

“Language of the Spirit”

1 Corinthians 14

Hymns: # 212 O For a Thousand Tongues

#274 Come Down O Love Divine

Reading: 1 Corinthians 14

Xanthus the philosopher, once told his servant that the next day he was going to have some friends for dinner and that he should get the best thing he could find in the market. The philosopher and his guests sat down the next day at the table. They had nothing but tongue - four or five courses of tongue – tongue cooked in this way and tongue cooked in that way. The philosopher finally lost his patience and said to his servant, “Didn’t I tell you to get the best thing in the market?” The servant said, “I did get the best thing in the market. Isn’t the tongue the organ of sociability, the organ of eloquence, the organ of kindness, the organ of worship?”

Then Xanthus the philosopher said, “Tomorrow I want you to get the worst thing in the market.” And on the morrow the philosopher sat at the table and there was nothing but tongue – four or five courses of tongue – tongue in this shape and tongue in that shape. The philosopher lost his patience again and said, “Didn’t I tell you to get the worst thing in the market?” The servant replied, “I did; isn’t the tongue the organ of blasphemy, the organ of defamation, the organ of lying?”¹

This morning as we come to chapter fourteen of First Corinthians we, like Xanthos the philosopher are going to sit down at table and the Apostle Paul is going to serve us tongue – four or five courses of tongue – tonged cooked in this way and tongue cooked in that way. For in this chapter we come to both the best and the worst examples of how the tongue can be used in the corporate gathering of the church.

We saw back in chapter 12 the Gifts of the Spirit, then in Chapter 13 we saw the Spirit of the Gifts, and now here in Chapter 14 we see the Language of the Spirit. The tongue is the organ of The Language of the Spirit. And in this chapter, Paul is going to compare and contrast two different expressions of the Language of the Spirit and their results within the corporate gathering of the church. The first expression comes via the gift of tongues and the second expression comes through the gift of prophecy. Depending on how it is served up and the quantity of it at a meal, tongue can be something that is enjoyable and satisfying or it can be something repulsive and ensure your dinner guests never return to your table.

For the boasting baby believers at Corinth, unfortunately, they were serving up ill prepared and grossly exaggerated quantities of the gift of tongues and were largely ignoring the more important table fellowship meal of the gift of prophesy. Both are legitimate Languages of the Spirit and are appropriate to be placed on the fellowship table if they’re prepared and served properly.

Like watching Jamie Oliver in his kitchen, let’s watch Paul in this chapter as he shows us how to prepare the Language of the Spirit and also how to set, serve and enjoy the Language of the Spirit in true table fellowship. We’ll see this first in v. 1-25 where we’ll compare and contrast the Gift of Tongues and the Gift of Prophecy. Then in v. 26-40 we’ll see the principles of orderly worship. I am very aware of the controversy that swirls around the gift of tongues and prophesy; whether they are even in us today or simply ecstatic expressions of self-deception; and if they are in still use, is the gift of tongues a sign of salvation; is it available to all or just a few; what is appropriate use of them etc. While I do not shy away from addressing these and other questions, the reality is that it is impossible to address all these questions in a single message. What I hope to do today is first make sure we

¹ Spiros Zodhiates; *The Behavior of Belief*

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understand what the Bible says and secondly try and make personal application of that through the perspective on gifts that I shared back in Chapter 12; namely that “until” (mexri) we have all arrived at unity of the faith, maturity in Jesus, and are no longer infants tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine and the cunning deception of men...“until” then, all the gifts are still in play. (Eph. 4:11-16)

1. Tongues or Prophecy V. 1-25 *“1Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. 2For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. 4He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified. 6Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? 7Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? 8Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? 9So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. 10Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. 11If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. 12So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. 13For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. 14For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. 15So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. 16If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? 17You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. 18I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. 19But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. 20Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. 21In the Law it is written: “Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,” says the Lord. 22Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. 23So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? 24But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, 25and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”*

The first thing we have to notice is the context. Once again, context, context, context. The context here is the gathered assembly of believers. V. 23 says literally, “Therefore if the whole church gathers together in the place...” This is important, because while some important characteristics of the gift of tongues are found here in this chapter, Paul is specifically addressing their use in the public gathering and not every conceivable use or their use in private. In other words, this is not the complete and singular location of biblical data from which to build ones view of tongues.

