

“Chaos and Confusion”

- 1 Corinthians 14, *part 1* -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers Church
in Menomonie, Wisc
on July 11, 2021



1 Corinthians 14 - 1 Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. 2 For he who speaks in a tongue does

not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification. 6 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? 7 Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? 8 For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? 9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. 10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. 11 Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. 12 Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel. 13 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. 15 What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. 16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? 17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. 18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; 19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. 20 Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.

Paul leaves the mountain top of 1 Corinthians 13, the “proverbial love chapter,” only to immediately leap into one of the greatest issues to divide the church since the upper room. Clearly when the issue of speaking in tongues comes up, you could do as many have, which is simply to ignore the whole matter and hope it goes away. Paul begins this discussion by telling us to firstly pursue love, therefore he clearly does not want us to simply “stand down” and do nothing. We are called to *pursue* love. The word pursue means relentless persistence. Love is never to be satisfied; whatever we have is not enough. It is also always to be our supreme pursuit within the church.

Paul goes on to encourage us to actually pursue *spiritual gifts*; and one of those gifts is speaking in tongues, however divisive such may have been in the past. In my opinion, much of the trouble on this issue is not so much the *existence of* or the *practice of* this gift by those who possess it, but rather *how* and *where* this gift is practiced, and the understanding of its place within the greater church. In other words, the battle seems to come from the peripheral issues that surround the gift of tongues more than the actual gift itself. The truth is that this gift has indeed caused a lot of commotion! Yet our answer to this issue must not be to reject all spiritual gifts because they have been mishandled, even though it is often simply easier to do so.

The issues that seem to cause the division on the practice of tongues are:

1) The inference or even outright declaration that one cannot be spirit-filled unless he/ she speaks in tongues.

- 2) The belief that tongues is a mandatory possession for any Christian, or at least is a “gateway” gift, a mandatory ‘door’ that must be passed through in order to receive and achieve the other gifts.
- 3) The practice of what is called corporate tongues, multiple people speaking in tongues all at the same time within a public church service.
- 4) The practice of publicly speaking in tongues with no interpretation.

14:1 Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

Paul begins by taking the unusual position of placing a level of importance and priority upon one spiritual gift over another, perhaps in a desire to undermine the oft “man-declared” priority of tongues. Paul tells those in the Corinthian church that in their pursuit and desire for spiritual gifts, their thirst should be the greatest to prophesy. While that word contains the idea of *foretelling future events* pertaining to the kingdom of God, it also, *and more importantly* means: “To speak forth by divine inspirations. To teach, refute, reprove, admonish, (and) comfort others.” This description may take some worldly glamour out of the word, but it rightfully brings it into a down-to-earth, practical application. This is the gift that comes forth from this pulpit and from the other pastors and teachers within this fellowship.

14:2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.

Paul begins now to deliver some much needed parameters for the exercise and handling of the gift of tongues. Ultimately his direction revolves around the matter of order. Order matters a great deal within a church, despite man’s seeming relentless battle against such. To start, he tells us that when one speaks in an unknown tongue, he speaks to *God*, not to *men*. That is eminently critical in the understanding of this issue.

What often occurs is a person will speak in an unknown tongue, which is then followed by an interpretation that is addressed to the congregation, perhaps even to an individual or individuals within that congregation. Immediately we have a problem, because tongues are to be directed toward God, not toward man. So if the interpretation begins, “*My little children...*” the tongue or the “interpretation” is not true and righteous. Because a message *to the flock* therefore is not tongues but rather prophecy. Furthermore, one should remember the awesome responsibility for the exercise of that gift of prophecy. It is never to be practiced lightly or flippantly. When one speaks for God, he will be held accountable for such.

