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1 Corinthians

Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy.

1 Corinthians 14:1

Paul now returns to the subject of "gifts" which he left off with in Chapter 12. However, even in Chapter 13, he never really left the issue behind. Rather, he had used his discourse on love to show the believers at Corinth that their use of gifts, and particularly tongues, wasn't in line with that precept. This will be seen in his coming words.

In order to set up his logic concerning tongues in the coming verses, he will first introduce a thought concerning obtaining a different gift. Why would he do this? The answer becomes evident when we see how Paul viewed the gift of tongues and its use within the church at Corinth.

Chapter 14 will explain these things in detail and understanding his instruction on tongues, in proper context, should be mandatory for every charismatic Bible college, seminary, and church. Almost every verse in chapter 14, a chapter which is 40 verses long, is given to properly instruct us on the completely abused gift of tongues.

And so to begin the chapter, he says to "pursue love." This asks us to reflect on his words of chapter 13. Everything that is done should have this as its main consideration. In pursuing love, the use of our spiritual gifts will be proper.

Secondly, he says to also pursue "spiritual *gifts*." True gifts of the spirit are necessary for the instruction and edification of the church. In that then, we are to pursue obtaining them. In fact, in 12:31, just before his parenthetical thought concerning love of Chapter 13, he said, "But earnestly desire the best gifts." So it is right to seek after spiritual gifts and it is right to seek after the best of those gifts.

Having said that, and understanding the context of his words, he now finishes this verse with, "but especially that you may prophesy." Why has he said this? To understand fully, consider again what he was speaking about in Chapter 12 - all the gifts of the spirit. To him, the best of the gifts was that of prophesying. This does not mean specifically "foretelling" but "forth-telling." Forth-telling is the right interpretation and then explanation of Scripture in order to build up and edify the church; it is "preaching."

The value of preaching the word is the highest gift to Paul because "faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). The means of hearing about the salvation which God has chosen for the people of the world is preaching. Without people exercising this gift, the word won't be heard and people won't be saved.

Therefore, Paul says that men of God should pursue this gift above all else. With that now understood, he will contrast this with "tongues" in the coming verses. In other words, the intelligible, thoughtful, and proper preaching of God's word will be used as the standard to compare to the gift of "tongues."

Thus he will demonstrate that the use of tongues at Corinth (and which continues to this day in unstable churches) is unintelligible, thoughtless, and even improper. Instead of edifying the body, it often divides and confuses it. For this reason, Paul will set very strict limits on the use of tongues; limits which are all but ignored in many churches. In ignoring Paul's words, they ignore the One who inspired his words.

Life application: Pay attention to the coming 39 verses of 1 Corinthians 14. Be prepared to rightly explain the use of tongues in a church - why they are to be spoken, who should speak them, and when they are to be allowed.

For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him*; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. 1 Corinthians 14:2

Paul will now contrast the speaking of a "tongue" to "prophesying" which he mentioned in the previous verse. Before analyzing this contrast, it needs to be noted that the word translated here as "tongue" signifies a human language in Acts 2:11, 10:46*, 19:6*; Romans 3:13; 1 Corinthians 13:1, 14:4*; and Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6; 17:15. The other times that "tongue" is used, it refers to the literal tongue in the mouth or something which resembles a tongue (such as "tongues" of fire). In three of these verses marked with an asterisk (*) it is implicitly understood to be a language because the people around them understood what was said.

There is no instance recorded in the Bible where the word "tongue" signifies anything other than a known language. The text must be forced to have this word imply some type of ecstatic utterance or a "shoo bop be loo bop" type of sound which is so commonly used by Charismatics and others in an attempt to draw attention to themselves.

Understanding that this is speaking of known languages, Paul's words imply that the language is not known to all. It would be comparable to saying, "A French guy stood up and spoke French in a German church meeting." In grasping this, we can properly interpret Paul's intent. When a person "speaks in a tongue" (meaning a known language which is not understood by those in the congregation), he "does not speak to men but to God."

