

**WHAT DOES THE BIBLE  
TEACH ABOUT  
SPIRITUAL GIFTS?  
AN EXAMINATION OF  
1 CORINTHIANS 12-14**

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## WHY IS THIS BOOKLET SO IMPORTANT?

In the last 100 years there has been a widespread claim that the Lord has restored all the spiritual gifts to His church. Around the world are individuals and churches who are testifying to their possession of such gifts. For example, there are many who are given the title of 'Apostle'. This is a very great claim. Is it true? Will it stand under investigation? If it is true then many Christians are missing out on God's blessings for in their churches they have no apostles, no prophets, no ministry of healing, no speaking in tongues.

We believe that the Bible is the very word of God and is our final authority in all matters of our faith. What the Bible reveals is true and final. We must believe it and reject any other view that opposes or misrepresents it. Someone might say, 'I do not agree with your interpretation'. We reply that no one is free to have any personal interpretation, but only that which is faithful to the text in the context of the whole Bible. Hence, we shall restrict ourselves to a study of that passage of the Bible which has the most extended instruction about spiritual gifts.

May God give us the wisdom and humility to first understand, then believe, and finally to put into practice all that He tells us.

Our method is to examine the specific part of the Scripture that deals with this subject at length, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapters 12 to 14. We shall go verse by verse, examining everything that is written and therefore putting everything in its context. So often well-meaning people have come to the Scriptures and just taken a sentence, or even just a few words, without considering the context. For example, it is written, "Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues", and it is easily concluded that therefore every Christian ought to speak in tongues. By a more careful examination of the Scripture you will see that this is not true, either to the passage, or to Scripture as a whole.

It is not just a matter of having correct doctrine so that we know we are right and others are wrong. Wrong doctrine is dangerous. Doctrine is the basis for godly living. Spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit for the benefit of the whole church. If what we believe about the gifts is correct then the church will greatly benefit. But if it is wrong, the church will be harmed. So for the glory of God and the good of the church we must search out the truth.

## TO WHET YOUR APPETITE AND GET YOU STARTED!

Here are questions that are so commonly asked that we shall seek to answer as the book proceeds.

### General questions

*Is it important to follow the common practice of Christian churches? (14:33)*

*Are the words of Jesus' apostles to be followed completely? (14:37)*

*Who are the truly spiritual persons? (14:37)*

### Questions about the Holy Spirit

*How can you be sure it is the Holy Spirit at work, and not some other power? (12:3)*

*Is the 'baptism with the Spirit' an experience after conversion that all Christians should seek? (12:13)*

### Questions about spiritual gifts

*How can you know which gift the Holy Spirit has given you? (12:5)*

*What is God's purpose in giving you a spiritual gift? (12:7)*

*How many spiritual gifts are there? (12:8)*

*Can I expect God to give me whatever spiritual gift I ask for? (12:11)*

*Are some gifts more useful than others? (12:31)*

*Is the possession of spiritual gifts the most important thing a Christian should seek for? (12:31)*

*What does the Bible say about a person who has wonderful spiritual gifts but does not have love? (13:1)*

*Why is love so much more important than spiritual gifts? (13:7)*

*Will spiritual gifts cease? (13:8)*

*Is it possible for us to control the use of our spiritual gift? (14:32-33)*

### Questions about speaking in tongues

*What is happening when a person speaks in tongues? (14:2)*

*Does a tongues' speaker understand what he is saying? (14:4)*

*Were tongues given as a gift to be used in private? (14:4)*

*Should all Christians strive to speak in tongues? (14:5)*

*What language does a tongues speaker speak? (14:5)*

*Is the mind used in speaking in tongues? (14:14)*

*How eager was Paul to speak in tongues? (14:19)*

*Is God still giving the gift of tongues today? (14:22)*

### Questions about women in the church

*May women participate in public worship? (14:33-35)*

## SPIRITUAL GIFTS (1 Corinthians 12)

Paul wrote this First Letter to the Corinthians to deal with various problems in the church, division, sexual immorality, lawsuits, marriage and divorce, eating food offered to idols, head coverings, the Lord's Supper, and the resurrection. In chapters 12 to 14 he deals with the problem of the misuse of Spiritual Gifts. The believers in Corinth were rich in these gifts (1:4-7), and they were particularly excited about their speaking in tongues. As a result it seems that many disorders arose in the church:

- There was confusion in the public meetings of the church (14:33,40 with the preceding instructions).
- Some made false claims to possessing spiritual gifts, but they were not speaking under the power of the Spirit (12:3).
- Some were dissatisfied with the gifts they had and envied those with different gifts, which is why Paul emphasizes that all kinds of gifts are necessary (12:14-26)
- Some were only interested in displaying their gift, especially tongues, acting like children and not considering whether other benefitted (14:20, and the previous discussion).

This is the background against which Paul writes these chapters.

Note: We shall now explain each verse in these chapters in order. The beginning of each section will start with the verse. For example, the first verse is chapter 12 and verse 1 and is written 12:1. The version of the Bible used is the ESV (English Standard Version). Any word quoted directly from the Bible is put in inverted commas. For example, in chapter 12 and verse 1, "gifts". Make sure you have your Bible open as you read.

### INTRODUCTION TO SPIRITUAL GIFTS (12:1-3)

**12:1** *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.*

Paul's subject for these chapters is "spiritual gifts".

(1) This is the way it is probably to be translated (as in 14:1). The word is 'pneumatikos' equivalent to "spiritual" and almost always is a reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. Here it refers to the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to the church, as follows.

(2) As Paul wrote it could also be translated spiritual 'persons' (see 2:15, 3:1). Because Paul later uses another word for the gifts, 'charisma' (12:4,9,28,30,31), it has been suggested that Paul is really instructing the Corinthians in what really makes a person "spiritual" (see 14:37). What makes a person spiritual is not having amazing gifts, but submitting to the instructions of the Apostle because they are "the command of the Lord".

Though such gifts were present to a high degree in Corinth they still had much ignorance about the gifts. So Paul is writing to inform them; he does not want them to be "uninformed". They (and we) need to be informed about the possibility of false claims, the place such gifts have in the church, and how they should be used in worship.

**12:2** *You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.*

It is because of their former way of life that the Corinthians needed this instruction. Pagan religions claimed things similar to the Christian exercise of spiritual gifts. For example, the practice of the cult of Dionysus (or Bacchus, the god of wine) involved ecstatic orgies of drunkenness and immorality. But Paul must remind them that such 'worship' was always in

connection with “mute idols”; and no matter how greatly their emotions were stirred up it was always to be “led astray”. They were being controlled by an influence they could neither understand nor resist. Such experiences of emotion are not necessarily Christian and must never be seen as a definite mark of divine favour. Christians are not controlled by a force that overpowers them and carries them away, but by the Holy Spirit of God. Yet today in the name of Christianity, people are ‘slain in the Spirit’, falling to the ground and laughing uncontrollably, and it is claimed that this is the Holy Spirit! Is it not more like the prophets of Baal in Elijah’s time (see 1 Kings 18:26-29)? How emotional they were, yet how deceived! Paul goes on to reveal how the Spirit works as distinguished from false religion.

**12:3** *Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.*

One test that shows the Holy Spirit is truly present in a person is what he confesses about the person of Christ. This verse may refer to a person making confession of his Christian faith, or it may refer more specifically to one who is speaking in tongues. The real mark of the Spirit’s presence is not religious emotions, or even speaking in tongues, but a confession of the truth, that Jesus is Lord. Paul deals with this negatively and positively.

*How can you be sure it is the Holy Spirit at work, and not some other power?*

(i) The Spirit cannot be at work if someone says, “Jesus is accursed”, meaning that it was just and good that Jesus was executed. “Accursed” or ‘anathema’ refers to something that is set aside for God’s use and which therefore has to die (see Leviticus 27:28-29). It usually has the idea of being destroyed because of God’s displeasure (as here, see also Joshua 6:17-19). It does not matter if someone says this when they claim to be speaking in tongues – it just cannot be said under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

(ii) The Spirit is always present when someone genuinely confesses “Jesus is Lord”. It is this confession, made from the heart that shows a person is a true Christian (Romans 10:9, 2 Corinthians 4:5). In its highest sense “Lord” means God – often that which refers to the LORD in the Old Testament is referred to Jesus as Lord in the New Testament (so Isaiah 40:3 with Matthew 3:3). To confess that Jesus is Lord is to say that the man Jesus is God come in the flesh, and is truly God and truly man united in one Person.

Perhaps Paul uses this example as the Corinthians might have written to him about one who had claimed to speak under the direction of the Spirit saying, “Jesus is accursed”. By way of application, we must always remember that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) and that whatever a man says under His influence must always be true to the word of God. Note that when the Holy Spirit reveals Himself in a person He does not overpower that person (see verse 2), but works through his *mind* to truly confess Christ. How can you test the genuineness of a person who says the Holy Spirit is speaking through him? Not by his qualifications, nor by any pretended apostolic succession, not by his oratorical skills, not by his professed experiences (Colossians 2:18 is interesting), but by whether or not he speaks the truth according to the Scriptures (remember Galatians 1:8). So be especially careful about those claims to experiences of the Holy Spirit when the person is not in control of his own mind.

## **ALL SPIRITUAL GIFTS HAVE THE SAME SOURCE (12:4-6)**

**12:4** *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;*

Paul begins his teaching about spiritual gifts. He first emphasizes that all the different gifts have the same source (vv. 4-6). “Gifts” translates the Greek word ‘charismata’, which can refer to any gift given by the Holy Spirit (Romans 1:11, 11:29, 1 Corinthians 7:7), or to such special gifts as prophecy, tongues, etc. They are called “gifts” to emphasize the freeness and abundance with which God gives them. Paul teaches that there are “varieties” of these gifts – different ones are given to different people (see v. 11), so that no one gets everything and the recipient has no reason for boasting. There can be no reason for division between those who have certain gifts and those who do not. It is the same Holy Spirit who gives every gift.

**12:5** *and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;*

These same gifts of the Spirit are used in the church for the benefit of others (v. 7), so that they are opportunities for “service” (or ministry). This is a most profitable way of seeking to find out your personal spiritual gift. Instead of looking inside yourself to your own feelings and desires, see what opportunities for service there are for you to do in the church. You see things that need doing in the church that perhaps others do not see. This could be the Lord showing you what to do and therefore showing you your gift. Every gift is useful in service.

*How can you know which gift the Holy Spirit has given you?*

**12:6** *and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.*

The gifts are also a display of the power of God. These are not things that can be done naturally, by mere human power. It is again emphasized that it is the same God who is at work in these different ways.

At least two implications must be drawn from verses 4-6.

(1) “Gifts”, “service” and “activities” are not three different classes of gifts. They are the same gifts looked at in three different ways. As regards the fact that they are gifts they are from the Spirit; as forms of service it is to the Lord and His people; as works of power they are from God. For example, we cannot say that one item, for example healing, is a ‘gift’ but not a ‘service’. It is both a ‘gift’ and a ‘service’ as God’s people benefit. And it is further an ‘empowerment’ as it is only possible by the power of God. Then as Paul continues *all* of the gifts are associated with the Spirit, thus putting them in one class (vv. 7-11).

