

In chapter 12 Paul addressed the importance of unity and equality among believers regarding their spiritual gifts and that they were to be used to build one another up. In chapter 13 he stressed that the gifts must be expressed in love. Now in chapter 14 he returns to two of the gifts to describe their correct use when believers gather.

*<sup>1</sup> Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.* 1 Corinthians 14:1 After telling the Corinthians about the necessity and superiority of love, Paul did not want them to think he was saying the gifts were unimportant. So, he instructs us regarding our attitude toward his last two subjects: pursue love and desire the spiritual gifts but especially the gift of prophecy.

Pursue is used 77 times in the Gospels in regard to following Christ with only one other usage (Matthew 23:34<sup>i</sup>). Pursue implies discipleship, a follower. It expresses "union likeness." To pursue *agape*/love is to pursue a relationship with Christ, the source of that love (1 John 4:8,9<sup>ii</sup>). You cannot have Christ and not have *agape* nor can you have *agape* and not have Christ. The goal of a first century disciple was to be like his rabbi. That is what it means to pursue. Our lives are to express Christlikeness which is *agape*.

We are also to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially that we might prophesy. To earnestly desire is one word in Greek. We could say to strive after something, or be jealous for it. **We are to strive for the gift of speaking Holy Spirit inspired words into a situation.** This is more than speaking truth. It is the appropriate expression of truth for a given situation (Isaiah 50:4<sup>iii</sup>; Proverbs 25:11<sup>iv</sup>). It is waiting on God to give us the right words (John 8:6<sup>v</sup>,26<sup>vi</sup>). I am often too quick to apply a general truth or to just speak my mind. If we will look to God and ask Him for the words for the situation before us, His words can make all the difference. That is the most needed gift.

Earnestly desire is the Greek word "*zeloute*" from which we get zealous. It is to covet or be desirous, envy, or jealous of something, in this case the gift of prophecy. (I described the meaning of prophecy more fully in comments on 12:28.)

*<sup>2</sup> 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.* 1 Corinthians 14:2 Paul seems to be downplaying the gift of tongues as a minor gift in a gathering as it differs from the others in that it edifies oneself and not the body unless it is given with an interpretation. (See 12:28<sup>vii</sup>; 14:4-19 especially verse 14.) Some people refer to this as a prayer language as it is speaking to God. It is just between you and God. I believe we can interpret "mysteries" merely as something not understood, in other words, unintelligible to the one praying.

How is that helpful? A passage from Romans 8 may clarify. *<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* Romans 8:26 Could this mean that we do not have the words, but the Spirit expresses through our lips our heart cry to God in words mysterious to us? That would edify the person praying as they would have been able to pour out their heart to God in praise or pain that was beyond the words that they could come up with themselves.

As we continue through this chapter try to understand what Paul is teaching. Regardless of the precise interpretation of the word tongues, Paul gets to the point in verse 4, that it only edifies the one speaking and is therefore not helpful in a gathering.

<sup>3</sup> *On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.* 1 Corinthians 14:3 This is the results of prophecy in the New Testament. It is different from the office of a prophet in the Old Testament (Luke 16:16<sup>viii</sup>). This is God's description of the fruit of the gift: upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation. If someone says they have the gift, but the fruit of their words is something different, they do not have the biblical gift of prophecy.

Let us take each word to see that we understand correctly what a prophecy does for the church. Upbuilding is an architectural word meaning a concrete structure, to build, confirm, or edify. A God given prophecy will edify and solidify the body of believers.

Encouragement, *paraklesis*, is also a word used for the Holy Spirit. We are encouraged by the Holy Spirit, sometimes through conviction to change, sometimes a confirmation that God is pleased with our actions, and sometimes that God knows what we are going through and will see us through. He consoles us in times of trials (2 Corinthians 1:3,4<sup>ix</sup>).

Consolation is similar to "encouragement." It can also mean to comfort in the difficulties we face. It is a main attribute of God in the Old Testament, *rahamim*. A word from the Lord can console us, which helps us bear up under distress.

