

## | 1 Corinthians |

### Week 23 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 14:6-40

#### Biblical Context

Paul has been addressing misconceptions about what it means to be *spiritual*. Believing they had already arrived, spiritually, the Corinthians nevertheless exhibited arrogance and division. Because of the Holy Spirit, we have both unity and diversity (1 Cor 12:12-14). God has given us Spirit-sourced gifts that are distributed at his initiation and discretion (12:4-11) to glorify Jesus (12:3b), proclaim the gospel (Acts 2:11), and build up the body of believers (1 Cor 14:3-5, 12, 26). Emphasizing the importance of diversity and building up the church, Paul instructs believers to earnestly desire the higher/greater (μέγας, *meγas*) gifts which build up the church (12:31a). True spirituality, however, is not merely found in the operation of the gifts but that love (ἀγάπη, *agape*), the “more excellent way” (12:31b), is our highest aim (13:1-7). In 14:1-5, Paul encourages the church to earnestly desire (ζηλόω, *zeloō*, “be zealous for”) the spiritual gifts that build up the church in love. In 14:6-40, Paul compares and contrasts prophecy<sup>1</sup> (his preferred gift) and tongues<sup>2</sup> (the Corinthians’ preferred gift) against the rubric of edification.<sup>3</sup> The lens through which this chapter should be read is that God is not a God of confusion but of peace (14:33), that all things should be done decently and in order (14:40) for the building up of the church (14:12b).

Speaking in hyperbole, Paul likens the unintelligible gift of tongues in the assembly (when lacking clear interpretation, 1 Cor 14:5b) to “lifeless instruments” making an “indistinct sound” (14:7-8). “In both cases sounds come from the instrument, but there is no tune or melody; thus having no purpose, they do not benefit the listener. So it is with tongues. Again one should not miss the corporate concern here. ‘Speech’ in the gathered community must be for the benefit of all, not simply a display of personal ecstasy expressed by the speaker.”<sup>4</sup> As one who spoke in tongues privately more than any Corinthian (14:18) and desired for all believers to speak in tongues (14:5), Paul recognizes that if he were to come to the assembly speaking in the unintelligible gift of tongues it would be of no benefit to them unless he brought an interpretation with “revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching” (14:6). He does not chide the Corinthians for being eager (ζηλωτής, *zēlōtēs*) for spiritual things, but they should, above and beyond that, strive (ζητέω, *zēteō*) to excel in building up the church (14:12). Just as if Paul should come speaking in tongues, the believer speaking in tongues should pray for the interpretation (14:13) so that the church may be built up. Paul recognizes the gift of tongues (i.e. “praying in the spirit”), used privately, speaks to God (14:2) and builds up the individual (14:4a). Thus, he resolves to both pray and worship in the Spirit, but also to pray and worship with intelligible words (14:14-15). However, in the church, he would rather speak five intelligible words of instruction than 10,000 unintelligible and uninterpreted words in tongues (14:19).<sup>5</sup>

Uninterpreted tongues may build up the individual (1 Cor 14:4a; Jude 20) but neither build up other believers nor unbelievers in the corporate setting, unless the interpretation is made known (14:6, 23; Acts 2). The Corinthians had been arrogantly using the sign of the gift of tongues for their status among other believers. The childish thinking of the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:20) is the notion that tongues “serves as evidence of their new transcendent ‘spirituality,’”<sup>6</sup> whereas mature (τέλειος, *teleios*) thinking is the notion of operating in *agape* love for the building up of the church. Thus, tongues had become a *negative* sign for the unbeliever (14:22a), because if the whole church came together speaking in tongues without an interpretation, the outsiders/unbelievers will say

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<sup>1</sup> The intelligible gift of prophecy (προφητεία, *propheteia*) is for the upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation of the church.

<sup>2</sup> Paul recognizes the validity of the genuine spiritual gift of tongues and that is for the building up of the individual (cf. Jude 20), who is speaking mysteries in the Spirit to God (1 Cor 14:2).

<sup>3</sup> We must remember that Paul recognized and emphasized the futility of any gift if self-sacrificial love was absent (1 Cor 13:1-13).

<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 736. It is important to remember that the overall argument deals with “manifestations of gifts in the church, not with individual spirituality.” Fee, 638.

<sup>5</sup> For Paul, if he speaks in tongues of angels and lacks love then he is as a noisy cymbal/gong (1 Cor 13:1). If he speaks 10,000 words in a tongue without interpretation in the church, he is as a lifeless instrument with indistinct sound (14:7-8). In either case, the church is not built up.

<sup>6</sup> Fee, 752.

“you are out of your minds!” (14:23) and not be built up.<sup>7</sup> “Instead of leading to conviction of sin and thus to repentance, the Corinthian believers’ speaking in tongues in the assembly turns out to fulfill the prophetic word of Isaiah (Isa 28:11–12; [1 Cor 14:21]), that ‘even then [by speaking in tongues] they will not listen to me.’ But that is not the final word. As with its usefulness to believers, prophecy on the other hand will have the opposite effect; it can lead to the conversion of an unbeliever.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, prophecy is a positive sign for believers (14:22b), because when an unbeliever enters, he is convicted of his sin by the prophecy, examined, and “the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (14:24-25), thus he believes, and confirms God’s activity in and through the church, building up the faith of the church.

