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## Bible Knowledge Commentary - 1 Cor 14:1-25

(3) Priority of Prophecy to Tongues ([14:1-25](#)).

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(3) Priority of prophecy to tongues ([14:1-25](#)).

[Chapter 13](#) is one of the most sublime digressions in any letter in any language. But it was nonetheless a deviation from the central theme of gifts and their use by the church which Paul began in [chapter 12](#) and then concluded in [chapter 14](#). Paul had intimated in [chapter 12](#) that the Corinthians were perverting the purpose of gifts from a unifying influence on the church to one fostering fragmentation and discord (esp. [12:21-25](#)). A contributing factor to their factious spirit was the Corinthian pursuit of individual freedom and personal enhancement at the expense of other members of the body whose needs may have been trampled or ignored along the way. Manifestations of this self-centeredness affected each of the problem issues taken up since [chapter 8](#).

The focal problem in the matter of the use and abuse of gifts seemed to be the Corinthian fascination with tongues, a gift which apparently lent itself most readily to perversion from something intended “for the common good” ([12:7](#)) to something employed for personal enhancement ([14:4](#)). Paul’s corrective was not to stifle the use of gifts ([14:39](#); cf. [1 Thes. 5:19-20](#)) but to urge that their use be regulated by love. The gifts of the Spirit should be controlled by the fruit of the Spirit, chief among which was love ([Gal. 5:22](#)). This would lead to exercising the gifts so they would benefit the church body as a whole ([14:5](#)) and also honor God ([14:25](#), [33](#), [40](#)). By way of illustration and correction, Paul compared and contrasted the Corinthians’ preoccupation with tongues with their apparent disinterest in prophecy.

[14:1](#). That [chapter 13](#) was something of a digression, however sublime, may be seen by the way Paul wove together the two strands which concluded [chapter 12](#) ([v. 31](#)) and which began [chapter 14](#) ([v. 1](#)). He did this in a chiasmus, a common literary style that connected a series of related words, phrases, or ideas by reversing their order of discussion in the second instance, for example, *a1, b1, b2, a2*. As a final note to his discussion on the unity and diversity of the gifts, Paul had exhorted the Corinthians to desire (*a1*) exercising the gifts which were of greatest benefit to the church as a whole (cf. [12:31](#)). He then affirmed (*b1*) that, however splendid and profitable the gifts were, there was a greater way of life ([chap. 13](#)). [Chapter 14](#) picked up on this note as Paul urged (*b2*) his readers to make this **way of love** ([14:1](#)) the definitive characteristic of their own course of life (cf. [John 13:34-35](#)). This in turn would lead them to “desire (*a2*) the greater gifts,” among which was **prophecy** (cf. [1 Cor. 12:31](#)).

### [14:2](#)

[14:2](#). What Paul meant by speaking **in a tongue** is a matter of considerable debate. One common view is to see Paul’s use of the word “tongue” (glōssa) against the background of first-century pagan religions and thus define it as ecstatic speech similar to that expressed by the sibylla, or female prophetesses. The Cumaen sibyl (cf. Virgil *Aeneid* 6. 77-102) was the most famous of the

10 female prophetesses claimed by various regions. Others see the tongues-speaking in 1 Corinthians as ecstatic speech similar to that of Pythia, the female oracle at Delphi (Plutarch *Moralia* 5. 409e) or similar to the maenads of Dionysus in their ecstatic frenzy (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3. 534, 710-30; cf. Euripides *Bacchae*). That the Corinthians may have thought of this gift as analogous to the pagan ecstasies is certainly possible, but to suggest that Paul used the term with reference to this pagan background is hardly enlightened scholarship. In fact the seedbed for most of Paul's theological concepts and the usual source of his terms was the Old Testament. This is evident by Paul's use of *glōssa* outside of these three Corinthian chapters. He used the word 21 times in [1 Corinthians 12-14](#) but only 3 other times in his other letters. Each of Paul's other uses was either in a quotation from the Old Testament ([Ps. 5:9](#) in [Rom. 3:13](#); [Isa. 45:23](#) in [Rom. 14:11](#)) or in an allusion to it ([Isa. 45:23](#) in [Phil. 2:11](#)). In all three instances he used the word "tongue" as a figure of speech for the statement or confession made. Whether good ([Rom. 14:11](#); [Phil. 2:11](#)) or bad ([Rom. 3:13](#)) the statement was clearly intelligible. The same may be said of the meaning of the word *glōssa* elsewhere in the New Testament. Whether it was used literally of the physical organ (e.g., [Mark 7:33](#); [James 3:5](#); [Rev. 16:10](#)) or figuratively of human languages (e.g., [Acts 2:11](#); [Rev. 5:9](#); [7:9](#); [10:11](#); [11:9](#); [13:7](#); [14:6](#); [17:15](#)), it nowhere referred to ecstatic speech. If it is reasonable to interpret the unknown with the help of the known, the obscure by the clear, then the burden of proof rests with those who find in this term a meaning other than human language.

