

First Corinthians 14

Introduction:

1. This chapter brings us to the conclusion of three chapters regarding the use of spiritual gifts at Corinth (12-14).
2. This chapter will teach the relative importance and place of gifts and the specific rules to regulate their use in worship.
3. We will learn by repetition that the edification of the church by instruction far exceeds any feelings or entertainment.
4. Corinth clearly had a ridiculous obsession with tongues, just as do many Charismatic churches and leaders today.
5. The gift of tongues was only and always the ability to speak a foreign language without any previous study of it.
6. Tongues was the permanent ability to speak gospel mysteries by the Spirit in a foreign language without study.
7. Prophecy was the permanent ability to reveal the things of God from Scripture or foretell future events by the Spirit.
8. There are some minor difficulties in this chapter due to our ignorance of the spiritual gifts, much like our ignorance of leprosy, the features of the tabernacle and priests' clothing, and other irrelevant matters of the Old Testament.
9. The shades of distinction among the gifts and between the spirit and understanding would have been very helpful to those with the gifts, but they are far less important to us who do not have those gifts at all.

Outline of Chapter 14:

1. Prophesying is superior to tongues (1-25)
2. All gifts must aim for edification (26)
3. Rules for speaking in tongues (27-28)
4. Rules for prophesying (29-33)
5. Rules for women speaking (34-35)
6. Summary arguments (36-40)

14:1 The proper order for Corinth's priorities were charity, prophesying, and then other gifts.

- A. As Paul taught eloquently and powerfully in the previous chapter, charity was preeminent.
- B. As he had taught a little earlier, Paul exhorted them to earnestly covet the best gifts (12:31).
- C. Though he had already ranked the gifts, he will show the superiority of prophesying (12:28).
- D. Superior to gifts of tongues and healings, which are always popular, was the gift of prophecy.
- E. Prophecy was a gift that revealed the will of God, both present truth and future events.

14:2 Tongues revealed gospel mysteries by the Holy Spirit, but they did not profit other hearers.

- A. An "unknown tongue" is not incomprehensible babbling or gibberish as Charismatics wish.
- B. An "unknown tongue" is a language not known by the speaker or those present to hear him.
- C. The only profitable exchange occurring was the person communicating only with the Lord.
- D. The mysteries described here at the mysteries of the gospel (I Cor 2:6-12; I Timothy 3:16).
- E. The mysteries described here are not unknown matters too high for human understanding.

14:3 The gift of prophecy was profitable to all hearers for edification, exhortation, and comfort.

- A. The gift of prophecy was the Spirit-given ability to reveal the will of God supernaturally.
- B. Usually this gift was used for opening doctrinal truth of God and other times for foretelling.
- C. Edification is building others up by instruction and warning that are profitable for their lives.
- D. Exhortation is encouraging and urging a person to do their duties in the Christian religion.
- E. Comfort is strengthening by promises and reassurances to calm fear and promote peace.
- F. Prophesying was always done in the language of the speaker and hearer for understanding.

14:4 Tongues not understood were a gift for the speaker only; prophesying edified others.

- A. A man speaking in a language unknown to his hearers was only edifying or helping himself.
- B. He vaguely understood the things he spoke, though he was saying them in a new language.
- C. He did not understand them clearly, for he needed interpretation or an interpreter (14:13,28).
- D. His eloquence in the other language was not matched by the same eloquence in his own.
- E. A man prophesying by the same Holy Spirit was edifying and instructing all his hearers.

- F. The prophet's understanding was fully involved in grasping what he was teaching the others.
- G. The wisdom, knowledge, doctrine, or revelation of a prophet was a miraculous discovery, but it was communicated in such a way that all the hearers could easily understand the message.

14:5 **While tongues are a good gift of the Spirit, prophesying is much superior by its edification.**

- A. Paul admitted he could be thankful if the whole church membership had the gift of tongues.
- B. But he was more interested in them having the gift of prophecy for the church's edification.
- C. Only if a man also had the gift of interpretation could he repeat his speech in their language.
- D. Edification, instruction of the church, is far more important than feelings or entertainment.
- E. Charismatics emphasize the very opposite of this point, as they crave feelings and events.
- F. Though he had ranked the gifts, Paul again declares tongues inferior to prophesying (12:28).