(2) The Bible always assumes the doctrine of the Trinity. The Father (God), the Son (Lord) and the Holy Spirit are each involved in *all* the works of God. Here it is the Spirit who is the author of the gifts, the Lord who is served (through serving His people), and God who is at work.

## THE PURPOSE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (12:7-11)

**12:7** *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

Paul now teaches the purpose of giving spiritual gifts to the church. They are not reserved for a few outstanding people so that these may be seen as special Christians and boast of what they have. In fact, gifts have no value in themselves – they are only valuable as they are put to use “for the common good” (this is emphasized in 14:5,12,19,26). For example, the eye is a part of the body, not for its own sake, but in order to give light to the whole body. This is the general

*What is God’s purpose in giving you a spiritual gift?*

principle: spiritual gifts are not given for private use and personal benefit, but for the whole church. This is something that must be emphasized in this self-seeking world.

**12:8** *For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,*

Paul gives a list of nine gifts to show something of the variety of gifts that there are. This must **not** be seen as a complete list, even when 1 Corinthians 12:28-30, Romans 12:6-8 and Ephesians 4:11 are added to it. There does not seem to be any clear way of classifying the gifts listed here, so we shall take each one in turn. Some are not easy to define with accuracy. We must use other Scriptures to help and illustrate.

*How many spiritual gifts are there?*

- “Utterance of wisdom” – Paul has much to reveal about wisdom in this letter (as in 1:17-2:13), as he contrasts the wisdom of the world with God’s wisdom. Because it comes first in the list here, it is best to interpret this gift as belonging to the apostles (who also come first in v. 28), and as being that ability to communicate the gospel as God’s wisdom in order that others might believe (so 2:7). It should not be understood as the ability to solve people’s problems or to give infallible guidance. Nor is it to be identified with prophecy, which comes later (v. 10).
- “Utterance of knowledge” – Paul refers to this again in 13:2,8, 14:6. This gift belongs to those who teach, especially to those who are able to understand and communicate the truths revealed by the apostles and prophets (so teachers are third in the list in v. 28). Of these first two gifts the Spirit is both the author (“through”) and the distributor (“according to”).

**12:9** *to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,*

- “Faith” – This cannot be saving faith which all believers possess. Nor does it seem to be the faith that is necessary for working miracles, which is included in the fifth gift. It is probably that higher measure of faith in order to trust God in special situations: in opposition, against obstacles, and even in death (see 13:2, Hebrews 11:32-38), and to keep hold of a bold profession of the gospel.
- “Gifts of healing” – This gift obviously refers to the ability to heal the sick (12:28,30, as in Acts 4:30). Note that there are many gifts in one, perhaps because there is a different gift for different sicknesses.

**12:10** *to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.*

- “The working of miracles” – This is the more general ability to work miracles than just healing. For examples read Acts 5:1-11, 13:8-11. It is also referred to in Acts 8:13, 19:11, 1 Corinthians 12:28-29, and Galatians 3:5. It seems to have been an ability characteristic of the apostles (see 2 Corinthians 12:12, where “mighty works” are miracles).
- “Prophecy” – Chapter 14 of this letter is taken up with the gift of prophecy in relationship to speaking in tongues. A prophet is one who receives a direct communication from God, and so speaks His word to men. Such words may be about anything, and not just the future, as you can read in the Old Testament prophets.
- “The ability to distinguish between spirits” – There were many deceivers in the apostolic age, wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15, Acts 20:29-30, see also 2 Corinthians



11:13-15, 2 Peter 2:1-3). So whatever is spoken in the Lord's Name must be tested (1 Corinthians 14:29, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 John 4:1-6). Let us be quite sure that the great way evil "spirits" work is through 'deception', getting people to follow false teaching (see 1 Timothy 4:1-3). Such testing is not grieving the Spirit for it is what the Lord commands us to do. Indeed, not to so test is to disobey the Lord and so to bring us into all kinds of spiritual trouble. For this purpose the Spirit is given to some for the benefit of all.

- "Various kinds of tongues" – These are most simply understood as different languages foreign to the speaker, as on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5-11). We shall explain this in detail from chapter 14.
- "The interpretation of tongues" – Although the one speaking in tongues could himself understand (see under 14:2), a spiritual gift was necessary for accurate interpretation to the church (see 1 Corinthians 14:27-28).

**12:11** *All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apports to each one individually as he wills.*

Paul now concludes this section by emphasizing that all these different gifts have the same origin, produced by the Holy Spirit Himself. Which particular gift is given to each individual Christian is entirely according to the will of the Spirit. We do not receive gifts according to our merits or wishes, or because we are more deeply dedicated to the Lord, because we have prayed and fasted, or because we follow 'an anointed servant of God'. We cannot decide which gift we would like to have and then expect the Spirit to give it to us. No, the Holy Spirit is sovereign in His work.

*Can I expect God to give me whatever spiritual gift I ask for?*

## THERE ARE MANY GIFTS BUT ONLY ONE SPIRIT (12:12-13)

**12:12** *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*

Beginning with the word "for" this verse is an illustration of the truth that in the church there are many gifts but only one Spirit. This is true of the human body in which the different parts are so joined together as to form one complete body. In applying the illustration Paul writes, "so it is with Christ", where we would expect him to write 'so it is with the church'. This is because the church is the body of *Christ*, and He is its head (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 1:22-23). Do not think of the church as an earthly society, but as being the embodiment of the risen Lord.

**12:13** *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body---Jews or Greeks, slaves or free---and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*

Paul now gives the conclusive evidence for the unity of the church as the one body of Christ. Note the emphasis on the words "one" and "all". To rightly understand this much misunderstood verse we must look at the context and ask the following three questions.

(1) Is the correct translation "by" (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB, NIV), or "in" (ESV, NIV footnote that also has "with" as an alternative) one Spirit? I believe "with" one Spirit is the more accurate translation. Paul is not referring to a baptism of which the Spirit is the *author* (so "by"), but

to a baptism of which He is the element, like the water of baptism (so “with”). Note these four pieces of evidence:

- The other six times these exact words occur in the original Greek, from which our English version is translated, all use “with” (read Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33, Acts 1:5, 11:16). There is no grammatical reason for not translating it this way in this verse.
- There are four things included in any baptism – the one baptizing, the one being baptized, the element used, and the purpose. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:2, God (we assume) baptized the Israelite nation using the elements of the cloud and sea for the purpose of a special relationship to Moses. So in 1 Corinthians 12:13, if the Spirit is the One baptizing, then there is no element into which He baptizes. It is better therefore to see God as the baptizer, Christians as those baptized, the Spirit as the element into which they are baptized, and “one body” as the purpose of baptism. In the same way work it out with John’s baptism in Matthew 3:11: John was the baptizer, Jews were being baptized, water was the element used, and repentance was the purpose (“for” in Matthew 3:11 translates the same word as “into” here).
- The last part of the verse also refers to the Spirit as the element, the one “drunk” by the Christian. In neither references is the Spirit the active Person: He is not the baptizer, and He is not the One who makes us to drink.
- Nowhere else in all Scripture is there a baptism of which the Spirit is the author. Rather we always have Christ (and the Father) “sending” the Spirit (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7), “pouring out” the Spirit (Acts 2:17,33, 10:45).

(2) What is this “baptism” with the Spirit? The word “baptism” means ‘to dip, immerse’. So baptism can be used as a symbol for great sufferings that totally surround a person (Matthew 10:38-39). To be ‘baptized with the Spirit’ means

*Is the ‘baptism with the Spirit’  
an experience after conversion  
that all Christians should seek?*

to be immersed in, surrounded by, controlled by the Spirit as the One who has been poured out. It is very clear from the teaching of the Bible here that this baptism is experienced when a person is born again of the Spirit, and not at a time distinct from his conversion. Here is the evidence:

- The purpose of this verse is to teach that the reception of the Spirit unites *all* Christians, whether “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free”, making them into “one body”. But if only some true Christians are baptized with the Spirit then there is a great division in the body of Christ between those who ‘have’ and those who ‘have not’.
- According to the New Testament, conversion is the time when the Holy Spirit is received. Read Romans 8:9, Galatians 3:1-5,14, Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30. Read carefully and see that this was true on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38-39), with Paul (Acts 9:17-18), Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48, 11:15-18) and the Ephesian disciples (Acts 19:1-6). The Samaritans were an exception to this rule (Acts 8:14-17) because it required the presence of two leading apostles to guarantee that they, despised by Jews (see John 4:9), were accepted as equal converts with Jewish believers.
- How can we answer the objection, “If baptism with the Spirit is at conversion, why do so many professing Christians lack spiritual power?” The answer is that in many cases such are not true Christians at all, because a Christian by definition is one who is controlled by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:5-6). Others lack power because as Christians they have grieved and quenched the Spirit.

(3) What then is the teaching of this verse? All true Christians have a common experience of the Holy Spirit at the time of their conversion, called a 'baptism', which unites them together into *one* body.

## **MANY GIFTS ARE NECESSARY TO THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH (12:14-26)**

**12:14** *For the body does not consist of one member but of many.*

To show that a variety of gifts is actually necessary to unity, Paul brings forward the two groups that differed – those who had 'ordinary' or less public gifts who could be despised as unspiritual (vv. 15-20), and those who had 'supernatural' or more public gifts who could boast that they were the most useful in the church (vv. 21-26). He dismisses this distinction by showing that this variety is because of a difference in function and not of spiritual position. So he begins this verse with a statement of fact, from the example of the human body, that the church does not consist of persons having the same gift.

**12:15-16** *If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body", that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body", that would not make it any less a part of the body.*

We might value a hand more than a foot, an eye more than an ear. But how foolish for a member that is less valued to deny that it belongs to the body at all! In the same way, a Corinthian Christian might have been tempted to think that he had no claim to belong to the church because he could not speak in tongues. Paul assures them that even if they do think in this way they are none the less members of the body. They must be content both with the gifts they have and with those they do not have.

**12:17** *If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?*

Here the situation is reversed and it is assumed that there is no variety of gifts. For example, everyone speaks in tongues, or everyone is an apostle. Such a situation is impossible, because the eye cannot hear like an ear, nor can the ear smell like a nose! Neither can any member of the body of Christ perform the function of another member. Each one, with his different gifts, is necessary so that the body can exist. If everyone were a pastor, who would they pastor?

**12:18-20** *But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*

Paul returns to the real situation as it exists in the church – there *is* one body made up of different members. This is the way God has made it, both the human body and the body of Christ (the church). God has arranged each part in the place He has decided, with the usefulness He wanted, so that together they make up one united body, each working for the good of the whole body. So it is in the church – the positions and gifts of every member are determined by the Lord Himself, not by the members. So there ought to be no idea of competition among the members.

**12:21** *The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you", nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."*

Paul now turns to those who thought they had more important gifts. The eye may appear more necessary than the hand, the head than the foot, but it is not so. *All* are necessary to the proper working of the body. So there is no place for pride in the matter of gifts as if some are more necessary than others.

