

assess modern charismatic claims to prophecy. For the moment, however, I must return to 1 Corinthians 14.

The Superiority of Prophecy over Tongues (14:1–19)⁸⁰

That Paul should restrict the focus of discussion from the *χαρίσματα* (*charismata*) in general to two of them, prophecy and tongues, strongly suggests that there was some dispute or uncertainty about these two in the Corinthian church. It is even possible that the Corinthians lumped both gifts under the rubric *prophecy*, and it is Paul that is making the distinction.⁸¹ After all, on the day of Pentecost when the believers spoke in tongues, Peter insisted that this tongues-speaking was evidence that the last day promised by Joel had dawned, the day on which sons and daughters would *prophesy* (Acts 2:17, citing Joel). The range of the “prophet” word group was certainly broad enough to encompass tongues-speaking. In this view, it seems likely that in the eyes of some Corinthians the tongues form of prophecy was greatly to be preferred over the intelligible form of prophecy, presumably because it was more spectacular. Paul in this chapter draws a distinction between the two, and reverses the order of rank on the basis of which one best edifies the church.

Whether Paul was the first to make the distinction between prophecy and tongues or not, if the background at Corinth is anything like what I am suggesting, there is an important deduction to be made. Although some of Paul’s arguments in this chapter are of the generalizing sort, applicable to all the spiritual gifts, Paul’s chief concern is the relative weight given to prophecy and tongues. This means that Paul may *not* be saying that tongues is the least of the gifts on some absolute scale, but only that it is less important than prophecy on the scale of reference adopted; equally, it means that Paul may *not* be saying that *prophecy* is the *greatest* of the gifts on some absolute scale, but only that it is more important than tongues on the same scale of reference. The relative value of prophecy over against, say, apostleship, teaching or giving is not what is primarily in view. This observation is not jeopardized by 12:31a, which encourages the Corinthians to desire the greater gifts. That exhortation assumes that the spiritual gifts can be ranked, of course, but instead of providing such ranking,

80. For the discussion on the relation of 14:1 to chaps. 12 and 13, and defense of the view that 14:1 begins with imperatives, see the second chapter.

81. See Thomas W. Gillespie, “A Pattern of Prophetic Speech in First Corinthians,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 83–84; R. A. Harrisville, “Speaking in Tongues: A Lexicographical Study,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 35–48.

Paul hastens to transcend the spiritual gifts entirely with his chapter on love. Taking up the argument in 14:1, he does not attempt to rank all the gifts he has listed in chapter 12. Rather, assuming that spiritually minded believers will want the greater gifts, and having encouraged them along such lines, he proceeds to distinguish which is the greater of two—the two that apparently stand at the heart of Corinthian debate. And here, as Mills puts it, “Paul’s main objection is not to the practice of glossolalia so much as to the *estimate* of the practice.”⁸²

Potential of a *χάρισμα* (*charisma*) for Building the Church (14:1–5)

That thought, of course, is simply a corollary of the love expounded in the previous chapter. The importance of love does not mean it should be pursued *at the expense* of spiritual gifts:⁸³ they too are to be eagerly desired. We have already noticed (in the second chapter) that there is no clash between this encouragement and Paul’s insistence that the spiritual gifts are sovereignly distributed.⁸⁴ Here the apostle immediately becomes more specific. Eagerly desire spiritual gifts, he says, *especially* the gift of prophecy. The expression underlying the New International Version’s “especially” means “rather” or “but rather.”⁸⁵ It does not affirm that the best spiritual gift is prophecy; it simply specifies that the Corinthians are to seek this one in particular. The reasons for that specificity can only be learned from the context; such reasons, as I have already pointed out, are cast in the form of a sustained contrast between prophecy and tongues.

The person who speaks in a tongue does not in the first instance speak to men but to God. No one understands him (14:2). Some non-charismatics seek to reduce the scope of that “no one” to “no one who does not know the (human) language that is being spoken.”⁸⁶ That is barely possible; but since the preceding line draws a contrast between speech directed to people and speech directed to God, it seems more natural to understand the “no one” in a broader, principial fashion. The content of this tongues-speech is “mysteries.” The word may be

82. Watson E. Mills, *A Theological/Exegetical Approach to Glossolalia* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 99.

