

# THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP: EMPTY OR EDIFYING?

BY DR. JERRY VINES

*By the Book*™ A Chapter by  
Chapter Bible Study Series  
from Jerry Vines Ministries  
2295 Towne Lake Parkway  
Suite 116 #249  
Woodstock, GA 30189

## Let's Begin

*Chapter 14 concludes Paul's instructions to the Corinthians concerning spiritual gifts. For Paul, spiritual gifts are closely connected to worship. Indeed in this chapter, we gain an entirely new dimension in our understanding of the way the ancient church worshipped. Up close and personal, we discover how our spiritual gifts may hinder or help the church's collective worship experience.*

*Unfortunately, at Corinth there existed much confusion and disorder in the services. Paul's obvious goal was to temper the services, giving them principles to implement and parameters past which they could not go. While Paul did not want to control the Corinthians, he surely wanted them under control, control of the Holy Spirit, as instructed from the clear Word of God.*

*As we shall soon see, almost the entire chapter is structured as a comparison between prophesy and tongues, prophesy remaining the preferred spiritual gift. Hence, as we follow chapter 14, note the outline below. Note that chapter 14 is best studied in clusters of verses rather than our usual chronological arrangement. Therefore, we will assemble various verses from the chapter as we proceed with each point in the exposition.*

- I. The Inferiority of Tongues
- II. The Superiority of Prophesy

## I. The Inferiority of Tongues

Since the latter part of the last century, the church has been inundated with the influence of what has come to be called the "Charismatic Movement." Having roots in the classical Pentecostal church, the Charismatic Movement did what the Pentecostal church never did—affect other evangelical churches with their teaching.

In other words, the Pentecostal church was a denomination in itself. The Charismatic Movement infiltrated virtually every Christian denomination, including Catholics! Southern Baptists were uniquely affected by the movement.

One of the chief teachings of the Charismatic Movement is the emphasis on "sign gifts," the chief gift of which is speaking in tongues. In a real sense, Paul dealt with the very same problem in Corinth. Many in the Corinthian church were so emphasizing the greatness of speaking in tongues, it became a point of contention even in the public worship of believers.

First, observe Paul's counsel on the appraisal of tongues. When Paul speaks of tongues he offers sympathy for the presence of the gift. He writes, "I would that ye all spake with tongues..." (v. 5a). Noteworthy is the Greek word, *glóssa*, consistently translated "tongues" in the New Testament. Literally, it means

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“an organ of the body” (Rev. 16:10), and metaphorically, it means “language.” The translators of the King James Version inserted the qualifier “unknown” (cp. v. 2) in the English text for clarity (note the italics of the word which always indicates in the KJV a word supplied by the translators not found in the Greek manuscripts). Unfortunately, their sincere intention turned out to be confusing. Why?

Readers wrongly assumed the insertion of the term “unknown” meant Paul referred to an “unknowable” language. However, Paul is not referring to an *unknowable* language but an *unknown* language; that is, a language not before spoken by the speaker or perhaps heard by the hearer. Indeed the unknown language to which Paul refers is of the same type as the unknown language the Apostles experienced on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

Paul himself spoke many languages. He confesses, “I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all” (v. 18). As Paul went from tribe to tribe, he spoke various languages, sometimes supernaturally. Hence, the gift of tongues — biblically speaking — is speaking in a foreign language not yet learned.

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Paul’s sympathy for tongues even extends to not forbidding their use: “...forbid not to speak with tongues” (v. 39c). It should also be noted that every time Paul sympathized with the gift of tongues, he also coupled his sympathy with a stern warning. For example, when Paul confessed, “I would that ye all spake with tongues...” (v. 5a), he followed his positive confession with, “but rather that ye prophesied” (v. 5b). Invariably, Paul makes this qualification. His attitude throughout chapter 14 is consistent with his conclusion here, “Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that *by my voice* I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an *unknown* tongue” (v. 19). If believers covet any gifts, they should covet prophesy, not tongues (v. 39).

Furthermore, consistent with Paul’s warning concerning tongues was his pattern of placing tongues always at the bottom of the gift list. Among the reasons for placing tongues last are the basic selfishness of tongues (v. 4), the absence of aid to spirituality (vv. 14-15), and the inevitable confusion and disorder tongues create (vv. 33, 40).

Also, Paul offers specific reasons why tongues were given in the first place. Consider, “In the law it is written, With *men of* other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying *serveth* not for them that believe not, but for them which believe” (vv. 21-22). According to Paul, tongues were a clear sign to unbelieving Jews.

In addition, while tongues emphasized *self-edification* (v. 4), the spiritual gift of tongues did not offer *spiritual edification* to the church collectively (vv. 5-13). Especially is tongues no proof to the church one has the Holy Spirit as



some seem to suggest (v. 22). Nor is tongues particularly helpful in bringing sinners to Christ (vv. 16-17, 23). In fact, Paul indicates the unsaved will think they have come into a mad house! Since the most important thing one may do for a person without Christ is to lead him or her to Christ, how does the gift of tongues provide assistance in promoting evangelism? In the end, one must consider how a spiritual gift is supposed to glorify God in the church today which neither edifies believers nor evangelizes the lost.

Second, observe Paul's counsel on the *abuse* of tongues. Not only did Paul offer guidelines on how we may *appraise* the gift of tongues, he also provides us with parameters on how to avoid the *abuse* of tongues. Though Paul loves the Corinthians and speaks lovingly toward them, he nevertheless offers strong warnings concerning the abuse of tongues.