When Charlie Garrett preaches at the Superior Word in Sarasota, Florida, he often preaches words and sentences directly from the Hebrew. When he blesses the elements of communion, he often gives the blessing in Hebrew. In this, none of

the congregants understand what he is saying. If he throws in a German or Japanese phrase, the same will probably be true. Either few or none of those present will understand. Thus he speaks not "to men but to God" (who understands all languages). However, holding to the tenets of Scripture, (as will be seen later in this chapter), he always translates what he says in a foreign tongue for the benefit of those in attendance.

The reason that when he speaks in a tongue he "does not speak to men but to God" is explained by Paul as he continues with verse 2. It is because "no one understands *him*." Without training in a language, nobody suddenly grasps that language. Instead, they sit listening without comprehending. This is no different than the recipients of the tongues spoken to in Acts 2. People heard the gospel preached in their own languages. If the languages were unknown to them, there would have only been confusion in their minds. But the Holy Spirit, acting as a "universal translator," converted the words of the believers into a language that they could understand; a known language.

If this didn't occur, a different outcome would have resulted. As Paul says, "However, in the spirit he speaks mysteries." The term "in the spirit" is *pneumati*. It can mean "wind," "spirit," or "breath." Only the context of the surrounding verses can properly interpret the exact meaning of *pneumati*. As this is speaking of oral utterances, the word *pneumati* is certainly referring to "breath." His "breath" speaks mysteries.

But even if it is to be translated "spirit," it is certain that the breath of the man indicates the utterance of his spirit. There is no reason to assume that this is referring to the work of the Holy Spirit. From the later verses, it will be seen that speaking in "tongues" which do not fit certain guidelines cannot be of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, this here is certainly not speaking of Holy Spirit inspiration either.

In Paul's words, we see that anyone who speaks in a different language will not be comprehended by those who hear it. Instead, they will find the words to be a mystery. A mystery is simply something unknown and which cannot be grasped

without an explanation of the matter. Thus, Paul will give very strict guidelines in the verses ahead for the speaking of tongues.

Too often, readers of the Bible insert presuppositions into the text as they read. When this is done, anything can mean anything. Along with presuppositions, sensationalism is also introduced in order to heighten the experience of reading. The reason why this is often the case is because Bible study takes effort and contemplation. But that is hard work. And so rather than enjoy the Bible for the depth of wisdom it contains, a lighter and more sensational approach is taken in order to find satisfaction from the words which seem difficult and even confusing.

Life application: Be diligent in the study of the Bible. As believers, we get just one brief life to glean from it all we can before we will stand before our Creator for rewards and losses. Let us be approved on that day.

But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.
1 Corinthians 14:3

Paul contrasts verse 2 with these words by beginning with "but." As he noted, people who speak in other languages while in the congregation (tongues) don't "speak to men but to God." In contrast to this, is the one who prophesies to the congregation. Rather than simply having a sole conversation with God (which the speaker can do anytime and at any place), the one prophesying does more. Not only does God hear his words, but he also "speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men."

Edification is spoken to build up the members of the congregation, to instruct them, to give them sound guidance, and to make them knowledgeable in the things of God. Exhortation is spoken to take away their feelings of insecurity, sluggishness, or timidity, thus making them bold. And words of comfort take away sadness, hopelessness, and despair.

Understanding the contrast between the two, which one is preferable to be spoken in the congregation? The answer is plain and obvious. Paul will say this later in this chapter -

"I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue."

Again, following through the logic of Paul's argument in this epistle, he demonstrates conclusively that tongues, though having been needed at the establishment of the church, are all but unneeded in the workings of the regularly operating and established church; thus the comparison "five" to "ten thousand." The inordinate focus on tongues by supposed "tongue speaking" churches shows a lack of scholarship and a complete misunderstanding of the purpose and meaning of "tongues" in the now-established church.

Life application: When one is in the church for growth and learning, and in order to be edified, he should either be explaining the word of God or listening to the word of God being explained in a competent and relevant way.

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 1 Corinthians 14:4

In Acts 2, this is recorded -

"And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language." Acts 2:5, 6

The followers of Jesus were heard speaking in various tongues according to the people groups who were assembled. Those who heard their words in their own

language were edified. They heard a message they could understand. However, anyone who spoke a different language was only edified in the language they understood, not in the ones directed to others. This is exactly the type of thing Paul is talking about.

