

In the Protestant Reformation, the reformers placed tremendous stress on the gifts of the Spirit to the whole body of Christ. Pastor John Calvin himself has rightly been described as “the theologian of the Holy Spirit.” Yet Reformed Christians always have been given a “bad press” for our views on the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Our conviction is that God purposefully gave some gifts (specifically the ability to work miracles, the gift of revelatory prophecy, and speaking in tongues) only for a limited period of time, which coincided with the time of the apostles.

I can give you the Reformed position in six words. The Spirit works with the Word. Six words. The Spirit works with the Word. So, as we come to the classic chapter on speaking in tongues, we find one main lesson.

The main tongues lesson: the emphasis in worship is not on interesting and impressive spiritual gifts that might divide, but rather on lovingly using spiritual gifts to explain God’s Word so that everyone understands and unites.

First, we are talking about the gift of the Spirit, and then about the Spirit’s gifts. The gift of the Spirit is as big of an event as the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the ascension of Christ, and the crowning of Christ as King, because these events actually belong together as one set of events having significance for all of us today. Let me explain. The Spirit was promised by God the Father, and given to us by Christ. John the Baptist baptized with water, but insisted that it was only Jesus who could baptize with the Holy Spirit. Christ’s work of being crucified and rising again was really Jesus securing or getting the Spirit for us. After Jesus rose, ascended to heaven and was crowned as King, Jesus received the Spirit. Jesus then poured out that Spirit upon us. Because we first-of-all have the Spirit of Christ we second-of-all have spiritual gifts from Christ. That included speaking in tongues in the early days of the church, which were a gift from Christ to the church. Christ exercises His headship over the church by means of the Spirit working with the Word.

Historical note: Before the New Testament books were completed, God revealed instructions through speaking in tongues, paired with prophesying (explaining). Later, tongues were replaced by the completed Bible. Apostles preaching without a completed New Testament were replaced by pastors preaching with a completed New Testament. The Spirit of Christ now works with the Word of Christ through the minister of Christ. The Spirit works with the Word.

Why did Paul write chapter 14? The church in Corinth was divided over the role and purpose of tongue-speaking in public worship, so Paul wrote chapters 12-14 to address it.

Paul wrote chapter 12 to emphasize unity in the church is like the unity of the human body.

Paul wrote in chapter 13 to emphasize that love of our brothers and sisters is the context in which any discussion of spiritual gifts must take place.

Paul is concerned for unity and love.

Which is why Paul's first two words in chapter 14 must be remembered throughout our study. Pursue love. This is an outflow of what Paul wrote in chapter 13.

The overarching theme of chapter 14 is building up the church.

This is why spiritual gifts are given to the church.

1. Build the church! tongues were less valuable, because the blessing is for one person, not the whole church. (v.1-9)

In verses 1-5, the point is that love is of top importance. With that established, Christians are to eagerly desire the greater spiritual gifts. Note this right away – tongues-speaking is not the greater gift. The greater gift is explaining the tongues. Those who thought of tongues-speaking as the most important, needed this reminder that tongue-speaking is inferior to preaching and teaching the Word.

In Verse 1, Paul says this, listen, *“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.”* To prophesy was to have Spirit-illuminated speaking, or preaching.

There is a simple reason that tongues-speaking was inferior to prophecy. It was because tongues-speaking could not be understood by the people as a whole. Verse 2, *“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.”* No one understands him. But God's intent is for it to be understood, for God is revealing mysteries. These were truths that people could not know unless God revealed them, because the people did not have the New Testament yet!

Here Paul wrote verses 3-4, *“on the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.”* Prophecy is better because everyone can understand it. Understanding leads to comforting, encouraging, and strengthening all the people.

If the tongues speaking is not translated, it is known only to the speaker. He alone is encouraged or consoled.

In verse 5, Paul echoed Numbers 11:16-30, where Moses wished that all of God's people were prophets. Here Paul seemed to wish that everyone could speak

in tongues. Listen to verse 5, *“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.”*

There is no doubt that Paul saw value in tongues-speaking. However, Paul emphasized the much greater value of prophesying, because Paul measured by getting your point across to the crowd. When tongues are translated, that is of equal value with prophesying, because both can be understood by the congregated people.

In verse 6, Paul asked how tongues can bless without other the other spiritual gifts to help the people to understand.

In verse 7, Paul gave examples of musical instruments not playing a distinction of musical tones, not enabling the audience to know what song is being played.

In verse 8, Paul gave the example in a military context, of a trumpet that was supposed to play a certain song to summon the army for war, but the trumpet did not make the notes clear. The trumpet fails to send the message to the army.

In verse 9, Paul compared those examples back to the issue of understanding tongues. If the congregation cannot understand, the message did not get across, and there was no more value than noise in the air.

