**SO THAT THE CHURCH MAY BE BUILT UP  
*1 Corinthians 14:1–40***

***“Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” (14:26b)***

In the last chapter, Paul taught poetically about the essentiality and supremacy of love, without which even miraculous gifts cannot edify. In today’s passage, Paul applies love to two specific spiritual gifts, explaining that prophecy is preferable over tongues to obtain the goal of love: so that the church may be built up. He also teaches about order in worship regarding tongues and prophecy. Even though these two specific spiritual gifts are relatively unfamiliar to us, we can apply the underlying spiritual principles to many areas. May God teach us how to follow the way of love—so that the church may be built up.

1. **Prophecy Is Greater Than Tongues (vs. 1–25)**

Paul transitions from his previous teaching about love in verse 1: “***Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.***” Every believer must follow Christ, who walked the way of love. Love is not self-seeking but kind; it is not proud but rejoices when others live according to the truth. All the gifts of the Spirit are meant to be exercised in love for the common good of the church. But Paul shows that the aims of love are better accomplished through prophecy than through tongues, giving a number of reasons why prophecy is greater than tongues.

First, tongues edifies the speaker; prophecy edifies the church. Look at verse 2: “***For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit.***” This verse gives a good definition of the gift of tongues as speaking in an unlearned language to God by the enabling of the Holy Spirit. So tongues is directed toward God. In verse 17, Paul mentions that it includes “giving thanks”, and at Pentecost in Acts 2:11, the foreign Jews said, “…*we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!*” The Spirit prays, thanks, and praises through the believers, like a musician blowing into a flute to produce a beautiful melody.

Speaking in tongues is a good thing. Look at verse 4: “***Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church.***” Tongues-speakers edify themselves through communing with God, feeling the presence of his Spirit. They are strengthened by experiencing God’s presence and love. Tongues can be very useful for situations where we don’t know how to pray. Romans 8:26b says, “*We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.*” I often don’t know God’s will for a situation and recognize the need for the help of the Spirit, who “*intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God*” (Ro 8:27).

However, the spiritual principle that Paul sets forth is that it is better, that is, more loving, to do what edifies the church than what edifies only the self. Therefore, if someone is going to speak by the Holy Spirit, it should be prophesy, which is spoken to others, rather than tongues, which is spoken to God. Look at verse 3: “***But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.***” Paul broadens the definition of prophecy from predicting the future to any message delivered by God and spoken through a human spokesperson. Wayne Grudem defines prophecy as “reporting something that God spontaneously brings to mind.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This verse also shows what edification means: “***strengthening, encouraging and comfort.***” Edification can apply to individual believers, multiple believers, and the church as a whole, leading to spiritual growth, maturity, and unity. Especially in the context of congregational gatherings, it is better to do what edifies the whole church or multiple other believers than what benefits only the self.

Thus Paul declares the comparative value of tongues and prophecy in verse 5: “***I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.***” The only edifying congregational use the gift of tongues has is if there is someone present with the gift of interpretation of tongues, in which case others can hear, understand, and say “Amen!”

Paul contrasts uninterpreted tongues with what does edify in verse 6: “***Now, brothers and sisters, 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?***” Here, revelation and prophecy can be considered as miraculous, whereas knowledge and word of instruction can be non-miraculous, though still administered in the power of the Spirit. Each of these that Paul described are intelligible and understandable, imparting to the listeners understanding of God. The edifying benefits of miraculous prophecy and revelation can also be conveyed by the power of the Spirit through Bible teaching and preaching.

Paul helps us understand the importance of intelligibility using the examples of different instruments. On a pipe or a harp, if there’s no difference between the notes, there’s no tune being played. However, if I hear a familiar hymn being played, I am reminded of the lyrics, and my thoughts turn to God, and I am edified. Likewise, if random notes are played on a bugle, the soldiers won’t know how to respond, but if they hear Reveille, they know it’s time to get up and get ready for battle. Likewise, speaking in tongues may sound impressive, but since it is unfamiliar to the listeners, no meaning is communicated, and it doesn’t edify anyone else.

Look at verses 12–13: “***So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church. 13 For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say.***” The Corinthians were eager for the gifts of the Spirit, but they needed to learn an attitude of love that put others’ benefit ahead of their prideful desire to look spiritual by displaying a supernatural gift. So those who spoke in tongues should pray for the gift of interpretation.