83. The second chapter deals with Martin’s reconstruction of this verse, including a perceived quotation from the Corinthian letter.

84. See further Robert Banks and Geoffrey Moon, “Speaking in Tongues: A Survey of the New Testament Evidence,” *Churchman* 80 (1966): 288.

85. μάλλον δέ. See BAGD s.v. 3.d.

86. E.g., Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts: The Christian’s Special Gifts in the Light of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 205–6.

used here in a nontechnical sense to suggest that "the speaker and God are sharing hidden truths which others are not permitted to share."⁸⁷ By contrast, the one who prophesies strengthens, encourages, and comforts others. This does not mean that prophecy is the only gift that has those virtues: teaching and tongues that are interpreted do as well. In other words, these *functions* of prophecy are not *definitional*.⁸⁸ The context specifies that the issue is *intelligibility*: among spiritual gifts of speech (others such as giving or administration are not in view), only those that are intelligible result in the immediate edification of the church. True, the tongues-speaker may be edifying himself (14:4);⁸⁹ but that is too small a horizon for those who have meditated on 1 Corinthians 13. This does not mean Paul is prepared to abolish tongues. On the contrary, he would love all of them to speak in tongues (which of course implies that some of them did not). This cannot mean that Paul's conception of the ideal in the church, as a considered theological stance, is that every Christian speak in tongues—any more than his desire in 7:7 that all be celibate as he means his considered theological stance is that the ideal church must be utterly celibate. After all, Paul has just finished insisting, in chapter 12, that not all *do* speak in tongues. The text before us simply means that Paul knows the gift of tongues is from God and is therefore a good gift, and he wants his beloved converts to enjoy as many good things as possible. One of those is tongues. "But rather," he says—the same expression as in 14:1—"I would like you to prophesy." Once again, the "but rather" does not *itself* establish a comparison in intrinsic worth. The expression refers to what Paul prefers, but does not itself give the reason why. The reason is provided in the context and the point is now driven home (14:5): in any comparison of prophecy and tongues, *in the church* the edification of the church is of paramount concern. On the other hand, it appears as if tongues can have the same *functional* significance as prophecy if there is an interpreter present. Of

87. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*.

88. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 181–84.

89. Some commentators find the notion of self-edification so difficult that they interpret this *in malem partem*: Paul is actually rebuking the tongues-speaker for edifying himself (e.g., Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, 207–8). But this scarcely fits the context, when Paul goes on to encourage tongues-speaking (v. 5), which here must be tongues-speaking *without* interpretation, and therefore in private and for self-edification, since once tongues are followed by interpretation there is no difference between this pair of gifts and prophecy, so far as the functional scale Paul is using is concerned. Moreover, contra Thomas, 1 Cor. 10:23–24 is no parallel. Paul is not there prohibiting the Christian "from misusing his Christian liberty by seeking his own profit or edification" (p. 208), but in the context of chaps. 8–10 doing so at someone else's expense. See further my comments on 12:7 in the first chapter.

course, against Hummel⁹⁰ and others, this does not mean there is *no* difference between tongues-plus-interpretation and prophecy. Verses 18–25 are still to come!

Edification Depends on Intelligibility of Tongues (14:6–12)

Paul has introduced the question of intelligibility; now he stresses and enlarges upon it. The string of gift words in 14:6 (revelation/knowledge/prophesy/word of instruction) should probably be rendered like this: "How shall I benefit you unless I report to you a revelation or some knowledge, or unless I prophesy to you or teach you?"—that is, the first two words probably refer to content, and the latter two to the form of content Paul's speech would take.⁹¹ The point is clear: edification demands intelligible content, and tongues, by themselves, cannot provide it. That Paul has to labor the point with examples from musical instruments and military bugle calls suggests how deeply committed to advancing the superiority of tongues the Corinthians (or at least some of them) must have been. Distinct notes from an instrument in coherent array constitute music and engender pleasure; distinct notes from a military horn elicit obedience; understanding another's language makes communication possible. "So it is with you," Paul writes—and the application of these illustrations is obvious. "Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts⁹² [here an assumption, with perhaps just a hint from the context that their desire was nevertheless unfortunately warped], try to excel in gifts that build up the church." Thus Paul's stress on intelligibility continues on from its introduction in the first five verses.

