

# Study 18: 1st Corinthians Chapter 14

## **Introduction**

After discussing the nature of the spiritual gifts in chapter 12, and their replacement in chapter 13, Paul gives specific instruction for their use in the church in chapter 14. There is much application to be made regarding *order* in the worship of the church.

## **Body of the Study**

**The proper place of the gifts**

**Comparison with musical instruments**

**Application to language**

**Support of the argument from the Old Testament**

**The use of the gifts within the church**

**Can we control the gifts?**

**The place of women in the worship service**

**Conclusions on spiritual gifts**

**Application for us**

## **Homework and preparation for next week:**

- *Think through the practical implications of what Paul has taught in the Corinthian church, and also how we should apply “orderliness” in our assemblies.*
- *How does the “love factor” that Paul describes chapter 13 relate to what he says in chapter 14? What will be different about our worship services when we apply this principle fully?*
  
- Read the notes as a review of the study.

# Notes for study 18: Chapter 14

## Introduction

After discussing the nature of the spiritual gifts in chapter 12, and their replacement in chapter 13, Paul gives specific instruction for their use in the church in chapter 14.

Whilst the discussion in the chapter is specifically about the miraculous gifts, there is much application that we can make regarding *order* in the worship of the church.

## Body of the Study

### *The proper place of the gifts*

Even though the spiritual gifts were temporal, were being misused by the Corinthians, and were inferior to love, yet they were to be desired. Paul puts the spiritual gifts into perspective. Apparently the gift of tongues was the one which was held in the highest esteem – as those who had it were able to speak in a language that they had not learned. Paul has already intimated the esteem to which this gift is held by its placement in last place in 1:12:28 and the specific discussion about it in chapter 13.

Compared to the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues comes a long way behind. Paul says that in desiring the spiritual gifts “...*especially the gift of prophecy...*” (1:14:1) is one to be desired. The gift of tongues allowed the person who held the gift to declare the revelation of God in a language that he had not learned. Whether it allowed the holder of the gift to use it for other purposes (such as in common activities) we are not told. However, there are several instances in the New Testament where the holders of other gifts were unable to exercise them openly – but rather only in limited circumstances. For example, whilst Paul had the gift of healing (Acts 28:8), he was unable to use his gift to heal his own disease (2:12:7-9), or that of Epaphroditus (Phil 2:27). The gifts therefore had limited power, and were used to confirm the word (Mk 16:20). Tongues were useful for demonstrating to those outside of the church (who could understand the language being spoken), and knew that the person speaking it had not learned it. But it was not a great deal of use to anyone else who may have had no idea what was being said.

In contrast to that, the gift of prophecy allowed a person to reveal to all who heard what was said, and for them all to understand what was said. Prophecy is not (usually) predicting the future (although it can be), but is the giving of a revelation from God that the person had not otherwise learned.

The important thing is edification – to build up – are we built up (or strengthened) by what we hear? Those who hear the prophecy are built up by what they hear, but those who hear (and can’t understand) the foreign language have no idea of what was said and aren’t built up at all. Paul acknowledges that those who speak the foreign language are themselves built up by the experience (1:14:4). This would suggest that the person who is speaking may understand exactly what he is saying, although (like the person prophesying) he might not know what is coming out of his mouth until he actually says it. On the other hand, Paul says that they should pray for the ability to interpret what they are saying (1:14:13).

In direct contrast to the tongues, Paul outlines several ways that we can learn God’s will:

- **By revelation** where the speaker stated (under his full mental control) the things that God had already revealed to him. As an example, Jesus appeared to Paul, and told him to leave Jerusalem (Acts 22:18), and Paul gave this information to the Jews (and to us) *by revelation* in his speech in Acts 22. Whilst Paul had *initially* gained the knowledge in a miraculous way, it was only given to the hearers when Paul *revealed it* to them.

