

Chapter 14

Prophecy and tongues 14:1-40

1. The effect of prophecy 14:1-5

v1 Follow the way of love. You should be eager to have the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Most of all, you should want the gift of prophecy. v2 Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people. He speaks only to God. In fact, no one understands him. What he says with his spirit is a mystery. v3 But anyone who prophesies, speaks to people. He says things that make them stronger. He encourages and comforts them. v4 The one who speaks in a tongue benefits his own spiritual life. But the one who prophesies benefits the church. v5 I would like all of you to speak in tongues. But I would prefer that you prophesy. Those who prophesy are more important than those who speak in tongues. But maybe those who speak in tongues explain what they have said. Then the whole church can receive spiritual help to benefit it.

Verses 1-5 The Christians in Corinth were emphasising the gift of ‘tongues’. Paul possessed the gift himself (verse 18). But he was thinking about how all the members of the church could grow in their faith.

Verses 1-2 He urges the Christians at Corinth to desire spiritual gifts. But especially they should want the gift of prophecy. A Christian who praised God in a tongue was helping himself. He was using sounds in no known human language when he could not find words to use. But other people could not understand him.

Verse 3 To give a message from God benefited the church. People could understand, so their faith would grow. Prophecy encouraged and comforted members of the church.

Verse 4 Paul makes the contrast clear. To speak in a tongue will help one person. To give a message from God for a particular situation helps the whole church.

Verse 5 So Paul would prefer the Christians to prophesy. It was more important for the church to understand what God wanted. Unless someone explained the tongues, the church would not become stronger.

2. Without meaning, speech is no use 14:6-12

v6 Now, brothers and sisters, suppose that I were to speak in tongues to you. I would be no use to you. I would be no use unless I came with some truth, knowledge, prophecy or teaching. v7 Think about certain things that make sounds. Musical instruments are examples. No one will know the tune unless they play different notes. v8 If the trumpet does not make a clear call, no one will get ready for battle. v9 It is the same with you. You must speak words that people can understand. If not, no one will know what you are saying. You will just be speaking into the air. v10 It is true that there are all kinds of languages in the world. They all have meaning. v11 But I may not understand what someone is saying. Then I am a foreigner to that person. And he is a foreigner to me. v12 So it is with you. You want to have spiritual gifts. So, try to do your best. Use gifts that benefit the church.

‘Tongues’ are not helpful in church meetings, unless someone explains them. Paul uses four different ways to show this:

1. Verse 6 The church would not benefit if Paul spoke to the Christians at Corinth in tongues. He would help them only with messages that they could understand.

2. Verse 7 If musicians do not play distinct notes on their instruments, nobody will listen. Because they are not playing a proper tune (a pleasant series of notes), nobody will enjoy the music.

3. Verses 8-9 The army used a trumpet to call people to battle. They must prepare for battle. But if the sound was not clear, no one would get ready. Christians are fighting a battle against Satan. So, they must be able to make people understand the dangers in their spiritual lives. They are wasting their breath if people cannot understand their words.

4. Verses 10-11 There are many different languages. Each has its own meaning. But two people cannot talk to each other if they do not understand each other's language. The Greeks described foreign languages as ugly noises like 'bar, bar, bar.'

Verse 12 Paul tells the Christians in Corinth that they too are preventing people from understanding them. They are like musical instruments that are not playing in harmony. They are like a trumpet that does not warn about danger. It is as if they are speaking a foreign language. They must not be selfish. Instead, they should use the spiritual gifts that make the whole church strong.

3. The need to pray for understanding 14:13-19

v13 For this reason, anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to explain his words. v14 Because if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays. But my mind does nothing. v15 So this is what I shall do. I will pray with my spirit. But I will also pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit. But I will also sing with my mind. v16 Suppose that you are praising God with your spirit. And perhaps there are people among you who do not understand. These people cannot say 'Amen' when you give thanks. They do not know what you are saying. v17 You may be

giving thanks well enough. But the other person is not receiving help to grow in his faith. v18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you. v19 But in the church, I would rather speak 5 words that people can understand than speak 10 000 words in a tongue. That is because I would then be teaching other people.

Verses 13-15 It is important to use the mind as well as the spirit when a Christian prays or sings. The Christians in Corinth thought that only the spirit is important.

Verses 16-17 Perhaps Christians were speaking in tongues as they were giving thanks to God. Then some people who were present would not understand. So, they could not add 'Amen' to the thanksgiving. 'Amen' is a Hebrew word. It means that the speaker agrees with the prayer.

Verses 18-19 Paul himself had the gift to speak in tongues. But in a church meeting, he would only use words that people could understand. He wanted to teach other people so that their faith would grow strong.

4. Visitors to the church 14:20-25

v20 Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. Be like babies who are innocent about wrong behaviour. But think like adults. v21 God warns his people in the Law: 'Through people who speak strange languages and by the lips of strangers I will speak to these people. But even then they will not listen to me.' This is what the Lord says. v22 So tongues are a sign. They are not for believers, but for those who do not believe. Prophecy, however, is for believers. It is not for those who do not believe. v23 Maybe the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues. And suppose that some pagans come into the meeting. They will think that you are all mad. v24 But suppose that a non-Christian or someone with no understanding of the

faith comes to the meeting. If everyone is prophesying, he will realise his sin. What everyone says will help him to understand that he is guilty. v25 The secret things about his life will not be secret any more. So he will fall down and worship God. He will say, 'God is really among you.'

Verses 20-21 Paul has already urged the Christians at Corinth to stop behaving like children (3:1-4). Now he wants them to think about the gift of tongues in a mature way. Children think that anything unusual is exciting. But they must not be like children. Paul uses words from Isaiah 28:11-12 to make his advice clear. The words 'in the Law' here mean 'in the Old Testament (the first part of the Bible)'.