14:6 **Tongues could not profit the church in comparison to revelatory instruction by other gifts.**

- A. If the great apostle Paul were to visit Corinth speaking Swahili, he would not profit them.
- B. It is impossible to know if these four expressions are variation in gifts or repetitive emphasis.
 - 1. Revelation is revealing something, which tongues did not do without interpretation.
 - 2. The prophets had the gift of revelation, for God would reveal things to them (14:30).
 - 3. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, showed things shortly coming to pass (Rev 1:1).
 - 4. Knowledge could easily be the word of knowledge that Paul listed earlier (12:8).
 - 5. Prophesying was the gift of revealing God's will in Scripture or foretelling the future.
 - 6. Doctrine is actually an older word referring to instruction or a body of knowledge.
 - 7. By doctrine the apostle could have referred to the ordinary gift of teacher (12:28).
 - 8. However, we will encounter both "revelation" and "doctrine" again later (14:26).
- C. What we can know for certain is the Holy Spirit's emphasis of doctrine and instruction!
- D. If your understanding is not being addressed on a regular basis and growing, we are wrong.

14:7 **Even inanimate horns and other noise making items must make distinctions for any value.**

- A. Are these things without life-giving sound? Or things without life, giving sound? The sense!
- B. Musical instruments, none of which have life, must make different sounds to communicate.
- C. Paul continued to ridicule speaking in languages unknown to hearers by describing a piano with only one white key and no black keys! Could you pick out the tune to save your life?
- D. Paul introduced an analogy that he will continue through the next verse against tongues.

14:8 **If a military bugler does not play precise notes for each signal, no one will respond rightly.**

- A. Paul further showed the inferiority of tongues compared to prophesying in a known language.
- B. Even the inanimate and crude instrument of a military bugle must play understood sounds.
- C. Paul concluded here the analogy he began in the previous verse against speaking in tongues.

14:9 **If a man does not speak clearly understood words to his hearers, he is talking to the wind.**

- A. Paul continued his various arguments and reasons against speaking in tongues in the church.
- B. He used this verse to apply the analogy of the previous two verses about speaking in tongues.

14:10 **There are many languages or tongues or voices in the world, each understood by some.**

- A. "Voices" in this place is clearly a synonym for languages, which is a synonym for tongues.
- B. Each language has its way of communicating to those who know that particular language.
- C. Each language is only of value to those who can speak and/or hear it with understanding.
- D. To its hearers, those who understand it, every language is valuable for communicating.
- E. Paul is excusing and defending various languages, though outlawing them in the church.

