

1 COR. 14:1-40

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6. Command to exercise zealously the gift of prophecy (14:1-5)

a. In v. 1 Paul essentially repeats the exhortation of 12:31 in light of his discussion of love. He commands them to follow the way of love and to zealously exercise the spiritual things, which command he immediately qualifies with the clause "but rather that you prophesy." This means something like "or more precisely, that you prophesy." In other words, contrary to the NIV rendering "especially," he is not urging them to be zealous with regard to gifts in general but, as in 12:31, to be zealous with regard to the greater gifts, which are here represented by the gift of prophecy. This is supported by the following:

(1) The exhortation in 12:31 was that they be zealous with regard to the *greater* gifts, and 14:5 identifies prophecy as a greater gift than tongues (referring to an assembly setting).

(2) Since they already were "zealots of spirits" (14:12), which probably refers to their passion for the gift of tongues, it would not make sense for Paul to urge them to be zealous with regard to gifts in general.

b. The reason they are to be zealous or especially intent on exercising the gift of prophecy instead of the gift of tongues is that the man who prophesies speaks understandable words of edification, comfort, and encouragement and therefore builds up the church. On the other hand, the man who speaks in a tongue is not understood and therefore builds up only himself, not the church. In an assembly setting, the emphasis is on building up the church.

(1) Tongues is the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign language one previously did not speak. It is exemplified in Acts 2:4-11. Those that gathered in response to the sound like a violent wind were amazed because they heard the believers, a group of Galileans who had been given the gift of tongues, speaking in a variety of recognizable human languages.

(2) The reason tongues were not understood in the Corinthian worship assembly is not because they were gibberish but because the worshipers undoubtedly spoke Greek (possibly some Latin) and the tongue-speaker was miraculously uttering a language other than Greek. Worship assemblies tend to be monolingual because people do not go where they cannot understand the language.

(3) If the gift of tongues in Acts 2 was different from the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians, as some claim, one certainly would have expected Luke to

indicate a distinction. After all, Acts was composed after 1 Corinthians and Luke would have been aware of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians from his extensive travels with him.

c. Some other observations about tongues

(1) The one speaking in tongues spoke *to God, not to men* (1 Cor. 14:2). It thus was a form of prayer or praise to God in which God was addressed in a foreign language. This is what was done in Acts 2:11 and 10:46. Since much of what passes for tongues in today's charismatic movement is, after being "interpreted," directions to the church, it is not the gift of tongues as revealed in the N.T.

(2) The one speaking in tongues spoke "mysteries by the Spirit" in the sense that neither he nor those assembled understood what he was saying. That is why the gift of interpretation was necessary (1 Cor. 14:13, 19, 27-28). The miracle was the fact the person spoke in a language he did *not* know. That is why Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:14 that when one prays/speaks in a tongue one's "mind is unfruitful." The tongue-speaker was not involved in cognitive articulation; rather than speaking words with his mind, the tongue-speaker was uttering sounds by the Spirit (see, 14:18-19).

(3) The man speaking in tongues "builds up" *himself* (1 Cor. 14:4). Paul may here be using "builds up" in a negative way, saying that the one who speaks in a tongue in the assembly builds up his status in the group at the expense of the loss of benefit to others. Or he may mean that, despite not knowing the meaning of the words he was uttering, the individual experiences a personal peace or even euphoria through this Spirit-generated, subconscious praise and prayer to God.

d. Paul is not opposed to tongue speaking; on the contrary, he'd like them all to have that gift (which he knows will not happen - see, 12:28-30), but his definite preference in the assembly is for prophecy. It is greater than tongues, unless tongues are interpreted, because it is intelligible and thus benefits its hearers.

7. Speaking in tongues does not benefit the hearers (14:6-12)

a. Paul says that if he comes to them speaking in tongues, thus conforming to their view of spirituality, he will not be of benefit to them. He will only benefit them if he prophesies or teaches them or if he reports to them a revelation or some knowledge.

b. Paul presses the point with an analogy involving musical instruments:

(1) Just as speaking in tongues prevents one from knowing what is being said, so making indistinct or unrecognizable sounds on an instrument prevents one from knowing what is being played.

