

XXVI. Spiritual Gifts Edify the Church

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1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Aim: To seek to use our spiritual gifts to edify, encourage, and console the church.

In his prolonged discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul has mentioned the gifts of tongues several times in passing (12:10, 28, 30; 13:8). In this passage, he finally grapples in detail with this particular gift. Tongues-speaking was a phenomenon that may have arisen in the Corinthian church since Paul's departure from the city.

After presenting love as the 'more excellent way' above all ministries and gifts, Paul directly and forcefully confronts the Corinthians in regard to their sin against love in misunderstanding and misusing the gift of tongues. Believers there had so abused the gift that they rivaled Babel in confusion of speaking, and the apostle devotes an entire chapter to the problem, which was so representative of their sinfulness.

We need to be reminded of the careful foundation Paul has laid to this point now that he is directly addressing the Corinthians towards his conclusions. First, since he was dealing with an activity called 'the spiritual things' (tongues speaking), he needed to establish the basic truth that all who had broken free from idolatry to declare that 'Jesus is Lord' have done so only by the power of the Holy Spirit (12:1-3). Conversion, not tongues speaking, is *the* evidence of the Holy Spirit. Second, the same Spirit – along with the Lord and God – distributes a diversity of gifts to the members of the body of confessors (12:4-11). Gifts to individuals are for the common good. Third, as in the human body there is no one member or organ: all are needed (12:12-21). As in a human body where weaker parts are given greater honor, the members of the body of Christ honor the weaker members and together share one another's joys and sufferings (12:22-26). Fourth, there is – nonetheless – a hierarchy of gifts graded for their value to the church, of which the last in the list is tongues (12:27-30). Fifth, tongues, like all the gifts, express temporary approximations of truth against the time of the coming of 'the perfect,' when knowing God is immediate and complete and love is full-orbed. In the meantime the exercise of gifts which are not love-driven in ministry to and for others is useless (13:1-13). Now that this carefully planned foundation has been laid, Paul is able to get down to teaching about prophecy and tongues.

A. Pursue Love (1 Corinthians 14:1)

¹*Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.*

1. Love

Whatever gifts individuals might have, what is of primary importance is *how* they are used. It is as though the apostle is loath to leave this emphasis, with his opening command, 'Pursue love.'

Paul's guiding principle for all that he will now say, which is derived from the previous chapter, is stated baldly: 'Pursue love.' Paul's verb (*diōkō*) means 'to hunt or chase after with intensity' Elsewhere Paul uses it to mean 'persecute,' as in 'I persecuted the church' (15:9; 2 Cor. 4:9). He is saying, 'Pursue, *go after* love.' Moreover, it is a command. Love is not an option, but an obligation.

To pursue something is to follow doggedly after it with determination and intensity. Much of the trouble in the church of Corinth can be attributed to the members pursuing the wrong thing.

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Instead of making love for each other the object of determined pursuit, they were chasing after the more spectacular gifts. And why were they so interested in these gifts? Was it for the good of the church? Far from it! It was rather to gratify their own selfish desires to be known as part of the spiritual elite.

Lovelessness was by far their greatest problem, to which all of their other problems were related in one way or another. The only strong affection many of them had was for themselves. Paul here commands them to pursue love.

2. Gifts

Paul quickly links love to the business in hand by showing that it is not contrary, but essential, to his next exhortation, namely ‘earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.’ The two belong together. Here what were earlier described as *charismata*, gifts of grace, are now termed *pneumatika* (‘spiritual things’ – a neuter, plural noun), gifts of the Spirit, but the two are, of course, the same.

The fact that love is primary, however, does not mean that everything else is to be disregarded. ‘Yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts,’ Paul continues. Love is no substitute for other virtues, or even good works; in fact, love is the great motivator, the only true motivator, of good works. It is also the great motivator of every spiritual ministry and of the proper use of every spiritual gift.