The only people who are edified by the speaking of a language are those who understand that language. And so if someone comes into a church in Walla Walla, Washington where one language is spoken, that being English, and the individual begins speaking in Thai, only the speaker will be edified. Why will he be edified? Because he understands the language he is speaking. We process our thoughts through the construction of speech. This is done in our heads as we speak. When we put words together which we understand, we receive edification of our thoughts in the compilation of those words.

**It should be noted that Paul says that, "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself." By virtue of the fact that the speaker is edified, it implies and proves that he is speaking of a known language, not an ecstatic, incoherent tongue (as is so often displayed in supposed "tongue speaking" churches). If the speaker were to be edified by "oola wahla bango wapo shoosh and shim" then everyone else who heard would be equally edified by it as well, because the incoherence of the words would equally apply to all. Instead, this is a known language which the speaker is edifying himself with. Were it not so, there would be no edification for anyone, including the speaker. Again, as every verse of Scripture concerning tongues has and will show, known languages are being referred to.

In contrast to this thought of "tongues" which edify only the speaker of the tongues, Paul continues with, "but he who prophesies edifies the church." A word of instruction which is conveyed in a known language by the hearers of that instruction will be edified in that instruction.

And so, which makes more sense for the building up of the church - listening to someone speak Thai which nobody else understands, or hearing a preacher speak in the native language of the congregation for everyone to understand? The answer is obvious.

Life application: Speak the word of God, speak it coherently, speak it so others will understand, and therefore edify those who hear the word. For the saying is true - "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God."

I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification. 1 Corinthians 14:5

Having shown the lesser nature of the gift of tongues, and then demonstrated that it does nothing to edify the congregation when tongues are spoken if nobody understands them, Paul tells the congregation that he wishes "you all spoke with tongues." Speaking in foreign languages is always a valuable asset when encountering others who only speak in another language. If there is a Hispanic community in one's town and nobody in the church spoke Spanish, then there would be no way of reaching out to them with the message of Christ.

However, tongues are a gift which are available to all people. With effort, anyone can pick up another language and can then effectively communicate with others in that language. But to speak that language in the church without anyone understanding it would be absolutely pointless, except for the person speaking and for God who knows all tongues. Because of this, Paul continues by saying to the Corinthians that even more than tongues, he wished "that you prophesied." He then follows up with an immediate explanation for this - "For he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues."

The explanation was given in the verse 3 which said that "he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men." Tongues are of no value to others in the congregation if nobody understands them. However, preaching the word of God is of benefit to all who listen. It is the wisdom of God and a proper explanation of it will always build up the body.

However, to not over-diminish the gift of tongues, Paul adds in a qualifying statement concerning them. Yes, the person who prophesies is greater than he

who speaks with tongues, "unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification." The goal of any gift is to build up the body and to bring honor to the Lord. If someone speaks in a tongue, and that tongue is then translated, it becomes a message which is then understood by all others within the congregation. Thus it has become a point of exhortation and edification of the body.

There is nothing in the verse to restrict the one speaking in the foreign language to also be the one who translates it. However, he should be competent in the translation. Just because someone can speak a foreign language, it does not mean that they are acceptable to translate that language. So whether by the speaker or by another, it is right for the words to be translated into the common language of the congregation for their edification. Otherwise, the words are merely an unedifying show of ostentation.

Life application: The goals of using one's gift in the church are to build up the others in the church and to bring glory to the Lord. Let us remember this in all we do in and for the church.

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? 1 Corinthians 14:6

Continuing to explain why speaking in foreign languages (tongues) is considered a lesser gift and a gift which only serves the individual, not the whole body, Paul contrasts the words of the preceding verse with "but now." His words were, "he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification." From this, he gives his "but now." And as a sign of warmth and fellowship, as well as instruction, he adds in the word "brethren."

He is speaking to the whole body and wants the whole body to grasp his meaning, which is "if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I

...speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?" The answer to his question is obvious - "There will be no profit to them." When someone speaks in a foreign language which is unknown to its hearers, there is no profit at all to them. They are not edified in any way, and they have simply sat through a word of unintelligible sounds which have no meaning to the hearers.