(2) To illustrate the point, if one sounds a battle call by playing an indistinguishable tune on the trumpet, no one will prepare for battle. In other words, the message to prepare for battle will not have been communicated and the people will not have been benefited.

c. The same holds for their speaking in tongues. Unless they speak in their own language, no one will know what they are saying. They will be speaking into the air, i.e. speaking but not communicating.

d. Given that there are many different kinds of languages in the world, if I do not know the meaning of a particular language, the speaker and I will be foreigners to each other. In other words, we will not communicate; we will not understand the *message* in each other's vocal sounds.

e. The same holds for the Corinthians. If they supernaturally speak in a language that the hearers do not know, they become foreigners to each other. They cannot convey the meaning behind their sounds.

f. Because they so zealously practice the gift of tongues, they should seek to have that gift overflow into the complementary gift of interpretation so that the exercise of tongues might benefit the church. After all, love seeks the interests of others.

(1) When Paul says they are "zealots of spirits" (not "spiritual things"), he probably means that they zealously exercise gifts of inspired speech, specifically referring to the gift of tongues.

(2) This terminology may derive from the fact that in tongues and in prophecy, the Spirit of God moves the spirits of individuals to produce the desired speech (see, 14:14-16, 32). He produces the desire or impulse within the man to utter certain words. In tongues the process to some extent bypasses the mind whereas in prophecy it does not, but in both gifts the Holy Spirit speaks through various human spirits.

8. Only words that edify are fitting for the assembly (14:13-19)

a. Given that interpretation is needed for tongues to be of benefit to the church, Paul commands those who speak in tongues to pray that they might interpret. He then repeats the rationale for it: tongue speaking is noncognitive ("my mind is unfruitful") and, by implication, unintelligible or noncommunicative.

(1) This is the only instance of Paul telling anyone to pray for a spiritual gift, and I think it is significant that it is a complementary gift needed to make an existing gift beneficial to the church.

(2) The message I get is that we should seek to optimize the gifts God has given us, which in the case of tongues happened to involve a related gift, not that we should pursue gifts he did not give us.

b. What then is the way to go? Paul says that he will do both. He will pray and sing in tongues ("with the spirit") but he also will pray and sing with his mind. In other words, he will not elevate tongues to some kind of elite form of worship that should be employed wherever and whenever possible. Both modes of praise are beneficial, but only the latter builds up others in the assembly. (The statement he "also will pray and sing with his mind" may be reinforcing the point that praying and singing "with the spirit" needs to be interpreted.)

(1) If one takes that view, insisting on tongues in the assembly, the result will be that those who are ignorant regarding the language being spoken (usually everyone) will be unable to say the "Amen" when the tongue-speaker give thanks to God because they won't know what is being said. Thus, the thanksgiving fails to edify others.

(2) Paul's attitude on the matter is summed up in vv. 18-19. Though he speaks in tongues more than all of them do, in the assembly he would rather speak five intelligible words, to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue!

9. As with believers, speaking in tongues will not benefit unbelievers but prophesying will (14:20-25)

a. In v. 20 Paul urges them to grow up in their thinking on this subject. The place to be immature or undeveloped is in the practice of evil, not in one's understanding.

b. Paul has already argued that uninterpreted tongues are of no benefit to the other believers in the assembly because they do not understand what is being said. On the other hand, intelligible speech, such as prophecy, builds up the gathered believers because it communicates truth to them.

c. The point here is that the same distinction applies with regard to unbelievers who may visit the assembly. Speaking in tongues will not benefit them but prophesying will. That this is Paul's point is clear from the illustrations in vv. 23-25. The difficulty is how these illustrations relate to vv. 21-22.

(1) In v. 23, Paul says that if the whole church is gathered together and everyone is speaking in tongues, the unbeliever who visits will not be benefited; instead, he will conclude that the believers are insane. Since, in most every case, he will not understand what is being said, the meeting will be chaos and nonsense to him. You see this very effect in Acts 2:13 where some who could not make sense of the languages being spoken accused the tongue speakers of being drunk.

(2) On the other hand, in vv. 24-25, Paul says that if an unbeliever enters a church where people are prophesying, the truths that are being

communicated among the believers will (quite possibly) convict that person of his sins and bring him to acknowledge the presence of God in the Christian community.

d. These illustrations follow from vv. 21-22 in the following sense:

(1) In v. 21 Paul refers to a passage from Isaiah in which God, in essence, said to Israel that since they refused to heed his intelligible prophecy, he would deliver a message to them in the form of the unintelligible speech of their Assyrian captors, and even then they would ignore it.