In telling the Corinthians to pursue love, Paul was not denying the legitimacy of spiritual gifts, but was simply demanding they get their priorities straight. Spiritual gifts were only to be desired, while love was to be pursued earnestly.

3. Prophecy

Paul then launches in to the next part of his agenda, which is to correct the over-valuation of tongues in the congregation at Corinth and to establish the superiority and need of the gift of prophecy. He will do this by demonstrating that speaking in a non-interpreted foreign language is less relevant than the other *charismata*, and certainly less desirable than prophecy in the vernacular.

‘Especially that you may prophesy’ is plural in form, indicating not that individuals should desire to prophesy, but that the whole church should desire that gift to be used in their assembly. It was the more significant gift because it was able to accomplish what tongues could not.

A prophet, or one with the gift of prophecy, was one who spoke for God. He received direct revelation from God and transmitted this to the church. When Scripture was completed there was no more need for the gift of prophecy *per se*, but the preaching of the Scriptures in our day is the successor of the biblical prophet. The preacher does not receive new truth from God, but he takes the truth ‘once delivered to the saints’ and expounds and applies it.

The essence of prophecy is not predictive of the future so much as revelatory of the mind and will of God. The prophet speaks God’s authoritative word to the congregation. Prophecy today will be the authoritative proclamation of the Bible’s life-giving truth in the power of the Holy Spirit. The opening verses of Hebrews teach us that, in Christ, God has spoken His final word to man and completed His finished work for man, so that we do not expect any further revelation. Nothing said by any contemporary ‘prophet’ has the quality or authority to be bound into our Bible as a sixty-seventh book. Indeed, any so-called prophecies must be tested by Scripture and should not be accepted as true unless they are in accord with the perfect and completed revelation.

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How did Paul go about deciding that prophecy was the most valuable among the gifts? As far as Paul was concerned, two very vital questions must be asked in determining which of these two gifts was more valuable: which gift edifies the saints (14:2-19) and which evangelizes sinners (14:20-25)?

Everything in the church ought to be done with these twin priorities in mind. However, another ‘e’ word has been added to the list of priorities by the modern-day church: entertainment. Instead of asking if worship services edify and evangelize, many church leaders now want to know if the people ‘enjoyed’ the service enough to want to come again.

When we submit the gift of prophecy, along with the gift of tongues, to Paul’s dual test, it is immediately clear that prophecy passes with flying colors while tongues falls far short.

B. Prophecy Edifies (1 Corinthians 14:2-5)

1. Tongue Speaking Is Not Understandable (14:2)

²*For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.*

The use of ‘for’ at the start of verse 2 alerts us to the fact that Paul is going to justify his elevation of prophecy as the most desired gift, in comparison to tongues, which seems to have been the gift the Corinthians most desired and elevated.

The sheer amount of space the apostle Paul gives to discussing the gift of tongues makes it reasonable to conclude this was the gift they regarded as the very pinnacle of spirituality. Those who didn’t possess it were probably regarded with disdain.

The terms *lalein glōssēi/glōssais* (‘to speak in a tongue/tongues’) that Paul uses so frequently in chapter 14 were commonly used in his day to describe pagan ecstatic speech. In the church at Corinth much of the tongues-speaking had taken on the form and flavor of those pagan ecstasies. Emotionalism all but neutralized their rational senses, and selfish exhibitionism was common, with everyone wanting to do and say his own thing at the same time (v. 26). Services were bedlam and chaos, with little worship and little edification taking place. Because of the extreme carnality in the church at Corinth, we can be sure that much of the tongues-speaking there was counterfeit. Believers were in no spiritual condition to properly use true spiritual gifts or properly manifest true spiritual fruit.

Regardless of what our understanding of this gift is, we should all be able to agree it certainly was not intended to be given the place of supremacy among the gifts. Paul’s purpose in this chapter is to downplay or minimize the value of the gift of tongues and to stress the crucial importance of prophecy.

a) Tongues Speaking – Unknown Languages

What are we to understand about the gift of tongues? Here the battle rages! On one side are those who assert this is the ability to speak to God in an ‘unknown’ language. The speaker, they maintain, doesn’t even understand what he is saying, but is speaking ‘mysteries.’ His mind is suspended and he is carried beyond himself into the level of the spirit.