**12:22** *On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,*

The fact is that members that seem to be “weaker” are actually necessary to the body if it is to function properly. Paul may be thinking of internal organs about which we usually think but little. So the gifts and offices in the church which are usually most admired may be of little account in the sight of God. How necessary in society are the ‘kibarua’ workers (who get paid on a daily basis), but they are not highly honoured! How necessary in the church are those who pray, those who give sacrificially, etc., who may have no praise from men.

**12:23-24a** *and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require.*

There are also members which seem “less honourable”, but the way we treat them is to give them greater honour by covering them up. He is probably thinking of our sexual organs and those organs through which the body removes waste. So it ought to be in the church – we ought to honour those members who naturally least attract honour.

**12:24b-25** *But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.*

God has a design in this arrangement. He has given necessary functions to “less honourable” members so that they might be given more honour. As a result, there is no excuse for bad feelings between members, or for divisions in the church (see 1:10, 11:18). Each member should care for every other as it cares for itself, as a recognition that it belongs to the same body.

**12:26** *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.*

Here is the final exhortation to recognize that God has given a variety of gifts in the one body. This is **not** a reference to suffering such as sickness or persecution, for the discussion is about members of the church and their gifts. Rather, one member suffers if his gift is despised because he does not have the opportunity to serve the whole body, and as a result the whole body suffers. On the other hand, a member who is able to use his gift in the way God has purposed will benefit the whole body. So the instruction to us is that *all* members in the church must have the opportunity and be given the encouragement to fulfil their work in the body of Christ.

Summary of conclusions from 12:14-26.

- (1) Every Christian must be content with the gift(s) he has and the position he occupies in the church, so that there is no place for grumbling or pride, because
- (2) The gifts of each member are determined by God (see 12:11,18,24).
- (3) Members depend upon each other so that even the least attractive gifts are necessary and should be valued.

## APPLICATION TO THE LOCAL CHURCH (12:27-31)

**12:27** *Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.*

This teaching is now applied to the Corinthian church, and so to each local church. This one church is literally called “a body of Christ”, because in each local church all the characteristics of the church are to be found – especially the great works of teaching and ruling. If they are not there according to the Bible, or if the gifts necessary to do these things are not present, then there would be no true body of Christ. Each individual in the church is a member of this body, so that no one can claim to be the whole body, and so no one is excluded.

**12:28** *And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.*

There follows another list of spiritual gifts. It is not identical with that in verses 8-10 showing that these are but some of the many gifts to be found in the body of Christ.

- “Apostles” – As in the list in Ephesians 4:11 apostles come first as the most important. Together with the New Testament prophets the apostles were the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Both the nature of the qualifications for being an apostle (Acts 1:21-22), and their work of being a witness to the resurrection, makes it very clear that this group of apostles (the Twelve and Paul) are unique, so that it is impossible to have such apostles today. There is no need to think that there were apostles in the Corinthian church – “in the church” refers to the world-wide or universal church. Sometimes it is objected that other people are called apostles in the New Testament: Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junius (Romans 16:7), where it probably means they were well known by the apostles, and in 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Philippians 2:25 where it is translated “messenger” as the Greek word ‘apostle’ means ‘one who is sent’ whether by Christ, a church, or an individual. In the absence of other evidence Barnabas and Paul might be considered as apostles of the church of Antioch from where they had been sent. That there was a fixed number of apostles of Jesus Christ is clear from the fact that their 12 names are written on the wall of the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:14).
- “Prophets” – They are second in importance, and were present in Corinth (14:29). Like the apostles they received direct messages from God. For examples of prophets read Acts 11:27, 13:1, 15:32, 21:10. Prophecy will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 14.
- “Teachers” – These are third in the list (fourth in Ephesians 4:11). See also Acts 13:1, Hebrews 5:12, James 3:1. Such men did not receive new revelations; their responsibility was to take the word of God already revealed and to explain it. It is associated with the office of pastor or elder (Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:9).
- “Miracles” – Such men had power to do mighty works, something closely associated with the apostles (see Acts 8:13, 19:11, 2 Corinthians 12:12, Galatians 3:5, Hebrews 2:4).
- “Gifts of healing” – This gift is also associated with the apostles (see Matthew 10:1-2, Acts 4:22,30, 5:16, 8:7, 9:34, 28:8-9). There is no evidence that there was such a gift present in Corinth. Such gifts are often thought of as being very common, but if there were not apostles resident in each local church then those gifts associated with them were also probably not there. At least it should not just be assumed.

- “Helping” – It is very hard to know the exact nature of this gift as the noun does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. The verb form is found in Acts 20:35, “help” the weak. Perhaps it refers to the deacons who help the elders in the care of the poor and sick (see Acts 6:1-6).
- “Administering” – A similar word is used for a ship’s captain or shipmaster (Acts 27:11, Revelation 18:17). Perhaps it refers to the gift of rule in the church, a gift that must be possessed by elders (so 1 Timothy 3:4-5, 5:17).
- “Various kinds of tongues” – Paul puts this gift last in his list probably because it was the most highly valued among the Corinthians (see at 12:10). And Paul is challenging their view of the gift of tongues.

From this list the following conclusions can be drawn about spiritual gifts in the church:

- (1) The teaching gifts are put first, showing they are the most important. The word of God is central in salvation and the Christian life.
- (2) The first three gifts are offices or positions of responsibility in the church. The last five are the gifts themselves. Therefore, positions and gifts ought not to be thought of as separate. Each office has a corresponding gift(s), and there can be no true call to that office without the necessary gifts. Also, each gift is worked out in people the Spirit so equips to do the work of ministry in the church.
- (3) It must not be assumed that any or all of these gifts are permanent in the church. Apostles certainly were not permanent.

**12:29-30** *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?*

By asking these questions Paul shows how wrong it is for everyone to desire the same gift, such as tongues. In the Greek in which Paul wrote, the questions are put in such a way that in each case the answer is a definite ‘No!’ A variety of gifts demands that different people have different gifts. Apart from a faulty understanding of baptism in the Spirit, how wrong it is to make tongues the test of having received the Spirit.

**12:31** *But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.*

Paul now urges the Corinthians to distinguish between gifts.

(i) Some gifts are “higher” than others. The Corinthians put the highest value on those gifts which were the most attractive and spectacular. But in reality the highest gifts are those which are the most useful. This is why the prophet is greater than the speaker in tongues (14:5).

*Are some gifts more useful than others?*

(ii) The local church is to desire these “higher gifts”. Do not think that here Paul is exhorting the individual Corinthian to seek after such higher gifts for himself, for remember that gifts are sovereignly given (12:11,18). Note the following two emphases:

- The command to “earnestly desire” is plural, and so is addressed to the whole congregation. It is what the local church as a whole should desire in their midst.
- The word translated “earnestly desire” can have the idea of jealously guarding that which they already have, rather than seeking that which they do not (so in 2 Corinthians 11:2).

In the church today we must put the greatest value on those gifts that are most useful in building up the whole church, that is, the speaking gifts that bring God’s word to men (Paul works this out in detail in chapter 14).

(iii) There is a more important way to live than these “higher gifts”. This “more excellent way” is a very important truth in Paul’s discussion about

*Is the possession of spiritual gifts the most important thing a Christian should seek for?*

spiritual gifts, for he begins to talk about the way of “love” (chapter 13). He is *not* comparing having the gifts with love and having them without love. Rather he is comparing a life which seeks after gifts and a life which seeks after love. Note the evidence for this: gifts without love profit nothing at all (13:1-3); and love will continue after the gifts have ceased (13:8-13). Christians are to seek love as the great priority of their lives, as love surpasses all other ways in its excellence. Yet it seems that today there is far more emphasis on spiritual gifts than on the Christian grace of love. This is not according to the will of God as revealed here in the Scriptures. Let us go on to examine this excellent way of love in the next chapter.

## SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND LOVE (1 Corinthians 13)

Chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians is often read at weddings, but it is not usually understood that the main reference is still concerning spiritual gifts. Gifts are useless where there is no love (vv. 1-3); the way of love is excellent (vv. 4-7); love is permanent (vv. 8-13). Love is our complete duty – see Matthew 22:37-40, Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:6,13-14, 1 Timothy 1:5, James 2:8.

### USELESSNESS OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS WITHOUT LOVE (13:1-3)

**13:1** *If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

First, love is compared with the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. It is supposed that a person possesses the highest imaginable gift, that of being able to speak in angelic languages. Consider the following evidence that this is imaginary and that there are no real ‘tongues of angels’ spoken by us.

*What does the Bible say about a person who has wonderful spiritual gifts but does not have love?*

- It is exaggerated language to make a point, as throughout verses 1-3. For example, only God can have understanding of all mysteries and have all knowledge, as in v. 2. I might try to think of the most beautiful singing as that of a bird, and say, ‘If I could sing like a bird everyone would listen to me’. But everyone knows I cannot sing like a bird.
- Everywhere tongues are recognizable human languages (see under 14:5).
- It would miss the purpose of the gift of tongues, that of judgement on unbelieving Jews (see under 14:21).

What are we to say about such a person if he does not have love? He is nothing more than a piece of metal which men strike in order to make a noise! Is Paul thinking of the loud noises tongue speakers can make when they try to be louder than others? Note this well, the best speech in earth, if it is without love, is just empty noise.

**13:2** *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

Secondly, love is compared with the spiritual gifts of prophecy and faith to work miracles. Once again it is supposed that these gifts are present to the very highest degree (“all”). These are truly great gifts and it would be a great privilege to have any one of them.

- God revealed to the prophets the mysteries about the redemption in Christ that had been hidden (Ephesians 3:4-6). Imagine such a prophet had all mysteries revealed to him, and had all knowledge.
- By the gift of faith to fullest extent great miracles could be performed (Matthew 17:20).

However, a man is “nothing” even if he has the greatest gifts to the greatest degree, but does not have love. It is love alone that makes a person something in God’s sight. Do not conclude that because a person professes to have spiritual gifts that he is ‘something’. Learn to measure by God’s standard.



**13:3** *And if I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

Thirdly, love is compared with spiritual gifts that demand self-sacrifice. Suppose a man gives away all his earthly possessions in one moment of time. Or suppose a man makes the ultimate sacrifice of himself for the good of others (martyrdom?). Such things are very costly to do, and yet they can be done without true love. But if they are done without love then God says that the man will “gain nothing” from having done them. By themselves all outward works of charity are worthless before God. Even these things cannot make up for a lack of love.

Conclusion.

You can claim whatever gift you like, and to the highest degree you like, but without love you are nothing and have nothing in God’s sight. The gifts of the Spirit *can* exist where there is no fruit of the Spirit as expressed in love. Remember Matthew 7:21-23. Remember the awful fate of Judas who obviously had gifts together with the other apostles (Matthew 10:1-4). The true evidence of salvation is not in the presence of spiritual gifts, but in the presence of love.