Building off of what he has been teaching in 1 Corinthians 12-13, Paul implies that each believer has something to contribute (12:11; 14:26a), and everything must be done to build up the church (14:26b) in love (ch. 13). Paul then gives guidelines for tongues and interpretation (14:27-28) and then prophecy and discernment (14:29-31). Paul nowhere speaks down about any gift (including tongues), but only reframes the church’s understanding. If anyone operates in the gift of tongues, and someone with the gift of interpretation is present, they are to speak “each in his turn” for the building up of the church.<sup>9</sup> If no one is able to interpret then the person speaking in tongues is to keep silent in the assembly (i.e. not speaking in tongues for the whole assembly to hear), but rather is to “speak to himself and to God” (14:28). Previously, Paul noted that uninterpreted tongues “speaks not to men but to God...but he utters mysteries in the Spirit...and builds himself up” (14:2, 4a; Jude 20). Thus, while limited in the corporate assembly, the believer is permitted to both pray and sing with their spirit (14:15) but is also encouraged to pray that he/she might interpret and thus build the church (14:5, 13).<sup>10</sup> Conversely, if one is given a prophecy (i.e. that which builds up, encourages, and consoles; 14:3), the guidelines are to speak and allow others in the church to discern, weighing on what was said (14:29; cf. 1 Thess 5:20-21; 1 Pet 1:20-21; 1 John 4:1-3). “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Cor 14:31-12). This follows Paul’s encouragement to be zealous for the gifts, especially prophecy (14:1), but he emphasizes that each one speaking a prophecy is able to be self-governed and orderly in delivery.<sup>11</sup> Paul’s penultimate concern was that the church was built up. Recognizing the validity of properly exercised gifts, Paul reminds the church that “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (14:33).<sup>12</sup>

As he winds down his discussion, Paul directly confronts the Corinthians over their pervasive arrogance as having spiritually arrived and having obtained a superior existence by rhetorically asserting that they have not understood what it means to be *spiritual*. Paul notes that they are not the only ones that have been reached (1 Cor 14:36b), but all the churches of the saints (14:33b). They are neither the originator of the message, nor the end of it. If they are, in fact, *spiritual*, then Paul calls them to acknowledge the validity of what God has spoken through him in this letter (14:37). As a summation of his discussion regarding the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, Paul reiterates the earlier instruction to “earnestly desire (*zeloō*) the spiritual gifts” (14:1a), but especially that they may prophesy (14:1b, 39a) and thus build up, encourage, and console the church (14:3, 4b). While Paul offers much correction to the Corinthian imbalance with the gift of tongues, Paul nevertheless encourages them, “do not

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<sup>7</sup> On the surface, 1 Cor 14:22 appears to be contradictory to 14:23-25. Considering the context of Isa 28:11-12 where the unintelligible language of the Assyrians (and subsequent nations) were a reminder to the Jews of their alienation from God, Paul’s usage becomes more clear that uninterpreted tongues are a *negative* sign for unbelievers, because they cannot understand it and are thus alienated. Acts 2 is different, however, because the interpretation was given both to unbelievers and through Peter. In contrast, prophecy is a *positive* sign for believers because the conversion of unbelievers builds faith of believers.

<sup>8</sup> Fee, 751.

<sup>9</sup> That this is specified indicates the possibility that more than one person was speaking at a time, thus adding to the chaos.

<sup>10</sup> A common misunderstanding is that when one sees another believer praying and singing in tongues without an interpretation, that believer is in error and is thus looked down upon. If not being publicly announced to the entire assembly, the believer is in line with Scripture to pray and sing mysteries in the Spirit, speaking to God, and being built up (1 Cor 14:2, 4a). Our response should rather be to pray for the interpretation that the church be edified (14:13).

<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the chaos and confusion that might ensue regarding the pagan mystery cults, the gifts exercised by the believers are to be ordered and deliberate, promoting peace and corporate edification, not chaos and confusion. This is emphasized in 1 Cor 14:40.

<sup>12</sup> The text of 1 Cor 14:34-35 has been under debate. From a text critical perspective, this text appears to be found in the most original documents and is believed to have been written in the margin of the letter regarding the situation in Corinth. The biggest question is whether it belongs here between 14:33 and 36 (keeping in mind that verse divisions are not “inspired” but man-made), after 14:40, or just as a note. For further discussion see Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), 1 Co 14:35. Also Fee, 780-92. In either case, the passage should be read as descriptive of a situation in Corinth and not generally prescriptive for our perpetual adherence. It should be noted that in the letter, Paul acknowledges that women pray and prophesy (11:5, 13). Women are also among men in having the Spirit poured out (Acts 2:17), and prophesy (21:8-9). Any limitation of women in the church likely had to do, in this context, with the maintenance of ecclesiastical order and lack of disruption in the Corinthian assembly so the whole body could be built up. Also keep in mind that these are house churches and not like modern churches of large buildings and large memberships.

forbid speaking in tongues” (14:39b) as this builds up the individual believer (14:2, 4a) and also has the potential to be used to build up the entire church (14:5, 6, 12, 26). To stop the division, the arrogance, and the chaos, Paul concludes, “all things should be done decently and in order” (14:40).