(2) In v. 22 Paul deduces from this Scripture that the presence of unintelligible speech, such as tongues, is a sign to unbelievers of their refusal to hear. The presence of prophecy, on the other hand, is a sign to believers of God's abiding presence.

(a) Consistent with what tongues signifies, the unbeliever refuses to hear that he refuses to hear. In other words, he rejects the message inherent in the presence of tongues. Just as the unbelieving Jews rejected the message inherent in the Assyrian language that surrounded them in captivity, so the unbelievers in Corinth would reject as insane God's message inherent in tongues.

(b) Consistent with what prophecy signifies, it will even bring the unbeliever to recognize that "God is really among you."

e. This is not inconsistent with the positive effect tongues had on some unbelievers in Acts 2.

(1) Remember that here Paul is speaking about the effect of unintelligible speech, languages that are not understood. Unbelievers who visited a Corinthian worship assembly would be locals who shared the same language as the believers (i.e., Greek and possibly Latin). Therefore, they would fare no better than the believers in understanding the various languages spoken when the gift of tongues was exercised. At Pentecost, however, the crowd that had gathered for the Feast was very cosmopolitan, so many different languages were understood.

(2) As I already mentioned, the unbelievers at Pentecost who did not hear a language they understood accused the believers of being drunk.

10. The principle of edification applied to prophecy and tongues (14:26-33a)

a. When Paul says "each one" has a song, a teaching, a revelation, etc., he does not mean that every individual worshiper has one of those things. Rather, he means that those things are distributed to different individuals – one has one thing to share with the congregation, another has another thing. As in 11:21, "each one" doesn't mean every single individual. Paul has been quite clear that not all in the congregation have speech gifts.

b. It is not clear what Paul means in saying that each one has a song or, more literally, a psalm. Since it's grouped with things that involve the exercise of spiritual gifts, it seems likely to me that he is referring to songs that some have composed or selected (e.g., from the Psalter) through the work of the Spirit. He doesn't say whether this was something for all to sing or for only one.

c. The upshot of all of this is that at Corinth, where many people had spiritual gifts suited for expression in the assembly, they needed to take care that all things be done for upbuilding. That is the controlling principle for the exercise of all gifts in an assembly setting. They must be employed in a way that serves that purpose of edification, the strengthening of the church.

(1) Christian assemblies are not about entertainment; they are about worshiping in ways that edify the saints. I couldn't agree more with the comments of Richard Foster, a scholar who has written extensively about spiritual life and growth (http://www.renovare.org/readings_heart_to_heart_1999_nov.htm):

Let's stop using a marketing approach to church life. The Church is *not* a vendor of religious goods and services but the Community of Faith, living in faith and through faith and by faith alone. We do not need to mimic the entertainment industry of our culture. We win people to Christ not by entertainment but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(2) The fact corporate worship is to be *evaluated* in terms of its effect on those taking part does not mean that it is not worship. It simply means that God desires to be worshiped in a way that edifies the community of faith (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 14:16-17). Alastair Campbell expressed the point well in his 1996 article in the journal *Churchman*:

The lesson is plain; worship is offered to God, but it can be evaluated only by reference to men and women. Practices that do not help those assembled cannot be justified by reference to their supposed reverence nor excused by saying that they were offered to God and not to man. The one who does not bless the brother or sister whom he can see, will not bless God whom he cannot see!

(3) Christian worship assemblies are not geared to non-Christians. Certainly non-Christians can benefit from edifying worship, but that benefit is incidental. Non-Christians cannot become the target or focus of the edifying effect of our worship. Yet I fear that, as John MacArthur has said, "unbelievers have become the number one church consultants in our world today."

d. Paul specifies what this means with regard to exercising the two gifts he's been focusing on, tongues and prophecy.

(1) If anyone speaks in a tongue, only two or at most three may do so, those two or three must speak one at a time, and someone must interpret what they said. If no interpreter is present, the tongue-speaker must remain silent in the assembly. In that case, he must speak to God for his own benefit, meaning he must exercise his gift in private.

(2) The regulations of prophecy raise several issues:

(a) The restriction to two or three prophets is probably not a limitation on how many can speak per assembly, as in the case of the tongue-speakers, but only a limitation on how many can speak before the others examine or weigh their message. Paul does not say "or *at most* three" as he does in reference to tongue-speakers, and 14:31 suggests that all who have a prophecy will be given an opportunity to speak. Plus, the overall concern of the chapter is that tongues not dominate the assembly.