## **THE EXCELLENCE OF THE WAY OF LOVE (13:4-7)**

Although the Corinthians were not lacking in spiritual gifts (1:9), it is clear that they were lacking in love. The definition of love in this passage is that it is much more than a feeling; it is giving myself to others, putting the interests of others before my own. The greatest example of such love is God in Jesus Christ (1 John 4:10-11). Love is defined as being and doing the following 15 things.

**13:4** *Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant*

- “Patient” – This word has to do with the way we react to the injuries we receive from other people. Think of God’s patience towards us as sinners (Romans 2:4, 1 Timothy 1:16, 2 Peter 3:9,15 where it is translated “forbearance”). Love is slow to react, bearing repeated acts of injury without doing anything; there is no revenge or even bitterness of spirit. What unloving things were happening in Corinth (6:7)! There may be times when we have to deal with such injuries, but always in a loving and patient spirit, and according to Matthew 18:15-17.
- “Kind” – Love does more than show patience when wronged. Love returns good for evil (Matthew 5:43-44, Romans 12:19-21). Such love does acts of kindness without expecting to receive a reward (Luke 6:35, 14:12-14); and cheerfully without any grudging in the heart (Deuteronomy 15:10, 2 Corinthians 9:7, 1 Peter 4:9). This is the sort of kindness God has shown to us (see Luke 6:35, Romans 2:4, Ephesians 2:7, Titus 3:4). Therefore, love demands that we show a practical interest in others and their affairs.
- “Does not envy” – What do you think when someone is more successful than you? Or has more blessings in this world? Or has a spiritual gift you do not have? How easy it is to be dissatisfied and so have a wrong feeling towards the person because you think it makes them superior (as in Genesis 37:11, Numbers 11:29). But love wants to share and so can rejoice in the success of others. Compare Cain (Genesis 4:4-5) with John the Baptist (John 3:30).

- “Does not boast” – This is with reference to ourselves, what we have, or what we do not have. Love is not proud. How easy to be proud because of the spiritual gifts we possess! The boastful man wants to gain the applause of others and so makes sure that everyone knows about his great spiritual experiences and all that he has done in the service of the Lord (Luke 18:11-12). How dangerous testimonies are as an opportunity for boasting. But one who loves feels no need to be significant before others because he knows his unworthiness before God (Genesis 18:27, Luke 17:10).
- “Not arrogant” – This was the great sin of the Corinthians (4:6,18-19, 5:2, 8:1). Let not the tongues speaker think he is someone special, for this leads to boasting. Love is more concerned to think great thoughts about others than about itself. You may indeed have much, but it is all by the grace of God (4:7, 15:10).

**13:5** *or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;*

- “Not rude” – Love will not bring offense by indecent or crude acts or words. But how many have been hurt by wild and emotional Christian meetings where there is no decency or order (14:33,40)? We *must* pay attention to the proper form of things (as Paul argues in another context in 11:13-14). It is quite Biblical to seek to please men without having to compromise the gospel (10:32-33).
- “Does not insist on its own way” – Christian love does not have its own benefit as the goal, but the benefit of others. This is such an important principle in the use of spiritual gifts that it forms the theme of chapter 14. Love is prepared to give up its own rights for the sake of others (9:19-23, 10:24,32). We must not think to ourselves, ‘What is in it for me?’
- “Not irritable” – Love is not quick-tempered, easily aroused to the point of anger due to hatred or desire for revenge. Sadly, anger is so often because I have been offended or affected, whereas love thinks of others.
- “Not resentful” – A loving Christian does not keep a record of wrongs done against him. He is not waiting for either God or man to put things right. Many people keep a list of the wrongs they have experienced, but the Christian seeks to live as if they never took place.

**13:6** *does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.*

- “It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” – Without giving details, Paul shows that love is against everything that is evil and supports everything that is good. Love has no pleasure in sad or evil things that happen to others, even if they are enemies (so David in 2 Sam. 1:11-12). It is false love that rejoices with someone when unrighteousness has been committed, because love rejoices *with* the truth (see also NIV). For truth as opposed to the wrong see John 3:20-21, 2 Thessalonians 2:10,12, 1 John 1:6. It is only by believing and loving the truth that we can live righteously.

**13:7** *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

- “Bears all things” – Love would rather conceal or excuse the faults of others, instead of talking about them. Love stands in the presence of a fault with a finger on her lip (Proverbs 10:12, 1 Peter 4:8). There are times when the sins of others need to be revealed, but only because love to the one sinning requires it (as in Matthew 18:15-17, Galatians 6:1).
- “Believes all things” –  
(1) Love is not suspicious. It readily believes what others say in their own defence. We must give others the benefit of the doubt. Of course, this will make us vulnerable to any

who seek to deceive us. But let us remember that love does not first think of itself and so is willing to take risks.

(2) Love does not give in to rumours. Only real evidence must lead to the conclusion that someone is wrong. And when a sin has been clearly committed love will add, 'The temptation must have been strong', or 'In the circumstances I would have sinned more greatly'.

(3) Love sees the best in a person, not the worst.

- "Hopes all things" – This refers to the way that we look at men in their failures and sins. Love hopes for the best, never despairing of fellow Christians. We refuse to take a person's failure as final and irrevocable.
- "Endures all things" – What does love do in the midst of suffering or persecution, when it is not appreciated? Like a soldier in the midst of battle who refuses to retreat, love continues to play its part whatever the difficulties. Love does not give up, whatever the situation is, but actively perseveres (see the use of the word 'endure' in 2 Timothy 2:10, Hebrews 10:32, 12:2).

These 15 definitions make up the love that we *must* show as Christians. It is the great evidence of salvation (see John 13:34-35, Ephesians 1:15-16, Colossians 1:3-4, 1

*Why is love so much more important than spiritual gifts?*

Thessalonians 3:12, 4:9-10, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Philemon 4-5). Love means putting others first. Love is best cultivated in the field of a local church as it not you who choose who the other members are. Thus you are put into situations with many different sorts of people, even those you would not naturally get along with, who test the quality of your love.

## THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE (13:8-13)

The final verses of 1 Corinthians 13 have generated controversy. The difficult words are found in verse 10, "when the perfect comes". What is this "perfect"? If we put this aside for now, the purpose of the passage is very clear, and we must not lose sight of Paul's purpose. The subject is "love", the first word in verse 8, and the last word in verse 13. He is continuing to show the greatness, and thus the importance, of love by reminding us that love is permanent. On the other hand the spiritual gifts listed are temporary. We shall first consider what the verses clearly teach, and then only at the end enter into the controversy.

**13:8** *Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.*

Love will endure for ever; it is not only for our present existence. However, the time will come when the gifts of the Spirit the Corinthians valued so highly will cease to be necessary. The time when they will pass away is revealed in verse

10, "when the perfect comes". The words "prophecies", "tongues", and "knowledge" each refer to the respective spiritual gifts, which is the way they are used in the context throughout these three chapters. This is based on the fact that exactly the same words are used in 12:8,10 where they are each a gift the Spirit gives. Note the three gifts listed have to do with revelation, the way through which God makes His will known.

*Will spiritual gifts cease?*

**13:9-10** *For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.*

(1) **Why** will they pass away? Because they are “in part” or “partial”. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with them – they are partial or incomplete, not false. For example, one prophecy only contains a small part of the whole truth of God. When all prophecies have been given then there is obviously no further need for the gift of prophecy.

(2) **When** will they pass away? These revelatory gifts will pass away when the “perfect comes”. The word translated “perfect” has already been used in 2:6, where it is translated “mature”. It will also be used in 14:20 where it is again translated “mature” as opposed to being “infants” (see also 3:1). If this is the way it should be translated in this verse then the idea of “perfect” is not moral perfection as opposed to sinfulness, but completeness as opposed to incompleteness. This fits in with the thought of “part” (verse 9), and the following example of man and child (verse 11). The question now is, What it is that comes that is described as “perfect” or ‘complete’, ‘mature’ or ‘manly’? We will leave this discussion to the end of the section, until we have examined all the verses of this section.

**13:11** *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.*

There are two illustrations to show the difference between the “partial” and the “perfect”. First, there is the difference between childhood and manhood. The speech, thinking and reasoning of a child are not foolish or false, but they are only suited to the state of childhood. They are clear and accurate in a childish way. Children are only able to grasp a very small part of the whole. Think of what they say when telling what has happened to them. They do not go into great detail about every single thing, every word that was said, as some adults tend to do! It is the revelatory gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge that are like these “childish ways”. A time will come when they are no longer suited to us and we will give them up.

**13:12** *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

The second illustration is the difference between seeing an image in a mirror dimly, and seeing clearly. Ancient mirrors were made of imperfectly polished metal so that the image was not clear. Try looking at yourself in a piece of metal like a car body!

It is very possible that Paul has in mind a specific Old Testament passage as he writes this, Numbers 12:6-8. Moses’ siblings, Miriam and Aaron, have complained against their brother (v. 2). The Lord speaks on behalf of His servant Moses and reveals what a great prophet he is. Other prophets see visions, and dream dreams, and as a result their revelations are like “riddles”, words not easy to understand. On the other hand the Lord speaks with Moses “mouth to mouth” so that Moses “beholds the form of the Lord”, and as a result his words are “clear”.

The connection between this passage in Numbers and ours in 1 Corinthians 13:12 is twofold.

- The word translated “riddles” (Numbers 12:8), in the Greek version of the Old Testament with which Paul was very familiar, is the same as the word translated “dimly”. It is a word from which we get our English word ‘enigma’. Think of a crime that is to be solved. When there is limited evidence (part) it can appear to be an enigma. But as more and more evidence comes to light the crime comes to be solved.

- The idea of “face to face” is very similar to “mouth to mouth”. Face to face is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to someone ‘beholding the form God’, such as Moses (Exodus 33:11, Deuteronomy 34:10), the people of Israel (Numbers 14:14, Deuteronomy 5:4), Jacob (Genesis 32:30) and Gideon (Judges 6:22). The fact that both phrases are used of Moses shows they are interchangeable. This was a very privileged experience of being in close fellowship with God, what is called a theophany (an appearance of God).

By way of conclusion, when “the perfect” comes, there will be a much more clear revelation of God. Often what you hear on the telephone is more difficult to understand than talking with someone face to face. In face to face communication we not only hear words but we engage with the whole person.

The result of seeing “face to face” is to “know fully, even as I have been fully known”. The word translated ‘know fully’ is the usual verb for ‘know’ to which is added a small word at the beginning (a preposition), often in order to give emphasis. In 14:37 the same word is translated “acknowledge”. In 16:18 it is translated “give recognition”. The particular emphasis given depends upon the context. Here the context is knowing in part, so the emphasis is clearly knowing fully or completely. The question that remains is *when* is that time we shall know fully, even as God has known us? This is the only time this intensive use of the word ‘know’ is used of God’s knowledge of His people. The non-intensive form is used of God’s knowledge of us being equivalent to being saved by God in Galatians 4:9, and there it refers to experiencing salvation. If this is so, when the “perfect” comes we enter into a mutual relationship with God of personal, close knowledge. This is obviously true in heaven, but is also one of the blessings of the new covenant (see Hebrews 8:11). Therefore, it is not necessary to conclude that this can only be true in glory.