The context of this verse is the assembled congregation in Corinth ([1 Cor. 11:2-14:40](#), esp. [14:4-5](#)) in which utterance in a tongue was given without the benefit of interpretation (cf. [vv. 13, 19](#)). Apparently no native speaker of the tongue was present in the assembly (cf. [vv. 10-11](#)), and no one was given supernatural enablement to interpret it. The utterances therefore were **mysteries**, truths requiring a supernatural disclosure which God had not provided the Corinthians in this particular instance. As a result, the expression of tongues became an exercise in futility for the assembly as a whole, with only the speaker deriving some benefit ([v. 4](#)) in **his spirit** (cf. [v. 14](#)), the sentient aspect of his being (*pneuma*; cf. [Matt. 5:3](#); [Acts 17:16](#); [2 Cor. 2:13](#)).

### [14:3](#)

[14:3](#). One with the gift of prophecy (cf. [12:10](#)), on the other hand, spoke in the tongue of his listeners, in this case Greek, and edified them by proclaiming God's Word in such a way that it gave them **strengthening**, (*oikodomēn*, "edification"), **encouragement**, (*paraklēsin*), and **comfort** (*paramythian*, "consolation," used only here in the NT).

### [14:4](#)

[14:4](#). A person with the gift of tongues (cf. [12:10](#)) who spoke without the benefit of the gift of interpretation (cf. [12:10](#)) could edify **himself** but not others in **the church**. The edification resulted from the fact that the user of a gift experienced the confirmation that he was the individual object of God's grace (cf. [12:18, 28](#)) and able to offer praise to God ([14:16](#)). Though he himself would not comprehend the content of that praise, his feelings and emotions would be enlivened, leading to a general exhilaration and euphoria. This was not a bad thing. Paul certainly was no advocate of cold, dispassionate worship. The gifts were not given for personal enrichment, however, but for the benefit of others ([12:7](#); cf. [10:24](#); [1 Peter 4:10](#)). Personal

edification and exhilaration were often natural by-products of the legitimate exercise of one's gift, but they were not the main reasons for its exercise.

#### [14:5](#)

**14:5.** Paul had no intention of depreciating the gift of **tongues**; he was simply interested in appreciating the gift of prophecy. There was nothing wrong with the gift of tongues; in fact Paul thought it would be good if everyone had the gift. Of course he had said the same thing about celibacy ([7:7](#)), but in neither instance did he expect universal compliance with his statement. Since both were gifts from God, neither should be despised. In a church gathering, however, the gift of prophecy and its exercise was greatly to be preferred to uninterpreted tongues simply because the former built up others. As already stated, the tongues gift was confirmatory and thus temporary (see [comments](#) on [13:8](#)). Thus those instructions, specifically directed to the Corinthians' misuse of tongues, are not directives for the use of tongues today (cf. [comments](#) on [14:21-22](#)).

#### [14:6](#)

**14:6.** Two illustrations (in [v. 6](#) and [vv. 7-9](#)) made this plain. In the first, Paul used himself with a possible glance back to his initial ministry in Corinth. He could have **come** proclaiming his message in the tongue of a language which they did not know (cf. [v. 18](#)), but it would have produced only disinterest at best ([v. 11](#)) or at worst, derision ([v. 23](#)). As it was, he brought them a **revelation** from God (cf. [2:10](#)) by his ministry of **prophecy** ([12:29](#)), or he brought them a word of **knowledge** (cf. [2:12](#)) by his ministry of **instruction** ([12:29](#); cf. [14:26](#)) which they would understand and to which they could respond (cf. [vv. 24-25](#)).

#### [14:7-9](#)

**14:7-9.** The same was true in a musical **tune** or a **call to battle**. To be profitable for others the notes of a **flute** or **harp** or **trumpet** needed to be **clear** and **intelligible**; otherwise they amounted to no more than the venting of air with consequences which, besides being annoying ([v. 7](#)), might be devastating ([v. 8](#)).

#### [14:10-12](#)

**14:10-12.** Human communication operated on the same principles as instrumental communication. The word **languages** in [verse 10](#) is phōnōn, the plural of the same word phōnēn, rendered "sounds" of the harp ([v. 7](#)) and "call" of the trumpet ([v. 8](#)). Human sounds, apart from a shared understanding of their meanings, were worthless. So was the Corinthian preoccupation with uninterpreted tongues. That was why Paul did not discourage their interest in **spiritual gifts** but did encourage them to pursue those gifts that benefited all in **the church** ([v. 12](#); cf. [12:31](#); [14:1](#)).