Second, tongues edifies the spirit; prophecy edifies mind and spirit. Paul gives another reason why a tongues-speaker should desire to interpret in verse 14: “***For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.***” Even the personal benefit from speaking in tongues is limited to the spiritual and emotional; the rational mind is not edified. Real edification comes not from being amazed at miracles, but by gaining understanding of God.

Paul gives the solution in verse 15: “***So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.***” Paul is saying that praying or singing with one’s spirit and with one’s understanding are not mutually exclusive. We can do both at once. Verse 16 reads, “***Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?***” Whether or not we have or exercise the gift of tongues, we can engage mind and spirit at the same time—with the enablement of God’s Spirit—to worship God together as the body of Christ.

The word “Amen” is very important for edification. “Amen” means “I agree” or “may it be so”, and it expresses singlemindedness with the other who is praying or praising—that their desire or confession expressed to God is mine as well. It builds up unity in the church and transforms representative prayer from one person praying in front of a group to the whole group petitioning God together as one. It turns public prayer into corporate prayer. So when someone else is praying, I should listen closely instead of letting my mind wander and affirm their prayers in my heart to God, silently praying along, “Yes Lord! Please do this,” and finishing together with an earnest “Amen!”

Look at verse 18–19: “***I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. 19 But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.***” On his own, Paul prayed in tongues privately to God, but in church, his aim was to build up through instructing. He considered intelligible instruction that could edify others minds to be 2,000 times more valuable in the church than tongues, which could only edify one’s own spirit. However, that wasn’t the mindset of the Corinthians, so he told them to grow up in verse 20: “***Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.***” Children are born selfish and need to be taught consideration for others. Immature believers should likewise grow until we share the selfless attitude of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.

Third, tongues seems strange; prophesy is convicting. This reason takes into account not believers but unbelievers who visit the church. Look at verse 21: “***In the Law it is written: ‘With other tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.’***” Paul quoted from Isaiah 28, where the foreign speech of the Assyrians would be a sign of God’s judgment against his unbelieving people. Thus he explains in verse 22, “***Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers.***” Believers don’t need a sign of judgment or any miraculous sign to believe, since they already believe. However, hearing people speak in tongues doesn’t guarantee that unbelievers will listen, since Paul quotes, “***even then they will not listen***”.

Next, Paul envisions a scenario in verse 23: “***So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?***” Paul describes disorderly use of tongues— “everyone speaks in tongues”. Imagine entering an unfamiliar gathering where everyone is speaking unintelligibly. You would think these people are out of their minds, and you would want to get out of there. Disorderly use of the gift of tongues can have a repelling effect on seekers.

Look at verses 24–25: “***But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, 25 as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’***” If believers were prophesying and saying things they couldn't naturally know, unbelievers could realize that God was among them and be convicted of their sin before God. This is similar to the Samaritan woman, who realized that she couldn’t hide her sinful life from Jesus’ prophetic power and became open to receiving living water from Jesus.

Thus, since tongues are not for believers, yet unbelievers “will not listen” and may think believers speaking in tongues are crazy, whereas prophecy is for believers and also leads to conversion of unbelievers, then prophecy is to be preferred for the sake of both believers and unbelievers.

So the three principles that make prophecy greater than tongues are that it edifies the church, it edifies the mind as well as the spirit, and it benefits unbelievers as well as believers. These principles apply not only to gifts, but to abilities, opportunities, activities, and resources; everything we do should be out of love in order to edify others.

Now that we know these principles, I want to revisit verse 1, where Paul commands to “***…eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.***” How do we go about eagerly desiring the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy—and presumably other edifying gifts? First, identify needs. Assess what gifts the church is lacking or what could help others. Second, pray. Verse 13 shows that prayer is a valid way to obtain gifts. Third, ensure your motives are pure—i.e., others-centered. It is a serious sin to use God’s gifts for selfish pride. Fourth, seek opportunities to use the gifts you desire. And fifth, use the gifts you already have with contentment and thankfulness. Remember, gifts of the Spirit include teaching, helping, leading, serving, encouraging, contributing, evangelizing, and many more.