**13:13** *So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

The teaching about love is brought to a conclusion. “Now” could be logical, not necessarily temporal. Let us take both possibilities.

- If logical, it forms the conclusion of an argument. Paul would be returning to the statement in v. 8 that “love never ends”. The ‘never ending’ would thus be a contrast to the ‘passing away’ of the revelatory spiritual gifts.
- If temporal, it means ‘now, at this time, as opposed to what does not now abide’. The revelatory spiritual gifts do not abide as faith, hope and love do.

However, with either possibility, two things are clearly taught:

(1) Together with faith and hope, love continues to be active. The interesting thing is that Paul brings faith and hope into view that he has nowhere mentioned in this section (vv. 8-13). There may be two reasons for this:

- Because it is the character of love to believe and to hope (as 13:7).
- Faith, hope and love are often found together in Scripture as the very basic character of our lives (Romans 5:2-5, Galatians 5:6, Colossians 1:4-5, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8).

Do faith and hope continue in heaven? Now we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The implication is that when we see the Lord, when we are at home with Him, faith will become sight. In the same way now we have hope because we do not see (experience) the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:24). “For who hopes for what he sees?” The implication is that when we “see” hope will be satisfied. The definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1 also implies that when what is hoped for is realized then there is no more need for

faith. Others have replied that there may be a sense in which both faith and hope continue for ever. Faith as 'thankful trust in God, deep appreciation for Him, and committed subservience to Him' will remain for eternity. Hope as 'hope in God, in Christ' for what will continue to lie ahead in the new heavens and new earth will also remain. I do not find it convincing that faith and hope will remain in glory.

(2) Of the three, love is the greatest. How? Not because it is the source of faith and hope. Rather faith is the source of love. But because of its greater usefulness. Faith saves ourselves, but love benefits others. So Paul continues in chapter 14 to teach us about the gifts of tongues and prophecy in order to show how they must be used to benefit others. How important in God's sight is our loving service to our brethren.

### Conclusion.

Whether or not we are able to come to a final conclusion about the exact meaning of everything in this section there is nothing that demands that all spiritual gifts continue until the very end, and in particular the three referred to in this section. Whether or not they continue must be decided on other grounds, both exegetical and theological. It is not the purpose of this passage to give the definitive answer, because the focus is elsewhere. What we must not do is to miss its teaching about love in comparison with spiritual gifts. Whatever we think "the perfect" is we must emphasize love in our lives and among the people of God. As we debate about spiritual gifts, and perhaps disagree, it must all be done in love. We neither show our genuineness as Christians by having such gifts, nor by not having them. As Jesus clearly told His disciples, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Paul tells the Galatians that the only thing that really matters in Christ Jesus is, "faith working through love" (5:6). In his first letter, John is equally clear about love as the great evidence that someone is a true Christian. "Whoever loves his brother abides in the light" (2:10). "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death" (3:14). "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (4:7-8). "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him" (5:1). Therefore, examining our conduct, especially including the way we use the spiritual gifts God has given us, to make sure we are living a life full of Christ-like love in our interactions with other Christians, is more important than anything else!!

### Question: What is "the perfect"?

If we know *what* "the perfect" is we will know *when* it comes. There are two different interpretations of the meaning of "the perfect". Both are held by serious Bible believers of different shades of theological thought. I believe that interpretation 2 is correct. However neither interpretation conflicts with other Scriptures. Neither interpretation changes the emphasis of what Paul is writing, as he shows the more excellent way of love. This is why we have put this study as a separate part of the writing.

**Interpretation 1** – *The 'perfect' is our full knowledge of God in the final glory.*

Reasons for this interpretation and responses. Three things may make us think of the glory to come:

- ✓ The English word “perfect” makes us think of glory where there is no sin. A response is that the word is nowhere else used in the Bible to refer to the age to come. It is used of the perfection of God (Matthew 5:48), but is a ‘perfection’ that must be pursued by God’s people now in this life.
- ✓ Seeing “face to face” also makes us think of glory where we shall see God personally (cf. Revelation 22:4). A response is that if the language is an allusion back to Moses then it can be used of experience in this life. Unlike Moses, through the new covenant our faces are “unveiled” as we behold the glory of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:18).
- ✓ Knowing “fully” also can make us think of glory if it means the time when we will be freed from “all misconceptions and inabilities to understand”. A response is that the word translated ‘know fully’ is also used of our present experience in Matthew 11:27, Ephesians 1:7, 4:13, Colossians 1:10, 2 Peter 1:2, etc.

Weaknesses of this interpretation.

- ✓ Will there be faith and hope in heaven? We do not naturally think this, and the effort to maintain this is strained. If not, then the reference to faith, hope and love remaining is now, that is, before the end. As a consequence the revelatory spiritual gifts pass away before the end.
- ✓ It ignores the analogy of Scripture. We must compare Scripture with Scripture. If the strengths of this first view depend upon words which might be interpreted in other ways, then we must consider what other parts of Scripture have to teach about these revelatory spiritual gifts. If these teach that they have already passed away, then we interpret these words in those ‘other ways’.

**Interpretation 2** – *The ‘perfect’ is the completed Scriptures, what we call the Canon = the authoritative 66 books of the Old and New Testaments.*

Strengths of this interpretation.

- ✓ Both the gifts that pass away and the perfect that comes are revelation, so that the “part” and the “perfect” both refer to the same sort of thing. One writer, who does not agree with this view, states that if it can be proved that all revelations given by the gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge are “Scripture-quality” then “the perfect” may well be the completion of such revelation, i.e. the completion of Scripture (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1037).
- ✓ The word translated “perfect” is *always* used of this life, never elsewhere of the life to come. See other uses of the word in reference to people in Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 3:15, Colossians 1:28, 4:12, Hebrews 5:14 where it is translated “mature”, and in Matthew 5:48, 19:21, James 1:4, 3:2 where it is translated “perfect” (ESV).
- ✓ The allusions to Moses as recipient of clear revelation in Numbers 12:8 and Exodus 33:11, Deuteronomy 34:10.
- ✓ If faith and hope cease at the return of Christ, then the spiritual gifts must cease before that time, so the perfect refers to something that comes before the return of Christ.

Difficulties of this interpretation and possible responses.

- ✓ It is new. It seems that no one interpreted the phrase this way until about 150 years ago. While this test does not prove beyond doubt that an interpretation is wrong, it must lead us to be very cautious about adopting it.
- ✓ Why did not Paul write, “When all things have been revealed” which would be more clear that “the perfect”? An answer could be that even the writers of Scripture did not fully understand what they were writing (see 1 Peter 1:10-12).
- ✓ How can the completion of Scriptures be termed ‘a coming’? It must be admitted that this is strange. Although the time of completing the Scriptures is known to God it took many years for the canon to be collected and received as such by the church.
- ✓ In what way will we “fully know” when the Scriptures are completed? We can understand if it refers to our glorified experience in heaven. An answer is, we are surely better off as Christians with all of Scripture rather than part. What if we only had two of the four Gospels? What if there

was no Acts, no Hebrews, no Revelation? Do we not ‘fully know’ in the sense we now have all that that God has purposed for us with the completed Scriptures?

Additional reasons for adopting this interpretation.

Other Scriptures make it abundantly clear that: (1) through the apostles the revelation of the word of God was completed, and (2) that the revelatory gifts of prophecy and tongues have therefore ceased.

✓ The New Testament writers do have a concept of the complete truth being revealed. It is not true simply to state that Paul could not possibly have had a concept of “the perfect” as the completed Scriptures. Consider the following evidence –

- Jesus promised His disciples that the Spirit would lead them into ALL the truth (John 14:26, 16:13). Then there would be no more truth to be revealed. This is not a promise to all Christians but to the apostles Jesus had taught for the Spirit would “bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you”.
- The apostles of Christ, as the ones through whom Scripture was revealed, are the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). That foundation is complete.
- Hebrews 1:1-2 teach that God’s final word is “by His Son”. When His authorized apostles had written Christ’s word then there was nothing left to speak. When a person is authorized to speak on behalf of another then it is as if the person authorizing is speaking. It is so important to understand the uniqueness of the apostolate in this regard.
- In his day, Jude can refer to “the faith that was *once for all* delivered to the saints (v. 3).

✓ What chapter 14 teaches about the gift of tongues (and so of prophecy). Please read the section explaining 14:2 and 14:21-22. There it is concluded that such gifts are the means by which God revealed His infallible and authoritative truth. They are revelatory gifts that have ceased, because they have served their purpose, with the completion of revelation.

We are now ready to try to answer the question, ‘*When* will “the partial pass away”?’ On the basis of both exegesis and the analogy of Scripture I believe the answer is, ‘When the Scripture is complete’. But it was completed by the end of the *first* century. If this is the proper interpretation, then Paul expected that the gifts of revelation would cease before the end. If so, such gifts have already ceased. Historically, there is no clear evidence for the gift of tongues in the post-apostolic church (only amongst a group called Montanists, who were regarded as heretics). Such gifts did not cease because of unbelief, for they are given according to the will of God; and remember that the Corinthian church that had the gifts also had many sins.

To many of you reading this, the position that such gifts have ceased may be absurd. Perhaps you will appeal to your own experience, and to what is happening around you. But it would be far better to first ask, ‘What does the Scripture say?’ Let Scripture interpret experience, and not experience the Scripture. I am not therefore saying that the things experienced today are of the devil; but whatever they are they are not the New Testament gifts of revelation. We shall seek to explain the nature of true tongues and prophecy from chapter 14. To which we now turn.



## PROBLEMS CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS (1 Corinthians 14)

In this chapter Paul deals directly with the problems of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church. They valued the gift of tongues too highly. Paul teaches that prophecy is much more valuable, and so gives directions for the exercise of these gifts in the church.

### IN CHURCH SEEK PROPHECY MORE THAN TONGUES (14:1-5)

**14:1** *Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.*

This command is not addressed to individuals, but to the whole church (as in 12:31). “You” is plural not individual. Every Christian is to pursue love. Because spiritual gifts are given according to the will of the Spirit (12:11), it is not the individual Christian who is to desire a particular gift for himself or herself. They are to be earnestly desired in the assembly of God’s people because they are needed for edification. Love is the more excellent way that is to be followed; spiritual gifts are to be guarded according to their usefulness, so that prophecy is most important.

**14:2** *For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.*

What is a person doing when he speaks in tongues? Here in this sentence is the Biblical definition that must guide all discussion about tongues. Note that “tongues” in this discussion in 1 Corinthians always means the gift without the interpretation of those tongues. And there is no evidence that the singular ‘tongue’ is anything different from the plural ‘tongues’.

*What is happening when a person speaks in tongues?*

(a) He speaks “to God”. This is not the purpose of speaking in tongues, because the purpose of any spiritual gift is for service in the church (remember 12:7). But it is a fact that when tongues are spoken without interpretation the hearers cannot understand what is being spoken; only God can.