The second thing we should notice is that Paul says in v.1 to “eagerly desire spiritual gifts”, but the gifts he has in mind are “...gifts that build up the church” v.12; he wants the Corinthians to “be eager to prophesy” v. 39; and we recall that chapter 12 ended with “...eagerly desire the greater gifts”

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prophecy being of them while tongues was not. Does this mean Paul was against tongues? Not at all as we shall see. But rather he wants them to be eager, zealous to boiling point for gifts that build up the body, equipping and releasing the saints for works of service through all their gifts.

If gifts are just that...gifts...and we don't give gifts to ourselves, rather we receive a gift...what does Paul mean to “eagerly desire gifts”? Does he want everyone to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to make them all apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers? Or does he not perhaps mean that we should eagerly desire and ask the Holy Spirit to send them to us or raise them up in our midst; men with these greater gifts? Again the context here is about the building up of the assembled body of believers, not individual pursuit of spiritual grace endowments.

I'm reminded of what Jesus said in Matthew 10:41, “Anyone who receives a prophet, because he is a prophet, will receive a prophet's reward.” He said this when he sent the 12 out to preach the Kingdom. The implication was that all who received them as prophets were actually receiving Jesus Himself and the One who sent Him (v.40). I think for the Corinthians and for ourselves today, we can receive the reward of a prophet by both desiring their giftedness in our midst which leads us into greater depths of receiving Jesus and His communion with the Father, but also in their millennial kingdom reward. Oh how much we squander when we don't eagerly seek the greater gifts because we are selfishly focused on seeking the lesser gifts or seeking the world's plastic baubles. Or worse still because we feel threatened or jealous of the greater gifts.

Let's now take a detailed look at the gift of tongues and do a compare and contrast with the gift of prophecy. Before we do let me say again that Paul is not denigrating the gift of tongues, for they are indeed a good and beautiful gift of the Holy Spirit. He is simply elevating the gift of prophecy for its value to building up others. It's also important to see that when Paul makes a general reference to tongues here, he is referring to “uninterpreted tongues”. It appears as if many of the Corinthians had received this gift (which raises some interesting questions about the Spirit's dissemination of this gift and the reasons why) and when they gathered together as the church they were all just going off in a cacophony of unintelligible words like budgies in a cage at the pet shop. It wasn't edifying one another.

- **Tongues** (Uninterpreted): I notice twelve important insights into the Holy Spirit given gift of tongues:
 - Speaking to God not men v.2
 - This indicates that tongues are given as a gift for us to express ourselves to God. Contrary to what some teach, tongues is not primarily a tool for evangelism. Even at Pentecost, while the men of other nations did hear their own languages being spoken, they themselves were not being addressed. Peter did that in his sermon, most likely in Aramaic or Greek. The nations heard the gifts of tongues speaking to God not men; “...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues.” (Acts 2:11)
 - Spoken from our spirit v.2; 14
 - This is not the same faculty as the mind, which resides in the “soul” alongside the emotions and the will. Our spirit is yet another distinct and deeper faculty.
 - Edify ourselves personally v.4
 - This indicates that while interpreted tongues were for the edification, the lit “building up” of the body, uninterpreted and or private tongues are profitable for “building up” oneself personally.
 - Paul wished everyone had this gift v.5

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- So obviously not everyone had the gift, thus tongues cannot be the “universal sign of one having been baptized by the Spirit and saved”.
 - Bring no revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or instruction to others v. 6
 - Require interpretation v.8;13
 - Like a flute playing a tune, the melody cannot be understood unless the musical notes are interpreted and played with sequentially with distinction.
 - A trumpet call to an army that is not clear could be interpreted as taps instead of revelry; or interpreted as make a retreat instead of move forward into battle.
 - A tongue speaker in the gathered assembly of believers should pray that he be able to interpret what he says.
 - Used in prayer v.14
 - Used in singing v.15
 - Used in praising God v.16
 - Used in giving thanks v.17
 - Prayer, singing, praising and giving thanks are all things directed to God, not men. (cf. v.2)
 - Paul himself had this gift and was glad he did v.18
 - Sign for unbelievers v.22
 - This is often misunderstood as a positive sign to impress or convict the unbeliever, but it’s far from that kind of “sign”.
 - Quotes Isaiah 28:11, 12. This section is a warning of judgement to Ephraim, which was the Northern Kingdom of Israel at that time.
 - Isaiah 28:7-13 “And these also stagger from wine and reel from beer: Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine; they reel from beer, they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions. ⁸ All the tables are covered with vomit and there is not a spot without filth. ⁹ "Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast? ¹⁰ For it is: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule ^{F69} ; a little here, a little there." ¹¹ Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people, ¹² to whom he said, "This is the resting place, let the weary rest"; and, "This is the place of repose"- but they would not listen. ¹³ So then, the word of the LORD to them will become: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there- so that they will go and fall backward, be injured and snared and captured.”
 - The priests and prophets had become drunkards and their visions and decisions God equated with tables covered with vomit and filth.
 - They were mocking Isaiah as if he were lecturing them as children. Isaiah says in effect: “Ok, if you don’t want to hear the warning from me in your own language, then you will have to hear it as judgement in the language of foreigners when the Assyrians come against you and haul you off in exile. Which is exactly what happened by the way.
 - When Paul says in v. 20 “Brothers, stop thinking like children”, he likely had these drunk priests and prophets in mind and equated uninterpreted tongues in the church to the same vomit and filth covered tables of Isaiah’s prophecy. Pretty strong stuff from Paul and indicates just how important the greater gifts are by comparison.
- **Prophecy**
 - Speaking to men not God v.3

