

# 1 Corinthians 14

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Pastor Jared Stoner, Lead Pastor

This morning I want to return to the topic I addressed last week, which is the Baptism in the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. This week I want to focus especially on the spiritual gifts used in public worship. If you were not here last week, can I ask you to pick up a copy of that sermon or listen to it online? It's not that I have an overly high opinion of that sermon, but I think it will help you to understand where we're coming from as a church as it relates to this issue. And I hope it will give you an opportunity to look at the Baptism in the Holy Spirit from more of a 30,000 foot view. This morning, I want to spend a few minutes talking about the spiritual gifts that are supposed to operate in public worship services and what Paul has to say about their operation. In order to do that, I want to work our way through the first part of 1Corinthians 14.

## 1Corinthians 14:1-5

<sup>1</sup>Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. <sup>4</sup>The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. <sup>5</sup>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.

In 1Corinthians 12, Paul talks about spiritual gifts. In particular, he explains how the varying gifts God has given to his church, while different, all come from him and all contribute in unique ways

to the health and growth of the body of Christ. That gives way to 1Corinthians 13 and the regulating principle of those gifts, which is love. 1Corinthians 14 then picks up the topic of spiritual gifts once more and describes the purpose of those gifts as well as how they should operate in the church. Paul is moving from the general to the specific. Paul begins 1Corinthians 14 by boldly telling the Corinthians: pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

Paul instructs the Corinthians to pursue love, even and especially when it comes to spiritual gifts. Why? I think Paul instructs the Corinthians to pursue love because the use of spiritual gifts has the potential to build up the church or to bring it into confusion and division. Why else would Paul spend 1Corinthians 12 talking to the Corinthians about the importance of all of the gifts and the inability of any part of the body to tell the another part of the body they are not needed. The public use of spiritual gifts is not for the benefit of any individual, but for the gathered church as a whole. If their use does not benefit the church, then they're not be used as gifts to the church at all. The problem, then, is in not in the gifts themselves, but in their use. Love for the church must regulate the use of spiritual gifts.

The second statement in verse one says that while we should pursue love, we should earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. Since the goal of spiritual gifts is the building up of the church, love directs us to seek spiritual gifts, not to turn away from them. It's not love or gifts. It's love expressed in the use of the gifts. Because the gifts of the Spirit can be used in a way that is destructive or divisive, we're sometimes tempted to do away with all of it just to be safe. And we can think that is the loving thing to do, but it's not. Why? Because spiritual gifts are a blessing from God to the church. Therefore we should desire spiritual gifts, but that desire should be motivated by love for the church and a desire to build it up.

The third statement in verse one sets the direction for verses two through five. Not only should we seek the gifts, but especially the gift of prophecy.

Paul then explains what he means in verse two. "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." Paul says that prophesying is better than speaking in tongues, unless there is an interpretation, because no one else in the church can understand what's being said when it's being said in tongues. When someone speaks in tongues they are speaking to God, not to other people. And even though it may be wonderful that they are uttering mysteries in the Spirit, that doesn't build the church up, which means when it comes to public worship, the priority is on prophecy or interpreted tongues.

Verse three brings to mind what we said last week. Prophesying is not simply predicting the future, although that has certainly been one component of it. In general, prophets speak for God to, among other things, build up, encourage, and console God's people. The word translated "to build up" is used in literature outside this passage to describe the literal construction of buildings. Metaphorically, then, it suggests that prophecy builds up the spiritual structure of the church. So Paul says in 1Corinthians 3:10, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it." The church also builds up the church by exercising spiritual gifts, particularly prophecy or interpreted tongues.

Prophecy also encourages or emboldens God's people in some belief or course of action. In Hebrews 6:18, the author encourages God's people by reminding them that it is impossible for God to lie, so that "we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us." We are emboldened to persist in hope because God does not lie and therefore his promises can be trusted. Prophecy often provides that kind of encouragement.

Prophecy also consoles God's people. It's often that God speaks a word of consolation to his people, that he comforts them in their times of grief or sorrow or anxiety. In fact, I think we have seen a pattern of God offering consolation to us in the past few weeks. If God knows his people and loves them and wants to provide for them, it's not

surprising that he would give them a timely word of consolation in difficult seasons. Prophecy provides all of those things at different times in accordance with God's will and the needs of God's people. If that's the case, is it any wonder that Paul tells the Corinthians, and by extension us, to earnestly desire spiritual gifts.

Verse four seems straightforward enough when it says, "The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church." However, it can be difficult to determine whether Paul is throwing shade here or speaking in a straightforward sense. Is Paul talking about those who build themselves up, that is, people whose use of the gifts is self-centered and attention-seeking way? Or is he talking about people who by their use of the gift of speaking in tongues are actually building themselves up spiritually in a good way, as an act of worship and prayer?