(b) He speaks “mysteries in the Spirit”. Many people think this means that a tongues’ speaker utters words which cannot be understood, and which his mind had no part in the speaking. For at least two reasons this is wrong.

- The word ‘mystery’ is a special one for Paul. It has to do with the content of what is spoken (see 13:2). It does not mean something that cannot be understood, but something that was once hidden from men and so could not be known, but has now been revealed. See how Romans 16:25, Ephesians 3:3-6, Colossians 1:25-27 all link ‘mystery’ with knowledge and revelation about redemption in Christ. To speak or reveal a ‘mystery’ is therefore to speak a word directly from God. So a claim to speak in tongues is a bold claim to bring God’s revelation to men. Tongues are nothing less than a form of revelation.
- To speak “in the Spirit” is not the opposite of speaking with the mind (see later under vv. 14-15). No, the one speaking in tongues is doing so by the power and under the direction of the Holy Spirit (see the same phrase in Galatians 5:5,16,18,24). Other translations have ‘spirit’, i.e. the human spirit (KJV, NKJV), or even ‘his spirit’ (NASB) although there is no ‘his’ in the original. The NIV also has ‘with his spirit’ but also a footnote with the

alternative 'by the Spirit'. We insist on the reference to the Spirit of God because: (i) only the Spirit of God can reveal mysteries; (ii) when Paul uses this form of the word 'pneuma' with the definite article then it refers to the Spirit of God; and (iii) Paul has just referred to "spiritual gifts", i.e. gifts given by the Spirit of God, making a reference to the Spirit in v. 2 much more likely.

Concluding definition: To speak in tongues is 'to speak by the power of the Spirit the very word of God in a language neither native to the speaker nor understood by the hearer'.

**14:3** *On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.*

Tongues is now compared to prophecy, as throughout this chapter 14. The emphasis is on the benefit each gift brings to the hearer. The prophet spoke in the language of the hearers, so prophecy is of much more direct value. Like tongues, prophecy also brings God's word to men. 'Prophecy' is not preaching, because preaching takes the word of God already given by the prophets in the Scriptures and explains it. Prophets so often began, "Thus says the Lord ..." (see 2 Peter 1:20-21). Note that revealing the 'mystery' is also the content of New Testament prophecy (13:2, Ephesians 3:3-6). Prophecy helps people in three ways, for the word can be understood directly by the mind because it is in the language of the people: (1) Generally, prophecy builds believers up into better Christians; (2) Specifically, prophecy gives encouragement to carry on in the faith, and (3) gives comfort in difficulty.

**14:4** *The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.*

When tongues and prophecy are directly compared, it is obvious that the prophet is more useful because he "edifies the church", and not just one individual. Note the following two things about tongues:

1. A person speaking in tongues "builds up himself". Therefore, the speaker *must* understand what he is saying. This is such an important fact, but it is almost always denied.

*Does a tongues' speaker understand what he is saying?*

The reason why prophecy edifies the church is because prophecy is understood by the hearers whereas tongues is not. So if tongues does in fact edify the individual, then that individual must understand them! It is a most dangerous teaching that says, 'I do not understand the tongues I speak, but because I have good emotional feelings I must be near to God and blessed by Him'. And if the tongues' speaker could be edified without understanding, then why not also the hearers? Yet these verses specifically deny that the hearers could be edified by tongues, unless they are interpreted (see vv. 6-12). And how are such feelings to be interpreted? Music and many false religious experiences can have a similar emotional effect. No! Edification *always* comes through the understanding of the mind in which the Spirit is working (see 2 Corinthians 12:19, Ephesians 4:11-12, 15-16, 29, 1 Thessalonians 5:11).

2. Although Paul writes that the speaker in tongues edifies himself, he cannot here be recommending the use of tongues in *private*. Such an understanding would go against the whole

*Were tongues given as a gift to be used in private?*

discussion in chapters 12 – 14. Gifts were never given for private use but for the benefit of the whole church. The one who exults in his private use of a gift is being very selfish, for he is using the gift in the wrong way. Rather, when Paul notes that tongues *only* edifies the speaker and not the hearer, he is thereby discouraging the Corinthians from thinking that

tongues are so important. It might be asked if God would give a revelation through a tongue and yet because it is not interpreted it benefits no one but the tongues' speaker. There is a similar question in v. 30 where a prophet is speaking a revelation but is then instructed to cut it short because another has received a revelation. Paul clearly says that the prophetic gift is controllable (v.32), and so it must be with the gift of tongues.

**14:5** *Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.*

However, since speaking in tongues is a gift of the Spirit it must not be ignored. Paul would have been happy if they all spoke in tongues, and even happier if they all prophesied! Note that Paul is not writing to them that it is the will of God for them that they

*Should all Christians strive to speak in tongues?*

all speak in tongues and prophesy. That would contradict 12:11,29-30. For example, when Paul writes elsewhere that he wishes everyone to remain unmarried like himself, he is not suggesting that it is God's will for them to remain unmarried (7:7, see also Numbers 11:29)! The specific conclusion is, "He who prophesies is greater". Yet tongues can be as useful as prophecy, *if* it is interpreted, for then the church understands what is being said and so is edified. So the only difference between tongues and prophecy is the language used. Tongues which are interpreted are the same as prophecy. Here is further evidence that what is spoken by one with the gift of tongues is revelation from God, just as is prophecy. Interestingly, the tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost were a fulfilment of Joel's prophecy about prophecy.

We must now ask the question, 'What language does a tongues speaker speak? Is it the language of angels, a personal language known only to the speaker and God, or is it a foreign language?' Note the following evidence to show that tongues are a human language but one foreign to the speaker.

*What language does a tongues' speaker speak?*

- (1) Tongues can be 'interpreted' or translated (the same word is used in Acts 9:36). Such interpretation applies to real languages. Read also 14:13,26-28.
- (2) The tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost were foreign languages: "— we hear them telling in our own tongues" (Acts 2:11).
- (3) The same word is used for "tongues" in both Acts and Corinthians, a word which means either the tongue as a part of the body, or a real language.
- (4) Tongues are the reversal of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). There the different languages divided people. For centuries we may say that God only spoke the Hebrew language. At Pentecost, through the tongues, He spoke the languages of "devout men from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5-6). This significance is destroyed if tongues are not such languages.
- (5) Paul uses a quotation from the Old Testament (v. 21), which refers to a real foreign language, that of the Babylonians.

Conclusion: According to the Bible, to speak in tongues is to speak in a language unlearned by the speaker and unknown to most hearers, although a language known by some people on the earth. The question, 'Why should God give such a gift to His church?' will be explained under verses 20-22. So do not make tongues more important than the Bible does. At the same time, do not accept as genuine any professed gift of tongues which is only spoken in private or which is not a real foreign language. May the Lord help us to test the spirits according to the Scriptures we have now studied, and not to be carried away with whatever people may claim for themselves.

## TONGUES WITHOUT INTERPRETATION ARE NOT USEFUL (14:6-12)

**14:6** *Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?*

Paul imagines his next visit to the Corinthians in order to show that speaking in tongues was not as important as they thought. Remember that throughout this discussion ‘speaking in tongues’ refers to untranslated tongues. Paul’s visit would profit them nothing if he spoke in a language they could not understand! He lists four types of speech which would benefit as each would be addressed to their minds in their own language.

**14:7** *If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?*

Paul illustrates the need for understanding the language in order to benefit from what is heard. In music, a young child might get hold of a musical instrument and make noises, but the sounds produced have no musical significance.

**14:8** *And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?*

A second illustration is from the use of the trumpet in war to convey messages from the commander to his men far from him. If the men do not recognize the sequence of notes they will not understand the message. In the same way, tongues may announce a very important message, but it will not profit those who cannot understand what is spoken.

**14:9-11** *So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.*

A third illustration is from human languages. All such languages have meaning but only those will benefit who understand each one. The word “foreigner” translates a Greek word ‘barbaros’ which pictures a foreigner as saying ‘bar, bar’, or nonsense words. That is how foreign languages often seem to us unless we can understand them.

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

This verse is the general application. “Manifestations of the Spirit” translates just one word, which literally translated is “spirits” (plural). It is a reference to the various gifts the Spirit gives (it is so rendered in the KJV and NIV). Paul commends their zeal for the Spirit to reveal Himself through various gifts in the church, but he wants that zeal to be properly directed. The purpose of spiritual gifts is to be a blessing to others (see 12:7, 14:2-5), so the church must understand what is spoken in tongues.

## TONGUES MUST BE INTERPRETED (14:13-19)

**14:13** *Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.*

Specific application is now made to the tongues' speaker – he should pray for the ability to interpret what he says. This does not mean that he does not understand (see v. 2). Imagine that you must translate a five minute message into another language – you must remember all that was said and you must be accurate in your choice of words. To do this perfectly demands a gift from God.

**14:14** *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.*

Beginning with “for”, this verse is the reason for the tongues' speaker praying for the ability to interpret/translate. Paul distinguishes between his “spirit” and his “mind”. There are two main views concerning the meaning of this distinction.

*Is the mind used in speaking in tongues?*

1. “My spirit” is my higher intellectual powers of which I am not conscious. When I speak in tongues my lower “mind” does not know what I am saying. For two reasons, this is **false**: (a) It contradicts v. 4; (b) “Spirit” and “mind” are not contrasted like this in the Scriptures. “Spirit” is in fact the great *knowing* power of a man of which he is very conscious (see Mark 2:8, Acts 17:16, 1 Corinthians 2:11).

2. “My spirit” is the Holy Spirit in me, my spiritual gift. Paul uses “spirit” in this way in vv. 12 and 32. When a man speaks in a tongue his spiritual gift is being exercised. But if this tongue is not translated “my mind” is unfruitful. This means that those who are listening do not benefit (note that Paul does not write that his mind is ‘dark’, implying that he would not understand). This is the only interpretation that fits the context about the edification of the church. It is confirmed by vv. 16-17 where the giving of thanks “with [your] spirit” (= speaking in tongues) does not build up others. The contrast is between speaking in a tongue (“my spirit”), and speaking in a tongue with interpretation (“my mind”). This is the very contrast in v. 19.

The conclusion is that there is **no** encouragement here for letting go of the mind in order to speak in tongues. Genuine religious experience *always* involves the mind.

**14:15** *What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.*

Paul is determined to use his spiritual gift, such as tongues, but only to benefit others. In this context, “praying” and “singing” in tongues has nothing at all to do with private use (see under 14:4). If you are going to pray and sing with your mind, then such worship in tongues *must* be interpreted so that others benefit. How much do those who claim the gift of tongues do this today? Paul returns to this in vv. 27-28.

**14:16** *Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?*

Paul imagines the case of one ‘giving thanks’ in tongues. An outsider is present but he does not understand the language used. How could he say his “Amen” to what he does not understand? The “Amen” is our agreement with what has been spoken, thus making it our own prayer (1 Chronicles 16:36, Nehemiah 5:13, 8:6). This illustration makes it so very clear that Paul is referring to uninterpreted tongues as unprofitable to the hearer.