Paul's first parameter is *quantitative*: no more than two or three may speak. He writes, "If any man speak in an *unknown* tongue, *let it be* by two, or at the most by three, and *that* by course; and let one interpret" (v. 27). Unfortunately, this parameter is almost always violated. Too many times in services where tongues are observed, there seems to be no apparent effort to follow the clear command of Scripture at this point.

The second parameter is *qualitative*. According to Paul, men cannot understand the tongue (v. 2). Hence, an interpreter is to offer the explanation. Often prayer must be made for an interpreter to surface (v. 13). Unless an interpreter is found, the church cannot receive edification. Hear the Apostle, "I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater *is* he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying. Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine?" (vv. 5-6).

Note carefully what Paul says. Prophecy is greater because people understand it and may be edified. Tongues is inferior to prophecy "except he interpret." *In essence, he says tongues must become prophecy so the church may be edified.* No wonder tongues is considered virtually useless in worship. It must be transformed into prophecy by an interpreter. Paul's words definitively make prophecy superior. We will look at this more deeply below.

In addition, if no interpreter is found, silence is the rule (vv. 27-28). Paul specifically mentions the silence of women and tongues, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law" (v. 34). At Corinth stood many Greek temples where prostitutes were available for pagan "worship." The prostitutes were known for their frenzied babbling during the ceremonies. Undoubtedly, the

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### Reflection Connection

*Do you think there is a widespread problem in the church today concerning spiritual gifts? Why or why not? Perhaps invite the Pastor in for a time of discussion on the various sign gifts.*



Apostle had this in mind as he counseled the Corinthians to silence the women from speaking in any way which likened them to the prostitutes of Venus.

Many times these parameters are completely ignored. The point to remember is, if worship is to glorify God, worship must observe the guidelines He establishes. If worship fails at this fundamental point, worship remains empty and void. On the other hand, if the conditions are met, Paul would not forbid tongues in the worship service (v. 39).

## II. The Superiority of Prophecy

Prophecy's superiority is clearly Paul's point in the comparison he makes between tongues and prophecy in chapter 14. In the very beginning, he makes prophecy prominent, "Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophecy" (v. 1; cp. v. 5). Indeed prophecy should be coveted (v. 39). Chapter 14 reveals two important aspects of prophecy.

First, Paul lists the reasons prophecy exists. Prophecy edifies saints (v. 4). When the church meets together to worship, the gift of prophecy possesses the potential to build up the body of Christ. As the word of God is preached, God is glorified and the saints are edified (cp. Eph. 4:11-13).

Next, prophecy evangelizes sinners (vv. 24-25). When unbelievers attend a service under the control of the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God is faithfully preached, the atmosphere is ripe for hearts to be transformed by the power of Christ.

According to Scripture, a person is convicted of sin. The Lord Jesus said, "And when he [the Holy Spirit] is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). Prophecy is preaching the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the Word is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit Who inspired it illumines it in the heart of the unbeliever, convicting him or her of sin.

### Reflection Connection

*Is the preached Word adored in your church? Do you think the people have a high view of the preaching? Explain.*

The sinner is also judged by prophecy. One's whole inner being is scrutinized by the open light of God's Word. Paul writes, "And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth" (v. 25). God's prophetic judgment exposes the secrets of men's hearts. It seems as if the whole world knows what the sinner has done. Therefore, the sinner falls under the weight of guilt, "down on his face" he will worship the Lord Jesus.

Even so, because prophecy is superior over tongues, the presence of prophetic preaching is indicative the Holy Spirit is in charge of a worship service. And, when the Holy Spirit is in charge, at least four things result.

First, *sharing* will result when the Holy Spirit is in charge. Paul calls this sharing a "coming together" (v. 26). He is not referring to various meetings of church events taking place throughout the week. Instead he is referring to the worship hour, the time when the church meets to testify of Jesus and the resurrection.

Second, *learning* will result when the Holy Spirit is in charge. Paul writes, "Brethren, be not children in understanding; howbeit in malice be ye children,



but in understanding be men” (v. 20). Understanding the realities of God is ever indicative of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Third, *growing* will result when the Holy Spirit is in charge. Paul’s concern for believers is always to “edify.” He charges the Corinthians to “Let all things be done unto edifying” (v. 25).

Finally, *obeying* will result when the Holy Spirit is in charge. When the Word of God is faithfully preached—true prophesy—believers inevitably discover the will of God (cp. Rom. 6:17). And, when believers obey the will of God, the Holy Spirit is the source of their power to obey.

### Golden Greek Nugget

Paul implores the Corinthian church to “Let all things be done decently and in order” (v. 40). The term translated “in order” is *taxis* which means “an arranging, arrangement, order.” Interestingly, the word was a military term used to describe the orderly ranks of soldiers, etc. Paul is emphatic about control and order in the worship services. In a city like Corinth, with the frenzied ceremonies of the Greek “worshippers” in the pagan temple, there would be a distinct but delightful beauty about the reverent, tempered services of the Christian church.

### Wrap Up

*Paul’s obvious intent in chapter 14 is to compare tongues and prophesy. In the comparison, he clearly attests to the superiority of prophesy over tongues. The preached Word is God’s preferred method in confronting sinners with the claims of Jesus Christ upon their life. Furthermore, prophesy is God’s preferred method of leading saints to understand His will for their life as they serve the Lord Jesus.*