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b) Tongues Speaking – Foreign Languages

On the other side of the debate are those who insist that the gift of tongues was the ability to speak in a foreign language. Several arguments can be advanced in support of this view. First of all, when the gift of tongues initially occurred, it was quite obviously the ability to speak in a foreign language. In describing this occasion, Luke actually names the various nationalities present in Jerusalem that day and explicitly says each individual heard the gospel in his own language (Acts 2:4-12).

Secondly, Paul uses the very same word, *glossa*, to describe the tongue phenomenon in Corinth as Luke used to describe what happened on Pentecost.

Thirdly, Paul talks in chapter 14 about interpreting tongues. He uses the Greek word *hermeneuo* which literally means ‘translation.’ To translate something is to put the words of a foreign language into a known language.

Finally, it is certainly noteworthy that Paul includes in his discussion of tongues two explicit references to foreign languages (14:10-11, 21-22). This would seem to have only confused the issue if the gift of tongues was not the ability to speak in a foreign language.

If the gift of tongues was the ability to speak in a foreign language, why did God ever give it to the church? What possible purpose could it serve? The most obvious answer is that it was to be used to preach the gospel to people in foreign countries. This would explain how Paul, who claimed to know more tongues than the Corinthians (14:18), used the gift. And the gift of tongues on the Day of Pentecost clearly had an evangelistic purpose. In fact, the preaching in tongues on that day led to three thousand conversions.

c) Tongues Speaking in Practice

(1) Speaking to God

Equating the gift of tongues with foreign languages does raise some difficult questions. The one that immediately comes to mind is what Paul means when he says the one with the gift of tongues ‘does not speak to men but to God.’ As far as many are concerned, this is *prima facie* evidence that the gift of tongues has to be the ability to speak in an unknown tongue. The gift of tongues on the Day of Pentecost was the ability to speak to men, but this is a different kind of tongue altogether because here the speaker is addressing God, not men.

This first phrase is inconclusive, because it can equally well be explained by both camps of the tongues controversy. On one hand, the ‘unknown tongue’ camp says it is speaking in a language that God alone can understand. But those who hold the ‘foreign language’ view of tongues can equally say that, unless interpreted, the meaning of the foreign language is understandable only to God. The most natural way to understand this business of the tongue being addressed to God is to phrase it something like this: ‘If you do not interpret your tongue so others can be edified, you might as well be speaking to God alone.’

A better translation instead of ‘to God’ may be ‘to a god.’ The Greek has no definite article, and such anarthrous constructions usually are translated with an indefinite article (see Acts 17:23, where the same form of *theō* [god] is used in reference to ‘an unknown god’). The translation here of ‘a god’ is supported by the fact that the Bible records no instance of believers speaking to God in anything but normal, intelligible language. Even in Jesus’ great high priestly prayer

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(John 17), in which the Son poured out His heart to the Father, when deity communed with deity, the language is remarkably simple and clear.

(2) Uttering Mysteries

In addition to that, what does Paul's next phrase, about speaking in 'mysteries,' mean? As far as modern-day charismatics are concerned, this can only mean the one speaking in tongues doesn't himself understand what he is saying.

The Corinthians did not care that 'no one understands,' or literally, 'no one hears.' Their concern was for the excitement and self-gratification of speaking 'mysteries' in the 'spirit.' They did not care that the mysteries had no meaning to themselves or to anyone else.

It has been suggested that the assertion that 'by the Spirit' the tongues speaker uttered 'mysteries' proves that he did not know what he was saying, the logic being that he would hardly have restated before God mysteries, previously undisclosed divine purposes now revealed to him by the Spirit. Yet why not? Why should not a tongues speaker have blessed God by referring to the content of those matters made known to him?

