



Prophecy and Tongues in the Corinthian Church (1 Cor. 14:1-25)

Paul has just shown in the previous chapter that prophecies, tongues, and knowledge would pass away, but in the meantime the Corinthian church needed to know how to deal with them. It seems that the church was most interested in tongues, but it was less important than other supernatural gifts; especially prophecy.

I. A Comparison Between Tongues and Prophecy

Love should be the paramount desire of the heart of every Christian, but in first century Corinth, Paul urges the Christians to desire spiritual gifts and particularly prophecy. It is clear that prophecy is a greater gift because a truth was being conveyed to the church whether it be a prediction of a future event or more likely a truth revealed to the church as they laboured for the Lord before the writing of the New Testament.

The misuse of tongues in the assemblies in the church is the focus of Paul's teaching. He stresses that prophecy is greater than tongues because without an interpreter one speaks to God and not to men since men don't understand foreign languages, but God understands any language. Because no one understands him, what he speaks is a mystery.

The one who prophecies speaks in a language all can understand and he provides a message from God that will build, encourage, and console Christians. The tongue speaker builds himself, but the one who prophecies builds up the entire church.

1. Is Paul discouraging the speaking in tongues by the Christians in first century Corinth? (Explain your answer)

2. Could all the Corinthian Christians speak in tongues? (1 Cor. 12:30)

II. The Useless of Tongues Without Interpretation

Tongues in the assembly of the church had no value unless they provided a revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching. This could only happen in the presence of one who could interpret. The goal of all spiritual gifts is that the church may be built up (vs. 12).

3. What is meant by a distinct note of a flue or harp or an indistinct sound of the bugle?

4. How can we know that tongues speaking involved intelligible languages? (vss. 9-11)

III. The Limited Value of Tongues

Speaking in tongues was of little personal value unless the person is able to interpret what he has said. For this reason Paul says in verse 13 that one should pray for the ability to interpret what he is saying. If one prays in a foreign language he doesn't understand he has not been able to engage his mind and the exercise is personally fruitless. In verse 15 Paul shows that it is possible to control this speaking in tongues, so when he was in the assembly with no interpreter, he would pray and he would sing in a language all could understand. If not, verse 16 says no one will be able to agree because they will not know what is being said.



Paul is not against speaking in tongues. He does it himself, but if there is no one in the church to understand, he would rather speak five intelligible words that would instruct than ten thousand that no one would understand.

5. **What would have been the effect on the listeners in the church if someone spoke, prayed, or sang in a language that no one understood?**
6. **What is the meaning of the word “Amen” in verse 16?**



Tongues also had a negative effect on those who were outside the church. Paul begins by warning the Corinthians Christians, in verse 20, not to be children in their thinking. Children are attracted to that which appears exciting, but the focus on tongues speaking had become detrimental in Corinth and those who misused the gift demonstrated their spiritual immaturity. While Christians should be like children in their innocence, they should be mature in their thinking.

The Old Testament reference in verse 21 comes from Isaiah 28:11-12. Here is a warning to Israel that they would be overrun by a people speaking a foreign language. They did not listen to the prophets who spoke in a language they could understand, so God would punish them as they were overcome by an army speaking a foreign language.

Verse 22 says that tongues were a sign to unbelievers, but what does the sign mean? It does not seem to be positive because verse 23 says an unbeliever hearing the commotion would think them mad. On the Day of Pentecost, God used languages spoken by the apostles to speak to people in their own languages to great benefit and used in this way they were fruitful. In Corinth, the tongues speaking was detrimental since the unbelievers did not understand.

7. **Why is prophecy more valuable than tongues speaking for the believer as well as the unbeliever according to verses 22-25?**
8. **What are the effects of prophecy in verse 24-25?**

IV. Orderly Worship

In verse 26 writes about using tongues in the public worship; he says “when you come together.” Paul has shown that tongues speaking had limited value to one’s self, other Christians, and to the unbeliever. Now he describes how spiritual gifts are to be used in the church assembly. Verse 26 makes it clear that the church gatherings involved many people in many ways; some of which were miraculous and some of which were not. A hymn and lesson were not miraculous while a revelation, tongue, or interpretation were. The overarching teaching is this: ***“Let all things be done for building up.”***

9. What guidelines does Paul give for tongues speaking in the church assembly? (vss. 27-28)

Guidelines for prophecy are also provided. Only two or three prophets were permitted to speak and then there was to be a time of pondering over what was said. It was possible to have a false prophet, so listening and then weighing what the prophet said with Scripture and previous prophecies will help the church determine if what he says is true.

