



1 Corinthians 14:1-25

ORDER IN WORSHIP: TONGUES

09



WEEK 09

Order in Worship: Tongues

After a detour in chapter 13 to discuss the nature of love and its centrality in the exercise of all gifts, Paul returns to the use of specific gifts in corporate worship. The two gifts, tongues and prophecy, were gifts of *speaking* in the early church. Theologian, David Garland, observes that the believers are to “*pursue*” love but to “*desire*” gifts with which to serve the body. This has two important implications. First, we cannot “muster” spiritual giftedness; it is something we receive from God. Second, our active work and focus should be on cultivating love for others. That is the context in which giftedness finds its home.

Background is needed to understand the two gifts being examined. The word “prophecy” refers to a word or message given to someone from God to be shared with others. Prophets speak words from God. People disagree as to what extent prophecy is still a ministry in the church today. Wherever one falls on this issue, we should agree on two boundaries. First, no one today speaks the authoritative word of God apart from the Scriptures. The Bible is the final, complete, and sufficient word of God for the church, and it cannot be added to. Second, the Holy Spirit is active in leading and guiding His people. He will often prompt and lead people in how they should follow Him and serve others. However we speak of the Spirit’s work today, we must avoid two extremes: claiming His promptings match the authority of Scripture or denying His ongoing ministry in the life of people.

Daily Readings

- 01 1 Corinthians 14:1-9
- 02 1 Corinthians 14:10-19
- 03 1 Corinthians 14:20-25
- 04 Colossians 3:15-16
- 05 Romans 14:19
- 06 Ephesians 4:16
- 07 Ephesians 5:21-33

If the gift of prophecy is difficult to identify today, the gift of tongues is moreso. The phrase “speaking in tongues” can sound strange, but it is rooted in the concept of a *tongue* as a *language*. Acts 2 tells the story of the original disciples on the day of Pentecost in which, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4). The Spirit supernaturally enabled the disciples to speak in foreign languages they did not previously know. This example of being able to proclaim Christ to foreigners is miraculous and clear in purpose.

Apparently, people with this miraculous enablement were speaking in foreign tongues in the worship gathering, missing the original purpose of “tongues” from Pentecost. While much is mysterious to us about precisely how this gift operated in the first century or its relevance for today, Paul’s main point is clear—spiritual gifts are not given for believers to show off or elevate their own standing. They exist to build up the church and to love others.

INTELLIGIBILITY IN WORSHIP

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. ³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? ⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

¹³ For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit,

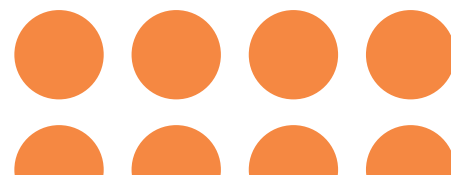
but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.¹⁶ Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?¹⁷ You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰ Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.²¹ In the Law it is written:

“With other tongues
and through the lips of foreigners
I will speak to this people,
but even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord.”

²² Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers.²³ So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?²⁴ But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all,²⁵ as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”



Discussion Guide

WARM UP

Have you studied a foreign language? Do you speak it fluently? What is the most difficult part of learning another language?

EXPLORING 1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-25

Keep in mind that Paul's emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is propriety and order in worship. Remember the conflicts that characterize the Corinthian church. What is the significance of the phrase, "Follow the way of love," from chapter 14 regarding spiritual gifts? Do you think Paul is prioritizing love over seeking spiritual gifts? Why?

Discussions over the use of tongues in corporate worship often lead to divisions among believers, missing the purpose of this section of Paul's letter. However, the interpretation of this section is the topic of much debate. Those from more charismatic backgrounds are accustomed to the public expression of the gift of tongues. Others believe tongues refer to foreign languages. According to verses 3-5, why does Paul say prophecy should take precedence over tongues? (Note: In this case, prophecy is not foretelling the future, but *forth-telling* the gospel for the edification of the body.)

In verses 6-12, Paul warns against using unintelligible, ecstatic language, which appeared to be an abusive practice of some within the worship services at Corinth. What was the negative effect of this practice? In their immaturity and worldliness (3:1-3) and with the context of this week's passage, do you think the Corinthians may have been obsessed with the gift of tongues?

How does Paul illustrate in these verses that prophecy is preferable to tongues? Why does *forth-telling* the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit have such a great effect?

What principles do you find in this passage that are most beneficial for the church today? Should we be cautious of practices in public worship that draw attention to ourselves and confuse unbelievers in our midst?

APPLICATION

How might you most effectively follow the “way of love” this week in the lives of others?

THINK

“When I was little, we used to play church. We’d get the chairs into rows, fight over who’d be preacher, vigorously lead the hymn singing, and generally have a great carnal time. The aggressive kids naturally wanted to be up front, directing or preaching. The quieter ones were content to sit and be entertained by the up-fronters. Occasionally we’d get mesmerized by a true sensationalistic crowd-swayer—like the girl who said, “Boo! I’m the Holy Ghost!”—but in general, if the up-fronters were pretty good, they could hold their audience for quite a while. If they weren’t so good, eventually the kids would drift off to play something else—like jump rope or jacks. Now that generation has grown up, but most of them haven’t changed too much. Every Sunday they still play church. They line up in rows for the entertainment. If it’s pretty good, their church may grow. If it’s not too hot, eventually they’ll drift off to play something else...”
- Anne Ortlund

PRAYER

List one or two prayer concerns to share with your group.

