



1 CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-40

INTRODUCTION

The importance of some spiritual gifts were being exaggerated in Corinth while others were minimized. Those with more “impressive” gifts saw their gifts as proof of their spiritual superiority and as a means of serving themselves rather than others. So far in this section, Paul has reminded the church that God has given them *numerous* indispensable gifts (ch. 12), and that if these gifts aren’t used in love, they’re worthless (ch. 13). In the final chapter of this section, we get a glimpse into what was happening at Corinth.

MAIN POINT

Orderly worship edifies believers, convicts unbelievers, and glorifies God.

REFLECT

So much of Paul’s teaching and rebukes on the various issues he addresses in this letter come down to the same point: build each other up. So committed should the Corinthians be to each other’s spiritual good that they should be willing to give up their rights for one another (chs. 8-9), and in chapter 13 he said that such loving concern for one another should dominate how spiritual gifts are used in the church.

In chapter 14, we get a clearer picture of how the gifts were being abused: the Corinthians were obsessed with speaking in tongues. It seems that church services were filled with people speaking in languages no one else could understand and probably at the same time. They probably felt that the less in control of themselves they were (spontaneously speaking, talking over one another, etc.), the more that must mean they were being controlled by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the more present the Spirit is, the more uncontrollable the church service will be.

Paul couldn't disagree more. His "build up one another" ethic begins his response ("Pursue love", carrying over from chapter 13) and runs throughout the whole chapter. Since chaotic worship services build up no one, Paul is intent to restore order to their gatherings. He does so first by downplaying the gift of tongues. It's a fine gift that Paul himself has and uses (14:18), but it comes with limitations. A person speaking in tongues builds himself up, sure, but unless he or someone else can interpret what was said, others won't be built up, and thus un-interpreted tongues have no place in church gatherings. Prophecy, by contrast, is inherently "others-focused" in that it is immediately understood by all and is therefore far more useful to building up the church (14:1-5).

In verses 13-25, he argues that worship must be intelligible if it's to be helpful. Paul goes as far as saying that five intelligible words do more to build up others than ten-thousand un-interpreted words (v. 19). To illustrate this, he paints pictures of an outsider who attends a church service where everyone is speaking in tongues and of an outsider attending a service where everyone is prophesying (vv. 21-25). Tongues will be a sign of judgment to the unbeliever in that it will confirm him in his unbelief. That is, if he comes to see what Christianity is all about and sees a bunch of people speaking in languages he can't understand, he'll decide that Christians are crazy and leave. Instead of being a bridge to faith, tongues will push him away. The outsider who visits a prophesying church on the other hand will understand what is said, be convicted, and repent. It is a sign of judgment in the sense that he will be convicted of his sin and the judgment it deserves and so turn to Christ for salvation.

Ordered worship is crucial then for both the building up of the church and for the salvation of outsiders. It's also crucial because God himself is ordered rather than disorganized, and so our worship of him must reflect his own character (v. 33a). Tongues-speaking then can be present in worship only if an interpreter is present, and even then only one at a time may speak (vv. 27-28). Paul's instructions for prophecies are similar (vv. 29-32). His words to women (vv. 34-35) address a situation in Corinth that we're not entirely certain of and should not be taken as an absolute prohibition of women speaking in church. After all, Paul's already assumed that women were speaking in church at Corinth (11:2-16) and had no problem with it. On top of that, these women are the *third* group in this section he has told to keep silent (vv. 28, 30), and the first two instances were clearly for the sake of order in worship. Whatever these women at Corinth were doing, they were disrupting orderly worship as well as dishonoring their husbands (see ch. 11).

All of these problems regarding spiritual gifts come back to the Corinthians' pride. Earlier, Paul sarcastically commented on how they had "arrived" in their spiritual walk (4:8), and here he reminds them that the Christian faith did not originate with them (14:36). If they're really as spiritual as they think they are, they'll recognize Paul's instruction here as the Holy Spirit's instruction. In conclusion he reminds them to pursue prophecy but not to forbid tongues (as might have been the overreaction by some). Above all, let worship be attractive to outsiders ("decently") and incorporate the gifts of all members ("in order") for the good of the church.

- What is Paul's reasoning for preferring prophecy to tongues?
- How can your gifts be used to build up the church? What self-focused ways of using your gifts do you need to be on guard against?
- Why is it important for our church services to be understood by non-believers who are present? What are some things that could cause them confusion?

MEMORIZE

1 Corinthians 14:12 – *“So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.”*