1. **A Fitting and Orderly Way (vs. 26–40)**

Paul begins the next section describing some of the elements of a typical Corinthian worship service in verse 26. Let’s read it in one voice: “***What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.***” Paul says that each of them participated in the worship service, bringing something so that everyone could be edified with a variety of offerings. This is one reason why I like worshiping in a small church: each of us can bring something to worship God and edify the church—a prayer, a special song, a message, a life testimony, etc.

It seems like the Corinthians were clamoring to share what they had, and the worship environment was becoming disorderly. However, this failed to build up the church, since it could be difficult to listen to multiple speakers at once. So Paul gave guidelines for speaking in tongues in verses 27–28: “***If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. 28 If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.***” If these guidelines were followed, then the service wouldn’t be monopolized by speaking in tongues, and the church could be edified, praying along with the Spirit-interpreted, Spirit-led praise, saying all together, “Amen!”

Paul gave similar instructions for prophecy in verses 29–30: “***Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. 30 And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.***” The revelation given by the gift of prophecy is not infallible revelation, like we have in the Bible. Rather, those who listen to prophecy must “***weigh carefully what is said***”, evaluating it based on Scripture. The Bible is our final authority. The purpose of prophecy, as with other elements of the worship service, is, “***so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged***” (31).

Verse 33a teaches us another reason for orderly worship: “***For God is not a God of disorder but of peace…***” God created ordered complexity at every scale of creation, from the atom to the cell to the animal to the ecosystem, solar system, and galaxy—every aspect of creation displays the orderly nature of its Creator. The only disorder came when created things decided to rebel against the Creator—the act of cosmic treason we call “sin”. Our sin creates disorder in God’s world and in our lives and communities. Fundamentally, our sin broke the peace between God and man. Instead of obliterating rebellious sinners in a fury of holy wrath, however, God loved us and wanted to save us, so he sent his Son Jesus Christ to restore the created order and reestablish peace between God and man. Jesus accomplished this momentous task by suffering the most disordered thing of all—the only innocent man mercilessly punished, so that we the guilty could receive mercy. John 1:12 speaks of the amazing reconciliation of those who accept God’s mercy by believing in Jesus: “*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God…*” Now that we are God’s children, we should conduct ourselves in accordance with his nature, especially as we gather to worship him.

In the context of order in the church, Paul gives a teaching that is controversial in our modern culture. Look at verses 34–35: “***Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.***” Many understand the silence Paul refers to here as a prohibition against women speaking authoritatively, as in the role of a pastor or preacher. This is based on what Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:12: “***I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.***” However, Paul did mention women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:5, and he doesn’t specify gender in verse 26 regarding participation in the worship service. So women are encouraged to participate in worship, just not to violate the created order and church harmony. The basic principle is respect for the order of worship.

Paul’s teaching here sounds old-fashioned to our modern ears, and it must have sounded controversial for the Corinthians as well, since Paul goes on to defend his teaching as the Lord’s command in verses 36–37: “***Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? 37 If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.***” If God’s word originated with us, then we can change it according to how we feel. But it did not originate with us but with God, so we do not have the authority to change or distort Scripture according to cultural consensus. The Bible will always contradict some cultural attitudes, and it is in those places especially that Bible-believing Christians must not compromise, choosing to obey God rather than men.

Paul concludes the chapter with a summary of his main points in verses 39–40: “***Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.***”

This passage challenges me to mature in my mindset, following the way of love to choose what is edifying over what is entertaining, or what builds up others over what just benefits myself, and especially what can help reach unbelievers to lead them to worship the true God. Paul instructs me to be eager to prophesy, and to eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. I don’t often desire prophecy or pray that I might, even though it has great potential to strengthen, comfort, and encourage. But even if I never prophesy, I have a responsibility to use the gifts that I do have to edify the church of which God has blessed me to be a member. I pray that God might empower my teaching and preaching to instruct, strengthen, and encourage.

When the members of the body of Christ work together, bringing our hymns, instruction, prayers, gifts, and praise in an orderly fashion, then God can be highly exalted in our midst, and we can have joyful fellowship in Christ and be built up as the glorious temple of the Holy Spirit. May we all mature to do everything so that the church may be built up.

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* p. 1024 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)