- 14:11 **Using the wrong language in the wrong place at the wrong time makes you a barbarian.**
A. Barbarian ranged in definition from not being Greek, to a foreigner, to an uncivilized savage.
B. A man speaking an unknown tongue (voice or language) would sound like a foreigner.
C. Every reader has been in a store and overheard foreigners babbling in their own tongue.
- 14:12 **Based on the previous arguments and their zeal for spiritual gifts, seek to edify the church.**
A. The adverbial combination “even so” indicates Paul appealed to his arguments and analogy.
B. Put your zeal for spiritual gifts to a profitable use and desire those gifts that edify the church.
C. Paul would teach the Galatians that zeal is good, if it is applied to a good thing (Gal 4:18).
D. Everything done in the church of God should be for the comprehensible purpose of building up the members by instruction, exhortation, comfort, warning, and so forth.
- 14:13 **With edifying the church the goal, those speaking in tongues should seek to interpret.**
A. Let us first establish that speaking in tongues and interpretation were distinct gifts (12:10).
B. Let us further establish that speaking in tongues resulted in actual self-edification (14:4).
C. Therefore, those speaking in tongues understood the lesson but often could not interpret.
D. The inability to interpret enhanced the quality of the gift, when it was used properly as a sign.
- 14:14 **Praying in a language unknown to hearers was a spiritual activity but fruitless for hearers.**
A. Please note the reference to praying in an unknown tongue, which we saw before (11:4-5).
B. It appears in the first generation of New Testament churches that much was supernatural.
C. Tongues apparently was Spirit control of vocal cords in conjunction with the speaker’s spirit.
D. The “spirit” here is neither the Spirit alone, nor the speaker’s spirit alone, but both together, for without the help of the Spirit, the speaker would not be able to speak the new language.
E. The speaker’s understanding was unfruitful, in that it could not bear fruit for others’ benefit.
F. The speaker’s spirit was edified, or built up, for we have been told that fact already (14:4).
G. Paul taught the prophet’s spirit, though being acted upon, was still his to control (14:32).
H. Most cannot repeat a message or sermon they hear; and most with the gift of tongues were unable to repeat the blessing or instruction, even though they might have been edified (14:4).
- 14:15 **Paul directed activity by God’s Spirit on the human spirit to be used for understanding.**
A. It was within the power of the speaker to control how the Holy Spirit used his spirit (14:32).
B. This verse and the next two clearly indicate that they prayed and sang in foreign languages, which is further confirmed by Paul’s correction of their bringing psalms (14:26).
C. Paul purposed to involve his spirit with the utmost passion along with mental understanding.
D. It should be remembered singing is not only to God but also very much for others (Col 3:16).
E. Musical instruments in the New Testament assembly cannot communicate understanding.
F. Singing with excessive vibrato or other embellishments does not provide understanding.
G. Apparently a person with the gift of tongues could choose to use or not use the gift; they could engage or disengage the spiritual gift from their ordinary ability to use their intellect.
- 14:16 **Paul continued teaching against praying in an unknown tongue for its worthlessness.**
A. Here the act of blessing is praying by context, which we find elsewhere (10:16; 11:24-25).
B. Praying in an unknown tongue would not even allow others to know when to say, “Amen!”
C. This seems to indicate that more “Amen’s” were expected than merely at the prayer’s end.
D. The “room of the unlearned” is describing those men that did not have public gifts and thus sat in the assembly as the hearers, who participated by showing agreement with “Amen.”
E. It is proper and right for hearers in a New Testament church to offer “Amen” with blessings.
F. The context of the verse itself indicates that “bless” here means “giving of thanks.”

- 14:17 **A man praying in tongues might do so very eloquently, but he would not profit the hearers.**
A. Again, please note, that we have pursued praying in tongues for four verses now (14:14-17).
B. While such an exercise might give “chills” to the speaker and hearers, it would not edify.
C. Paul continued his course from the first verse that tongues are inferior by inability to edify.
- 14:18 **Paul told them graciously and reverently he spoke in tongues more than any at Corinth.**
A. Remember, this was the apostle Paul: he likely had all gifts, and he easily had lowly tongues.
B. Consider the language well; Paul claimed his gift was greater than their combined gifts!
C. He used wisdom in appealing to his extensive gift, and he wisely did so very reverently.
- 14:19 **Paul used a severe comparison to further argue for prophesying and against tongues.**
A. This verse is based on the previous verse, where Paul identified his great gift of tongues.
B. In spite of his great gift of speaking in tongues, “yet,” he valued 5 understandable words by which he could teach hearers over 10,000 words unknown to the hearers.
C. He identified where this superiority of prophecy occurred – “in the church.” For if he was in a market in India, he might very well value 5 words in Hindi over 10,000 in Greek (14:22)!
D. He identified that his understanding had to be active in order for him to teach others.
- 14:20 **Paul identified preoccupation with noise rather than understanding as childish.**
A. Charismatics, by this apostolic definition, are childish, for they are obsessed with tongues.
B. Here are two sure lessons about children: they are without both understanding and malice.
C. The Corinthians would be better off seeking childishness in malice rather than understanding.
- 14:21 **God had prophesied long before He would speak by men in other languages to Israel.**
A. Isaiah recorded the prophecy about the coming Babylonian captivity (Isaiah 28:11-12).
B. But Paul applied it further here to the speaking in tongues of the apostles and their hearers.
C. The use of the quotation is to show that unbelief would still prevail in spite of such tongues.
- 14:22 **Tongues were given for the benefit of unbelievers; but prophesying was for believers.**
A. Tongues were a sign gift to confirm the apostles to their hearers (Mark 16:17-20; Ac 2:1-12).
B. Believers do not need such a sign: they already believe the message of a resurrected Christ.
C. Prophesying was a revelatory gift to give God’s will before the New Testament was finished.
D. Unbelievers did not need such detailed instruction, for they still needed initial conversion.
- 14:23 **A church assembly emphasizing speaking in tongues would be disturbing to visitors.**
A. Believing visitors not knowing the language and unbelieving visitors would think them mad.
B. Paul did not mean all members speaking in tongues, but rather all with the gift of tongues.
C. The unlearned visitor here is a person not knowing the language or languages being used.
D. The public babbling in other languages unknown to the hearers would be bizarre, like Babel!
- 14:24 **A church assembly emphasizing prophesying will have a very different effect on visitors.**
A. Again, the apostle is not suggesting that every member prophesy, but those with the gift.
B. A visitor unlearned in other tongues or an unbeliever will be able to understand the words.
C. He will hear convincing evidence of Christianity and be judged for his wicked lifestyle.
- 14:25 **Instruction that is understandable will result in regenerated hearers being converted.**
A. This delightful description of conversion is the result of speaking words easily understood.
B. The secrets of his heart are likely more than coincidental and anecdotal agreement.