Jer 14:14 “*Then the LORD said, ‘These prophets are telling lies in my name. I did not send them or tell them to speak. I did not give them any messages. They prophesy of visions and revelations they have never seen or heard. They speak foolishness made up in their own lying hearts.’”*

Jer 23:28 “*Let these false prophets tell their dreams, but let my true messengers faithfully proclaim my every word. There is a difference between chaff and wheat!”*

1Pe 4:11 “*Are you called to be a speaker? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you.”*

14:3-4 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

The exercise of prophecy is a daunting call, for it is directed toward and profoundly affects others. When one does so he speaks with: (1) “edification,” the building up of the flock to promote growth in Christian holiness,

(2) “exhortation,” *a* calling near, encouragement, instruction and correction, (3) “comfort,” any address made for the purpose of persuading, or consoling, generally accepted as evangelism.

On the flip side, the one who speaks with the gift of tongues edifies or “builds up” *himself*. Paul isn’t scolding them for this, he is just speaking the honest truth. We do indeed need to individually be built up, made spiritually “stronger.” However, the corporate exercise of tongues does nothing for the flock. The corporate building up of the flock comes from the dispensing of the prophetic Word: *the pulpit teaching*. With this comes the edification, exhortation, and comfort found in expounding upon God’s Word.

14:5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Again, we need to note that Paul in this letter isn’t bad-mouthing the exercise of the gift of tongues. He states clearly here that he wishes all of those in the church in Corinth had the gift of tongues. Many...depending on whether you have been denominationally “hardened” on this subject, will simply turn off this message today without any consideration on the matter. Yet let’s state for the record, Paul wishes that everyone spoke in tongues. Yet his even *greater* desire, though, was that they would exercise the gift of prophetic teaching.

As Paul has already stated, the use of tongues in the midst of the fellowship does nothing for the body unless, *as he elaborates herein*, there is subsequent interpretation. The gift of tongues is focused upon self-edification, but the gift of prophecy is focused upon ministry, upon the edification of others. Yet let us note that with the act of interpretation, there is indeed edification, the building up of others in the body.

Many have used these immediate verses as a permission to use tongues privately for self-edification. I do not find any direct prohibition in scripture, but such “permission” is secondary at best. Paul’s point was not to give directions on how to use the gift of tongues in private practice, but rather how to build up the church.

14:6-8 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

Again, with the health and edification of the church body in mind, Paul asks a facetious question (as he was often fond of doing): “*If I came to you speaking in tongues, what good would that have done?*” In other words, it would have had no profit to the church. Because unless this individual comes with a much more tangible and understandable message, he or she will just be making a lot of noise.

For example: Let’s imagine we handed out a bunch of musical instruments to everyone here today, but if you couldn’t actually play a song, it would sound like a grade school band on the first day of school. *Understanding* is crucial to gaining anything from what is being presented. This is true whether it be clear and concise expository preaching or any other gift of the Spirit. Unless there is understanding on behalf of those present, there is no benefit to the hearers. This is a simple and uncomplicated premise, despite what men have done to torture the text to fit it into their denominational positions.

14:9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

Paul's urging is for two things, edification and understanding. Unless people can understand what you are saying and what you mean, the exercise of your gift is worthless; you are just speaking into the air, and of course that benefits no one.

1Co 14:20 "*Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.*"

14:10-11 **There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me.**

Paul goes on with further illustration to really make his point. There are 7, 117 languages in the world at this time. They all have meaning to the people who speak them. But unless I speak that language, I will have no idea what is being said, and therefore it would be no value to me whatsoever. Again, without understanding *we have nothing*, just gibberish.

14:12 **Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.**

The church in Corinth, just like so many of us today, desired spiritual gifts. We are clearly led to believe throughout this letter however, that the believers in Corinth had allowed themselves to be led by their flesh. They wanted the grandiose and flashy gifts, the public and verbal gifts. Their pride and shameless self-promotion had come to rule their lives.

The point of this section of scripture, *if not the entire letter*, is not to detail the finer points of the gift of tongues. The point again, is **unity and the fullness of the church**, the body of Christ. In an age where so many want to write off the local church as an old idea, a relic of days gone by, Paul is throughout this letter as well as his other writings, to reinforcing the priority of the body of Christ, as well as how it ought to operate. In our pursuit of gifts, we are, just as *they were*, to pursue gifts that will edify and build up the church.