The word 'mysteries,' instead of proving the unknown language position, actually contradicts it. The word 'mystery' is one of the most well-defined in Scripture. Mysteries are truths which were once hidden but have now been revealed (cp. 2:6-16). If a mystery is, by definition a truth God has revealed, the idea that speaking in tongues means speaking something one doesn't understand goes right out the door! The one speaking in a foreign language, on the other hand, is speaking in that language the truths God has revealed. Those truths must be interpreted, of course, but they are still truths God has revealed.

The 'mysteries' that Paul has in mind here are of the type associated with the pagan mystery religions, out of which many of the Corinthian Christians had come. Unlike the mysteries of the gospel, which are revelations of things previously hidden (Mt. 13:11; Eph. 3:9; etc.), the pagan mysteries intentionally remained mysterious, as unknown truths and principles that supposedly only the initiated elite were privileged to know. The 'spirit' to which Paul refers is not the Holy Spirit, as some interpreters claim, but the person's own spirit, as implied in the Greek (locative case) and indicated in the NASB by 'his' (cp. vv. 14-16).

(3) Not Understood by Men

Paul's concern is for the congregation, who listen to these utterances, that they will derive no benefit from them because they have no idea of the meaning of the sounds, as with any unlearned foreign language. Since the purpose of speech is to convey meaning, they are speaking to God, rather than to men. Apart from the speaker, only God can comprehend what is said, the congregation making no sense of what appears to be a jumble of sounds. This has led many to recognize that uninterpreted tongues are for private, rather than public, use. The experience of those who use the gift is of a heightened capacity to praise and pray to God beyond their normal ability in their native language. Although the speaker does not understand the meaning, he knows that he is speaking to God [DSB: but see vv. 14-15].

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2. Prophecy Edifies the Church (14:3-4)

³*On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.*

‘To edify’ means simply ‘to build up.’ If we say a service was edifying to us, we mean it was constructive and helpful, that it built up our faith. The crucial thing to remember about edification is this: before something can be edifying, it has to make sense. People cannot be built up in their faith if they don’t understand what is going on in the service.

This is Paul’s first point of contrast, stressing the intelligibility of the prophetic message to the hearers, which automatically insures that it is much more beneficial to the church. Paul provides further arguments for the superiority of prophecy based on what it achieves in those who hear and receive its message. It speaks for ‘upbuilding and encouragement and consolation’ so that ‘the one who prophesies builds up the church.’ The edification of the church is what matters most; that will only happen when God’s word is spoken intelligibly, in the power of God’s Spirit.

The apostle’s stated priority for the gathering of God’s people is that they be ‘built up, encouraged (*paraklēsis* = ‘exhortation, comfort, or counsel’), and consoled’ (*paramythian* = ‘encouraged’). Prophecy will achieve these ends because it comes in a known language, but tongues, unless interpreted, will be of no help since it is speech that will not be ‘heard,’ that is, ‘understood.’

The purpose of prophecy is to build up by ‘edification,’ to encourage through ‘exhortation,’ and to comfort through ‘consolation.’ Spiritual gifts are meant to accomplish something spiritually and practically worthwhile, and are always meant to be of benefit to others, believer or unbeliever. The believer who prophesies ‘edifies the church.’ That person uses his gift to minister, as all the gifts are meant to do. The purpose of gifts, Paul was saying, is to minister *for* God but not *to* God.

Speaking in tongues builds up the speaker (provided there is understanding – verse 13-15), but prophesying builds up the gathered assembly and is accordingly an expression of love towards the members of the body.

On the other hand, ‘one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.’ Paul’s point here is probably sarcastic. Because even true tongues must be interpreted in order to be understood, they cannot possibly edify anyone, including the person speaking, without such an interpretation. They cannot, therefore, be intended by God for private devotional use, as many Pentecostals and charismatics claim. Paul here is referring to the *supposed* value the Corinthians placed on their self-styled tongues-speaking. The satisfaction many of the believers experienced in their abuse of tongues was *self*-satisfaction, which came from pride-induced emotion, not from spiritual edification.