A person does not have to say, "Thus saith the Lord!" to be prophesying. Every believer infilled with the Holy Spirit will experience one or more of these effects from their words. Our mutual sense will be that God has encouraged and comforted us, even if it was a word of correction. We will come away sensing we are more established as a group of believers. It can come in a number of ways: a timely song, a call to worship, a sermon, or even a testimony. Sometimes the one delivering the message will not even know they are being an instrument of prophecy, and God will receive all the glory.

<sup>4</sup> *The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.* 1 Corinthians 14:4 Again, it seems clear that this is a prayer language, praying directly from the Spirit of God what is on our heart without the involvement of the mind. It is the heart crying out to God with the help of the Holy Spirit expressing what cannot be put into words we are familiar with. It might be anguish or praise. (See vs 2.) It does edify the one praying but no one else. All the other gifts edify the body. Prophecy especially builds up others in the church as described in verse 3.

<sup>5</sup> *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.* 1 Corinthians 14:5 That does not mean that tongues are of no value. Paul wished the whole body had the gift. Nor does it mean all receive the gift (12:30<sup>x</sup>). We saw in chapter twelve that God gives the gifts as He wills (12:11<sup>xi</sup>). Our desire should be more toward those gifts that help everyone. If tongues are spoken with an interpreter, then it edifies others, for they can understand the words of praise (Acts 2:11<sup>xii</sup>).

I should add that there have been many attempts to prove or disprove the gift of tongues. Linguists tell us it is not like human language. Charismatics would say, "Of course not, it is a spiritual language." One man went to a congregation that often spoke in tongues with interpretations. He spoke a phrase in Greek. Someone who claimed to have the gift of interpretation gave a completely different meaning to what was said. These tests do not prove or disprove anything, but they do tell us that there are probably many imitations of the gifts, people saying what comes to mind and thinking it is from God. We

will see later in the passage that we do not take what is said as Scripture, but we try to discern if it was indeed from God or from man (14:29<sup>xiii</sup>). The prevalence of the imitation of the gifts is probably one reason many churches are reluctant to give free reign to them being expressed. We should not be afraid of the gifts, but we should be discerning. As Paul encouraged us in this verse, desire the gifts that build up our fellow believers.

*<sup>6</sup> 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? <sup>7</sup> If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? <sup>8</sup> And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.* 1 Corinthians 14:6-12 If Paul came just speaking in tongues the body would not be edified. They need to hear a revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching with understandable words for edification to occur. Paul drives home the point by illustrating it with off key music, an indistinct bugle sound, or a speaker of a foreign language, all of which communicate nothing to others. The off-key music just sounds like chaos. The sounding of the bugle is one of Paul's many applications of the military life as an example of Christian life. We are soldiers in the Lord's army (2 Timothy 2:3,4<sup>xiv</sup>). Our weapons are not carnal but mighty through God (2 Corinthians 10:4<sup>xv</sup>). But if our captain's signal through the bugle is uncertain, we do not know if we are to attack or set up camp.

The speaking of foreign languages was something the Corinthians were quite familiar with as their port had ships from different regions of the world. You can imagine a ship pulling into port and someone asking about their cargo and hearing in an unfamiliar language to go find someone who speaks Coptic. "What?" comes back the reply in Greek. And then confusion ensues as they try to find a language both understand. That is Paul's comparison with someone speaking tongues in the assembly of believers.

Paul goes on to acknowledge their zeal for spiritual gifts but tries to direct it by adding that they should strive to excel in a manifestation of the Spirit that builds others up. We gather to praise God and grow spiritually. You can pray in tongues at home as much as you want. You can even pray in tongues silently in the worship service.

Verses 3, 5, and 12 repeat the theme of using gifts that build up the church. He is not talking about the physical structure. He means that each of us who worship the Lord Jesus together need to be strengthened in our faith and knowledge of God's Word, encouraged, loved, and helped to continue following the Lord, maturing together increasingly into Christlikeness. Sometimes that means a loving rebuke to the one caught in sin (James 5:20<sup>xvi</sup>), sometimes it means giving to help a need, and sometimes it just means sharing what God is doing in your life or something new that you saw in God's Word. Paul describes this to the Ephesians in Ephesians 4:11-16 *<sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, <sup>14</sup> so that we may no longer be children,*

*tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

<sup>13</sup> *Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.* 1 Corinthians 14:13 Ask God for gifts that edify others! If God wants to convey something to you in tongues that is for the rest of the congregation, ask for the interpretation. If it is for others, God will give you the words others can understand so that they will be edified. As clear as this instruction is, you will find churches where there will be a time of speaking in tongues and everyone will babble something at the same time which no one understands.