Rather than such a self-centered display, Paul recommends that the greater gifts of revelation, knowledge, prophesying, and teaching be used to build up the congregants. It is a much better use of the precious time we have been given because we can assimilate the instruction and grow in our knowledge of spiritual matters. Paul doesn't say that there is no place for speaking in tongues, but that there is a much better use of time and gifts than following this avenue. For those who do speak in tongues, Paul will eventually give very specific guidelines to follow.

Life application: If there are two teams playing football and one of the teams has a player who is determined to play baseball during the game, there will be dysfunction on the field. Be a team player and work with your team, using the gifts you have for the benefit of the whole.

Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? 1 Corinthians 14:7

In the previous verse, Paul intimated that there is no profit in speaking in a tongue if it contains nothing to edify those who hear the tongue spoken. To bolster this, he now shows that "even things without life" have the same effect on us. If this is so, then how much more living beings who need to be articulate in their utterances in order to benefit others!

And so he says, "whether flute or harp, when they make a sound..." The flute and the harp are inanimate objects. They need something external to produce sounds. If there is nothing external applied to them, then no sound will be made. Such is

the case with the vocal chords too. They need to have the body initiate an action in order for them to resonate.

Continuing on he says, "unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?" Again, the image he is making is obvious. When one plays a flute, they vary the amount of wind entering it. They also cover or uncover various holes in order to obtain differing notes, etc. The harp requires fingers or a hand utensil to be applied to it in varying amounts of pressure and at varying intervals. Different strings on the harp are also employed for differing sounds.

There must be a "distinction in the sounds" in order for there to be any type of music to be produced. In the Greek, three different words are used to describe the process - *phóné*, *diastolé*, *phthoggos*, or literally "voice," "distinction," and "sound." And so we see that there is the "sound" which is like the voice. There are distinctions in that voice which provide proper modulation. And then there are the resulting sounds as they are modulated.

All of these combine to form that which is coherent and which results in something useful, be it a sweet song, a request for dinner, or a cry for help. Whatever the intent of the sounds is, they must go through a certain process which includes all three steps in order for others to hopefully comprehend what is being relayed.

Understanding these different words which Paul uses to describe what he intends, will lead us to a simple revelation concerning the false tongues which are so often used in churches. To assume that God would make a secret "prayer language" that we didn't understand, or to assume that He would give an incoherent "tongue" that wasn't a known language, is utterly ridiculous. God can't produce a language which is unknown to Him, and He would not have us produce a language which is unknown to us that we would speak to Him for His benefit. That makes no sense at all. There would simply be no purpose in it.

Life application: If you have the ability to speak, why would you waste that ability on a showy demonstration of meaningless words rather than words which edify and build others up? Be wise; speak with purpose and sense!

For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?

1 Corinthians 14:8

The words today continue with the thought of the previous verse. There, Paul noted the flute and the harp which need to be played properly in order to make a distinction in the sounds. Likewise, the same is true with the trumpet. The word for "trumpet" here is *salpigx*, which is properly denoted as a war-trumpet. It was comparable to another Hebrew trumpet which was played before battle and which jubilantly would announce the Lord's victory over His enemies.

In the Old Testament, which is where Paul's mind would be referring to, there were different trumpets which were used for different occasions. The trumpet that he was most probably thinking about would be the *chatsotsērah* or "battle trumpet" which is first referred to in Numbers 10:1-10. In that description, this is found -

"When you go to war in your land against the enemy who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, and you will be remembered before the LORD your God, and you will be saved from your enemies." Numbers 10:9

In the surrounding instructions for this trumpet, the Lord noted it would be used for various purposes and when it was used, different signals would be given to distinguish what was occurring. Without varying the tunes, one wouldn't know whether the congregation was being gathered for a meeting or for going to war. As Paul says, "if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?"

The same is true with military units throughout history. There have always been different signals for different purposes. Those signals have been used to call the troops to battle, engage in various types of maneuvers, to sound retreat, or even to surrender. If the trumpeter blew the same note all the time, only chaos would result.