- **By knowledge** where the speaker gave the information to the hearers, but may or may not have learned it by miraculous intervention. The gift of knowledge was one of the miraculous gifts, although knowledge of the scriptures may have been learned by study (as in the case of Apollos Acts 18:24).
- **By prophesying** where the speaker revealed to the hearers things that he did not (necessarily) know himself. The Old Testament prophets sometimes received a revelation from God, were told what to say, and then later revealed it to the people. However we also have an example of prophecy in the New Testament, where the occasion of, and the words spoken by the prophet are revealed to us (Lk 1:67-79).
- **By teaching** where the teacher had knowledge, probably from study, and he imparted that knowledge to his students by teaching them. This did not necessarily need miraculous intervention for the teacher to learn.

### **Comparison with musical instruments**

Paul uses a comparison with mechanical instruments, such as a harp and a flute. If every note that they put out was the same, then we won't understand the tune (like me trying to play guitar!). A trumpet was used to control battles on a battlefield. One sound meant advance, another retreat, and another to prepare for the battle. If there were no distinction in the sound, then how would we know what the signal meant? Some obvious observations by Paul, but what's the point?

In each of the above examples, the hearers need to understand what was intended. And if they don't then the sound makes absolutely no sense. If we apply that to speaking in tongues – foreign languages (as Paul does in 1:14:9) – then we may as well just talk into the air, because it does the hearers absolutely no good at all.

### **Application to language**

All of the languages in the world are important to those who speak them (try telling a Frenchman that French is a stupid and useless language and see what kind of response you get!). But if we can't speak French, then it is as useless to us as English is to a Frenchman who doesn't understand it. We may as well all speak Chinese.

The miraculous gift of tongues has exactly this application (1:14:11). If we can't understand the words, then (as far as the hearer is concerned) we learn nothing from what is said.

The important application is that the church needs to be edified (built up and strengthened) by what is said. The Corinthians were zealous for the gift, but had totally missed the point in its application. Those who had the gift were (apparently) flaunting their ability to speak foreign languages, but they had no care at all for the *purpose* of the gift – in edifying the brethren.

The foreign language only has a use (ie a useful purpose) if someone can interpret what has been said. Paul says “...therefore, let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret...” (1:14:13 NKJV). Incidentally, this shows that the person who has the gift of tongues may or may not have the gift of interpretation.

The important outcome is our *understanding* of the things that are said and taught (1:14:14). McGarvey says:

“The one who was so under the influence of the Spirit of God as to speak with tongues, produced words and sentences with little or no intellectual effort. His spirit, being in accord with the Spirit of God, uttered the exhortation or the prayer with his spirit rather than with his understanding. Therefore taking the case of prayer as an example, Paul advises that the understanding be kept as active as the spirit, and that a man so control the flow of prayer as to pause from time to time that he might interpret, thus making his understanding as fruitful as his spirit. ...”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> McGarvey J.W. “Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans” Gospel Light Publishing Co; Delight, Arkansas; p 138  
Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer

Paul concludes his arguments for this section by noting what the uninformed hearers might say to what they see and hear happening. “...*how shall he say ‘amen’ in response to your giving of thanks, if he doesn’t understand what was said?...*” (1:14:16). To this he adds “...*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...*” (1:14:19)

### ***Support of the argument from the Old Testament***

Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:11-12 in support of his argument. Israel was rejecting God, and they were not listening to the prophets. They were just regarding God’s commands and instructions as “...*do this and this, and this and this...and...rule on rule, and rule on rule...*” (Is 28:10) God said (through Isaiah) “...*very well then, God will speak with foreign lips and strange tongues...*” (Is 28:11). The inspired writer Paul, says that this prophecy of Isaiah was specifically regarding speaking in tongues, and the practice of tongues in the church (not just a specific reference to Pentecost).

For all of that, the people would not listen to God. If they didn’t listen when He spoke in plain language, they certainly wouldn’t listen when He spoke in foreign language! So, the application that Paul is making here is the secondary nature of tongues compared to the plain revelation that is given by prophesying.

