

The Spiritual Gifts of Tongues and Prophecy

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

1 Corinthians 14:1-25: *“Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. 2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification. 6 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? 7 Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? 8 For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? 9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. 10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. 11 Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. 12 Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel. 13 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. 15 What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. 16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? 17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. 18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; 19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. 20 Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. 21 In the law it is written: “With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,” says the Lord. 22 Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. 23 Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. 25 And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.”*

Background Notes

In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul began a three-chapter section on the proper use of spiritual gifts in the Church. Chapter 12 teaches that the Church is the body of Christ, consisting of many members with different functions and different spiritual gifts, but all gifts are designed for the mutual edification of the body of Christ. Every local church should reflect the one true body of Christ with all believers exercising their spiritual gifts and fulfilling the function that God designed and ordained for them in the body.

By the way, the best way to find out your spiritual gift (or gifts) is to get involved in Christian service. Fellow-members of the body will sense your gifts and communicate where you fit, and where you are a blessing to the body. They can also communicate where you don't fit and what is not your function in the body. Unfortunately that experience can be unpleasant if the communication is not done in love.

Obviously, the body will not always run smoothly. There will sometimes be misunderstandings and abuses of gifts. There will be jealousy concerning the gifts. There will be the despising of certain gifts and functions that are perceived as "less valuable." There may be a lack of communication and a lack of care for all the members of the body. All of these problems existed at Corinth, so the apostle Paul spent a whole chapter on the importance of love in the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most sublime chapters in the Bible, but it was written in the context of the proper use of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ - in the Church. It may have seemed like a digression from the main topic of spiritual gifts, but it was a necessary digression. Love for one another is essential for the proper functioning of the body of Christ and the proper use of spiritual gifts. The fruit of the Holy Spirit - especially the fruit of love, must control the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 14 Paul taught that for the proper functioning of the body, there must be a recognition and appreciation of the spiritual gifts that are most beneficial for the edification of the whole body.

Doctrinal Points

1. The gift of prophecy is greater for the Church than the gift of tongues.

The last verse of 1 Corinthians 12 says, *"But earnestly desire the best [greater] gifts."* So some spiritual gifts are "greater" or more important than others – "greater" in the sense that they are of greater benefit for the whole church. Our sovereign God distributes spiritual gifts to individuals as He wills. However, it's important for us to desire and even pray for the Lord to raise up individuals who have the spiritual gifts that are of greatest benefit for our church. That's the point of 1 Corinthians 12:31, and it's the point of 14:1 - *"Desire spiritual gifts, but especially the gift of prophecy."*

The gift of prophecy was (and is) a greater gift for the overall benefit of the entire Church than the gift of tongues. The Corinthians needed to learn this truth - and so do many well-meaning Christians today. The Corinthian Christians were putting too much emphasis on the gift of tongues because it was more dramatic and spectacular than some of the other gifts.

Regardless of the position you take on the gift of tongues (whether they were known languages or ecstatic speech and whether they were just for the early church or for today), the point of 1 Corinthians 14 is clear. The gift of tongues was not as great or important as the spiritual gifts of prophecy or knowledge or teaching (v6). Why? Unless there is interpretation, the gift of tongues does not edify the entire body (v5). The person who speaks in tongues may be speaking great mysteries and be blessed in his own soul, but if only God understands and the church is not built up, forget it – it's useless (v2-4).

On the other hand, the gift of prophecy can edify and exhort and console those in the body of Christ (v3). Prophecy is telling forth the truth of God in the language of the people who are listening. Speaking in a tongue that no one understands is like playing blaring noise on a musical instrument, or a military bugle that doesn't communicate with the troops (v7-8). If people don't understand an unknown tongue, speaking in tongues is like just speaking into the air (v9), or like trying to communicate with a foreigner (v11).

Prophecy, on the other hand, is a greater gift because it can be understood. Thus it can edify or build up the body - and edification is what it's all about! The gift of prophecy is greater for the Church than the gift of tongues.

2. The gift of tongues should be limited in the Church, but not condemned.

Verses 13-25: "Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. In the law it is written: "With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me," says the Lord. Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.

Did you ever hear a Christian state that "speaking in tongues today is of the devil"? That is certainly not a wise statement. It's true that Satan can counterfeit spiritual gifts, and there have been documented cases where the source of tongues was demonic. However, it is unwise to limit God from giving the gift of tongues today, or to state that speaking in tongues today is demonic. Even if you take the position (as I do) that the gift of tongues was a "sign" gift that was *primarily* for the early church, we should not limit God by saying that He can't give the gift of tongues today, if He so chooses in a particular situation. In a country, for example, where the Bible has not yet been translated, the Lord might choose to use "signs" to confirm the true word of the missionary.

So we shouldn't limit God - but 1 Corinthians 14 certainly puts some limits on the practice of tongues in the Church. While it was not condemned, the gift of tongues was to be limited. So if you believe that the gift of tongues is given today, the use is limited. Here I see three limitations on the use of the gift of tongues in the Church.

a. The limit of interpretation (v13). Speaking in tongues without interpretation cannot penetrate the mind, and thus there is no understanding and no edification (v14-17).

b. The limit of priorities. It is obvious from this chapter that priority and emphasis should be put on the gifts that edify and build up the body of Christ. In verses 18-19 Paul said that even though he spoke with tongues more than all of them, yet in the church he would rather speak five words that people could understand so he might teach them, than ten thousand words in a tongue!

c. The limit of order. In verse 40 of this chapter, we see that everything in the church should be done “*in a fitting and orderly way.*” “Order” in the church would certainly include the orderly use of spiritual gifts. If everyone was speaking in a tongue, the church service would become disorderly, and unbelievers who had come to the service would say that they were in the midst of a bunch of crazy people (v23)!

Verses 20-22 indicate that the gift of tongues was given primarily as a “sign” gift for the purpose of convincing unbelievers of the truth, just as the gift of tongues was used on the Day of Pentecost. Within the church, however, the use of tongues can be disruptive and can easily get out of order. In the church, we should put emphasis on prophecy or teaching. Teaching in a known language can even lead to the salvation of unbelievers who attend church services (v26).

The Bible clearly teaches limits on the gift of tongues. The gift of tongues should be limited in the church, but not condemned.

Practical Application

It’s okay to say “Amen” in church!

I’ve preached in churches where there were a lot of “amens” from the audience during my sermon. It was encouraging, because I knew the congregation was listening and agreed with the teaching. But I’ve also preached at churches where no one said “amen” -and I wondered whether the people were even listening to what I was saying!

Verse 16 teaches that it’s OK to say “Amen” in church. In fact, it is indirectly encouraged - as long as you understand what’s being said. So when you’re in agreement, and you’re being blessed by the message from the Word, feel free to say so!

It’s okay to say “Amen” in church!