In chapter 14 Paul returned to the topic raised by the Corinthians in their letter to him. They had inquired about matters of the Spirit (pneumatika, ref. 12:1), but Paul’s discussion makes it clear that they were actually concerned with the charismata – the Spirit’s gifts. The Corinthians might not have discerned any distinction between them, but Paul did; he understood that the Spirit bestows His gifts to the Church as a key component of His work in the creation and on its behalf.

The charismata are but one aspect of the pneumatika which have their singular goal in a christified creation – that is, in the summing up of all created things in Christ.

In the present age, the Spirit’s work of renewal is limited to the spirits of the saints; like the rest of the physical creation, Christians’ bodies continue under the curse awaiting the resurrection and full and final perfection which will follow upon Christ’s Parousia (cf. 15:12-58 with Romans 8:9-1; 2 Corinthians 5:1-8; Philippians 3:17-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; etc.). This means that the pneumatika are solely concerned in this age with the Church and its up-building as the spiritual community of the new creation. And being one aspect of the pneumatika, the charismata share the same concern.

- The Spirit distributes His gifts to individual believers according to His wise and purposeful design that the Church – Christ’s Body – should be built up in all things into Him who is the Head. (Hence Paul’s discussion in 12:1-30). The charismata are individual endowments, but which have their meaning, use and value in the community: The gifted members receive and employ their gifts for the well-being and up-building of the whole body. Only in this way are the gifts authentic as charismata; only in this way are they authentically pneumatika.

- And if the Spirit gives His gifts for the sake of the members’ individual and mutual conformity to Christ, then the gifts must operate as a ministration of love (13:1-13). This is true for two reasons: First, there is no edification in the absence of love (cf. 8:1 with 12:18-13:3); second, and most importantly, the life of the body and its members is the life of Christ Himself (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-4), and the life of Christ is the life of love.

Paul recognized that he couldn’t rightly address the Corinthians’ concerns about the Spirit’s gifts and their operation without first providing the proper framework. One cannot address questions respecting the charismata without situating them within the larger matter of the pneumatika. And this means approaching the Spirit’s gifts in terms of the Church: the Body of Christ which is a spiritual organism animated and nurtured by love. Expressed in terms of Paul’s letter, this explains why chapter 14 – which at last turns to the concerns raised by the Corinthians – follows after (by necessity) chapters 12 and 13. And by way of introducing chapter 14, a few observations are in order:

The first thing to note is that Paul limited his treatment to the gifts of tongues and prophecy. There are two likely reasons for this: First, the Corinthians may have posed their questions to Paul in terms of these two gifts (certainly tongues); a second possibility is that Paul drew upon these two because of their usefulness in constructing his argument.
The first option is supported by the natural-minded orientation of the Corinthian believers. In every issue and concern they placed themselves and their own personal interests at the center. So it was with spiritual gifts; their gifts were ultimately about them, and so the Corinthians would have naturally focused their attention on the more showy and seemingly important gifts: tongues, knowledge, prophecy, etc. On the other hand, tongues and prophecy are eminently suited to Paul’s point that the charismata are given to serve the Church’s edification. The reason is that both gifts involve utterance, and speech is a primary way in which believers build one another up (ref. 14:1-6, 12-17, 26; cf. also Ephesians 4:11-16, 29; Colossians 3:16, 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Secondly, Paul’s intent in this chapter was to answer the Corinthians’ inquiry regarding the Spirit’s gifts and their meaning and purpose, not provide a formal theology of tongues (or of prophecy). This observation is critically important because the gift of tongues is typically the focal point in the dispute between charismatics and non-charismatics and this chapter is a classic proof-text in the dispute. Employed in that way, the passage is set at odds with Paul’s intent and divorced from its context. The result is that its true meaning and contribution to Paul’s argument and overall instruction are obscured.

Implied by the previous observation is the fact that rightly interpreting Paul’s instruction in this chapter depends upon grasping – and working from – his understanding of the gift of tongues (as well as the gift of prophecy). A common error is to start from one’s own premises and definitions and then interpret a text through that lens; so here people tend to read Paul’s instruction in terms of their own definition of tongues and prophecy (whether or not they do so consciously). But it ought to be obvious as a first principle that arriving at Paul’s meaning requires starting with his definitions and premises.

- What did Paul understand the gift of tongues to be?

- And in what sense does this gift comprise a plurality? That is, what did Paul mean by his statement that there are kinds of tongues (12:10)? Does “kinds” refer to different manifestations of the one gift or to a family of related gifts?

- Paul also indicated in verse 12:10 that the Spirit endows the same person with these “kinds” of tongues. Is this always the case, and does this lend support to the notion of public and private gifts of “tongues-speaking,” the latter often being associated with a personal “prayer language”?