Stipulations for Tongues-Speakers (14:13–19)

Whether the opening "for this reason" (διό, *dio*) refers to 14:1–12 or just to verse 12,⁹³ the rendering of the rest of the verse is probably as in the New International Version: the tongues-speaker, in consequence of the importance of edifying the church and the concomitant need for intelligible utterance in the church, should pray for another

90. Charles E. Hummel, *Fire in the Fireplace: Contemporary Charismatic Renewal* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1978), 151.

91. See Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 138–39. He also points out that this pairing might be seen to generate an abab structure: revelation is communicated by prophecy, knowledge is communicated by teaching. But this may be too schematized.

92. On the unexpected πνευμάτων, instead of the expected πνευματικῶν, see K. S. Hemphill, "The Pauline Concept of Charisma: A Situational and Developmental Approach" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1976).

93. Compare Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), and Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, 210.

gift—the gift of interpretation.⁹⁴ Verse 14 does not introduce a new subject, a switch from speaking in tongues to praying in tongues, for 14:2 has already established that speaking in tongues is primarily directed to God. In other words, speaking in tongues is a form of prayer. Paul acknowledges that such prayer is valid prayer—his spirit praying—but his mind remains “unfruitful.” This may mean that such prayer leaves him without mental, intellectual, or thought benefit; but it may mean that under such circumstances, since his mind is not engaged in the exercise, it does not produce fruit in the hearers—the presupposition being that the edification of the hearers requires intelligibility of utterance, and intelligibility of utterance requires that the mind of the speaker be engaged. In light of the sustained emphasis in this chapter on the edification of the hearers, this latter interpretation is marginally more likely.

If that is the correct way to understand verse 14, then verse 15 probably means something like this: What then shall I do? Well, having prayed for the gift of interpretation, I will pray with my spirit (that is, I will continue to speak in tongues), but I will also pray with my mind (that is, the prayer will be repeated, this time with the mind engaged—presumably the interpretation of the prayer with the spirit). The same is true for singing with the spirit (apparently this is a more melodious or metrical form of tongues-speaking/praying). There is no evidence that this justifies entire congregational participation, as in many contemporary charismatic churches. For a start, that would violate Paul's principle that not all have the same gift; and moreover, since this too is a form of tongues-speaking, interpretation should be required. Still less is there justification for linking this with the hymn singing of Ephesians and Colossians: that the latter was “in the Spirit” is not a sufficient criterion.⁹⁵

That Paul has been talking about what he expects the tongues-speaker to do in the church is now confirmed by verse 16. Again Paul allows that the tongues-speaker whose utterances are not interpreted may be praising God with his spirit; but the non-tongues-speaker in the congregation does not know what the tongues-speaker is saying,

94. There is another way to understand this verse. The man who speaks in a tongue should go ahead and pray (in a tongue), in order that an interpreter, presumably some person other than the tongues-speaker, may interpret. In that case, the *ἵνα* clause does not constitute the prayer's content but its purpose. See Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, 210–11. But that presupposes that speaking in a tongue is different from praying in a tongue—a postulate refuted *infra*. Moreover, with no interpreter in the context, it is much more natural that the subject of the verb *interpret* is the tongues-speaker himself.

95. So Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation*, 70–71.

and cannot join in with the corporate “Amen.” The word I have rendered “non-tongues-speaker”⁹⁶ simply means the outsider, the layman, with the nature of the guild from which he is excluded determined by the context. This person must be a Christian, or there would be no expected “Amen” from his or her lips; hence the conclusion that this is a non-tongues-speaker. Again the principles of the passage are summarized: “You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified” (14:17).

