

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.

Order ([1 Cor. 14:26-40](#))

Two statements in this section go together: "Let all things be done unto edifying" ([1 Cor. 14:26](#)), and, "Let all things be done decently and in order" ([1 Cor. 14:40](#)). When a building is constructed, there must be a plan, or everything will be in chaos. I know of a church that had terrible problems building their parsonage, until someone discovered that the lumberyard had a different set of plans from that of the contractor. It was no wonder that the materials shipped to the site did not fit into the building!

The Corinthian church was having special problems with disorders in their public meetings ([1 Cor. 11:17-23](#)). The reason is not difficult to determine: they were using their spiritual gifts to please themselves and not to help 615 their brethren. The key word was not *edification*, but *exhibition*. If you think that *your* contribution to the service is more important than your brother's contribution, then you will either be impatient until he finishes, or you will interrupt him. Add to this problem the difficulties caused by the "liberated women" in the assembly, and you can understand why the church experienced carnal confusion.

[First Corinthians 14:26](#) gives us a cameo picture of worship in the early church. Each member was invited to participate as the Lord directed. One would want to sing a psalm ([Eph. 5:19](#); [Col. 3:16](#)). Another would be led to share a doctrine. Someone might have a revelation that would be given in a tongue and then interpreted. Apart from some kind of God-given order, there could never be edification.

Note that the tongues speakers were the ones causing the most trouble, so Paul addressed himself to them and gave several instructions for the church to obey in their public meetings.

First, speaking and interpreting, along with judging (evaluating the message) must be done in an orderly manner ([1 Cor. 14:27-33](#)). There must not be more than three speakers at any one meeting, and each message must be interpreted and evaluated in order. If no interpreter was present, then the tongues speaker must keep silent. Paul's admonitions to the Thessalonian congregation would apply here: "Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" ([1 Thes. 5:19-21](#)).

Why were the messages evaluated? To determine whether the speaker had truly communicated the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. It was possible for a speaker, under the control of his own emotions, to imagine that God was speaking to him and through him. It was even possible for Satan to counterfeit a prophetic message (see [2 Cor. 11:13-14](#)). The listeners would test the message, then, by Old Testament Scriptures, apostolic tradition, and the personal guidance of the Spirit ("discerning of spirits," [1 Cor. 12:10](#)).

If while a person is speaking, God gives a revelation to another person, the speaker must be silent while the new revelation is shared. If God is in charge, there can be no *competition* or *contradiction* in the messages. If, however, the various speakers are "manufacturing" their messages, there will be confusion and contradiction.

When the Holy Spirit is in charge, the various ministers will have self-control; for self-control is one fruit of the Spirit ([Gal. 5:23](#)). I once shared a Bible conference with a speaker who had "poor terminal facilities." He often went fifteen to twenty minutes past his deadline, which meant, of course, that I had to condense my messages at the last minute. He excused himself to me by saying, "You know, when the Holy Spirit takes over, you can't worry about clocks!" My reply was to quote [1 Corinthians 14:32](#): "And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets."

Our own self-control is one of the evidences that the Spirit is indeed at work in the meeting. One of the ministries of the Spirit is to bring order out of chaos ([Gen. 1](#)). Confusion comes from Satan, not from God ([James 3:13-18](#)). When the Spirit is leading, the participants are able to minister "one by one" so that the total impact of God's message may be received by the church.

How do we apply this instruction to the church today since we do not have New Testament prophets, but we do have the completed Scripture? For one thing, we must use the Word of God to test every message that we hear, asking the Spirit to guide us. There are false teachers in the world and we must beware ([2 Peter 2](#); [1 John 4:1-6](#)). But even true teachers and preachers do not know everything and sometimes make mistakes ([1 Cor. 13:9, 12](#); [James 3:1](#)). Each listener must evaluate the message and apply it to his own heart.

Our public meetings today are more formal than those of the early church, so it is not likely that we need to worry about the order of the service. But in our more informal meetings, we need to consider one another and maintain order. I recall being in a testimony meeting where a woman took forty minutes telling a boring experience and, as a result, destroyed the spirit of the meeting.