- C. His secrets are much more likely the longings of a regenerate heart addressed by the gospel.
- D. Regeneration includes much instruction from God (John 6:45; I Thess 4:9; Heb 8:10-11).

14:26 **Paul questioned the propriety of Corinthian assemblies confused by their many gifts.**

- E. Apparently, the Corinthians were so obsessed with their gifts they all wanted to perform.
- F. Those with a psalm had ability to sing in the spirit, with or without understanding (14:15).
- G. Those with a doctrine had ability to explain a specific truth with a word of knowledge (12:8).
- H. Why are you all so intent on using your gifts in every assembly that you sacrifice edification?
- I. Every gift, and the way it was used, was to be subordinate to the overall goal of instruction.
- J. Here we see the clearest indication of the need for things to be “done decently and in order.”

14:27 **Paul applied three rules to the godly use of the tongues gift in a Christian assembly.**

- A. Any church or assembly using their idea of tongues outside these three rules is manifestly in error, even though they may not understand they do not have the Biblical gift of tongues.
- B. First, the most individuals that could speak in tongues at any one service was limited to three.
- C. Second, they had to take turns and only speak one a time; there was no group babbling at all.
- D. Third, they had to have an interpreter that could explain what they had said to the assembly.

14:28 **If the three main rules could not be met, then those with the gift of tongues had to be silent.**

- A. The gift of tongues was not a spontaneous gift that left the speaker babbling out of control.
- B. Paul clearly indicated by this verse that the person with the gift could control the use of it.
- C. If there was no interpreter for edification and instruction of the church, he had to be silent.
- D. The context puts a very definite limit on the words “let him keep silence in the church.”
- E. He could allow the Spirit to bubble in his heart with the utterance to God and himself.

14:29 **Paul applied a few rules to the prophets as well, who had the gift of prophecy.**

- A. He applied the same rule as to those speaking in tongues, at the most three, and by course.
- B. The words, “and that by course,” are elliptical, taken from the rule for tongues (14:27).
 - 1. While one of the two (or three) prophets was speaking, the other was to listen and judge.
 - 2. If another single prophet needed to say something, then the speaker had to quit (14:30).
 - 3. We are told in the context Paul certainly meant for them to speak “one by one” (14:31).
 - 4. We know Paul would reject two prophets to speak at once for decency and order (14:40).
- C. If a sitting prophet had a word of knowledge, he could take the floor to speak (14:30).

14:30 **The prophets were to share the pulpit, as additional knowledge might be revealed.**

- A. If a prophet that was sitting and judging had additional knowledge, he could speak.
- B. The speaking prophet was to give way before the prophet with a fresh revelation.
- C. Here are specifics of how decent and orderly God expected a church’s assemblies.
- D. The proper use of charity would easily allow such sharing of the pulpit in their church.

14:31 **Every prophet would be allowed to speak in due course for comfort and learning of all.**

- A. We were already told that not all were prophets, so this must limited to all prophets (12:29).
- B. Observe that we are told more about the gift of prophecy – it was for comfort and learning.
- C. He has already limited the number of prophets in an assembly to three, so do not think 10!
- D. The “all” of this verse is all the prophets – they would each get their proper turn in order.