What have we learned in the first nine verses? It is clear that some individuals in Corinth with the gift of tongues thought that their own interesting and impressive, attention-getting spiritual gifts made them superior to others in the church who did not have this gift of tongues-speaking. That error in thinking was causing offenses and separations. So, in these verses, Paul was instructing them in the right way to think about the gift of tongues, so that no one would feel superior and no one would feel offended, left out, or jealous. The gift of tongues was intended by God as a blessing, and so it should have been used in the correct way that strengthened the body, demonstrated love, and unified people.

Yet Paul did not want to discourage tongues-speaking, but rather encourage it. The most important thing for Paul is that the church understands. Only when the church understands, can the church can be comforted in God’s love, and grow to trust God more. The congregation must be built up in the faith, not confused. The church must be unified, not divided. Love is the best way for the church to function. Long after the gift of tongues passes away, there would be love. Long after the gift of prophecy passed away, the gift of love will remain. Those who love God and love the church, build up the church, which brings us to our second point.

2. Don’t distract. tongues, like all gifts, must be used as intended. Tongues must be paired with the prophesying for the understanding of all. (v.10-19)

In verse 10, Paul made a simple point that there are many different

languages in the world, and each language has meaning to those who speak that language. Paul is saying that when God gave tongues, it was understandable to someone who speaks that language.

So, what was speaking in tongues? It was when the Spirit came upon Christians and gave them the ability to speak in an existing foreign language, even though the person speaking had never studied that language. Let me prove that from the Bible.

First - when the Spirit came in Acts 2, we read in Acts 2:4, that “...*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” In Acts 2:5, “*there were dwelling in Jerusalem....men from every nation under heaven.*” Acts 2:6, “...*each one was hearing them speak in his own language.*” The words of the speaker were the words of the Holy Spirit!

Second – the same word from Acts 2 to describe what happened when the Spirit was given, is the same word that Paul used “glossa” in 1 Corinthians 14 to describe the tongues activity in Corinth. Identical expressions have an identical meaning.

This sermon would be of no use to you if I preached it in the Hungarian language. If I was suddenly given the ability to preach in Hungarian, and someone else was suddenly given the ability to understand the language of Hungarian, so that he could translate my Hungarian sermon into English for you. The gift of tongues was not some mysterious babble, but was a known language, capable of translation. This is what was happening in ancient Corinth.

The reason understanding was such a problem is explained in verse 11, “...*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.*” The language barrier must be overcome for there to be unity in the church.

In verse 12, Paul again highlighted his main point, “*So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations (showings) of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.*” Since tongues-speaking alone leaves them foreigners to each other, they should desire something better than tongues. What is better than tongues? Whatever builds up the church to love each other better! To remain as foreigners to each other leads to treating each other as foreigners. That is what the pagans across Corinth do. Paul again wrote his point in verse 13, “*Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.*”

It is not enough to speak in a tongue. The job is not done until the church understands. So, the tongues-speaker should pray that God will also give him the ability to explain that spoken message to that congregation.

In verse 14, an amazing statement, “*For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.*” Paul shows that the mind of the tongues-speaker is not involved in what he is saying. The Spirit of God uses the person’s voice, his sound-

producing ability, but his mind is bypassed! What this means is that the voice is the voice of the man, but the words are the words of The Holy Spirit.

In verse 15, we read, *“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.”*

In verse 16, Paul turns to the actual practice of tongues-speaking. The words must be stated in the language of the gathered people, or how can others agree? They will say amen, because everyone else is saying amen, but they don't really grasp what is going on. Paul concludes in verse 17, that event would not build up such a person. It is not satisfactory to Paul for some people to be following along and saying amen at the correct times, but without fully understanding. This unacceptable situation is why Paul finishes by writing verses 18 and 19. In verse 18, Paul wrote that he himself spoke in tongues more than any of them! Consequently in verse 19, it is important to see how Paul approaches public ministry in the church - Paul preached in church, rather than speaking in tongues in church, because Paul loved the people. Since Paul loved the people, Paul wanted the people to understand. So, Paul would rather say 5 words that the church can understand, than to say 10,000 words that the church cannot understand. Here is the point – while the gift of tongues had an important role to play in giving the church the words of the Spirit of Christ, if the tongues-speaking was not interpreted into the language known by that church, no one would be edified.

Please feel the weight that Paul placed on understandable preaching. Not an emphasis on earnestness, but on understanding the words. Not an emphasis on dynamic words and powerful sermons, but on understandable sermons. Not a priority on personally fulfilling and emotionally recharging experiences in worship, but on the understandability of the worship service to our minds. Love drives Paul to write this, and love drives us to present everything in worship in a way that can be followed by everyone.

3. Worship God together. tongues were a temporary sign to confirm to unbelievers that God was actually present. Nowadays unbelievers become aware that God is present by hearing the Bible clearly proclaimed so that the church and visitors can understand it. Understanding God's Word brings an awareness of God's presence, a conviction of sin, a call to faith, an upbuilding of faith, a unifying of the church, and the worshipping of God! (v.20-25)

In verse 20, Paul urges them to be mature in their thinking. This is so that church members will realize their behavior and correct it. The maturity will allow them to see that their distracting and disorderly behavior in worship was serving as an obstacle to visiting unbelievers coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

A preoccupation with tongues or with dynamic preaching shows immaturity.