Evangelist D.L. Moody was leading a service and asked a man to pray. Taking advantage of his opportunity, the man prayed on and on. Sensing that the prayer was killing the meeting instead of blessing it, Moody spoke up and said, "While our brother finishes his prayer, let us sing a hymn!" Those who are in charge of public meetings need to have discernment—and courage.

Second, the women in the meeting were not to speak ([1 Cor. 14:34-35](#)). Paul had already permitted the women to pray and prophesy ([1 Cor. 11:5](#)), so this instruction must apply to the immediate context of evaluating the prophetic messages. It would appear that the major responsibility for doctrinal purity in the early church rested on the shoulders of the men, the elders in particular ([1 Tim. 2:11-12](#)).

The context of this prohibition would indicate that some of the women in the assembly were creating problems by asking questions and perhaps even generating arguments. Paul reminded the married women to be submitted to their husbands and to get their questions answered at home. (We assume that the unmarried women could counsel with the elders or with other men in their own families.) Sad to say, in too many Christian homes today, it is the wife who has to answer the questions for the husband because she is better taught in the Word.

What "law" was Paul referring to in [1 Corinthians 14:34](#)? Probably [Genesis 3:16](#). (The word *law* was a synonym for the Old Testament Scriptures, especially the first five books.) In [1 Corinthians 11](#), Paul had discussed the relationship of men and women in the church, so there was no need to go into detail.

Third, participants must beware of "new revelations" that go beyond the Word of God ([1 Cor. 14:36-40](#)). "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" ([Isa. 8:20](#)). The church had the Old Testament as well as the oral tradition given by the Apostles ([2 Tim. 2:2](#)), and this was the standard by which all revelations would be tested. We today have the completed Scriptures as well as the accumulated teachings of centuries of church history to help us discern the truth. The historic evangelical creeds, while not inspired, do embody orthodox theology that can direct us.

In these verses, Paul was answering the church member who might say, "We don't need Paul's help! The Spirit speaks to us. We have received new and wonderful revelations from God!" This is a dangerous attitude, because it is the first step toward rejecting God's Word and accepting counterfeit revelations, including the doctrines of demons ([1 Tim. 4:1ff](#)). "The Word did not originate in your congregation!" Paul replied. "One of the marks of a true prophet is his obedience to apostolic teaching." In this statement, Paul claimed that what he wrote was actually inspired Scripture, "the commandments of the Lord" ([1 Cor. 14:37](#)).

[First Corinthians 14:38](#) does not suggest that Paul wanted people to remain ignorant; otherwise, he would not have written this letter and answered their questions. The *New International*

Version translates it, "If he ignores this [Paul's apostolic authority], he himself will be ignored [by Paul and the churches]." Fellowship is based on the Word, and those who willfully reject the Word automatically break the fellowship ([1 John 2:18-19](#)).

Paul summarized the main teachings of [1 Corinthians 14](#) in [verses 39-40](#). Prophecy is more important than tongues, but the church should not prohibit the correct exercise of the gift of tongues. The purpose of spiritual gifts is the edification of the whole church, and therefore, gifts must be exercised in an orderly manner. Public worship must be carried on "in a seemly manner," that is, with beauty, order, and spiritual motivation and content.

Before leaving this chapter, it might be helpful to summarize what Paul wrote about the gift of tongues. It is the God-given ability to speak in a known language with which the speaker was not previously acquainted. The purpose was not to win the lost, but to edify the saved. Not every believer had this gift, nor was this gift an evidence of spirituality or the result of a "baptism of the Spirit."

Only three persons were permitted to speak in tongues in any one meeting, and they had to do so in order and with interpretation. If there was no interpreter, they had to keep silent. Prophecy is the superior gift, but tongues were not to be despised if they were exercised according to Scripture.

When the foundational work of the Apostles and prophets ended, it would seem that the gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues would no longer be needed. "Whether there be tongues, they shall cease" ([1 Cor. 13:8](#)). Certainly God could give this gift today if He pleased, but I am not prepared to believe that every instance of tongues is divinely energized. Nor would I go so far as to say that all instances of tongues are either satanic or self-induced.

It is unfortunate when believers make tongues a test of fellowship or spirituality. That in itself would alert me that the Spirit would not be at work. Let's keep our priorities straight and major on winning the lost and building the church.