The first time that the battle trumpet was used in the Bible came later in the book of Numbers when Israel took vengeance on the Midianites. Here is that record -

"Then Moses sent them to the war, one thousand from *each* tribe; he sent them to the war with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the holy articles and the signal trumpets in his hand. ⁷ And they warred against the Midianites, just as the LORD commanded Moses, and they killed all the males." Numbers 31:6, 7

In the Psalms, this same trumpet is mentioned, not for going into battle, but for a joyous praise to the Lord at His victory -

"Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth;
Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.
⁵ Sing to the LORD with the harp,
With the harp and the sound of a psalm,
⁶ With trumpets and the sound of a horn;
Shout joyfully before the LORD, the King." Psalm 98:4-6

Someday, the final battle trumpet will be sounded when the Lord's victory is complete and all of His enemies have been made His footstool. The sounding of that trumpet is seen in Revelation 11:15 -

"Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become *the kingdoms* of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'"

Paul's use of the trumpet is given to again demonstrate the need for coherence and understanding within the congregation. He is doing his best to ensure that the Corinthians (and thus us!) see the importance of using words that can be comprehended by all when speaking in the church. As he progresses through this chapter, this needs to be kept in mind. There should never be anything spoken within the church that is not perfectly clear and understood by all, unless it is properly translated.

To ensure this will be the case, he will give definite instructions which are expected to be adhered to. How sad it is that they are all but neglected by so many in the church today. There is flash at the expense of edification. There is an attempt to draw attention to self rather than a desire for exhortation. May we take to heed Paul's words and sound out notes of clarity and purpose!

Life application: When in the congregation, let the voice which proceeds from your mouth always be a voice of clarity for instruction or edification.

So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

1 Corinthians 14:9

Paul continues to argue against the use of tongues in church, and instead for the use of a logical, sensible set of utterances which will edify others. With this entire chapter almost exclusively being devoted to the issue of tongues, it is appropriate to contemplate *why* it is so. It is apparent that the use of tongues was abused in the church at Corinth, this is certain. But if we can put ourselves into that church, it may help us to understand why such meticulous care is being given to this subject.

Corinth was a large and notable city and there were certainly a variety of languages spoken there. The more languages a person spoke, the more valuable they would be in trading, marketing, and maybe even in politics. Such power is

normally an intoxicant and so to speak in other languages in front of others would be like flashing a wallet full of money or pulling up in a new Corvette.

With the church now established, knowing Hebrew would be an even greater source of pride. If one could read the Scriptures in Hebrew as well as Greek, he would have a leg up on others. It is no different today. Pastors and teachers who know the biblical languages are always held in a sort of special esteem, even if they are really crummy at proper biblical interpretation. The flash of knowing the language immediately places them in the spotlights, whether they are handling the use of that language properly or not. Understanding this, we can continue with the evaluation of this chapter from a reasonable perspective of what Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians (and thus us!) about the gift of tongues.

In the past couple of verses, he has shown that instruments are only effective if they are played properly. If they aren't, then only noise will result. Further, actual harm can come about from an improperly played instrument. The war-trumpet can cause chaos on the battlefield if the wrong signal is played. Because of this, there must be intelligible sounds which emanate from those instruments or there will only be worthless noise. In comparison to that is the use of tongues. In this verse, Paul begins with, "So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken?"

If someone comes into a church and starts speaking in a language that nobody else understands, the result will be chaos. The air will be filled with nonsensical noise, even if it is a known language (which the term "words easy to understand" implies; a known but not understood language). Why would anyone walk into a Greek-speaking church and start speaking in French? It makes no sense. This is what Paul is trying to tell them.

The congregants probably thought they were being impressive, maybe even cool, by speaking in other languages. But in reality, they were only making unintelligible noises. Remember from the fifth verse of this chapter Paul said, "he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification."

Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to wake up and be mature in their conduct. For those who thought they were doing something nifty by speaking in another language, they weren't. He next tells them that by doing so, they were merely "speaking into the air." Sounds were floating around the church, but they were only unintelligible noise.

Life application: Don't speak meaningless words into the air just to look cool.