If a revelation comes to one while another is speaking, the one speaking should stop and allow the other to speak. Then those who have a revelation should take turns so that all may learn and be encouraged. A prophet could control himself according to verse 32. Even when God had revealed something to him, he could wait his turn and speak. God expects order in the church for he is not a God of confusion, but of peace.

10. According to verse 31 what was the purpose of prophecy?

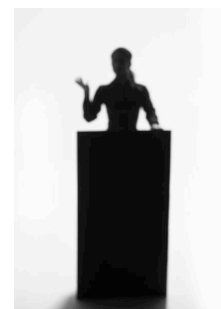
11. What does it mean to say that God is a God of peace and not confusion?

V. Teaching Regarding Women in the Assembly

As Paul begins his teaching concerning women in the assembly, he lets the Corinthians know that this is his universal teaching in all the churches. Today many want to dismiss this teaching entirely claiming that either Paul is anti-women or he did not write these verses, but since Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, these are not his personal opinions and there is no compelling reason to doubt these verses were penned by Paul.

Paul gives this instruction to women in the context of the church assembly; an assembly that had been marred by the misuse of tongues and prophecy. The silence is not a complete lack of speech at all times, but was referring to public speaking in the church assembly and most particularly the use of tongues and prophecy. Note how Paul had written about speaking in 13:1; 14:2, 3, 5, 6, 13, 19, 21, 23, 27, and 29. In each of these verses the speaking was in tongues or prophesying.

In chapter 14 Paul had told two groups to keep silent previously. The first is in verse 28 where the tongue speaker was to be silent if there was no one present to interpret. The second is in verse 30 where a prophet is to be silent if a revelation comes to another prophet while he is speaking. In both cases to be silent simply means to not talk.



Paul is not commanding absolute silence in all matters at all times, the saying of the “Amen” in verse 16 or singing in the assembly are certainly acceptable, but he does prohibit a public speaking role in the church for women. Paul doesn’t just prohibit speaking in tongues or prophesying, but makes a more blanket statement and specifically addresses the asking of questions. “In this instance it would be questioning that disrupted the assembly or challenged the authority of the speaker (as in the discerning of the prophets), or the type of questioning used among the Jewish rabbis as a method of teaching.”¹ Previously when speaking of head coverings Paul had taught women to act in a way that would bring honour to her husband and show herself to be in voluntary subjection to him. In chapter 14, the speaking and asking of questions seemed to undermine the authority of her husband.

How can we harmonise this teaching with 11:2-16 where women were prophesying. First, it is probable that 11:2-16 was not in the public assembly because in 11:17 Paul moves to a new topic and says, “when you come together,” indicating that previously he had been addressing behaviour that was not in the public assembly. Second, there could be assemblies that were not the assemblies of the entire church.

Not only does Paul say that this is a universal teaching for all churches, he says that the Law also said that women should be in submission. This does not stem from a cultural setting, but goes back to Genesis 3:16 where part of the penalty for Eve’s sin in the Garden was that a husband would rule over his wife. So this teaching goes back to the order of creation and the penalty for sin. In the Old Testament the leadership of worship in Israel was led by men.

12. What does 1 Timothy 2:8-12 say about women in church assemblies?

13. What reason does Paul give for not allowing a woman to ask a question in the public assembly? (vs. 35)

The word ask in verse 35 is the Greek word *eperotao* which is a strong word virtually signifying a demand. Paul is saying to go home and demand an answer from your husband. Apparently the women were demanding answers from speakers in the assembly and Paul says, do that at home. “He is not forbidding asking questions in humility.”² Paul’s goal is to see order in the public assemblies of the church.

It is important to note that these verses (nor the teaching in 1 Timothy 2:11-15) do not prohibit women from teaching men outside the church assembly or from women teaching women.

Paul closes chapter 14 by reminding the Corinthians that they were not unique. His teachings are the same in the churches. He calls on the prophets among them to confirm his teaching and if one does not agree then he is not recognised as a prophet. As he has consistently written, prophecy is better than tongues, but tongues may be used in the proper context so long as everything in the church assembly is done decently and in order.

14. How can the church today make sure that all things are done decently and in order?

¹Ferguson, Everett. *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*” Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996. p. 342.

²Redick, Dave. Women Speaking in the Assembly Part 2: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. <http://preacherstudy.com/pdf/women2.pdf>