<sup>14</sup> *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> 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.* 1 Corinthians 14:14,15 This shows us that this prayer language is not understood by the person's mind. So if you have the gift, pray with your spirit but pray also with your mind. Sing both in tongues and sing words you understand. This is, of course, in your own private times of worship.

<sup>16</sup> *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? <sup>17</sup> For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.* 1 Corinthians 14:16,17 Thanking God with your spirit in tongues cannot have the agreement of others for they don't know what you are saying. Your heart may well be praising God in gratitude in a deeper way than you could express in your native language, but no one else can join in your prayer of thanks. This is the fifth mention of the importance of gathering to build one another up, which certainly tells us this is Paul's theme in this passage. Gifts are not about the one employing the gift, but about growing together and maturing in Christ.

<sup>18</sup> *I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.* 1 Corinthians 14:18 Paul is really downplaying the helpfulness of tongues in a congregational setting but does not want them to ignore the gift. He tells them that he is glad that he prays with his spirit more than they do. Perhaps one reason the Corinthians so highly prized the gift is that they had seen Paul praying in tongues and wanted to emulate it, but partly for the reason of being seen as spiritual persons. In verse 5 he told them he would like for all of them to have the gift. It is not that the gift is unhelpful, it is just that it has its place and purpose, and the Corinthians and the church today need to understand that so there is not a cacophony of noise in a worship service. Paul is leading up to the next paragraph that will deal with order in a worship service.

<sup>19</sup> *Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.* 1 Corinthians 14:19 Here is the qualifier: is the gift done in public or private? A prayer language is personal and for private prayer, but in a congregation, we should speak so others are edified.

<sup>20</sup> *Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.* 1 Corinthians 14:20 God gave us a mind. Reason is a gift from God. Logic is a valuable tool. When used properly, it helps to clarify situations and even in understanding Scripture. Paul was a mature thinker. His letters demonstrate mature

thinking based on the truth of the Word of God and the understanding of what God has said before in the Old Testament (Acts 17:2<sup>xvii</sup>). It is unreasonable to think everyone speaking in tongues in a worship service is going to help the body to grow. Both new and old believers need clear Biblical teaching. Our minds need to be renewed by the Word of God (Romans 12:2<sup>xviii</sup>). Since I preached on 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, the Holy Spirit has been using that passage again and again to correct my thinking and behavior. That is something I can share with others that will help them as well. But my time of praying in tongues only benefits me.

There is an interesting principle here. Think clearly, in a mature way about the Scripture and how God wants us to speak and act. But there is no need to delve into the nature and depths of evil in its multitude of behaviors and temptations. Those in the law enforcement who must do that can tell you how detrimental that is.

*<sup>21</sup> In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." <sup>22</sup> Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. <sup>23</sup> If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? 1 Corinthians 14:21-23* It seems at first glance that Paul is contradicting himself by saying that the unbeliever will think you are mad when they hear the babble of tongues but in verse 22 saying that it is a sign for unbelievers. We must understand the context of the verse he was referring to, Isaiah 28:11,12. Paul applied a verse from Isaiah regarding God's warning of the foreign invasion speaking a language the Israelites did not know. Even though it came to pass, the Jews did not listen to the sign from God. When it came to pass it was a sign, but it left them in unbelief. So would it be with the immature use of tongues in a worship service if there is no interpretation. In other words, they would hear it but there would be no change of heart.

On the other hand, prophecy, or proclaiming the Word as directed by the Spirit is meant to build up believers. The gathering of believers we call the church is not generally the place where unbelievers find Christ. That is done one on one as we share the love of Christ with those we meet. The natural man does not understand the things of the Spirit, as they are foolishness to him (1 Corinthians 2:14<sup>xix</sup>). So, bringing a person to church is not the main way people are saved. But if they do happen to attend, they may be convicted by an inspired proclamation of the Word and repent.

