

Edification ([1 Cor. 14:1-5](#), [26b](#))

This was one of Paul's favorite words, borrowed, of course, from architecture. *To edify* means "to build up." This concept is not alien to the "body" image of the church; even today, we speak about "bodybuilding exercises." There is an overlapping of images here, for the body of Christ is also the temple of the living God. Paul's choice of the word *edify* was a wise one.

The mistake the Corinthians were making was to emphasize their own personal edification to the neglect of the church. They wanted to build themselves up, but they did not want to build up their fellow believers. This attitude, of course, not only hurt the other Christians, but it also hurt the believers who were practicing it. After all, if we are all members of the same body, the way we relate to the other members must ultimately affect us personally. "The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee" ([1 Cor. 12:21](#)). If one member of the body is weak or infected, it will affect the other members.

Paul detected that the church was neglecting prophecy and giving a wrong emphasis to tongues. We must not think of a New Testament prophet as a person who foretold the future, for even the Old Testament prophets did more than that. Prophets received God's message immediately, through the Holy Spirit, and communicated that message to the church, usually in a tongue, but not always. Prophecy was not the same as our modern-day "preaching," because today's preachers study the Bible and prepare their messages. No preacher today should claim that he has immediate inspiration from God.

Paul explained the supreme value of prophecy over tongues by contrasting the two gifts.

Prophecy speaks to men, tongues to God ([yv. 1-3](#)). "If you are zealous for spiritual gifts, at least desire the best gifts," was Paul's counsel. Prophecy was best because it built up the church. It gave the listeners encouragement and comfort—something that everybody needs.

It is unfortunate that our translators inserted *unknown* in [1 Corinthians 14:2](#), because the New Testament knows nothing of an "unknown tongue." From the very beginning of the church, tongues were *known* languages, recognized by the listeners ([Acts 2:4](#), [6](#), [8](#), [11](#)). The tongue would be unknown *to the speaker* and to the listeners, but it was not unknown in the world ([1 Cor. 14:10-11](#), [21](#)).

It is also unfortunate that people have the idea that tongues were used to preach the Gospel to the lost. Quite the contrary was true: Paul was afraid that the excessive tongues-speaking in the church would convince the lost that the Christians were crazy! ([1 Cor. 14:23](#)) At Pentecost, the believers extolled "the wonderful works of God," but Peter preached the Gospel in the Aramaic language his listeners could all understand.

The believer who speaks in a tongue speaks to God in praise and worship; but the believer who prophesies shares the Word with the church and helps those who listen. This leads to the second contrast.

Prophecy edifies the church, tongues edify only the speaker ([vv. 4-5](#)). Paul did not deny the value of tongues to the speaker, but he did place a greater value on building up the church. "Greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues" ([1 Cor. 14:5](#)). Unless the tongues are interpreted ([1 Cor. 12:10, 30](#)), the message can do the church no good. Paul pointed out that an interpreter must be present before the gift of tongues may be exercised ([1 Cor. 14:28](#)).

Keep in mind that the members of the Corinthian church did not sit in the services with Bibles on their laps. The New Testament was being written and the Old Testament scrolls were expensive and not available to 613 most believers. God spoke to His people directly through the prophets, and the message was sometimes given in a tongue. The three gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues worked together to convey truth to the people ([1 Cor. 13:1-2, 8-11](#)).

Paul emphasized the importance of doctrinal teaching in the church. Our worship must be based on truth, or it may become superstitious emotionalism. Christians need to know what they believe and why they believe it. The prophet shared truth with the church, and thereby edified the assembly. The person speaking in tongues (unless there is an interpreter) is enjoying his worship of God, but he is not edifying the church.

In my own ministry, I have shared in many local church services and conferences, and I have always tried to communicate biblical truth to the people. Sometimes the music has not been edifying, and at other times, the music communicated the Word of God in a powerful way. Whenever all of us as ministers have aimed at edification, and not entertainment, God has blessed and the people have been helped. A ministry that does not build up will tear down, no matter how "spiritual" it may seem. When we explain and apply the Word of God to individual lives, we have a ministry of edification.

Understanding ([1 Cor. 14:6-25](#))

Eight times in this section, Paul used the word *understanding*. It is not enough for the minister to impart information to people; the people must *receive* it if it is to do them any good. The seed that is received in the good ground is the seed that bears fruit, but this means that there must be an *understanding* of the Word of God ([Matt. 13:23](#)). If a believer wants to be edified, he must prepare his heart to receive the Word ([1 Thes. 2:13](#)). Not everybody who *listens* really *hears*.

The famous Congregationalist minister, Dr. Joseph Parker, preached at an important meeting and afterward was approached by a man who pointed out an error in the sermon. Parker listened patiently to the man's criticism, and then asked, "And what *else* did you get from the message?" This remark simply withered the critic, who then disappeared into the crowd. Too often we are quick to judge the sermon instead of allowing the Word of God to judge us.

Illustration (vv. 6-11). Paul used three simple illustrations to prove his point that there must be understanding if there is to be an edifying spiritual ministry: musical instruments, a bugle call in battle, and daily conversation.