14:32 **The gift of prophecy was under the control of the prophets to use wisely for edification.**

- A. By the use of “spirits” here, we must understand the spiritual gift given by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the prophets’ own spirits. They were not out-of-control, talking marionettes.

- B. The next verse further clarifies this as the Holy Spirit, for God is identified as the Author.
- C. The speaking prophet could stop and sit, and a sitting prophet could stand and speak (14:30).
- D. God did not give spiritual gifts that led supernaturally to disorderly and barbarian conduct.

14:33 God has not given any gift or instruction that would bring confusion in Christ's churches.

- A. The reference to God as Author must refer back to the spiritual gift being very controllable.
- B. God is not the Author of confusion by gifting or ordaining any activities that bring confusion.
- C. God is the Author of confusion, as at the Tower of Babel, in causing many to be confused.
- D. Confusion is set in distinction to peace, for the matter of orderly assemblies is foremost.
- E. And this rule for peace, and not confusion, was to be followed in all the churches of Christ.

14:34 Women were not to participate in any assembly in any way that would lead to confusion.

- A. The general rule for women to be silent in all church assemblies does not exclude exceptions.
- B. Every careful reader must answer the question, which church is under consideration here.
 - 1. There is a use for church buildings, but we allow women to speak in a place (Acts 19:37).
 - 2. There is a use for church members, but we allow women to speak at home (14:23; 15:9).
 - 3. Therefore, we understand that women must be silent in full church assemblies (14:28).
- C. The requirement for their silence and prohibition of their speaking has its limitations.
 - 1. Paul let women sing in church, which is speaking and teaching (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).
 - 2. Paul has already addressed women praying and prophesying under a covering (11:5,13).
- D. Paul gave further light to his rule for women speaking by appealing to the Law of Moses.
 - 1. He indicated that his position was no different than what was taught under Moses' law.
 - 2. The Law taught the general rule that women are to be in subjection to men (Gen 3:16).
 - 3. Yet the Law allowed women prophetesses like Miriam to lead the people (Ex 15:20-21).
 - 4. And the Law allowed women to speak when on trial before a priest (Numbers 5:22).
 - 5. And the Law allowed women to participate with "Amen" in assemblies (I Chron 16:36).
 - 6. And the Law allowed women to participate in other ways in assemblies (I Kgs 1:39).
- E. A sense is to be put on these words, as in most places, lest we create manmade bondage.
 - 1. Paul used the same words, "keep silence in the church," for a very different thing (14:28).
 - 2. The words only applied to a man speaking in tongues without an interpreter, other than that he could say just about anything depending on his gifts, offices, or circumstances.
 - 3. Paul has reached the end of contrasting tongues and prophesying and now sought peace.
 - 4. Women asking questions is surely a primary consideration as the context shows (14:35).
 - 5. The sense must be any talking, questioning, or teaching that disrupts the peace of an assembly, violates Moses' subordination of women, or usurps authority (I Tim 2:11-12).
 - 6. The sense allows inspired prophetesses to pray or prophesy as Paul indicated (11:5,13).
 - 7. The sense allows singing, saying "Amen," testifying as a witness, and such exceptions.
- F. There is a certain need for this text and its counterpart to oppose today's carnal Christianity.
 - 1. The Holy Spirit's gifts to women passed away with the other miraculous gifts in 70AD.
 - 2. There are only two offices in the church – bishop and deacon – both of which have wives.
 - 3. Older women may teach younger women (Titus 2:3-5), but not the men (I Tim 2:11-12).
 - 4. It is a mark of perilous times when women are exalted in Christian circles (II Tim 3:6-7).
 - 5. God has not called a woman in 2000 years to be pastor, preacher, or teacher of a church.

14:35 Paul clarified quite clearly what kind of speech by women he was particularly condemning.

- A. He condemned any public questions, even for learning, by women in a church assembly.
 - 1. Women asking questions in a mixed assembly would be disruptive and insubordinate.
 - 2. The woman is under obedience to men, and questions imply disagreement or rebellion.
 - 3. Women are generally myopic, missing the big picture, which leads to dumb questions.