Those who already believe in Jesus would not need to be convinced of the gravity of the things that were spoken. They already believe, and need to understand so that they can learn. On the other hand, when an unbeliever sees (and hears) someone fluently speaking a language that they have never learned (and can even hear it in their own native language, as was the case at Pentecost (Acts 2:6-8)), then they will recognise that the message being delivered has come from a higher source than the one who is speaking. “...*Therefore tongues are a sign...to unbelievers...*” (1:14:22)

### ***The use of the gifts within the church***

Whilst tongues have a use in demonstrating to unbelievers the power and wonder of God, when they are applied without restraint, the result is pandemonium. The people wouldn’t understand most of what was said, and they will go away without having learned anything. All that they would say was that “...*everyone was mad...*”. By contrast, if everyone prophesied, then everyone would go away having been edified.

Paul is specifically discussing the order in the assembled church (1:14:23, 40), and he commands that if tongues are to be spoken at all, then “...*there are only to be two or at the most three, and each of these are to be undertaken in turn...and that someone is to interpret...*” (1:14:27). Those who had the gifts were able to exercise control over their practice. Paul intimates it here, and explicitly says it in vs 32. If there is no-one to interpret, then the gift of tongues is not to be used.

Likewise with the gift of prophecy, there are only to be two or three uses of the gift during the assembly, and those who are listening are to judge what is said. We have an example in Acts 16:9-10 of Paul receiving a vision from the Lord. The information that he received was not totally explicit as to what needed to be done, but was sufficient for him to reason it out and draw a conclusion as to what God wanted him to do (vs10). So, with the use of prophecy in the assembly, even though the hearers could understand what was said, there was still a need to reason and judgement to be applied to learn what God was revealing in the matter.

### ***Can we control the gifts?***

Well, not in the sense that we can control what gift we receive, and whether or not we get one. But having received the gift, those who had them were able to control the use. Paul explicitly says that “...*the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets...*” (1:14:32 NKJV). He has already instructed them concerning controlling their use – which shows that they did have power over them.

This appears to be yet another example where the Christians in Corinth had become so self-centred that they were oblivious to the effects that they were having on others. Everyone was intent on *having his say*, even though that resulted in confusion and disorder. They were (apparently) saying that *'the Spirit has moved me to say this, so I have to say it'* or they were saying *'I am just letting the Spirit speak through me'*.

The result was just a state of confusion in the church, and a total lack of orderliness. This is in direct contrast to how things ought to be, because *"...God is not the author of confusion, but of peace..."* (1:14:33 NKJV).

### ***The place of women in the worship service***

This subject deserves more than can be discussed at this time, and so an abbreviated discussion only will be held here.

Some women had the gifts of prophecy (Acts 21:9), and in the church in Corinth, the women were (apparently) demanding their right to exercise their gifts along with the men. Paul says that *"...they are not permitted to speak...but they are to be submissive...and it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church..."* (1:14:32-33). Whilst he applies some restrictions here, they apply to the leadership of the church, and do not imply that women have no role at all. More on this later.

### ***Conclusions on spiritual gifts***

The Corinthians had the gifts. They were given for some specific purposes. One of those purposes was to confirm the word (Mk 16:20). Paul writes and says that those who had the gifts should use them not only to confirm what was spoken, but also to confirm that the things that he was writing were not of his own invention, but *"...are the commandments of the Lord..."* (1:14:37).

The gifts had an important place in the early church, and the desire to prophesy should not be overlooked. Whilst tongues had a limited usefulness and application, they should not be forbidden to be used.

### ***Application for us***

The miraculous gifts had application for a limited time whilst the church was in its infancy. They were temporal and were to pass away. The way in which the gifts were being administered and used in the church reveals yet another way that the Corinthians had allowed the social mores of their society to invade the church. People had become so self-centred that they were forcing their position at the expense of others.

Exactly this situation can occur regardless of the miraculous gifts. The result was disorder and confusion in the worship service of the church. This is not the way that things should be. Rather, Paul concludes *"...let all things be done decently and in order..."* (1:14:40 NKJV) or *"...everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way..."* (NIV)