- So also, how did Paul understand the gift of prophecy? Did he view it as functioning essentially like the ministry of Israel’s prophets? If so, does this imply continuing revelation in the New Covenant era and therefore an “open canon”? Can a revelatory prophetic gift exist without jeopardizing the integrity of the Scripture? On the other hand, if the gift of prophecy differs from the prophetic ministry of the Old Testament Israelite prophets, what is that difference and how do we know? Also, what is the relationship between prophecy as a spiritual gift and the role of the prophet under the New Covenant (cf. Acts 11:27-28, 13:1, 21:8-11 with 1 Corinthians 12:28-29, 14:29-32 and Ephesians 4:11-13)?
It goes without saying that Christians provide different answers to these (and other) questions, and the answers they give are foundational – in some cases, even determinative – in how they interpret Paul’s instruction and its relevance for the Church today. With that in mind, it’s necessary to start the treatment of this passage with at least a general framing of Paul’s understanding of the gifts of tongues and prophecy. Of course, many will take exception to the view espoused here; indeed, that would be the case regardless of the position taken. More will be said later at the appropriate points in the exegesis of the passage, and the hope is that the position promoted here will be adequately developed and supported from the text. But for now, a handful of observations ought to suffice by way of introduction.

1) First, concerning the tongues gift, and setting aside for now the notion of tongues as a private, personal phenomenon (as in the case of a “prayer language”), it seems clear that Paul understood the gift of tongues – in its public expression, at least – to be a supernatural endowment by which a person is enabled by the Spirit to speak in a language he (and perhaps at least one or more of his hearers) doesn’t know, but an authentic language nonetheless.

2) This means that there is inherent meaningful content in what is spoken. This is important in that it implies that the interpretation of tongues involves extracting and communicating the content that is present in the speech rather than assigning meaning to sounds which are intrinsically meaningless (as when one assigns a certain meaning to non-linguistic gibberish). Indeed, as Carson has noted, one must question in what sense mere sounds without intrinsic meaning can be “interpreted.” Assigning meaning where none exists in the speech itself is either speculation or divination, not interpretation.

Carson’s comments are helpful: “The interpretation issues in intelligible speech, cognitive content; and if it is not in fact a rendering of what was spoken in tongues, then the gift of interpretation is not only misnamed but also must be assessed as undifferentiable from the gift of prophecy. The tight connection Paul presupposes between the content of the tongues and the intelligible result of the gift of interpretation demands that we conclude the tongues in Corinth, as Paul understood them, bore cognitive content.”

3) Taken together, these two observations leave room for language that is non-human, but language nonetheless. Some treat this notion of non-human language in terms of purported “angelic language” (ref. 13:1), but the example of computer code shows that it can take a myriad of forms. Binary object code (“machine language”) doesn’t constitute a human language, but consists entirely of the numbers 1 and 0. Yet it is language in that it contains and conveys informational content; it communicates to the machine “hearer.” So it is conceivable that tongues could embody verbal communication that exists beyond the bounds of human language. Tongues as non-human language is certainly possible, but the manifestation at Pentecost would seem to argue against it – at least with respect to the public function of the gift (ref. Acts 2:1-6).
With respect to the gift of prophecy, opinions are no less diverse than with the gift of tongues. There are those who maintain no essential distinction between the role of the Old Testament prophet and the spiritual gift of prophecy. Others distinguish the prophetic gift from the office of prophet, and link Israel’s prophets, not with the spiritual gift of prophecy, but with the men identified as prophets in the New Testament. Still others distinguish all three of these prophetic dimensions. Where prophecy is regarded as revelatory, it is generally held by non-charismatics to have ceased (as also the role of “prophet”) with the completion of the canon. This conclusion is grounded more in philosophical and doctrinal considerations than exegesis of this passage (and others), with the primary concern being the obvious problem of an “open canon” and ongoing divine revelation.

Many, however, regard the gift of prophecy as non-revelatory and treat it as roughly synonymous with the preaching function. Those holding this view thus tend to describe the prophetic gift rather than define it. That is, they address it in terms of its functional operation rather than a formal definition. Packer’s comments are illustrative (and reflect a general Reformed perspective): “The essence of the prophetic ministry was forthtelling God’s present word to his people, and this regularly meant application of revealed truth rather than augmentation of it [i.e., the introduction of new revelation]. As Old Testament prophets preached the law and recalled Israel to face God’s covenant claim on their obedience… so it appears that New Testament prophets preached the gospel and the life of faith for conversion, edification and encouragement…”

Packer thus conflates and makes essentially synonymous all three prophetic dimensions: the spiritual gift of prophecy and the two prophetic roles of Old and New Testament prophet. But in trying to equate the three, he confuses the matter by moving the prophetic ministry as such away from a revelatory role. He starts with the premise that the Church’s prophetic ministry involves the proclamation of previously revealed truth, but his further premise of “sameness” requires him to then assert the same thing regarding the Old Testament prophets – an assertion he knows he must qualify. (Thus his use of the qualifier “regularly.”)

But there is a better option for doing justice to the biblical text’s treatment of prophecy and the prophetic office and the problem of an open canon. Thus some initial observations: First, the Scripture distinguishes the New Testament prophet (and prophetic utterances) from the Old Testament prophet and prophecy at least in terms of authority. In the New Covenant era, prophetic utterances and prophets are subject to apostolic authority and judgment (cf. 14:29-33, 34-37 with 11:4-6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). Christ’s apostles, not prophets, are the final authority in matters of God’s word. Consistent with this, it is possible for the New Testament prophetic ministry to be a revelatory ministration without jeopardizing the scriptural canon (ref. 14:6, 26, 29-30). It can be a form of secondary revelation – that is, the Spirit’s work of revealing truth in the cause of the grand revelation of God in Jesus Christ – the revelation embodied in the Scriptures (cf. 2:10 with Matthew 11:27, 16:17; Galatians 1:15-16; Ephesians 1:17; etc.).