**14:17** *For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.*

In the case of uninterpreted tongues, the tongues themselves are “good”. This means that they are acceptable to God and profitable to the speaker, for he can understand them. “Giving thanks” cannot be good if the speaker cannot understand (v. 2), for the word of God nowhere recognizes unintelligent and mindless worship. This completely forbids the use of foreign languages like Latin, which people do not understand. Worship ought to be in the vernacular, because the most important principle is ‘edification’.

**14:18** *I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.*

Paul has been warning against speaking in tongues without giving an interpretation. This is not because Paul does not speak in tongues himself. In the context Paul is referring to the public use of tongues, although we have no record that Paul did this apart from this verse.

**14:19** *Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

Despite his ability to speak in tongues, Paul would rather speak 5 words in a language people understand, than 10,000 they cannot understand. As in 14:14, “my mind” means to speak so as “to instruct others”, because it is in a language they can understand.

Many people wrongly think that Paul is here contrasting speaking in “church” with speaking in ‘private’. But Paul does not use the word ‘private’ and we must be very cautious about introducing words that are not present in the text. In fact, because the words “in church” come first, the contrast is between two activities that both go on “in church” and not a contrast between public and private tongues. The contrast is thus between the different attitudes of Paul and the Corinthians to the public use of tongues. The Corinthians were very happy to do what Paul is forbidding. So once again, there is nothing about private tongues speaking.

*How eager was Paul to speak in tongues?*

## THE PURPOSE OF THE GIFT OF TONGUES (14:20-25)

**14:20** *Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.*

The purpose for which God gave the gift of tongues in the church, as revealed in this passage, is usually ignored. This section is the most clear explanation of the purpose of the gift of tongues. Paul wanted the Corinthians to be very careful about this. They needed to be “mature” in their thinking. Like children, the Corinthians had a childish attitude towards tongues. They glorified in their tongues, even though no one benefitted because there was no interpretation. It is good to be comparatively innocent towards evil as children are, but we must *think* like men. Paul is going to be tough!

**14:21** *In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord."*

This verse is an appeal to the “Law”, the Old Testament, as it continues to have authority over Christian believers. It is noteworthy that the writing of the prophet Isaiah is termed ‘Law’. All the word of God is ‘Law’ in the sense it has absolute authority. It is a reference to Isaiah 28:11-12, where God tells the Israelites that, because they have refused to hear His prophets who spoke their own language, He will bring them into judgement. This will be through a people (the Assyrians) who speak a language they do not understand (note the references to

childishness in Isaiah 28:9,10,13). God is applying one of the covenant curses He spoke through Moses (Deuteronomy 28:49, see also Jeremiah 5:15). When God speaks to His people through those whose language they do not understand, it is judgement. A foreign nation has invaded the land to destroy them. Therefore, tongues have two purposes:

1. God is judging His people the Jews, who have refused to listen to the great Prophet (Christ), and is taking away the kingdom from them (as Matthew 21:43).
2. At the same time that God is turning away from the Jews, and He is turning to all the nations of the world by using their own languages, as at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11).

Do you see why Paul exhorts them to cease their childishness? They are like children playing with fire, not understanding the danger. By tongues God is judging the Jews for their refusal to believe in Christ.

**14:22** *Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.*

A conclusion is now drawn about tongues, and about prophecy.

1. *Tongues* are “a sign for unbelievers”. Towards unbelievers, “signs” show God’s disapproval and are a warning of judgement (Numbers 16:38, 17:10, Ezekiel 4:3, Luke 11:30, 21:11,25, Acts 2:19). This emphasis of tongues being against unbelievers is clear from the use of Isaiah 28 (v. 21). Tongues are not a wonder designed to bless unbelievers. When they cannot be understood they only harden them (as with many at Pentecost, Acts 2:13). Paul is pleading with the Corinthians that they surely do not want to bring a message of judgement through their tongues. So they should discontinue the habit. Remember that tongues are of no benefit to the believer either, unless interpreted, and then they are equivalent to prophecy.

By way of application, we must now ask the question, “Are tongues a gift God is giving to His church today?” Many people claim this gift, but we must consider the issue more carefully. We have learned that:

*Is God still giving the gift of tongues today?*

- Tongues were a direct revelation from God (like a prophecy) in a real foreign language. Mysteries are revealed (v. 2), and tongues that are interpreted are equivalent to prophecy (v. 5). Prophecy is called revelation (v. 30). These words were as God-given and authoritative as the written word of God we now have. Such direct revelation from God has been completed through the apostles (Ephesians 2:20).
- Tongues were a sign of judgement upon the unbelieving Jews. Consider this illustration. The driver of a vehicle wants to turn left and he puts on his indicator to show this. After he has made the turn he switches the indicator off, for there is no more purpose in it flashing. In fact it is distracting to other drivers. It is the same with tongues. Once the kingdom was taken away from the Jews and there was no more danger of the church being Jewish (see Acts 15), then tongues had already served their purpose.

If you think this conclusion is ridiculous because there are those who claim to speak in tongues today, you must ask this question, “Have such claims been tested so that it has been proved that real foreign languages were spoken?” If not, how can you be sure that such are genuine tongues according to the Bible?

2. *Prophecy* is “a sign for believers”. Signs can also indicate God’s approval and blessing (Genesis 9:12-13, John 2:11, Acts 5:12). When God speaks through prophets in a language people understand, then He is blessing His people.

**14:23** *If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?*

Imagine a situation where the whole congregation is together, everyone is speaking in tongues, and those ignorant of the languages spoken, and even unbelievers, enter. What will be their reaction? They will think the Corinthians are mad, and Paul agrees! Such a display of tongues (uninterpreted) would turn away these people from God and be a sign of God's judgement upon them. And yet today, sometimes thousands are shouting, often together, in what they call tongues. There is no attempt at interpretation and to the outsider it is as if they are mad. Are we trying to win or drive away unbelievers?

**14:24-25** *But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 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.*

What about the use of prophecy in the congregation? If all are prophesying when an outsider or unbeliever enters, he is able to understand what is spoken (compare tongues in 14:23). It can produce the following:

- (1) What he hears from all will convict him of the truth (John 16:8-11).
- (2) The truth the prophets speak search into him (see Hebrews 4:12).
- (3) The result is that he begins to know himself, his real character and moral condition.
- (4) The effect is humility before God – the first step in the Christian faith is to humble oneself (Matthew 5:3).
- (5) Finding mercy with God leads to worship and the confession that Christianity *is* divine, and not madness. It is not that all these things happen at once. Rather it is a way of describing a person who is becoming a Christian. Has the truth so entered your heart that you have humbled yourself and so come to worship God?

## **DIRECTIONS FOR THE USE OF THE GIFTS OF TONGUES AND PROPHECY IN CHURCH (14:26-36)**

**14:26** *What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.*

Commands are given how these gifts must be used in public worship, “when you come together”. Throughout this chapter Paul has the two gifts of tongues and prophecy in mind (see the conclusion in 14:39). The Corinthians seemed to be very eager to come together in order to use the spiritual gifts each one had. Once again it is emphasized that it is the “edification” of *others* that must control the use of any spiritual gift. It is not enough to feel you are the subject of divine influence, or that the use of your gift will benefit you yourself. Some people think that this verse tells us what *must* be done in a worship service. But Paul is not teaching what should make up a worship service here.

- (1) There were obvious problems in the Corinthian church with people wrongly using their gifts, so that this is the specific context of this verse. This what the Corinthians were actually doing in worship, whether right or wrong.
- (2) We ought to look at Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus for our teaching on worship, as this is one of the purposes of those letters (see 1 Timothy 3:14-15). Such letters emphasize the public teaching of the word of God, for example (1 Timothy 4:13-16).



**14:27-28** *If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.*

How were the Corinthians to use the gifts of *tongues* in the public meetings of God's people (vv. 27-28)? Four directions are given:

- (1) A maximum of three were to be allowed to speak in tongues, whether this be in the form of instruction, prayer or song (14:15), or of giving thanks (14:16).
- (2) They must speak separately, and one after the other.
- (3) Only one person must interpret what each has spoken.
- (4) If there is a time when no one is present with the gift of interpretation then *no one* is to speak in tongues in the meeting (does this mean that the one to interpret was chosen beforehand?). This is because the church would not be edified if he spoke without interpretation; but he is allowed to speak (silently!) with himself and God, because he understands the tongue and will be edified (see 14:4,14). This has nothing to do with speaking in tongues in private; the directive to speak with himself is only a concession when there is no interpreter, and is taking place in the assembly not at home. Note that the words "in church" do not mean a building, for there were no church buildings at this time. The "church" is the gathering together of the people of God, the assembly of the saints.

Many are claiming they have gift of tongues today. But why do they not keep the very clear instructions of these verses? Why are people encouraged to 'pray in tongues', all at the same time, when the Bible says, "two or at most three, and each in turn"? Why is there usually no attempt made to interpret a tongue, when it is very clear that without interpretation there is no edification to the people of God assembled together? It is all evidence that what we have today is not the tongues of the New Testament church.

**14:29** *Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.*

How were the Corinthians to use the gifts of *prophecy* in the public meetings of God's people (vv. 29-36)? Two specific directions are given:

- (1) A maximum of three people were to be allowed to prophesy. As with tongues, this limitation on the number is so that the whole service is not devoted to these gifts, as was the danger in Corinth.
- (2) Each prophet was to be 'weighed', probably by the other prophets. Please note that the words "what is said" are not found in the original. The word translated 'weigh' is most frequently used in relation to people, not things like words (for example, 1 Corinthians 6:5, "to settle a dispute [= weigh] between the brothers"). So this 'weighing' involves at least three things:

- (a) Who is to speak, as only two or three have the opportunity? In v. 31 he assures all prophets that they will get the opportunity some time.
- (b) Is this prophet a true prophet? Is he really inspired by God? (see Deuteronomy 18:20-22, 1 Corinthians 12:10, 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, 1 John 4:1).
- (c) If he is a true prophet, then how must his words be put into practice? (see Acts 21:4,10-14).

Many are claiming the gift of prophecy today. Do they keep the clear instructions of this verse, especially to 'weigh' the person who is speaking? Is it not too often true that whoever claims to be a prophet expects people to listen to him without questioning? And what is done with a person who makes prophetic claims but his words are not true so they do not come to

pass? Is he automatically seen as a false prophet? In the Old Testament, such a man was put to death (Deuteronomy 18:20-22)!

**14:30** *If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.*

More regulations are given governing the use of the gift of prophecy in the meetings of the Corinthian church. Suppose a particular situation when a prophet is in the act of speaking to the church. It may be that he, together with one or two more, was chosen to speak beforehand. What would happen if at that moment the Lord gave a revelation to yet another prophet? In this case, the one already speaking should stop, for the Lord obviously has something to say through the other prophet. Note that the prophet is described as receiving “a revelation”, which is the normal prophetic experience of receiving and delivering a direct word from the Lord.

**14:31** *For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged,*

In this way all the prophets would get an opportunity (of course, not all at the same meeting, v. 29!), and the congregation would benefit by learning and being encouraged. Note once again that in the various regulations Paul’s great concern is that *all* are edified.