Mature people know that what is important is the content of the preaching and what gets across to the worshippers. Children want to be entertained in church, and mature people want to hear the truth of God explained.

In verse 21, Paul used an Old Testament passage to illustrate the point of immaturity preventing understanding. God's message came when the prophets spoke in Hebrew to God's people. But when God's message did not get through, God sent his message in the form of hostile invaders who spoke different languages. The people of God could not understand what the invaders were saying. Because the people did not listen to God through the prophets, the people of God were then oppressed by foreigners. Listen to verse 21, *"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.'"* Paul is making the application that if the Corinthian tongue-speakers continue to speak in uninterpreted tongues – even though the tongue-speaker was declaring God's message – the people in the congregation will not be able to understand the words of God, just like the Israelites could not understand the Assyrians. This is the key thing to grasp – not being able to understand the message of God is a form of judgment that is brought about by the people's immaturity – their failure to do things properly.

Lack of understanding tongues is the basis for Paul's comment in verse 22, *"Thus tongues are a sign not for believers, but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers."* The unintelligible language of ancient Israel's conquerors was the result of the fact that the people of Israel had not believed God's promises, and thus came under God's judgment in the form of unintelligible speech. To speak in a way the people can understand is a blessing. To speak in a way that the people cannot understand results in confusion, which becomes a sign of God's judgment. No one can listen to God, because no one can understand what is being said. Do you see the connection with ancient Israel? The church in Corinth is being so immature that they are risking becoming like ancient Israel and being held captive to a people who cannot be understood. Unbelievers were coming to church, and hearing tongues, and the visitors associated the speaking in tongues with pagan worship, and instead of being drawn into salvation in Christ, they were being pushed further away into judgment. On the other hand, when the church in Corinth practiced speech that WAS understood by visitors, the understanding brought genuine conviction of the truth and the result was faith – saving faith.

This explains verse 23, *"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?"*

The visitors will react according to the immaturity of the church. They will

say you people are crazy. The visitors would likely come to the conclusion that the church is no different from the other religions with false worship in Corinth. Those religious gatherings were characterized by wild behavior and ecstatic utterances, much of it not understandable. The church is supposed to be mature and therefore different.

The maturity of thinking leads to a vision of how God uses the church to bring people to Himself. Paul explains how God works in the last two verses. In contrast to immaturity and chaos, here is a mature view of what God does for church visitors when there is wisdom and orderliness in the worship. Verse 24-25, *“But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 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.”*

Look at the remarkably different effect of worship that is understood. The better effect of preaching in a way that people grasp is obvious.

Conclusion: *Bring people to church so that they understand the Bible.*

SI – in the middle ages, church was held in a language the people did not understand. Latin. The high point of the service seemed to be when the minister would hold up the bread of the Lord’s Supper and say in Latin, “Hoc est corpus deum” This is my body. But the people did not understand. They would repeat the phrase, not knowing its meaning, but assuming it was powerful. They did their best to repeat the phrase, but it sounded like “Hocus pocus Ummm.” Have you heard that before? Still today the misunderstanding of the phrase this is my body of the Lord’s Supper, is used as the phrase in magic tricks when the magician is about to pull a rabbit out of a hat, he has the whole crowd say, “hocus pocus Umm.” And then he pulls the rabbit out of the hat. Look how the message of God, when not understood, pushes people further into darkness, and even invites people to believe in dark magic with the most powerful words that they can find.

SI – an American woman grew up as a Mormon. As a young adult, she started to question whether Mormonism was true. She decided to attend a Christian church. While there, the pastor said, “God cares more about people than about the rules that you broke.” In that moment for the first time, she understood that God gives grace to save sinners. She said, “Okay, I needed to hear that, because I was living by a rule book, and I knew that I could not live good enough.” She started to read the New Testament, and she became a Christian and a follower of Jesus Christ. What is key to her conversion? Coming to a Christian worship service, and understanding it.

Paul was writing truth to the Corinthians about how God saves people. It is preaching in a way that is understood. Pagan religions emphasize religious experience and bizarre behavior. Christian churches have an entirely different

atmosphere.

When an unbeliever comes from the chaos in the world, into the beautiful and organized truth of the worship of God, things start to happen. First, the unbeliever becomes aware of the presence of God. Second, the unbeliever becomes aware of his own sin. Third, the unbeliever becomes aware that he cannot keep his sins hidden from the holy God into whose presence he has come in that worship service. Here is the most important matter in the life of that person. How will that sinner respond? Instead of seeing crazy people speaking in tongues, that sinner will see that because of the truth of God's grace being explained in that place, the sinner will conclude that God must be worshipped and believed. The people in the church go from being strangers and foreigners, to being brothers and sisters in Christ.

Bring people to church so that they understand the Bible.