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- Brings strengthening, encouragement and comfort to others v.3
 - The gift of prophecy is not about being a fortune teller or a prediction maker.
- Edifies the church v.4
 - Again, edification is Lit. οἰκοδομεῖ (house+ build). We are supposed to be built into a dwelling place where God lives by His Spirit (Eph. 2:22) and so we need the prophetic gift.
- Paul prioritizes prophecy above the gift of tongues (unless interpreted) v.5
 - He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in uninterpreted tongues.
- Five intelligible words of prophecy is preferred to ten thousand words in an uninterpreted tongue. V. 19
- Convinces people of their sinful nature v.24
 - The two Greek words used here to describe the people Paul has in mind describe those who are either enquirers, that is people who pop into to the church to see what it’s all about and to unbelievers, people who know but are wilfully rejecting the faith.
- Convinces people that they are discerned and their secrets are laid bare v. 24
- Convinces people that God is amongst His gathered people v.25
- Prophecy is a sign for believers, not of judgement, but of God’s grace in edifying them v.22

So there we have it. That’s how “tongue” is to be prepared if you are going to serve it up at the next gathering of the church. Whichever Language of the Spirit you employ, the most critical preparation instruction is edification...to ensure that it builds up the body, be it tongues or prophecy.

Now, preparing “tongue” in the kitchen is one thing, but as all good chefs will tell you, you can wreck a well prepared meal if it is not presented properly. Presentation is absolutely critical, especially if you are serving “tongue”, and Paul knows just how to do it.

2. Orderly Worship V. 26-40 *“What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. 27If anyone speaks in a tongue, two--or at the most three--should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. 28If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. 29Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. 30And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. 31For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. 32The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. 33For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.34As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.36Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? 37If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. 38If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.39Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”*

Like a fine table set with cutlery, wine glass, candle, cloth napkin Paul describes five things which must be done for proper presentation, for the building up of the gathered Church v. 26:

- Everyone has a hymn
- A word of Instruction

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- A revelation
- A tongue (interpreted tongue)
- An interpretation

What we notice here is that clearly the early church meeting was much more fluid than what most of us have experienced as a “Sunday Service”. There was room and structure for multiplicity of gifts and input. We also notice that “everyone” had something to offer. A hymn, a word of instruction- most likely a reading and application from the OT, a revelation- a Spirit directed insight into the Life of Christ, a tongue or an interpretation. As we shall see, this was not a free-for all, and while everyone had come prepared to offer for the common good from the overflow of the Life of Christ in them, not everyone participated.

It’s difficult for many of us to envision this happening today, largely because the way we have structured our “service” it is impossible for us to accommodate such practice. It’s also difficult to envision this because most of us have never seen the Holy Spirit free to lead a gathering through His prompting of present, prepared and self-controlled believers.

While it is debated among some as to whether this is prescriptive for the church today, what cannot be debated is that this is certainly descriptive of apostolically informed and Spirit directed functioning of the Body of Christ, and as such it certainly cannot be held in derision. Granted, today it would likely end up in a free for all with most congregation’s if this was suddenly introduced as the order of service next Sunday. Crazy Bob would likely stand up and go off on a disconnected and railing tangent and crazy Mary would go on and on about her Aunt Millie’s bunions. But this would only confirm how far we are from apostolically informed and Spirit directed gathering which must be predicated by leadership, teaching and courage.

“Evangelist D.L. Moody was once leading a service and asked a man to pray. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the man went on and on. Sensing that the prayer was killing the meeting instead of blessing it, Moody spoke up and said, “While our brother finishes his prayer, let us sing a hymn!”