#### [14:13](#)

[14:13](#). Interpreted tongues, like prophecy, could benefit the assembly (cf. [Acts 19:6](#)). Therefore the gift of interpretation should be requested of God. If no one was present who was able to interpret, the tongues-speaker was to keep silent ([1 Cor. 14:28](#)).

#### [14:14-15](#)

[14:14-15](#). It was also true that however beneficial the gift of tongues might be to its recipient (cf. [v. 4](#)), when coupled with the gift of interpretation it had much more value because it involved not only the feeling aspects of a person, but his mental faculties as well.

#### [14:16-17](#)

[14:16-17](#). If it were true that one who possessed the gift of tongues would find his worship enhanced by the possession and use of the gift of interpretation ([v. 15](#)), it was certainly true that anyone listening to him who did not have the same gift could not empathize with the tongues-speaker. At least another person with the gift of tongues could identify with the exhilaration experienced in the exercise of the gift. However, a Christian with a different gift required intelligible communication if he were to gain any benefit from what was said and so have a basis for affirming his agreement by saying an **Amen**. But such comprehension did not exist if the tongue were not interpreted and so the brother was **not edified**.

#### [14:18-19](#)

[14:18-19](#). Paul's concern to harness the enthusiasm for the gift of **tongues** in Corinth was not motivated by sour grapes. When it came to the gift of tongues, he could outtalk them **all**. But Paul was not primarily interested in self-fulfillment. Instead he was concerned with ministering to **others** and thereby glorifying God (cf. [10:31-33](#)). For that reason he did not use his gift of tongues with the assembled **church** but he did exercise his gift of prophecy ([14:6](#)). That, in fact, was in accord with God's purpose. Where then did tongues fit into God's purpose? Paul discussed that next.

#### [14:20](#)

[14:20](#). The Corinthian infatuation with tongues was for Paul another manifestation of their immaturity and worldliness (cf. [3:1-3](#)). This he hoped would change, especially in regard to an enhanced appraisal of prophecy and a recognition of the importance of this gift for the assembled church. His final words, contrasting prophecy and tongues ([14:21-25](#)), were intended to conclude the exhortation begun in [verse 1](#).

#### [14:21-22](#)

[14:21-22](#). This summary argument in [verses 21-25](#) began with the citation of a portion of Isaiah's prophecy against Israel ([Isa. 28:11-12](#)). Because Israel refused to **listen** to God's message proclaimed by His prophets, Isaiah predicted that another message would come. This one would be delivered in a foreign tongue unintelligible to the Israelites, yet unambiguous (cf. [2 Kings 17:23](#)). The foreign tongue symbolized God's rejection (cf. [Deut. 28:49](#); [Isa. 33:19](#)), His

disciplinary response to Israel's stiff-necked rebellion against Him (cf. [2 Kings 17:14](#); [Acts 7:51](#)). Foreigners instead of Israel became the temporary servants of God (cf. [Isa. 5:26](#); [Hab. 1:6](#); [Matt. 21:43](#); [Rom. 10:19-21](#)), and their foreign tongue was a punitive **sign** to Israel of what had taken place.

That seems to be the significance which Paul attached to tongues. As such, the primary arena for its exercise was **not** the company of **believers but... unbelievers** (cf. [Matt. 13:10-15](#), on parables). Uninterpreted **tongues** had their place but not in the church where **prophecy** benefited **believers** (1 Cor. [14:3](#)).

#### [14:23-25](#)

**14:23-25. Tongues** were of benefit in an assembly of believers only if they were interpreted. But this seems not to have been the Corinthians' practice. Instead they apparently poured forth their gift of tongues in unrestrained fashion. As a result believers with some other gifts were nonplussed by the behavior of the tongues-speakers ([v. 16](#)). Furthermore, newcomers (idiōtai, those who attended but were not believers) and other **unbelievers** (apistoi) who were aware of but as yet unconvinced by the gospel message (unlike those of [vv. 21-22](#) who had forthrightly rejected it) would find their behavior positively ridiculous. **Will they not say that you are out of your mind?** This, Paul suggested, would certainly not advance the cause of Christ in Corinth. But prophecy was desirable because it would not only benefit believers ([v. 3](#)) but would also expose unbelievers not to a scene of chaos but to one of conviction (cf. [John 16:8](#)) and judgment ([1 Cor. 2:15](#))—which would lead to personal disclosure (**the secrets of his heart will be laid bare**) and the **worship of God**.