

1 Corinthians 14:1-19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 14 July 2020

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 1 to 19 Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

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. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. 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. 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? If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? 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. So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. Therefore one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. 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. 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? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church, I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue. 1 Corinthians chapter 14 continues the discussion of behaviour in gathered worship that has been going on since chapter 11 verse 2, and the discussion of spiritual gifts that has been going on since chapter 12 verse 1. Paul is dealing with a chaotic worship situation in the city of Corinth. There's competitive demonstration of spiritual gifts, there's unintelligible speech, there's people speaking over each other, there's all sorts of disorder going on, and part of it seems to arise from a seeming overvaluation of the gift of tongues. Elsewhere, the gift of tongues is presented as a phenomenon that occurs when the spirit rests upon people.

In Acts chapter 2 verse 1 to 4, when the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place, and suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting, and divided tongues as of fire appeared to them, and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts chapter 10 verses 44 to 46. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Acts chapter 19 verse 6. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. In Numbers chapter 11 verses 24 to 25, we have the description of spontaneous prophecy occurring when the Spirit comes upon the elders. So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and placed them around the tent.

Then the Lord came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him, and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not continue doing it. In 1 Samuel chapter 10 verse 10, speaking of Saul, When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them. In these descriptions of the gifts of tongues and prophecy, they seem to have a more ecstatic character to them. They are dramatic signs associated with the descent of the Spirit upon a personal group. Unsurprisingly, given the spirituality that was practiced by the Corinthians, these sorts of dramatic gifts would be very attractive to them.

[4 : 48] Chapter 13 was not a digression from Paul's argument, and the first verse of this chapter applies the force of it to the spiritual gifts. Love must be the touchstone of all practice in this area. Chapters 12 to 14 are all a single undivided argument. Chapter 12 concerns diverse spiritual gifts that are given for the sake of edification, building up, and for unity. They are expressive of the one Spirit that we all share in. They're not merely for those with more dramatic gifts.

Chapter 13 speaks of the indispensability of love, the moderating character of love, and the enduring nature of love. Once the centrality of love is appreciated, the spiritual gifts will be practiced in a far more edifying and appropriate manner. Paul does not dismiss the spiritual gifts. They are to pursue spiritual speech, but especially prophecy, for the reasons that he goes on to discuss.

When we read about the verbal content of tongue speaking in places like Acts chapter 2, we're told that it was praise of God. But the description of tongue speaking in 1 Corinthians has led most commentators to argue that they are not the intelligible languages that we see in Acts chapter 2.

This is not an unreasonable interpretation. Rather, it seems that what Paul is describing in Corinth is a sort of ecstatic speech. It's not necessarily a language. In the Old Testament, for instance, there are a number of different ways of speaking a prophecy. When we're told that the elders prophesied, we shouldn't presume that they were delivering the sort of prophecy that we find in the book of Isaiah. Likewise, when Saul prophesies, it seems to have been a more ecstatic experience, much as we see variety in the way that prophecy functions in the Old Testament, and different levels of prophetic speech and phenomena. So, tongue speaking in the New Testament seems to have involved, in some cases, actual languages, and in other cases, just ecstatic speech. The person who engages in such ecstatic speech speaks mysteries in the spirit. By mysteries here, I think Paul is referring to unintelligible things. Nobody understands what is said. He says that the one who speaks in tongues builds up himself. Does that mean it's self-edification? Or rather, is he saying that the person who's speaking in tongues in this way in the congregation is merely bolstering their own self-importance? I think it might be the latter. Public tongue speaking has become such a matter of status-seeking and demonstration of individual spiritual power that Paul has to challenge it quite forcefully at some points. This wouldn't be the first time in scripture that something that was given by God for the building up of his people and their benefit came to be used for damaging or even idolatrous purposes. The bronze serpent that the Lord had given to Israel in the wilderness had to be removed by Hezekiah in the book of 2 Kings chapter 18, as Israel had started to treat it like an idol. In contrast to their tongue speaking, prophecy is intelligible speech that builds others up. Anthony Thistleton persuasively argues that rather than the interpretation of tongues being spoken of tongues being spoken of here, what is meant is the tongue speaker's own capacity to put their speech into intelligible words. So what we see on the day of

Pentecost, for instance, is a more elevated form of the gift, the exciting of the tongue of the speaker by the Spirit that enables them to speak intelligibly in another language. However, when tongue speaking isn't an intelligible language, it's of little benefit. It's not communicating anything. Paul gives a number of examples of the failure or breakdown of communication. Musical instruments that do not give distinct notes are like tongues that aren't speaking a language. They leave us unable to recognize what is being played. Likewise, instruments that are designed to give a military signal must do so clearly. These illustrations suggest that we are not dealing with regular languages here. There are also problems when a meaningful yet foreign language is spoken. Where we do not have the understanding of the language, the experience of hearing a foreign tongue being spoken can simply make us feel like a foreigner to the speaker. Far from bringing people into greater unity, it divides people. It has a babelic effect. The Corinthians must learn from this. The most important thing is to build others up.

[9 : 06] They are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, but this should be for the end of building up others in the church, not for puffing themselves up. The tongue speaker then needs to pray that he will be able to put his communication into intelligible words. The Corinthians probably thought that they were speaking in angelic languages. Paul doesn't deny that their speech is a manifestation of the Spirit, but he does greatly downplay the gift. Such ecstatic speech can be a way of the Spirit addressing itself to God, but it isn't a language. Tongue speaking in private prayer can be an expression of the person's Spirit to God, much as the babblings and the gurglings of a baby might be an expression of their appreciation for or their need for their parent. But the ideal is to speak to God in intelligible words, so that your understanding is also involved, so that both you and others can say Amen. The true work of the Spirit is not like that of pagan religion, which privileges ecstatic phenomena of spiritually elevated individuals. Rather, the Spirit is about intelligible and reasonable communication for the purpose of edification. The irrational ecstasies of pagan religion do not have a proper place within the life of the church. Paul points out that he is more gifted in tongues than any of the Corinthians. He's not saying he speaks in tongues more than any of them, as some translations put it, but he's stressing that he has this gift in great measure.

However, intelligible communication must take priority in the gathered assembly, and Paul would prefer speaking five intelligible words with his mind than many thousands in unintelligible speech.

A question to consider. How might Paul's emphasis upon intelligible communication over ecstatic utterances or dramatic phenomena and the like in gathered worship help us in thinking about our worship and its proper forms?