This illustrates the point that those who would shepherd God’s people in their corporate gather must have discernment for what builds up the body and the courage to shut down everything that does not. So what are those things that support the building up? I notice at least eight principles of orderly worship here in our text:

- 1. No interpretation, then no overtly visible exercise of tongues v. 27**
 - a. Silent in the church YET speak to himself and God. V. 28 (see v.4 self-edification)
- 2. Two or Three at the most**
 - a. Applies to tongues v.27 as well as prophecy v.29
- 3. One at a Time**
 - a. Applies to tongues v. 27 and prophesy v. 31
 - b. We have ‘one conversation’ not two or three at one time. Oh how often this happens in Jesus focused corporate gatherings and it is a childish disgrace.
- 4. Self-control v.32-35**
 - a. “God is not a God of disorder” (confusion KJV) Lit. akatastasia- meaning “not-down-stand”; ie: unsettled; commotions generating confusion; things “up for grabs”; out of control
 - b. “...but of peace” Lit. eireine from eiro- “to join together as a whole”; ie: order tranquillity.

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- c. Context here suggests “married women” were not to be disruptive by disgracefully chattering questions to each other. Instead, they were to maintain a tranquil and quiet presence as in 1 Tim. 2:11-12 (heysuchia), and inquire of their husbands at home.

5. Universal Church Practice v.33

- a. This is a repetition of what Paul said in 11:16, where again the context was the propriety of women praying and prophesying “...we have no such practice.”

6. Great Commission Content v. 37

- a. Chapters 11-14 and the orderly functioning of the church must be part of the content of our teaching for this verse tells us that this “...is the Lord’s command”. The Great Commission includes “...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” So if this is Lord’s command we must teach it.

7. Gift Receptivity v. 39

- a. Eager to prophesy; be zealous; be “boiling hot” for the prophetic in your midst.
- b. Do not forbid speaking in tongues. Do NOT.

8. Decently and in order v. 40

- a. EVERYTHING should be done this way.
- b. This requires forethought and preparation; worst case scenario planning;
- c. Seating, lighting, visual and hearing arrangements, noise and distraction elimination (pets), pre-testing AV technologies; beauty of the Sacrament, our movements, dress, and a hundred other things. Does that mean things never get overlooked? Of course not. It happened to me just last week. Even after all my careful preparations on Saturday night to prepare our Eucharist Table, you can imagine my shock when I uncovered the plate to find no bread there. I forgot to get it out before we gathered. Embarrassing? Yes! Just blow it off as “Oh well, these things happen”? NEVER! IT made me ask, Jesus where was my heart in preparing things last Sunday morning? Jesus, what are you saying to me...to us through that? For some of you, that may seem like over processing an inconsequential oversight. But it is the little things and our care about them that attracts the attention of Jesus. Remember what He said in the parable of the Shrewd Manager? “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much” (Luke 16:10)

In closing, allow me to tell you a very short story.

I knew a young man in his late twenties in Hawaii who had not long before come to faith in Christ. On hearing the full counsel of the Word of God on the Spiritual Gift of tongues and its benefit both corporately and personally, one night he prayed a simple prayer of openness and faithful receptivity to God for this gift should He desire for him to have it. Nothing happened to him; he wasn’t overcome by ecstatic utterance. But one afternoon a few days later, he found himself “groaning” under the weight of the world upon his soul and unable to pray fully. He had the sense that the Holy Spirit was leading him to just open his mouth and speak to God in the Language of the Spirit which had in fact been given him in answer to his prayer. With something like awkwardness coupled with self-consciousness, he fearfully edged his way to what felt like the edge of a giant cliff... and he moved his vocal cords towards God and what came out was one of the most comfortable, reasonable and articulate languages that he had ever heard, but that he had never spoken or heard before. The burden of his heart flowed out like pulling the plug on a bathtub full of water. Praise, gratitude and prayer flowed out. He never was called upon to use this gift in the gathered assembly of believer and has never been given the gift of interpretation, though he sensed the language he

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heard to be of Polynesian and Middle Eastern sounds. However, he did find it was called for in intercessory rescue prayers for others from time to time. He’s functioned in that gift privately for over 32 years now. I know him pretty well and think his experience is genuine and biblical. If you ever wanted to talk with him more about this gift, I know he’d be glad to talk with you for that man is me.

Father, thank you for your Holy Spirit and the beautiful Language of the Spirit in both the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. Would you please keep us sensitive to you and all you have for us and may each and every corporate gathering of your people bring you honor and be done decently and in order. In the name of Jesus. Amen.