Reverting again to the first person, Paul thanks God that he speaks in tongues more than all of his readers. Like a wise pastor, he thus identifies himself with those he seeks to correct.⁹⁷ But more movingly yet, like other passages in Paul's epistles (such as the astonishing list of his sufferings in 2 Cor. 11), this one suddenly provides a remarkable insight into Paul the Christian—an insight of which we would have been ignorant had not the circumstances of a particular church, in the providence of God, elicited these words from him. “But in the church,” he continues, “I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19).

There is no stronger defense of the private use of tongues, and attempts to avoid this conclusion turn out on inspection to be remarkably flimsy.⁹⁸ If Paul speaks in tongues more than all the Corinthians, yet in the church prefers to speak five intelligible words rather than ten thousand words in a tongue (which is a way of saying that under virtually no circumstance will he ever speak in tongues in church, without quite ruling out the possibility), then where does he speak them? It will not do to suppose Paul is counseling private, quiet use of tongues *during the assembly* when another is ministering. To adapt Paul's argument, where then would be the tongues-speaker's “Amen,” if he or she was not paying attention? We have already seen that Paul envisages praying with the spirit as a form of valid prayer and praise; what he will not permit is unintelligibility in the church. The only possible conclusion is that Paul exercised his remarkable tongues gift *in private*.

This is a point of considerable significance, from a pastoral point of view; but I shall take up such matters in the final chapter.

Throughout history there have been pendulum swings of various sorts. The church, unfortunately, is not exempt. At times there are enormous pressures to intellectualize and formulate the gospel; at

96. ἰδιώτης.

97. See Henry Chadwick, “‘All Things to All Men’ (1 Cor. ix.22),” *New Testament Studies* 1 (1955): 268–69.

98. See Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts*, 171ff.; well rebutted by Turner, “Spiritual Gifts Then and Now,” 22–23.

others, enormous pressures to “feel” one’s religious faith and develop passion for God—profound, emotional outbursts of contrition, praise, adoration. At most times in history, of course, groups espousing each of these polarities co-exist, one perhaps on the decline, the other on the ascendancy; and most groups embrace some mixture of the two, without much thought as to their proportion. Only rarely have Christians, such as the early English Puritans, self-consciously committed themselves to wholistic integration of the two. Noncharismatic evangelicals *tend* to the former stereotype; charismatics *tend* toward the latter. Both have their dangers.

One lesson, however, comes through these first verses of 1 Corinthians 14 with startling force. Whatever the place for profound, personal experience and corporate emotional experience, the assembled church is a place for intelligibility. Our God is a thinking, speaking God; and if we will know him, we must learn to think his thoughts after him. I am not surreptitiously invalidating what Paul has refused to invalidate. I am merely trying to reflect his conviction that edification in the church depends utterly on intelligibility, understanding, coherence. Both charismatic and noncharismatic churches need to be reminded of that truth again and again.

4

Order and Authority: Restraining Spiritual Gifts (14:20–40)

The Relation of Tongues and Prophecies to Unbelievers (14:20–25)
Order in Public Worship (14:26–36)
Tongues (14:27, 28)
Prophecy (14:29–33a)
Restrictions on Women (14:33b–36)
Warning (14:37–38)
Summary (14:39–40)
Concluding Reflections

There is a sense in which the contrast between the gifts of prophecy and tongues, developed by Paul in the first nineteen verses of this chapter, continues in the second half of the chapter. Certainly tongues and prophecy are set over against each other in verses 20–25. Although verse 26 lists several of the *χαρίσματα* (*charismata*), its primary function is to set the stage for renewed discussion of tongues (vv. 27–28) and prophecy (vv. 29–33). Even verses 33b–36, on what I judge to be the most likely interpretation, are not unrelated to the gift of prophecy. The closing verses include a warning (vv. 37–38) and a final pithy contrast between prophecy and tongues (vv. 39–40).

Nevertheless several noteworthy characteristics set this part of the chapter off from what precedes. Paul’s tone becomes a shade more