14:13-14 **Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.**

The practice of tongues without interpretation, even alone, is ultimately unfruitful. Paul has had a lot to say about the importance of producing fruit in all that we seek... "*fruit that remains.*"

"Pray that he may interpret" can also generally mean "pray for interpretation." If tongues are exercised, we must seek for interpretation to follow. While we have no direct passage to prohibit a person from having both the gift of tongues *and* interpretation, this is unlikely, even though so many wish it to be so. The analogy of the human body suggests different functions for different members. Scripture also provides for a dynamic in the church which calls for affirmation of authenticity via the participation of more than one party. (1 Thess 5:21, Luke 12:57, Acts 17:11)

The practice of one person interpreting their own practice of tongues would create a natural danger in what clearly is created in a beautiful design that requires the body dynamic to occur. If one person speaks in tongues and then interprets himself, wouldn't there be an obvious danger of potential problems? It runs contrary to the

idea of each individual playing a part in the greater whole. Each person is interdependent upon the others for the spiritual “machine” to operate.

14:15-16 What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?

Paul, having plainly reasoned out the issues concerning this topic of exercising of the gift of tongues, is stating the obvious conclusion. There are two ways to understand what Paul is saying here. One is in light of all that he has covered thus far, to indeed “pray with the spirit” or rather, with the gift of tongues, but also to give equal attention and practice to praying in the language common to the church body. The same applies to his singing.

The second understanding of this passage is that that he will indeed pray in the power of the spirit. In this case, that prayer will be manifest in the common language of the day so it is understood by those in the church body. In light of the context, verses which proceed and follow this one, I believe it is the latter. It really makes no difference, though. One thing is for sure throughout this chapter, as specifically spelled out in verse 16 (*which he begins with “otherwise”*), Paul’s focus again is on *understanding*, which requires a use of the common language of that particular church body. Paul reminds the reader that unless it occurs this way, the others (who are *Paul’s priority*) will not be able to join in corporate agreement concerning what is said and what is prayed for.

The word “amen” means “so be it.” We could not make such a statement unless we knew for sure what the speaker was saying. Again this goes also for the exercise of the gift of prophecy, the *forth-telling*.

14:17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

Continuing to make his point, Paul reiterates the fact that while the individual who operates differently may be totally blessed by their actions, the rest of the church body is not. The gifts were given to each of us in order to build up (edify) the body of Christ, not ourselves individually.

So the exercise of our gifts on any level should be *primarily* to bless the church as a *whole*. This concept has been all but lost in the greater church of our generation. Selfishness and pride, *just like the church in Corinth*, have become the norm in our individualized, modern American church. We more often *hurt* each other than *bless* each other. Why would anyone who does not know Christ want such a relationship if they see such a display and representation?

14:18-19 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul acknowledges that he *has* the gift of tongues, and uses it. However his priority is not himself, but others, especially those within the body of believers we call the local church. He gives emphatic wording to this issue. He says that five words of teaching in the language they held in common was worth more in the church than 10,000 thousand words in an unknown tongue.

How could Paul have been more clear? Why is it then that the greater church today is *still* not clear on this issue? Is it that we don’t get it? Or is it that we just aren’t listening because we don’t like the answer?

14:20 Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.

Children like shiny objects. They would rather be entertained than learn. That's why video games are so popular today. It is a human and fleshy attribute that is natural to mankind. Sadly, such immature thirst for entertainment has moved into the modern church like a tidal wave. Entertainment is center stage in many churches today. Men desire it and, sadly, many pastors deliver it in order to build large attendance.

As he often does in his writings, Paul calls us to spiritual adulthood. He really had very little patience for the "Peter Pan syndrome" within the body of believers. We are indeed to be "babes" when it comes to evil and trouble. In spiritual matters, however, we are called to adult wisdom.

Many of us are unwilling to be challenged in this area and refuse Paul's directions in this letter. No matter how clear and scriptural he is being, some will refuse to be moved in areas of child-like entrenchment.