Verses 21-23 Priests and prophets who had drunk too much wine made fun of Isaiah's message. They spoke nonsense. (The Hebrew words are 'sav lasav, sav lasav, kav lakav, kav lakav'.) So Isaiah warned them. The soldiers from Assyria would come into their land and defeat them. Then the priests and prophets would hear a language that sounded like nonsense to them. So the Christians' use of tongues may sound like nonsense to someone else. Suppose that they use this gift at the wrong time. Visitors to the service will think that they are mad. 'Mad' does not mean the behaviour of someone with a mental illness. In pagan religions with secret ceremonies, people sometimes behaved in mad, excited ways. They believed that a god had power over them. The visitors may have been interested in the Christian faith. But they will decide that the Christian faith is no different from these pagan religions. So, they will go away and probably they will never return.

Verses 24-25 Preaching helps those who are already in the church (verse 22). But it is also a powerful witness to visitors. A person's conscience will tell him that he is sinful. His spiritual state will become clear.

He will declare that God is really present in the church. Paul believed that this was coming true. At a future time, people from every nation would want to learn from the Jews. Paul uses these words from Zechariah 8:23: 'Let us go with you. We have heard that God is with you.' When visitors would listen to Christian preaching, they would want to know more about Jesus.

5. The need for control in worship 14:26-36

v26 Brothers and sisters, we must be clear about what we say. When you come together, everyone brings something. You bring a song to praise God or words to instruct people. You bring a message from God, a message in a tongue or an explanation of such a message. All these things should happen in order to make the church strong. v27 No more than two or three people should speak in a tongue. They should speak one at a time. Then someone must explain what they have said. v28 If there is no one to explain, the speaker must keep quiet in the church. He should speak to himself and to God. v29 Only two or three prophets should speak. The other people should decide whether their message is true. v30 A message from God may come to someone who is sitting down. If it does, the first speaker must stop. v31 Those who prophesy can speak in turn. In this way, everyone can learn. The prophets can encourage everyone. v32 The gift to declare God's message must be under the control of the prophet. v33 This is because God is not a God of confusion, but a God of peace.

As in all the churches of God's people, v34 women should remain silent in the meetings. They must not speak. But they must obey those in authority, as the law says. v35 If they want to ask a question about something, they should ask their own husbands at home. This is because it is

shameful for women to speak in church meetings. v36 The word of God did not begin with you. You are not the only people that it has reached.

Verse 26 Paul believed that in a Christian meeting each person had a gift to share. These gifts would help the church to grow strong. But he had heard that the Christians' worship in Corinth was confused. Christians wanted to display their own gifts. They were competing for attention with each other. So there was noise, but no proper worship of God. God loves control and peace (verse 33). The meetings also went on for far too long. So Paul gives advice to three different groups:

1. Those who speak in tongues, verses 27-28

There should be a limit to the number. They must speak one at a time. If there is no one to explain the message, the speaker must keep quiet. He can speak to God but not speak aloud.

2. Those who had a message of prophecy, verses 29-32

The number of prophets should be limited. They too must control what they have to say. A speaker must stop and allow another person with a message to take his place. If they speak in turn, everyone will benefit. But Christians must hear all the messages with careful thought. They must decide whether a message is true.

3. Women, verses 34-36

Paul had made it plain that women could pray and prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:5). So it seems that he is saying the opposite. Here he is telling them to remain silent. Some writers are worried about this. So, they suggest that Paul did not write these verses (34-36). Perhaps someone else added them at a later date. But there may be several good reasons for the difference.

1. Some women were becoming too proud about their new freedom as Christians (Galatians 3:28). 'In Christ there is neither male nor female'. Some of them would have had little freedom before they became Christians. So, they were speaking at the wrong time and they were interrupting the meeting.

2. At that time, some religions with wrong beliefs gave women a very important role. The woman called 'Jezebel' in Revelation 2:20 had caused Christians to have wrong sexual behaviour. So, Paul may have been warning against women teachers with bad morals.

3. The women may not have understood what someone was saying. They might have had little teaching before they became Christians. So they interrupted. They asked the men what the speaker meant. But men and women sat apart in public meetings then. So the women had to shout or walk about. Paul said that they should ask their own husbands to explain at home.

4. They may just have been gossiping to each other. They were not trying to take part in the meeting. This is possible even in some church services today!

Verse 36 The Christians at Corinth allowed confusion in their meetings. But they were proud of themselves. So Paul made fun of them in an angry way. He said that the Christian message did not come only from them. They were not the only Christians in the world. They should pay attention to what happened in other churches (verse 33).

6. Last words 14:37-40

v37 Some may think that they are prophets. Or they think that they have gifts from the Holy Spirit. They should agree that my message is the Lord's command. v38 No one should take notice of anyone who does not

take notice of the Lord's command. v39 My brothers and sisters, you should want to prophesy. And do not stop people from speaking in tongues. v40 But you should do everything in a proper way, and under proper control.

Verse 37 Paul emphasises his authority. It comes from the Lord. So those with spiritual gifts should recognise the authority of his advice to them.

Verse 38 Paul plays with the words 'take notice'. He means this: 'Nobody should

follow the advice of any person who does not believe in Paul's authority.'

Verse 39 Paul had no wish to prevent anyone from using his spiritual gifts. He had spoken about the need to use 'tongues' with care. But he did not forbid their use.

Verse 40 Public worship is important. So everything should happen in a way that gives honour to God. And it should happen in a way that benefits the church. Public worship should bring peace because God is a God of peace (verse 33).

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