- B. The shame here is obviously an appeal to human customs and tradition that condemn it.
 - 1. Paul made this appeal a few chapters earlier in appealing for right hair length (11:14-15).
 - 2. Until this perverse generation, it was always understood that women were to be silent.
 - 3. Women did not have the right to speak in a public assembly of men unless called upon.
 - 4. It is a shame for the inferior and subordinate sex to speak in an assembly including men.
 - 5. Women are inferior and subordinate for two reasons – order and role from creation, and failure in Eden (Gen 2:18; 3:16; I Cor 11:9; I Tim 2:13-14; II Tim 3:6; I Pet 3:7).
- C. Husbands should be able to answer their wives, which requires them to study more than her.
 - 1. There is no reason or Scriptural basis for women running to Bible studies all the time.
 - 2. This is the very problem Paul condemned as a trait of carnal Christianity (II Tim 3:6-7).
 - 3. If they have time for Bible studies on a regular basis, then they are not busy enough.
 - 4. If they did even half what the virtuous woman did, there would be no time (Pr 31:10-31).
 - 5. Husbands should devour the word of God, and wise pastors will promote their learning.
 - 6. If a husband cannot answer his wife, then he should ask the pastor to secure the answer.

14:36 Paul confirmed the authority of his instruction based on their position as gospel recipients.

- A. They were recipients of the Christian religion, not originators of it; so they should submit.
- B. He said plainly that not a single point of Christian doctrine or practice had come from them.
- C. Before Paul came, the Corinthians were pagan idolaters or Jewish Christ-rejecters (12:2).

14:37 Paul headed off any opposition by Corinth's spiritual leaders by his apostolic authority.

- A. If any man were to appeal to his own spiritual gifts, he should recognize Paul as an apostle!
- B. Paul had full apostolic authority from Jesus Christ to give His commandments to churches.
- C. If a man thought himself led by the Holy Spirit, he should easily recognize Paul's authority!
- D. For any that might read this chapter as suggestions, Paul called them commandments.
- E. There is no room to modify or compromise these commandments beyond their true sense.

14:38 If there were any that continued to oppose Paul's commandments, they should be ignored.

- A. If a man were to say Paul's rules were not from the Spirit, Paul called him ignorant (14:37).
- B. A man rebelling against Scripture should be rejected (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10-11).
- C. Paul had no further time to waste on such fools and scorners (II Tim 2:14,16,23; Titus 3:9).

14:39 He summed up his arguments by encouraging desire to prophesy and allowing tongues.

- A. Since he had clearly shown the superiority of prophesying over tongues, he exhorted them to covet, or desire, that gift (12:31); yet he still allowed the proper use of tongues.
- B. Consider Paul's wisdom. He had just spoken harshly against any opposition (14:36-38); now he comforted them by calling them "brethren" and allowing their use of speaking in tongues.
- C. In spite of all he had said, he did not want any forbidding tongues from his commandments.
- D. Even when God warns heavily about the proper use of a thing, it is Pharisaism to reject any use of that thing. For example, teetotalers are Pharisees for rejecting the proper use of wine.

14:40 He closed with a general rule to keep all activities in the assembly decent and orderly.

- A. He prohibited many activities that are not decent or orderly, which are often allowed today.
 - 1. It is not decent or orderly to let women open their yappers; it is a shame (14:34-35).
 - 2. It is not decent or orderly to let tongues confuse and disrupt an assembly (14:22-28).
- B. Here is a general rule for determining the right thing to do between two godly alternatives.
 - a. Assemblies of the church should be structured to always keep this general apostolic rule.
 - b. Any practice that tends toward confusion, disruption, or distraction should be dropped.

Conclusion:

1. We must maintain, against the obsession of our effeminate age, emphasis on teaching doctrine (II Tim 4:3-4).
2. Paul did not care people were getting “a rush” at church speaking in tongues; he wanted knowledge spread.
3. Whether singing, praying, or preaching, all should be done clearly with the supreme goal of understanding.

Additional study:

1. [“Instrumental Music in the New Testament Worship Service” by Zack Guess.](#)
2. [Charismatic Religion Tried by the Scriptures.](#)