If a musical instrument does not give a clear and distinct sound, nobody will recognize the music being played. Everyone knows how uncomfortable one feels when a performer *almost* plays the right note because the instrument is defective or out of tune. Large pipe organs must be constantly serviced lest their reeds fail to perform properly. I was in a church service one evening during which the organ pitch gradually changed because of atmospheric conditions, and by the close of the service, the organ could not be played with the piano because of the radical change that had occurred.

If the bugler is not sure whether he is calling "Retreat!" or "Charge!" you can be sure none of the soldiers will know what to do either. Half of them will rush forward, while the other half will run back! The call must be a clear one if it is to be understood.

But this fact is also true in everyday conversation. I recall the first time my wife and I visited Great Britain and were confronted with the variety of local dialects there. We asked directions of a friendly gentleman in London and, quite frankly, could understand very little of what he said. (Perhaps he had a difficult time understanding us!)

[First Corinthians 14:10](#) gives us good reason to believe that, when Paul wrote about tongues, he was referring to known languages and not some "heavenly" language. Each language is different and yet each language has its own meaning. No matter how sincere a speaker may be, if I do not understand his language, he cannot communicate with me. To the Greeks, a *barbarian* was the lowest person on the social or national ladder. In fact, anybody who was not a Greek was considered a barbarian.

The musician, the bugler, and the everyday conversationalist cannot be understood unless their messages are communicated in a manner that is meaningful to the listener. Having illustrated the principle of understanding, Paul then applied it to three different persons.

Application (vv. 12-25). Paul first applied the principle of understanding to the speaker himself ([1 Cor. 14:12-15](#)). Again, he reminded the Corinthians that it is better to be a blessing to the church than to experience some kind of personal "spiritual excitement." 614If the believer speaks in a tongue, his spirit (inner person) may share in the experience, but his mind is not a part of the experience. It is not wrong to pray or sing "in the spirit," but it is better to include the mind and understand what you are praying or singing. (Note that the word *spirit* in [1 Cor. 14:14-15](#) does not refer to the Holy Spirit, but to the inner person, as in [1 Cor. 2:11](#).) If the speaker is to be edified, he must understand what he is saying.

What, then, is the speaker to do? He must ask God for the interpretation of the message. Paul assumed that an interpreter would be present ([1 Cor. 14:27-28](#)) or that the speaker himself had the gift of interpreting. Of course, all of this discussion emphasized once again the superiority of prophecy over tongues: prophecy needs no interpretation and can therefore be a blessing to everybody.

Paul then applied the principle to other believers in the assembly ([1 Cor. 14:16-20](#)). He assumed that they would listen to the message and respond to it. But if they did not understand the message, how could they respond? (Apparently, saying *Amen!* in church was not frowned on in those days.) The "unlearned" person was probably a new believer, or possibly an interested "seeker." He could not be edified unless he understood what was being said.

Again, it was a matter of priorities. While Paul did not oppose the ministry of tongues, he did try to put it into a right perspective. The issue was not quantity of words, but quality of communication. The Corinthians were acting like children playing with toys. When it came to knowing about sin, Paul wanted them to be "babes"; but when it came to spiritual understanding, he wanted them to be mature men ([1 Cor. 3:1-4](#); [13:11-13](#)).

Some people have the idea that speaking in a tongue is an evidence of spiritual maturity, but Paul taught that it is possible to exercise the gift in an unspiritual and immature manner.

Paul's final application was to the unsaved person who happened to come into the assembly during a time of worship ([1 Cor. 14:21-25](#)). Paul made here another point for the superiority of prophecy over tongues: a message in tongues (unless interpreted) could never bring conviction to the heart of a lost sinner. In fact, the unsaved person might leave the service before the interpretation was given, thinking that the whole assembly was crazy. Tongues were not used for evangelism, neither at Pentecost nor in the meetings of the early church.

However, tongues did have a "message" for the lost Jews in particular: they were a sign of God's judgment. Paul quoted [Isaiah 28:11-12](#), a reference to the invading Assyrian army whose "barbaric" language the Jews would not understand. The presence of this "tongue" was evidence of God's judgment on the nation. God would rather speak to His people in clear language they could understand, but their repeated sins made this impossible. He *had* spoken to them through His messengers in their own tongue, and the nation would not repent. Now He had to speak in a foreign tongue, and this meant judgment.

As a nation, the Jews were always seeking a sign ([Matt. 12:38](#); [1 Cor. 1:22](#)). At Pentecost, the fact that the Apostles spoke in tongues was a sign to the unbelieving Jews who were there celebrating the feast. The miracle of tongues aroused their interest, but it did not convict their hearts. It took Peter's preaching (in Aramaic, which the people all understood) to bring them to the place of conviction and conversion.

The principle of *edification* encourages us to major on sharing the Word of God so that the church will be strengthened and grow. The principle of *understanding* reminds us that what we share must be understood if it is to do any good. The private use of spiritual gifts may edify the user, but it will not edify the church; and Paul admonished us to "excel to the edifying of the church" ([1 Cor. 14:12](#)).

But a third principle must be applied: the principle of order.