before the service and that a tongues message from that person is to be expected and accommodated in the planning of the service. The interpretation might also have been imparted to someone before the service, and the interpreter comes to church expecting that there will be a tongues message spoken to be interpreted. But if a person feels motivated to speak in tongues, and there is no interpreter, and he does not feel that he can interpret himself, then Paul's instructions for him are to keep his tongues message to himself while he is at church. He should then go into his private prayer place and speak to God directly without involving others.

**And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgement. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.** The instructions for prophets follow the same line as before. The leader of the service arranges so the prophets speak in turn. The 'others' in the passage could mean the remainder of the group. This means a fairly wide ranging

acknowledgement and approval of a prophecy from the majority of the congregation. Paul does not mention that a select group of 'senior' people are to do the judging. Now this is not the same time of judgement that Jesus tells people not to do. It is not a judgement of someone's faith or character. It is the prophecy, not the person being judged. Of course, one would assume that the people doing the judging are ones who are experienced in the Word and the ways of God. But then, if a novice got up and spoke in judgmental terms, other more experienced members of the congregation would take him aside and gently encourage and guide him, if his judgement did not concur with the rest. Judgement of prophecy in the church service tends to work by general consensus among those qualified to judge.

Paul accommodates the incidence of a person receiving something from God while seated in the congregation. This can often happen unexpectedly. It is not clear how this is communicated to the leader of the service, but we can be sure that they had some method of doing it. This meant that the prophets who were standing ready to minister remained silent until the new revelation has been communicated and evaluated. There is no limit to the number of prophecies that can be given in the service. The limit seems to be the number of people in the service, as long as they do it one by one. The object of prophecy is for people to experience learning and exhortation. There is no mention that prophecy is to be used to discipline or criticise people. The objective is to build people up, not put them down.

Prophecy is not given by compulsion. The prophets are always into control of what they say and how they say it. Although prophecy sometimes can be quite impromptu, where the prophet knows only what the next sentence is going to be, says it and then receives the next sentence, there is complete control. If something comes to mind that the prophet feels is inappropriate or in error, he has the choice not to say it. The Holy Spirit may very strongly inspire and direct at times but does not compel a person to say things that might harm himself and others. Of course there are times and places where these rules have been broken, and people have been confused and hurt. This goes to show that the Holy Spirit does not always have total control over the spirits of some people who wish to hijack the church services for their own ends.

The underpinning factor of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is peace. If a person or group of people feel confused, depressed, unsettled or agitated, fearful in terms of terror; then it can be safely assumed that what is being said and done is not inspired by the Holy Spirit. Where people are getting up and contradicting each other in their prophecies, speaking out of turn, and talking or singing others down, or dominating the services with long, involved prophecies, we can safely assume that they are ministering out of the inspiration of their own hearts and minds, and not from the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Spirit is always accompanied by the fruit of the Spirit: - love, joy, peace, etc. If the fruit of the Spirit is not fully evident in the ministry of a person who is speaking in tongues or prophesying, then the evaluation from wise Christians is going to be negative, and the congregation advised to safely ignore the utterance.

The principles that Paul speaks about in these instructions is not limited to one locality. He is clearly saying that they apply to all the churches of the saints. If they applied to all the churches then, they can be applied in the general sense to all our churches now, in theory, that is.

Verses 34-40: Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? 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. Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.

**Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.** This next piece is a difficult and contentious issue for our present day church. But it was not such a controversial issue in Paul's time. Notice that he does not have to spend time putting a case for his instructions

about the woman's role in the church. This is because men and women in the early church accepted their roles without any problems. Married women were subject to their husbands, and did not have a separate ministry in the church. If they did have a ministry it was in partnership with their husbands, as in the case of Aquilla and Priscilla. Also, in their culture, this was acceptable, and there was no argument about it. Paul refers to the Law, but does not quote any Scripture. Perhaps he does not need to, given the level of acceptance by most people in the church. These days, there are some conservative Christian groups who still apply these instructions and forbid women to have any place of ministry in the church. Perhaps they could be right, if the face value of this Scripture is to be accepted. For the purposes of this study, this is all that is going to be said about it. However, Paul says in verse 37 of this chapter that what he is writing is the Lord's commandment. That bears thinking about when his instructions concerning women are considered, because the Lord made it clear that there is no distinction between male and female in the New Covenant. It also seems unfair to impose 2000 year old cultural values on today's church. Nevertheless, each person or group must come to their own conclusions after prayer and consideration. The important thing is that persons and groups have no right to discriminate against others who decide on policies opposite to their own.

**Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? 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.** What Paul is saying here is that the Corinthian church is not the authority when it comes to God's word. They are not the originators of the Gospel message. They are one of the recipients. Also, it is not the only church that has received the word of God. Therefore it is not for one group or person to say that they have the exclusive rights to God's word to His church. This was the mistake of the Roman Catholic Church, and it defended its error through the centuries of its dominance by persecuting and killing those who challenged its exclusivism. There are modern day groups and sects making the same mistakes. They maintain that they are the true Church, as if the word of God first went forth from them, or that it has come to them alone. This statement of Paul can be used to successfully challenge any of these groups or sects. Therefore the Corinthian

church is being exhorted to be more humble in its approach, and realise that it is a part of a body of believers throughout the known world. It is not a separate denomination in itself. This is also a lesson for the different Christian denominations that have attitudes that they are more spiritual than others. Who then has ownership of God's word? None of them exclusively, but all of them collectively.

Paul sees that there are people throughout the church who think they are spiritual and have the ministry of prophecy. He does not discourage them from thinking that way, but exhorts them to recognise where his writings come from. Paul is quite confident that what he is writing has definitely come from the Lord, and is not merely the thoughts in his natural mind. For a person to make assertions like this, he has to be the calibre of Paul. There are not many like him in today's world.

**But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.**

Paul had enough authority in all the churches to make this statement. He had a unique place in the early church. He was recognised everywhere as an Apostle of Christ. To have an effective ministry in the early church, one had to be recognised by Paul as a fit person. It was not enough for a person to stand up and say he was spiritual, or had a ministry in the Spirit. For his ministry to be effective, he needed to be appropriately recognised throughout the churches. The main evidence that supported recognition is that the person aspiring to prophetic ministry needs to recognise the Apostleship of Paul and that what Paul wrote were the commandments of God. Paul was not being arrogant when he taught this; everyone knew that he had been called directly by Christ, and was an absolutely dedicated follower of Christ to the exclusion of all else. This gives Paul a unique position of authority in the church, even to the present day and beyond.

**Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.**

Paul is now summarising his teaching in this chapter. Remembering that Paul's teaching and exhortation carries God's authority behind it, his instruction to desire earnestly to prophesy carries a lot of weight, to the early church, and to us. When we think about it though, it is mainly the Pentecostal denominations that are

seeking to comply with this. This means that many other groups are ignoring what Paul had put forward as the command of God. Where does this place these groups in the eyes of God? Paul also exhorts not to forbid people to speak in tongues. In the light of Paul's writing being totally connected to the command of God, are the people who ridicule the idea of tongues and those who speak it in a right place with God. Maybe not. It's not that a person has to speak in tongues to be in a right place with God, but those who put it down are aligning themselves with those who would not be recognised in the early church. It strongly implies that those who enthusiastically support prophecy and tongues are in a good place with God because they are fully supporting what Paul is teaching.

The important thing for all things connected with the ministry in the Holy Spirit, is that every activity is done properly. The benchmarks for prophecy and tongues are found in this chapter. If they are practiced according to what Paul teaches here, they will be practiced in a proper and orderly manner., and the results will be similar to what was experienced in the early church.

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