(b) The prophecies are examined or weighed to determine whether they truly are from God. We are not told how or by whom this is done. It may well be that the community as a whole, aided by the gift of discerning spirits (12:10), evaluates how the message conforms to the Spirit of God within them. In that kind of process, you can see how those who delivered prophecies would occasionally be quizzed or challenged. This is relevant to understanding the discussion in vv. 33b-36 regarding the role of women.

(c) If a revelation is received by a prophet while another is delivering a prophecy, the one speaking is required to yield the floor. As explained in v. 31, this procedure allows all to prophesy in turn so that all may learn and be encouraged. Verse 32 indicates that such etiquette is possible because the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. And v. 33a makes clear that such prophetic discipline is not unspiritual, as some in Corinth no doubt thought, but is in keeping with the very nature of God; he is not a God of disorder but of peace (harmony and smooth working).

11. Women are not to participate in the prophetic process in the assembly (14:33b-36)

a. The context of this passage is Paul's discussion of how the gifts of tongues and prophecy are to be exercised in the assembly.

(1) The exercise of tongues is regulated in vv. 27-28. Only two or three individuals are permitted to speak in tongues and they are required to do so one at a time. If there is no one present to interpret the tongues for the congregation, the tongue-speaker is obliged to remain silent.

(2) Paul begins to regulate the exercise of prophecy in v. 29. Two or three prophets are permitted to speak and the others are instructed to weigh carefully their message. As I previously mentioned, the purpose of this weighing was to judge

whether the message was in fact from God (see, 1 Thess. 5:19-21), and it probably included some kind of oral examination of the prophets.

(3) Verses 39-40 are crucial to a proper understanding of Paul's instructions about women because they reveal that he has not changed subjects. He is still discussing the exercise of tongues and prophecy in the assembly, so his instructions about women speaking must be understood as part of that discussion, not as a new and unrelated topic.

b. Since the discussion of tongues concluded at v. 28, no reader would think that Paul had returned to that subject without some clear indication of an intent to do so. Therefore, the context strongly suggests that vv. 33b-36 somehow relate to prophesying. In that light, the most natural reading of this passage is that Paul is prohibiting women from participating in the prophetic process during the worship assembly. (As explained in the discussion of chapter 11, I believe the female speech that took place in the community worship assembly was prayer. My understanding of 1 Tim. 2:8-10 is provided in my study of 1 Timothy that is available at this site.)

(1) This means that women are forbidden to prophesy or to weigh (orally challenge) the prophecies that have been delivered by others. The rationale for the prohibition is the same as in 1 Tim. 2:11-14: women in the assembly are to express their divinely ordered submission to male leadership by refraining from authoritative speech. This explains the universality of the command, the statement that women are obligated to be in submission, the reference to the Law, and the strong tone of moral condemnation.

(2) Verse 35 poses no problem for this view. It had apparently been made known to Paul that some women were publicly quizzing the prophets and were thus engaged in weighing their messages. (Questions were a common way for teaching and challenging in the ancient world.) This practice was defended by the claim that the women were only seeking to learn which, after all, was the purpose of prophecy (14:31). Paul exposes this claim as a pretext by making clear that if the women were truly interested in learning rather than in teaching, they could accomplish that outside the assembly by questioning their husbands at home. Paul's instructions in 1 Tim. 2:11 on *how* women are to learn (in quietness and in all submission) appear to address a similar concern.

c. It might be useful to state my understanding by way of a paraphrase of 14:33b-36:

As in all the congregations of the saints, the women must refrain from participating in the prophetic process in the assemblies, for they are not permitted to speak authoritatively but must be in submission as even the Law says. And if they want to learn something, they should question their own husbands at home rather than use that as a pretext for correcting the prophets, for it is shameful for a woman to speak authoritatively in the assembly. Did the word of God originate with you, or reach only to you?

12. Conclusion of regulation of prophecy and tongues (14:37-40)

a. Verses 37-40 form the conclusion to the section begun in 14:26.

In vv. 37-38 Paul admonishes those who consider themselves to be prophets or to be spiritual, those to whom his corrective measures specifically apply, to recognize what he has written as the command of the Lord and to act accordingly.

b. In vv. 39-40 he sums up his discussion of prophecy and tongues by reducing it to a simple principle: pursue prophecy and accept tongue-speaking, but as with all things in the assembly, do them in a fitting and orderly way.