

1 Corinthians 14:1–2

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy. For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries. But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church. I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.

Power, Love, and a Sound Mind — Three Chapters

Reviewing the three chapters: chapter 12 sets before us the manifestations of the Spirit given to profit withal — this is the Spirit of power. Chapter 13 is love, that more excellent way which surpasses all gift. Chapter 14 now brings before us the Spirit of a sound mind — for it does not appear that the Corinthians were acting like persons with a sound mind. They had the gifts, and they had the powers, but those powers were being used without sound judgement. The spirit of a prophet is subject to a prophet — the assembly is not the place for the kind of uncontrolled impulse that characterised the oracles of the city, where prophetesses and others acted under the impulse and power of a demon, unable to control themselves. Nothing like that belongs in the assembly of God.

Follow After Charity — Then Desire the Spirituals

The order is instructive. *Follow after charity* comes first; only then, *desire spiritual manifestations*. The word *gifts* is supplied by the translators — in the original, it reads simply, *desire the spirituals*, or spiritual things, with an article in front and in the plural. Darby places *manifestations* in brackets, linking back to the opening of chapter 12: *Now concerning spiritual manifestations, brethren, I would not have you ignorant*. Diabolical activity is a spiritual manifestation, as chapter 12 established. Chapter 14 builds on that foundation.

There is a subtle but important contrast between chapter 12:2 and chapter 14:1. Chapter 12 says, *even as ye were led* — the emphasis is on the leading, on external force carrying one along, like a rope around a sheep pulling it in a direction. The sheep is simply dragged. But chapter 14 says, *follow after charity*. The emphasis is on the following — a sound mind, attached to the Lord Jesus who is love personified, delights to follow Him. A sound mind does not need a rope. It is drawn by what can completely satisfy: His love. Whereas being led to dumb idols could never satisfy — the pleasures of sin are for a season; Demas loved this present world and departed — the love of Christ is an abiding satisfaction.

Dumb Idols and the Edifying of the Church

The contrast between dumb idols and prophesying is the thread that runs through the opening of this chapter. Those who were led away to dumb idols heard exactly nothing from them — there was no building up, no instruction, no growth. They said nothing, because they were dumb idols. And if someone speaks in a language no one understands, and there is no interpreter, what is the practical difference, as far as the assembly is concerned? Nothing has been built up. Nothing intelligible has been received. The general theme of chapter 14 is this: a sound mind needs to be edified — built up. And the building up of the assembly of God is what is to govern the exercise of spiritual manifestations within it.

Love comes first because the building up has to start with His love. It does not say, desire the spirituals, and follow after charity. It starts with follow after charity. And then, desire the spirituals — but rather that you may prophesy. Prophecy is put in the preeminent place. The others are not to be disregarded; there are to be desires for all the spiritual manifestations. But the emphasis falls on prophecy, and there are reasons for that.

The Absence of the Word Gifts — The Spirit, Not the Gift

The absence of the word *gifts* in the original is worth pausing over. The sentence says simply, *desire the spirituals*. By framing it that way, without naming a specific noun, the attention is directed to the Holy Spirit himself — the origin, the giver — rather than to the things given. There is a little more emphasis on the giver than on the gift. And that is exactly the right starting point for this chapter. Let the power be of Him, and not of the flesh. Not a self-generated emotional excitement that gets labelled as a work of the Spirit, but genuine manifestations of the Spirit whose origin is God.

Prophecy — The Mouthpiece of God

Prophecy is placed first among what to desire, because of its character and its duration. From chapter 13:8, we know that tongues shall cease, but prophecies shall be done away only when the perfection of glory comes. Tongues ran their course in the apostolic age; prophecy continues. And this is prophecy as a gift — the apostle has not changed his subject from chapter 12. The gift of knowledge in chapter 13 is not general knowledge; the gift of prophecy in chapter 14 is not just saying something about the word of God. It is the gift that was spoken of in chapter 12.

God explained the function of a prophet clearly when He spoke to Moses about Aaron: *he shall be thy spokesman unto the people, and he shall be to thee instead*

of a mouth — thou shalt be to him instead of God. The prophet is the mouthpiece of another who has authority. That is the root meaning. And a parallel passage says plainly, *he shall be your prophet.* The prophet speaks for God — not his own words, his own wisdom, his own opinions, but as the mouthpiece of the One who has authority.

The revelatory element of prophecy — as when Agabus foretold a coming famine — has passed with the establishment of Christianity. But prophesying in its fundamental character, being God's mouthpiece, continues. And as verse 3 will describe, it speaks to men in edification, encouragement, and consolation. Nothing is said there about fresh revelation. The apostle's emphasis in this passage is not on the revelatory aspect but on these three characteristics — and the meeting described in chapter 14 can continue on the basis of what has not been withdrawn.

He That Speaketh in a Tongue Speaketh Not Unto Men, But Unto God

Verse 2 establishes the essential character of speaking in a tongue in the assembly. The word *unknown* is supplied by translators; it is not in the original. It is simply *a tongue* — a language. And as a language, it has intelligence, content, substance. This is not ecstatic utterance or gibberish. He that speaks in a tongue is speaking — speaking actual things. If it were merely gibberish, there could be no interpretation of it, because there is nothing in gibberish to interpret. One cannot render something without content intelligible.

But in the assembly at Corinth, those tongues were languages that the hearers did not know. A man could be saying ever-so-exalted things and speaking of the mysteries of God — likely New Testament truth brought out by the Spirit — and God hears and understands it. So in that sense he speaks to God: not that he is not speaking real and significant things, but that no man in the assembly is receiving

them intelligibly. God understands; no man in the room does.

The expression *in the spirit he speaketh mysteries* — with a lowercase *s*, referring to the man's own spirit — is consistent with the tongue-speaker understanding what he is saying. The spirit of man is that part connected with his intelligence and his relationship with God. It was not just his physical tongue moving. His intelligent faculties were involved. And this connects with the principle of chapter 14 itself: the spirit of a prophet is subject to a prophet. The man is in control of himself. There is no impulse and power of a demon such as the Corinthians had been used to in the city before their salvation. Christian assembly is not like that.

Edifieth Himself — Edifieth the Church

Verse 4 draws the contrast plainly: he that speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he that prophesies edifies the church. This was directly applicable to the Corinthian disorder. The tongue-speakers were using their gift when no one was present to interpret — and since no one could understand, nothing was being built up in the assembly. At best, they were edifying themselves. The apostle does not deny that self-edification occurs; but it is not the purpose for which the assembly is gathered.

Compare this with what the Corinthians had come from: the dumb idols that said nothing, edified nothing, built up no one. Speaking in a tongue without an interpreter is not as far from that as one might think — as far as the assembly's receiving anything is concerned, the result is the same. Hence the apostle's word: *I would that ye all spake with tongues — but rather that ye prophesied*. He values tongues; but prophecy is greater, because it builds up the church. And that is the heart of this chapter: what builds up the assembly of God is what should govern all that is done there.

— *Study ends* —