

As we approach chapter 14, it is imperative to understand the historical situation in Corinth. As we have seen, there were those in Corinth who were neglecting the gifts God had given to them because they were intent on pursuing the gift of tongues. From this chapter, we gather that, even when the gift of tongues was legitimately being exercised, it was done so in the context of confusion, so that unbelievers coming into worship settings were confused by the unintelligible speech that was going on. This was helpful neither for worship nor evangelism. Paul now writes to correct this abuse.

TO THINK ABOUT

Paul emphasises that God has given gifts to the church to be used in the context of the body to build others up in the faith. What would you say to someone who says that the gift of tongues was given to them as a private prayer language rather than something to be exercised in the setting of the gathered church?

As we approach the content of this chapter, we must remember one vital thing about spiritual gifts: No gift is inherently better than another. Every believer has been given a gift by God, and the exercise of all the gifts is indispensable to a healthy church. Believers who refuse to exercise their gift in the context of the local church are hurting the church, and this is particularly so if the believer is neglecting his or her gift in pursuit of a different gift that the Lord has not given to him or her.

The Business of Building

Paul’s clear call in this chapter is that believers will be concerned to build the church through the use of their gifts. The business of the church is to build its members in the faith. In the pursuit of “love” (v. 1), the believer must seek to use her gifts for “upbuilding,” “encouragement” and “consolation” (v. 3). If a gift is ever used to tear someone down, or if it is exercised without the explicit purpose to build up, the point is being missed, and it would be better not to exercise that gift.

In the Corinthian context, we can define *prophecy* as intelligible speech by which God calls him people to fidelity and faithfulness; *tongues* as languages supernaturally spoken by people who are unfamiliar with those languages; and *interpretation* as the supernatural ability of a member of the community to interpret a language with which they are unfamiliar. (It is, of course, also possible that the interpretation could take place by a congregant whose native tongue was the language being spoken by the tongues-speaker.)

Given these definitions, it is easy to see how an abuse of tongues (i.e. exercise in the absence of interpretation) did nothing to build up the congregation. Prophecy, on the other hand, could be understood by all and therefore was edifying to all. When the tongue was interpreted, it served the same purpose as prophecy, but when it was uninterpreted, it did nothing to edify the body.

The Danger of Destruction

When the gift of tongues was improperly exercised, it not only failed to build up but actually destroyed. This was true both edificationally and evangelistically.

1. **Edificationally destructive.** If the purpose of teaching in the church is to prepare people for spiritual warfare, to teach in a way that no one can understand is destructive because the church is sending people into the world unprepared for the battle they will face. An ill-prepared soldier faces the very real danger of a sound defeat.

2. **Evangelistically destructive.** Even if the gospel is clearly communicated in the exercise of the gift of tongues, if the unbeliever cannot understand what is being said, he will leave without having done business with Christ, and therefore still on the path to eternal destruction.

If the gifts of the Spirit are used for selfish ends, or are used in a way that is unintelligible, we have not used them in a way that has served the purpose for which they were given. No matter what gift you have been given, you must use it intelligibly to build up the church of which you are a member.

TO THINK ABOUT

It is easy, at this point, to be pointing fingers at Charismatic abuses of the gift of tongues, which very much fit the mould that Paul is describing here. However, his point remains true for the exercise of *any* spiritual gift. Can you think of ways in which the exercise of *other* spiritual gifts might similarly destroy rather than build up?

Without dwelling on these verses, we must briefly address Paul’s claim that “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers” (v. 22). He quotes Isaiah 28:11–12 as proof of this claim. His point is that tongues were a sign to unbelieving Jews that judgement was coming upon the house of Israel, and that God’s covenant blessings were moving from ethnic Israel to a multi-ethnic church (cf. Matthew 21:43). Prophecy, on the other hand—in the sense of the clear, intelligible preaching of God’s truth—was a gift given for the upbuilding of the church. (Technical note: The words “a sign” with reference to prophecy are supplied by the translators of the ESV. The original literally reads—as in the NKJV—“prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.”)

TO THINK ABOUT

If, as Paul writes, “prophecy” (or preaching) is “not for unbelievers but for believers,” what benefit is there for the unbeliever to sit in the corporate worship service of a church? Should we invite unbelievers to church? Why, or why not? What about involving an unbeliever in a Grace Group?

The Beauty of Building

The beauty of spiritual gifts, properly exercised, is that the gospel is magnified. When the gift of prophecy—or even tongues—is exercised in a way that is clear and understandable, people are exposed to the gospel and are brought to worship Christ. When the same gifts are used in an unintelligible way, the gospel is mocked.

TO THINK ABOUT

When you exercise your spiritual gift, do you deliberately think about how your exercise of that gift adorns the gospel? Does your use of your spiritual gift(s) magnify the grace of God, or does it give cause for unbelievers to mock the gospel?

“The whole point here is not, do I have the gift of prophecy or the gift of tongues or the gift of healing? It’s not about appearing to be impressive because a certain gift is possessed. It’s a matter of those speech gifts being used and exercised in a skillful way to speak the gospel into a person’s life so the human heart will be enlarged by the reality of what Christ has done.”

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