The reason so many churches started offering a salvation message each Sunday is that the people in the congregation were being taught that you invite people to church to hear the gospel. That was not the way the early church functioned as we will see in the next paragraph. Many churches expect the pastor to be the soul winner and members just invite people to church. People are won in that manner as they come and hear the gospel and the Spirit touches their heart and convicts of sin, but that is not the main reason we gather. We gather, as Paul has said five times in this passage, to be built up, or matured, in Christ. We are to be equipping one another to be the witness to those we meet throughout the week.

Speaking forth the Word of God is for those who will receive it and be edified by it. Those people are the believers. The unbeliever does not recognize the Word of God as authoritative. A recent Gallup poll found only 20% of people claiming to be Christians believed the Bible was the Word of God. It is important as ever that the Word be

proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit so that people might be convicted that it is indeed the pure Word of God to us today.

*<sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, <sup>25</sup> the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.* 1 Corinthians 14:24,25 Prophecy, speaking forth the Word at the direction of the Holy Spirit, can convict the seeking unbeliever. The believer sees the Word bringing them under conviction and to repentance and transformation and recognizes the power of God's Word. In other words, prophetic expressions will call the person to repentance, whether it is from a revelation of the goodness of God or exposure of the sins that keep them from God. The holiness of God always reveals by contrast how sinful we are (Isaiah 6:5<sup>xx</sup>).

We experience a natural sense of unity when we are with like-minded people at an event or game. The enthusiasm is contagious. A similar thing happens in a supernatural way when the Word is proclaimed in the power of the Spirit to a church body. Together we sense God is speaking. I can tell when it happens because from my vantage point I can see everyone completely focused. There is an unusual silence. I sense it in my spirit as well. God has our attention, and he is impressing something on our hearts. During those moments even unbelievers among us know that God is really among us.

Paul is telling us something very important about what should happen when we gather. **Our focus should be to hear from God. Our part in the worship service is to see that all can hear from God.** That means helping with childcare or children's church, ushering, greeting, singing with our whole hearts, praying for each person who has a part as well as everyone attending, giving time and financial support, and bringing that seeking soul we have been witnessing to, getting to know others and their needs. It is that body that Paul described in chapter 12, working together to see that all are built up to be a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit (Ephesians 2:22<sup>xxi</sup>). You have a part in this. Do you know what it is? Are you letting God work through you in service to others so that the body of Christ might be built up?

A word of prophecy for you as an illustration and benediction, for those to whom it is meant hear 1 Corinthians 1:3-5, *<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. <sup>5</sup> For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.*

Questions:

- 1 What are we to pursue? Earnestly desire?
- 2 What should be the fruit of prophecy?
- 3 What is prophecy?
- 4 What is the purpose of tongues?
- 5 Do all who are believers speak in tongues?
- 6 How do we build one another up?
- 7 How does the Isaiah quote help us understand verse 22?
- 8 What happens when an unbeliever hears prophecy?
- 9 What should be our focus when we gather?
10. What is your part in making that happen?

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<sup>i</sup> **Matthew 23:34 (ESV)**

<sup>34</sup> Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,

<sup>ii</sup> **1 John 4:8-9 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

<sup>9</sup> In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

<sup>iii</sup> **Isaiah 50:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.

<sup>iv</sup> **Proverbs 25:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

<sup>v</sup> **John 8:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

<sup>vi</sup> **John 8:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.”

<sup>vii</sup> **1 Corinthians 12:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

<sup>viii</sup> **Luke 16:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.

<sup>ix</sup> **2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,

<sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

<sup>x</sup> **1 Corinthians 12:30 (ESV)**

<sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

<sup>xi</sup> **1 Corinthians 12:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

<sup>xii</sup> **Acts 2:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

<sup>xiii</sup> **1 Corinthians 14:29 (ESV)**

<sup>29</sup> Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

<sup>xiv</sup> **2 Timothy 2:3-4 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.

<sup>xv</sup> **2 Corinthians 10:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

<sup>xvi</sup> **James 5:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

<sup>xvii</sup> **Acts 17:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

<sup>xviii</sup> **Romans 12:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>xix</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

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<sup>xx</sup> **Isaiah 6:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

<sup>xxi</sup> **Ephesians 2:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.