

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF CORINTHIANS

First Corinthians – Chapter 14

Chapter 14

TONGUES & PROPHECY

“Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it—because it does. Give yourselves to the gifts God gives you. Most of all, try to proclaim his truth.” (v1 MSG)

The last chapter we studied (chapter 13) focused heavily on love and it is the go-to chapter when it comes to love in the bible. Paul continues his teaching on the gifts of the Spirit by focusing on two vocal gifts (tongues and prophesy) and how this is administered personally and within the church setting.

He starts this chapter by advising that we go after love as if our life depended on it... because it does. Our life depends on love.

Give ourselves to the gifts God has given us which invariably means that we should be proficient in the gifts that God has given us... and that we should prophesy! In this case, prophesy is singled out in all the gifts that we should be encouraged to go for.

Purpose of Tongues:

“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.” (v2)

Speaking in tongues is:

- Speaking to God
- Not speaking to man neither is tongues spoken that man may understand him
- Speaking mysteries

What are these mysteries?

Purpose of Prophecies:

“But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.” (v3)

The 3-key purpose of prophesy are:

- Edification: A building up, in a moral and religious sense; instruction; improvement and progress of the mind, in knowledge, in morals, or in faith and holiness.
- Exhortation: The act or practice of exhorting; the act of inciting to laudable deeds; incitement to that which is good or commendable.
- Comfort: To strengthen the mind when depressed or enfeebled; to console; to give new vigour to the spirits; to cheer, or relieve from depression, or trouble.

Difference Between Prophecies and Tongues

“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 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.” (vv4-5)

Paul was explaining the difference between Tongues and Prophecy. For ease of understanding, I have highlighted the difference on the table below based on the two verses above.

Tongues	Prophecy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Edifies yourself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Edifies the church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Tongue” is less 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prophecy is greater
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tongue + Interpretation = Prophecy 	

Praying in Tongues vs Addressing the Church in Tongues:

“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?” (v6)

In this section, Paul is not discouraging praying in tongues as he also affirmed in v18 (“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all”). He is speaking about addressing the church in tongues. Therefore, Paul said: If I come speaking with tongues to you, how will that profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying or by teaching?

Yes, pray in tongues for by that, you speak to God and you speak mysteries but don’t speak to each other in tongues neither should you address the church in tongues except you can interpret.

Reading verses 7-11, Paul was emphasising the limitation of tongues in communicating with others and in addressing the church.

Go After Gifts for the Church Purposes:

“Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.” (v12)

Paul gives a clue as to why we should seek spiritual gifts and why we should excel in spiritual gifts. It is so that the church might be edified.

Encouragement to Interpret Tongues:

“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. 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? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.” (vv13-17)

Can anyone give an instance when they had interpreted tongues?

Paul encourages everyone that speaks in tongues that they should pray that they might be able to interpret. As stated earlier, if you pray in tongue, your spirit prays but your understanding is unfruitful i.e. you don’t understand what you are saying. Therefore, Paul conclusion is this:

- I will pray with the spirit
- I will pray with understanding
- I will sing with the spirit
- I will sing with understanding

When you pray with the spirit and sing with the spirit then it is largely between you and God. Your attention is not to any man however, if you are for example, leading public prayer, you will have to lead with understanding that those you are leading might be able to respond or say “Amen”.

Also, when Paul says he will "pray with the spirit" and "pray with the understanding", is it more likely he meant he would pray both ways at the same time.

Tongues & Understanding

"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." (vv18-19)

The context of Paul's admonition here is this: He loves to speak in tongues and was boasting that he speaks in tongues more than the entire church in Corinth however, in teaching (preaching, exhorting, prophesying and all verbal communication) to the church, he would rather speak with his understanding and in so doing, teach, encourage or instruct others towards their growth in faith.

Tongues & Prophecy as a Sign

"Therefore, tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. Therefore, if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus, the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you." (vv22-25)

Paul is saying that the purpose of speaking in tongues is to be a sign, a proof of sorts, to the unbeliever. Therefore, there is no reason for a group of believers to be speaking in tongues in this way to one another, for they already believe and do not need a miraculous sign.

Therefore, Paul says that a nonbeliever would think the believers mad if he walked in on them speaking in tongues to each other. You see, the tongues are supposed to be a sign to him, the nonbeliever, directed to him and for him.

Paul never said prophecy was only effective on believer. When he says "But if all prophesy" he is not saying they are all prophesying to each other only, but that they all possess the gift of prophecy. The contrast between the two scenarios is to show that a message of truth is effective and edifying for nonbelievers as well.

Tongues, Prophecy and Order in the Church

"So, here's what I want you to do. When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight. If prayers are offered in tongues, two or three's the limit, and then only if someone is present who can interpret what you're saying. Otherwise, keep it between God and yourself. And no more than two or three speakers at a meeting, with the rest of you listening and taking it to heart. Take your turn, no one person taking over. Then each speaker gets a chance to say something special from God, and you all learn from each other. If you choose to speak, you're also responsible for how and when you speak. When we worship the right way, God doesn't stir us up into confusion; he brings us into harmony. This goes for all the churches—no exceptions." (vv26-33 MSG)

The clear instruction is this:

- When we gather for worship, let all prepare for the edification of the church (hymn, song, tongue, prophecy etc.)
- If prayer is offered in tongues then, there must be 2 or 3 who can interpret otherwise, keep your tongue between yourself and God.

- There shouldn't be more than 2 or 3 speaking a message to the church at the same time while the rest listen.
- Each one speaking should take their turn in speaking and everyone will get their chance to deliver their message.
- If you choose to speak, you are responsible for how and when you speak.
- When we worship this way, there are no confusion for God will not stir us up into confusion.

Instruction to wives:

“Wives must not disrupt worship, talking when they should be listening, asking questions that could more appropriately be asked of their husbands at home. God’s Book of the law guides our manners and customs here. Wives have no license to use the time of worship for unwarranted speaking. Do you—both women and men—imagine that you’re a sacred oracle determining what’s right and wrong? Do you think everything revolves around you?” (vv34-36 MSG)

Further to Paul’s instruction on how we conduct ourselves in worship and to do things in harmony, he therefore instructs the wives (who prior to now had not been part of proper worship setting as Jews or newly converted Gentiles) not to disrupt worship but if they have questions, they should ask their husbands at home.

In this setting, there were a lot of whispering as wives were new to all these and wanted to understand what was going on. Paul instruction is to stop the disturbance at worship setting and asked the wives to ask their questions in such a way that the worship service is not disrupted.

God’s Way

“If any one of you thinks God has something for you to say or has inspired you to do something, pay close attention to what I have written. This is the way the Master wants it. If you won’t play by these rules, God can’t use you. Sorry.” (vv36-27 MSG)

If you don’t play by the rules, God can’t use you!!! These are the rules and let us learn to be submissive to the Spirit of the Lord.

Conclusion

“Three things, then, to sum this up: When you speak forth God’s truth, speak your heart out. Don’t tell people how they should or shouldn’t pray when they’re praying in tongues that you don’t understand. Be courteous and considerate in everything.” (vv39-40 MSG)

The 3-concluding statement from Paul is:

- **Desire earnestly to prophesy.** When you speak forth God’s truth, speak you heart out.
- **Do not forbid to speak with tongues.** Don’t tell people how they should or shouldn’t pray when they’re praying in tongues that you don’t understand.
- **Let all things be done decently and in order.** Be courteous and considerate in everything.