3. Prophecy Is Superior to Tongues (14:5)

⁵*Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.*

Why, many people wonder, did Paul say, ‘I wish that you all spoke in tongues’? Paul was wishing the impossible for the sake of emphasis. He knew that all Christians do not have the

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same gifts (12:30). To have wished literally that all Corinthian believers had the gift of tongues would have presumed to improve on the Spirit's wisdom. Paul simply was making it clear that he did not despise the genuine gift of tongues, the true manifestation of which is of God. 'If the Holy Spirit chose to endow every one of you with the gift of tongues,' he was saying, 'that would be fine with me.'

Even more, however, Paul wished that all of the Corinthian believers 'would prophesy.' He knew that that was also impossible, for the same reason that their all having the same gift of tongues was impossible. His point was that, if they insisted on clamoring after the same gift, it would be much better if they clamored after prophecy. Not only was prophecy superior to tongues in edifying the church, but it was a longer-lasting gift, one Paul knew would continue to be used by the Lord long after tongues had ceased.

In short, prophesying is greater than speaking in tongues, because it enables the church to receive upbuilding. A prophet is greater than a tongues speaker, which does not mean that the former is personally superior to the latter. Paul's meaning is that since non-translated tongues are unintelligible, they will not edify the church.

The gift of tongues simply could not compete with the gift of prophecy on the matter of edification. For tongues to edify the church, they had to be interpreted. Evidently, a lot of speaking in tongues was going on in the church of Corinth without anyone bothering to offer an interpretation, and Paul wanted to bring this to a screeching halt. But even with interpretation, the gift of tongues is still no match for prophecy. Two stages were necessary for the church to receive edification from tongues: the tongue had to be spoken and then interpreted. Prophecy on the other hand, was intelligible in and of itself. So even though tongues could be interpreted for the edification of the church, Paul says he would rather speak five words that could be understood than ten thousand words in a tongue (14:19).

The contemporary church will be edified only in so far as the attested and assured word of Scripture is proclaimed with all its relevance, in the Spirit's power, as this is the only sure and abiding Word of God.

C. Tongues Do Not Edify (1 Corinthians 14:6-12)

1. Prophecy Edifies the Church (14:6)

⁶Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?

Paul continues to pursue his emphasis that the content of a message is the criterion by which a gift's usefulness is to be assessed, within the context of the church. The Corinthians seem to have used the display of the gift and its obvious supernatural origin as their criteria, but neither of these has a beneficial effect. Personalizing his argument, Paul makes the point that his own speech would only benefit them, when he came to the congregation in Corinth, if it were understood. Because non-interpreted languages are useless, of what value to the church will the apostle be if he speaks in rational tongues which are beyond his hearers' understanding?

Paul's second major truth regarding the secondary position of tongues is that, in themselves, they are unintelligible. To strengthen his point he uses himself as an illustration. Even by an apostle, 'speaking in tongues, gives no profit apart from interpretation, through which the 'revelation' or

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‘knowledge’ (internal) or the ‘prophecy’ or ‘teaching’ (external) is made understandable to those who hear. Any message is useless if it cannot be comprehended. It is incredible that some Christians put a premium on private or en masse unintelligible utterances that no one, including the speaker, can even attempt to understand.

Paul lists four verbal activities: revelation, knowledge, prophecy, and teaching. Overall there is a sequence: revelation leads to knowledge, and the possessor of knowledge becomes a prophet who will enlarge the minds of people. The common factor is clarity. All four of these have in common that they are *intelligible*, thus bringing profit to the hearers.

2. Examples of Non-Edification (14:7-11)

The gift of tongues does not edify the church, unless there is an interpretation. To edify, first it must make sense. Paul uses three examples to hammer this truth home.

a) Musical Instruments (14:7)

⁷If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?