**14:32** *and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.*

In the situation of v. 30, it would be possible for the prophet to cease speaking because the prophets are able to keep their own ‘spirits’, even when they have a message from the Lord. The “spirits” of the prophets does not refer to their human spirits but to the divine influence by which the prophets spoke (see 14:14). One who received the spiritual gift of prophecy is not compelled to speak by some irresistible power. The Holy Spirit does not destroy self-control (remember Galatians 5:22-23), nor does He send the person into a state of frenzy as in heathen religions (go back to 12:2).

*Is it possible for us to control the use of our spiritual gift?*

**14:33a** *For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.*

Self-control in the use of spiritual gifts must also be possible because God, who is their author, is Himself a God of peace and not of confusion. If God has willed that there be peace in His church (and He has!), then He will *never* give men ‘a spirit’ to bring confusion. “Peace” means that all things are being done in an orderly way, for only in this way can everyone benefit. This principle has a wide application. If a person says he is influenced by the Holy Spirit and yet he does or says what God forbids, then he is either deluded or he is an impostor. You have *no* need to fear that you will be quenching the Spirit by asking questions, for God Himself commands you to test the spirits and to reject the evil (1 Thessalonians 5:20-22).

**14:33b-35** *As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

From here to verse 36 Paul turns to consider the participation of women in the public worship of God’s people. These verses are often cut out, ignored or explained away, but we must give attention to them as part of the authoritative word of God. The command is that women must “keep silent”. In the context Paul is at least referring to the activity of ‘weighing’ what the prophets have

*May women participate in public worship?*

spoken (v. 29). But this is to be seen as just one application of the principle that a woman is not allowed “to teach or have authority over men” (1 Timothy 2:12). It also forbids women to prophesy or to speak in tongues in church. If it should be objected that this conflicts with 1 Corinthians 11:5, then the reply is that there is nothing in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 that makes it refer specifically to church assemblies. Such a command is not liked in our day, but nor was it liked in Paul’s day. There are at least three reasons given to encourage us to obey this plain duty of the word of God:

(1) It is the universal practice of the church (v. 33b). We cannot ignore the command by saying that the situation in Corinth was unique so that this was a special instruction only to them. *Every church had the same practice, whether in Palestine among the Jewish culture, or in Europe amongst the Gentile culture which was so different.*

*Is it important to follow the common practice of Christian churches?*

(2) It is the teaching of the Old Testament, “the law” (v. 34b). This appeal is to the creation order as revealed in Genesis 2:20-24 (Paul also appeals to these verses in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, 1 Timothy 2:13). Women are to be silent because the position of women is to “subject themselves”. This does not mean a woman is an inferior or lesser Christian (see Galatians 3:28), but it does mean that her position is one of subjection (see also 1 Corinthians 11:3, Ephesians 5:22-24, 1 Timothy 2:11, Titus 2:5, 1 Peter 3:1,5-6). If it is said, ‘I know a woman who is a gifted teacher of the whole church, one who is called of God to be a preacher’, then the answer is, ‘Will God go against His own law?’ Never! Let us judge all things by the infallible and unchangeable standards of the word of God and not by experience.

(3) It is reasonable (v. 35b). Paul appeals to custom, as he also does in 1 Corinthians 11:6,13-16. Certain things are shameful to other Christians, and even to the world outside. In Paul’s day, it was shameful for a woman to be an instructor of men, and to do so would discredit Christianity in the eyes of most people. Although it is not usually seen as shameful today that does not make it right; rather it shows how far we have departed from God’s laws in society. It may be asked that if a woman cannot even ask a question in public in church (for example, when the prophets’ words are being ‘weighed’), then how will she learn? Women are certainly to be edified. The answer is that they can learn all they want to know at home, privately. You who are men, this means that it is your duty to listen to your wives, to answer their questions, and to instruct them at home. But what about unmarried women? They should talk with men in the church whom they respect, especially the elders.

**14:36** *Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?*

Here are the final words to the Corinthians who were allowing their women to speak when they ought to have been silent. He strongly challenges them, ‘Did the gospel begin in Corinth so that you are the only ones who know everything?’ ‘Are you the only church that knows what it means to be a Christian?’ In the same way, to ignore the practices of sister churches of the past centuries, churches that have submitted to the final authority of the word of God, is to show pride. Are not the true Biblical churches the body of Christ, in which the Holy Spirit dwells? It is therefore wrong to practise new things, just because of the culture of the world around you, only relying on your own understanding. What a rebuke this is to the many new things that are now being brought into Christ’s church!

## **CONCLUSION (14:37-40)**

**14:37** *If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.*

Paul concludes the teaching about spiritual gifts by asserting his apostolic authority in the strongest way. What Paul has been writing is the very command of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of His church. You cannot submit to Christ unless you submit to His apostles to whom He gave authority (2 Thessalonians 3:6,12,14, 1 John 4:6). How can we know if a person's claim to being a prophet, or being a speaker in tongues (is this the meaning of "spiritual" here?) is genuine? Let him submit to Paul's apostolic authority by obeying ***all the***

*Are the words of Jesus' apostles to be followed completely?*

*Who are the truly spiritual persons?*

***instructions in this chapter.*** Let him use his gifts for the edification of others. Let prophecy be preferred to tongues. Let women refrain from authoritative speaking in the presence of men. Do not claim great things from God if any of these things are ignored. They are the word of the LORD Himself.

**14:38** *If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.*

There are very strong words for those who refuse to put into practice these commands. Such people are "not recognized"! They are not counted as spiritually gifted people, and the church ought not to recognize them. It is so easy to be awed by the gifts a person claims to have. The real question to ask is this, 'Does he submit to the word of God as he seeks to use his gift?'

**14:39** *So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.*

Here is the conclusion concerning tongues and prophecy in particular (see also 12:31, 14:1). Prophecy is to be actively preferred in the church. Tongues, while not to be prohibited, are not to be greatly encouraged. In Paul's later letters, such as to Timothy, there is nothing about tongues at all.

**14:40** *But all things should be done decently and in order.*

Here are the two basic principles for the use of prophecy and tongues, and then more generally for all our conduct in the assembly of God's people. Note the reference to "all things".

(1) "Decently". Gifts must be used in such a way as to give the least possible offence (see Romans 13:13 and 1 Thessalonians 4:12 where the same word is translated "properly"). We must aim to give a pleasing impression to people as far as we are able (1 Corinthians 10:32-33, Romans 12:18). Surely it is not our desire that people think we are mad!

(2) "In order". Like a well-ordered army where each soldier keeps his place, acting at the proper time in the proper way, as opposed to a mob that acts noisily and excitedly.

When either of these principles are not kept the gifts are being wrongly used, for others will not be edified.

### **Vital Principles for Worship Today**

From the context in chapter 14, what do these principles mean in practice? This is important because it might be argued that if the spiritual gifts of prophecy and tongues are gifts no longer needed in the churches what does this chapter have to do with us?

(1) The Principle of *Edification* (14:3,5,6,12,17,26). Peter has the same emphasis when he exhorts his readers to use the gifts given to them “to serve one another”, whether gifts of speaking or of service (1 Peter 4:10-11). Consider the following applications.

- Church leaders must examine all the meetings of the church and make sure that everything done is of spiritual benefit to the persons present. This is what the chapter is all about. Tongues must be interpreted, for example, or forbidden in the assembly.
- This principle could be applied to endless singing, announcements about so many different situations and events, visitors being asked to ‘greet’ the church, etc.
- It is possible for a preacher to speak in a style which is above the average person to easily understand. Speakers must learn to communicate in the most effective way to the audience in front of them.
- Since edification only comes through speaking, the activity of the mind, the activities of the church must be centred around the word of God.
- It is not wrong to test a person’s claim to have a particular spiritual gift. This will not grieve the Holy Spirit. We know that the same Spirit who gives gifts to men also directs men to His word, written by the apostles, that they might follow these instructions. Any person who refuses to follow these instructions ought not to be recognized as having the particular gift.

(2) The Principle of *Decency/Peace*. Confusion, as when many people were speaking in tongues at the same time, or perhaps one prophet interrupted another, is to be avoided. Nothing should be done to which an outsider can legitimately say, ‘These people are mad’. Yet think of meetings where there is incessant shouting, or where people fall to the floor and wriggle around, and such like. It will not do to say this is the power of the Spirit, for God is not a God of confusion (14:33). This does not mean cold formality, for decency means self-control so we do not bring any shame on the name of the Lord.

(3) The Principle of *Order*. There must be order so that people can understand what is going on and meaningfully participate. Tongues speakers were to speak in turn, and one to interpret. If a prophet was due to speak but another received a revelation then the latter was to be given priority. [Please note, this does not imply that tongues and prophecy are gifts in the church today, and for this see the previous discussion.] Spiritual gifts must be controlled. It is proper for Pastors to plan church meetings, to inform people ahead of time who are to take part, and to explain what is going on to the people. A limit must be put on use of spiritual gifts. For example only two to three were to speak in tongues or prophecy. All the parts of worship, for example, must be given their proper place. It is even possible to so exalt preaching that there is little prayer offered, and no public reading of the Scripture.

(4) The Principle of *Women’s Submission* (14:34-35). See also 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Our dear women are equal with men in Christ, have spiritual gifts and have a vital service to perform in the church. But they are not to do anything in the assembly of God’s people where they “teach or exercise authority” over men. In the apostolic churches this included weighing the prophets, publicly prophesying and speaking in tongues. Today no woman should be a church pastor or preach before a mixed assembly.

(5) The Principle of *Church Tradition* (14:33,36). Although the consistent practice of Churches over the centuries can never be the final authority, nor is it to be ignored. A new doctrine, a new interpretation, a new practice is most unlikely. Such new things often arise because of pressure from the world and not from a re-examination of the Scriptures. This is especially true of the role of women.

## WHAT I HOPE YOU HAVE LEARNED

There are a great variety of spiritual gifts, but they are all from the one triune God.  
Each Christian is given one or more gifts in order to be of service to others in the church.  
The Holy Spirit gives gifts as He chooses.  
The body of Christ, the Church, is one because of the common experience of the baptism with the Holy Spirit.  
Christians are baptized with the Spirit at conversion.  
Differing gifts are necessary for the one body, and all gifts should be honoured.  
No one gift is possessed by everyone.  
Love is a more excellent way than the spiritual gifts, without which a professing Christian is nothing and gains nothing.  
Above everything else a Christian must pursue love.  
Spiritual gifts will outlive their usefulness, but love will never end.  
Spiritual gifts must only be used as they edify/build up fellow Christians.  
Uninterpreted tongues do not edify others, so must never be used in the assembly.  
Prophecy and interpreted tongues are revelation from God and have been superseded by the completed written Scriptures.  
Tongues were the specific sign to unbelieving Jews of judgement from God because of their refusal to believe in Jesus as the Christ.  
The worship of God must be conducted with decency and order.  
Women are not to speak publicly in the assembly of men and women together.  
All apostolic commands are to be obeyed, and the practices of apostolic churches are to be followed.

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