This argument goes back to the early church fathers who seem to disagree, and all the theologians who have disagreed since their time. If you have ever heard Pentecostals talk about speaking in tongues as a prayer language, this is often one verse they point to. They argue that speaking in tongues is actually edifying to the individual believer even when done privately.

Understood that way, the distinction between prophesy and tongues is not that one is good because it builds up the church and the other is bad because it builds up the individual. Prophecy is good because it builds up the church and therefore should be used in public worship. Tongues is also good, but should be used in private worship because it builds up the individual. Unless a message in tongues is interpreted. It's hard to see how Paul would tell the Corinthians that he wanted them all to speak in tongues, and that speaking in tongues was talking to God and uttering mysteries in the Spirit, then suggest that speaking in tongues in general was an exercise in selfishness and pride.

I think Paul clarifies even more what he means in verse five when he says that he wants everyone to speak in tongues, but even more for them to prophesy. The gift of speaking in tongues is something that Paul says he wants for everyone. I think

that is both because it can be a blessing in private worship, but also and especially because it is a blessing to the church as a whole in public worship when accompanied by interpretation. Again, I would point you back to Numbers 11:29 where Moses wishes or prays that God would pour out His Spirit on all of his people and that they would prophesy. That happened in Acts 2, which resulted in what the New Testament calls speaking in tongues. Why would Paul not want for God's people what Moses did want for them and Joel said God would do for them?

As it relates to the church then, the one who prophesies is better than the one who speaks in tongues unless there is an interpretation, in which case both gifts essentially function the same way and have the same status. If the point of spiritual gifts is to build up the body, then prophecy or tongues with an interpretation both serve that function. TS: I want to conclude this message by reading verses six through 12 for you and make just a couple points and we'll be done.

## 1 Corinthians 14:6-12

*<sup>6</sup>Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? <sup>7</sup>Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? <sup>8</sup>Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup>So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup>Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. <sup>11</sup>If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup>So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

In verses six through 12, Paul reiterates the points he has already made. Even the Apostle Paul himself would be of no use to the Corinthians if he

came and communicated something they could not understand—a revelation, teaching, or prophecy. He explains that by talking about the distinction between notes and the order in which they're played and the length of time they are played allow us to distinguish different tunes from each other. If you speak a language that no one understands, then you're just making sound and no one else is helped in any way. There has to be a distinction in letters and sounds and words in order to understand a language. That's why when you're learning a language you first learn how to say would you please speak slowly. The bottom line of all of this is that there is nothing wrong with an eagerness to exercise spiritual gifts, but we should try to excel in the gifts that build the church up.

## Conclusions

So I want to think and talk through some of the conclusions we can draw about spiritual gifts from this passage. One, if you are going to be used in the gifts of the Spirit, you better have a deep love for the church and be motivated by that love. If you don't, you're far more likely to make the use of the gifts about your own personal gratification and that's a dangerous place to be. The church is the bride of Christ, for whom he gave his life. The spiritual gifts are for the building up of the bride of Christ, not the glorification or even edification of any individual.

Some of you, no doubt, have been in churches where the gifts of the Spirit were used to draw attention to individuals. Sometimes, in fact, the crazier the behavior the more legitimacy it seemed to lend to the person exercising it. That way of exercising the gifts is absolutely diametrically opposed to the way Paul says they should be used. Better to remain quiet than to sin against God and his church in such ways.

Two, the second thing worth considering is that if spiritual gifts build up the church and if we love the church, then we should love spiritual gifts. I've told you about my own struggles in coming to terms with the gifts of the Spirit. I saw abuses,

which I knew hurt the church, and so I was tempted to say forget the use of the gifts because it's not good for the church. However, that reasoning is unbiblical. That's like a baby getting sick after drinking bad milk and saying, "well, I probably shouldn't feed them milk ever again." If we love the church, then we will love the use of the gifts in the church, provided they are used in accordance with the teaching of Scripture in passages like 1Corinthians 14.

Three, it's worth noting that prophecy and speaking in tongues with an interpretation are functionally equivalent because they both build up the church by communicating what God is saying to his people in the moment. That means that there doesn't always need to be a message in tongues for there to be a word or message to God's people. There can be a prophecy without a message in tongues.

Four, prophecy or interpreted tongues, should build up, encourage, and console the church. And they do when they are done properly. That does not mean that every prophecy is equally applicable to everyone in the church. It doesn't mean that every message in tongues with interpretation speaks just as directly to one person as to the next. But on the whole, they build up the church and encourage God's people and embolden them to stay the course.

As I said last week, the most important question we can ask is simply, what does Scripture teach? My desire for you is that you would spend time this week in 1Corinthians 12 and 14, asking questions of this text and letting the text ask questions of you. And if you're struggling with the question about whether these gifts are still for the church today, ask yourself this question: does the church still need building up? Do God's people still need to be encouraged and consoled? Does Scripture give any indication that God only intended to build up, encourage, or console his people for a limited time? Or is God still at work in the use of spiritual gifts? Are you open to receive anything God wants to give you or anything God wants to give His church through you?

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