Paul’s first example is from the world of music. His point is that music, to be appreciated and enjoyed, has to be intelligible. A tune can only be recognized and identified as a tune, if its notes are distinct.

Even lifeless things, such as a flute or harp, are expected to make sensible sounds. Rhythm, structure, harmony, and other such orderly qualities make a group of notes music instead of mere noise. For music it must be intelligible in its own way; it must make sense. Each note, chord, and phrase has a musical purpose—to communicate joy, sadness, militancy, peace, strife, or whatever the composer intends. Without variation, order, and ‘distinction’ of notes, a musical instrument makes only noise.

b) Military Bugle (14:8-9)

⁸And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air.

Then Paul goes to the military world. Bugles are used by the military for giving certain commands to the soldiers. One sound from the bugle meant the soldiers were to get ready for battle. Suppose the bugler just played a few random notes. No one would know what to do! They certainly will not get ready to go into battle unless the trumpet call is heard and its message understood.

Hearing a bugle meant nothing to a soldier if a definite military call is not being played. Mere bugle notes are meaningless, even if played by the official bugler on the best instrument available. A soldier gets no message from a bunch of random notes. He can only get ready for battle when ‘Call to Arms,’ ‘Charge,’ or other such calls are played.

In the same way, we cannot communicate Christian truth through meaningless sounds. ‘Intelligible’ translates *eusēmon* (*eu* = ‘well’; for *sēmon*, cp. the English ‘semantic’); an utterance is significant only if it conveys a message.

The Corinthians were so carnally self-centered that they could not have cared less about communication. They were interested in impressing others, not communicating with them, much

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less edifying them. Paul compares those Christians to musical instruments blown into by one who is not a musician or a bugle played so poorly that what comes out is unrecognizable. From such incompetence, produced by pride and lovelessness, the Corinthian assembly could not have been other than it was: confused, disorderly, and unproductive.

It is easy to see the point in Paul's illustrations. Sounds have to make sense! We have no trouble accepting this in the world at large. We would not have it any other way. How ironic it is, then, for us to want the exact opposite in the church! We cannot function in the world if sounds do not make sense. Why should we desire sounds that do not make sense in the church?

c) Foreign Languages (14:10-11)

¹⁰*There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.*

Finally, Paul actually uses the example of foreign languages. There are all kinds of languages in the world and each language makes sense if you understand it. But what happens if someone comes up to you and begins talking in a language you don't understand? The words all sound like a meaningless jumble!

Paul continues to hammer away at his point by mentioning the obvious. A language without meaning is pointless. A language without meaning is not really a language. It is meaning that makes language language. Each different language has a single common purpose to communicate, to transmit meaning among those who speak it.

Because the need for understanding is universal, a tongues speaker may not be an exception. In both verses 10-11, the word translated as 'languages' is really 'sounds' (*phōnōn*); the 'sounds' employed in communication must be significant. So, if there is no intelligible sound there can be no contact. 'Inarticulate' or 'without meaning' (*aphōnōn*) means 'dumb' in the same sense that idols are dumb (cp. 12:2). Paul is stating that in the real world there are no languages unable to convey information to those who know them. It is the same with speaking in tongues: if the hearers do not comprehend, the tongues should either be translated or else held in check.

Not only must a legitimate language be used in order to communicate, but both the speaker and hearer must understand it. By definition communication must be two-sided. 'Barbarian' was an onomatopoeic word derived from the twin syllables 'bar-bar.' To a person who does not know a language it often sounds as if the words are all alike and meaningless. To most Greeks of Paul's day, anyone who did not speak Greek was a barbarian. His language was unintelligible. If, therefore, even true tongues are meaningless without interpretation, Paul says, how much more meaningless is pagan-like gibberish that is a counterfeit of a true thing.

