

1st Corinthians 14: Principles Governing the Operation of Spiritual Gifts in the Church

Tongues & prophecy pertain to the period of the Church's infancy, when these gifts of the Spirit operated. Ch13 teaches that tongues would cease, prophesying & knowledge would be brought to inactivity, by the completed revelation of Scripture, in particular the mystery of Christ & the Church.

We can learn basic principles about the appropriate operation of spiritual gift in the local assembly today.

v1-5: Contrast between the gifts of tongues & prophecy for edification of the church

v1: A general exhortation to "*follow after love*" in the pursuit of spiritual activity, but have the greater desire for what will be most edifying for the company, i.e. "*but rather that ye may prophesy*".

v2: Whilst God hears & knows what the tongue-speaker says, if there was no interpretation, then "*no man understandeth (heareth)*", it remained as undisclosed "*mysterics*" to men, of no profit for the company.

v3-5: In contrast to tongues, prophetic ministry met the present needs of God's people, it edified, exhorted and comforted the church, it was to bring the hearers into the definite presence of God (see also v24-25).

At Corinth, tongues were not only predominating over prophesies, but also that there was not the necessary interpretation (v5), and so it was entirely without profit to the church (see also vs13,27).

Spiritual gift in our assembly gatherings today is to strengthen, encourage, succour & support the saints.

It is to operate for "*edification*", i.e. to build up believers in the truth of God, for "*exhortation*", i.e. to stir up believers to greater spiritual exercises, and for "*comfort*", i.e. to cheer up any discouraged believers, in order "*that the church may receive edifying*" (v5).

v6-19: Conditions regulating the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church gatherings

v6: There would only be profit for the company if Paul spoke "*either by revelation* (that which is divinely imparted), *or by knowledge* (which would speak of spiritual intelligence), *or by prophesying* (giving a specific revelation from God), *or by doctrine* (i.e. teaching the truths of God)".

Revelation & knowledge are to do with acquiring divine truth from God.

Prophesying & doctrine are to do with communicating that truth to others.

Revelation must precede prophesying, and knowledge must precede teaching.

For us today, we learn divine truth & the mind of God through the diligent reading & teaching of His Word.

For spiritual gifts to operate in the assembly for profit, there needs to be that which has been divinely imparted, and communicated with appropriate spiritual intelligence, as directed by the Spirit of God.

We need to seek to be "*the LORD'S messenger in the LORD'S message unto the people*" (Haggai 1v13).

v7-12: General illustrations (vs7-8,10-11) are followed by general applications (vs9,12), to emphasise that whatever is given publicly in the gatherings of God's people must be given with clarity & be understandable.

v7: Musical instruments must be played with appropriate skill so that "*they give a distinction in the sounds*".

v8: The trumpet that gives the urgent assembling call to battle must be sounded with certainty.

v9: Any public speaking or teaching in the assembly must "*likewise*" be marked by clarity & distinctness, so that the message is clear and "*easy to be understood*" by all who hear.

v10-11: What is spoken publicly in the gatherings should not be so confusing that it is like listening to someone speaking in a foreign language. We must present the truth of God using the simplest & most basic language as possible, if we are going to speak to profit, and for the edification of those who listen.

v12: ***“forasmuch as ye are zealous / jealous of spirits”***; in the church of God at Corinth, they were trying to compete with all the ungodly activity of heathen religion, the table of demons in Corinth.

Paul’s basic instruction is ***“seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church”***.

We must never be seeking to compete with or rival the activities of other places, or the world generally.

The upbuilding of the church must always have priority over any appeal to the world around us.

v13-19: Paul develops the unprofitability of tongue-speaking when there is no interpretation.

v13: ***“Wherefore let him that speaketh in an [unknown] tongue pray that he may interpret”***.

Apostolic direction is now given for the person who speaks in a tongue to also seek to interpret that tongue.

This is how tongues would be brought to cessation (ch13v8); by a man interpreting his tongue, the man was in effect becoming a prophet, and prophesying to make known the revelation. The use of tongues would therefore become superfluous, and thus the gift of tongues could cease to function (see also v28).

God does not withdraw gifts that He has given; Romans 11v29 ***“the gifts and calling of God are without repentance”***. But the Spirit of God needs to lead & direct individual believers in the exercise of their gift.

A further general principle: the possession of a gift is, of itself, no justification for the use of the gift.

v14: A man speaking in a tongue may be understanding what he is saying, but ***“my understanding is unfruitful”*** if there is no public interpretation, as it is incomprehensible to those who listen.

v15: For the gatherings of the saints, any public oral contributions must be marked by ***“understanding”***, not just in the mind & spirit of the man speaking, but by all who listen, so it is edifying to the whole company.

v16: The uninstructed believer does not understand what was being said, if there was no interpretation of the tongue, so cannot enter into the spirit of the thanksgiving, or say ***“the Amen”*** at its conclusion.

v17: What was being said in the tongue might be appropriate & honouring to God, but with no interpretation, others who hear are not edified.

v18-19: The statement ***“I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all”*** is qualified and given context by v19 ***“Yet in the church ...”***. So outside of local church gatherings, possibly in the synagogues before a Jewish audience, Paul may well have spoken more in tongues than all of the Corinthians (see v22).

In the gatherings of the local church, what is most important is that there be ***“understanding”*** by all who hear, thus emphasizing again the unprofitability of tongues when there is no interpretation.

We do not dumb down the Word of God to the point that we do not teach the detailed truths of Scripture.

But teaching must be given by those who have the ability to explain even the profound truths of Scripture.

The speaker himself must understand clearly what he is seeking to teach others, and that requires time in God’s presence (2nd Tim 2v7 ***“Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things”***).

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