If you do not know the meaning of another language the speaker and the hearer will be like 'Barbarians' to one another. A 'barbarian' (translated as 'foreigner') was a non-Greek; the Hellenes prided themselves that they were the only people who spoke intelligently, others being considered to splutter out, so to speak a nonsensical 'bar-bar' (cp. Acts 28:2). The 'meaning' (*dynamis*) of an articulate 'sound' – that is, of a language – carries the sense of 'power' or 'ability'; the voice has the strength to communicate.

So, asks Paul, what if intelligent words in God-given sounds come across as gibberish to a listener who things and speaks in a different tongue? Whereas the speaker believes that he has a

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superior endowment, his hearer concludes that the man is a fool. Barriers are set up and fellowship is impossible.

Possible Paul means us to infer something deeper in each of these analogies of unintelligibility. In the first, he may be implying that the tuneless noise of flute and harp reflect a confused babble of tongues-speaking in the church. In the second, he may be saying that muffled and ambiguous tongues noise is no substitute for the piercing chord of the military trumpet calling for advance in evangelism, for example. In the third, he may be saying that hearing tongues that are not comprehended effectively alienates member from member in the assembly.

3. Strive to Edify the Church (14:12)

¹²*So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.*

If the Corinthians are going to be keen to use and develop their spiritual gifts, they should major on those that edify and excel in those. Apparently the tongues speakers portrayed themselves as the men and women of the Spirit *par excellence*. Perhaps with some irony Paul addresses these super-spiritual ones as ‘zealots for things of the Spirit.’ Paul seems to be saying, ‘If you are truly Spirit-filled people you won’t be obsessed with gifts that begin and end with you, as tongues does. Rather, you will want to exercise those gifts that build up the church, which prophesying above all else does.

Paul says here, ‘If you are so eager to minister spiritual gifts, minister them in the way God intended for the benefit of the church, in particular for the church’s edification. The present tense of *zēteō* (‘seek’) indicates continuous, habitual action.

The purpose of the gift of tongues, just as the purpose of all languages, was to communicate. Although it was a miraculous sign gift, it also was a communicating gift. From its first occurrence at Pentecost the Lord intended it to be a means of communication. The very miracle of tongues at Pentecost was in the fact that everyone present, though from many different countries, heard the apostles ‘speak their own language’ (Acts 2:6; cp. vv. 8, 11). That was always a characteristic of genuine tongues. The Pentecost tongues, and every true manifestation of tongues after that time until there was cessation, were understandable—either directly (Acts 2:6) or through an interpreter (14:27). God did not give two kinds of tongues, one intelligible and the other unintelligible. The Bible speaks of only one gift, whose characteristics and purpose did not change.

Paul represents in his conclusion the need for edification urged by 14:1-5. He acknowledges his readers do not lack zeal for spiritual gifts, yet he implies that their enthusiasm is off-balance. They place too much emphasis upon tongues-speaking and too little upon building up the church. This tendency must be corrected. Because the Corinthians want to display their endowments (literally ‘spirits’), Paul approves: if they do so with a view to building up the church, let them ‘abound.’

Congregational meetings are therefore to be judged not by their excitement levels but by the content of the message proclaimed. Words of truth strengthen faith, encourage action, and equip God’s people to serve Him and to serve His world. They confirm what is right and correct what is wrong. But they do all this, not by magic, but by their content. If Paul had come to Corinth speaking in tongues but not preaching the gospel of Christ crucified, there would never have been a church.

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To allow meaningless speech, or mindless repetition of empty mantras, to dominate their times together is to cease to love and care for one another as they should. To insist on using particular gifts in public, such as tongues, that have no beneficial effect, is a serious dereliction of their Christian duty of love to one another. They might as well be strangers and foreigners to one another. Those who ‘pursue love’ will excel in gifts that strengthen and encourage the whole body, not in outpourings that confuse or alienate. Once again, love is the vital test of how gifts are used.

The key takeaway from this section of Scripture is for us to understand how important it is for us to strive for edification in our worship services. Anything that doesn’t edify is not of God.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 14:13-25.