

THE SUPERIORITY OF PROPHECY
1 Corinthians 14:1-25
May 21, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

I. The Proposition Stated (14:1-5)

Paul's argument in chapters 12 and 13 are as follows: (1) the spiritual gifts are proper objects of desire to be pursued with the right motive, (2) though spiritual gifts are to be valued they are not of equal importance in the body, and (3) love is of more worth than any of the spiritual gifts.

In the first verse of our text, Paul transitions from the superiority of love back to the main issue at hand. **"Pursue love"** refers back to chapter 13 and Paul's argument that the Corinthians should pursue first that which is permanent, love, before pursuing those things which were only temporary. The eternal was more important than the temporary. In doing so, their motivation would be correct.

However, the fact that love is primary does not mean that the temporal is to be disregarded. So Paul continues, **"Yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts."** Notice the difference in the imperatives. They were to **"pursue love,"** chase after it with great intensity, and having first done that, then they were to **"earnestly desire spiritual gifts."** There is a difference in the intensity that they were to **"pursue love"** and **"earnestly desire spiritual gifts."** The Corinthians had the order reversed and the result was their motive was wrong and there was schism in the body, just the opposite of what would be the case if they had their pursuits in order. So Paul here asserts that love is not to be exalted improperly, to the disparagement of spiritual gifts, but in their interest. As one writer put it, love "is not to be pursued by forgetting everything else, but opens the true way to everything else" [Findley, quoted by Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 139].

Paul then implores them to seek the gift of prophecy over against that of tongues, **"but especially that you may prophesy."** He holds up prophecy as a superior gift to that of tongues. He then offers his justification for doing so. In v. 2 he states three things about tongues. First, he says, **"One who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God."** As we noted in chapter 12, the gift of tongues was not some ecstatic utterance. There is simply no evidence in Scripture to suggest that **"tongues"** refers to anything other than an actual language. In Acts 2, when the Spirit came upon those at Pentecost, the Scripture is clear that they began to speak "in other tongues." But these "tongues" were recognized because "each was hearing them speak in their own language" (Acts 2:4, 6). The Greek word *glōssa*, translated "tongues," almost always means an actual language in Scripture. The difference in Pentecost and Corinth lies in the fact that those at Pentecost were able to interpret the tongues that were spoken (Acts 2:6, 8, 11). Therefore, no translation was required.

At Corinth, the situation was different. The second thing that Paul says about their use of tongues is, **"no one understands."** As we will see in a moment, Paul does not discount speaking in tongues when there was an interpreter to translate what was said into the native tongue. Here he is speaking of an uninterpreted tongue, **"no one understands,"** literally, "no one hears."

The third thing that Paul says about the gift of tongues is, **"but in his spirit he speaks mysteries."** Some think this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, but I believe the NAU

translation is correct. While **“his”** is not in the original and added for clarification, notice **“spirit”** is not capitalized. This is a reference to the person’s own spirit, his emotions, as distinct from his understanding. Paul bears this out later in this text. Further, a **“mystery”** is something that remains a secret until it is revealed. Paul seems to emphasize the secrecy of the **“mystery.”** Without the tongue being interpreted, then what was spoken would remain unknowable to others. This leads to Paul’s conclusion on the matter of uninterpreted tongues in v. 4, **“One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself”** and that only on an emotional level, only in his spirit.

He then turns to prophecy. As noted previously, I believe the gift of prophecy to have ceased in a revelatory way with God’s final revelation in Scripture. God has given us all the revelation we need in His holy Word. This does not mean that expository preaching does not in some way assume this role today. As God illumines the mind of a preacher to things pertaining to His Word, the preacher proclaims, “Thus saith the Lord” just as the biblical prophet of old. This appears to be Paul’s emphasis in this text. Over and against tongues in v. 3, he writes of the result of prophecy, **“But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.”** The one who prophesies has a message, an understandable message. If it were not understandable, then it would not edify or build up, exhort or encourage, or console others in times when they need to be comforted. Unlike the gift of uninterpreted tongues, which was only on an emotive level, prophecy centers on the intellect, on what can be known concerning God’s Word. Therefore, in contrast to tongues which edify only the one who speaks, **“but one who prophesies edifies the church.”** This hearkens back to Paul’s opening words on this subject in 12:7, “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

So Paul’s proposition to those at Corinth was that *prophecy edifies the entire body; tongues edify self.*

II. The Proposition Supported (14:6-25)

Two series of arguments:

1. Tongues are unintelligible (vv. 6-12)

(1) An appeal to common sense (v. 6)

Paul asks a rhetorical question, **“But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?”** Paul asks the question from an educated man to educated men. Paul knew that these at Corinth knew the importance of the intellect. Each of the gifts he mentions here, “revelation,” “knowledge,” “prophecy,” and “teaching” all are gifts that involve the mind. While Paul’s question does not devalue the importance of emotions in the Christian life, it does force the Corinthians to put things in perspective. His question, again rhetorical, was to remind them that the emotions must not bypass the mind. To do so would be to have a purely subjective view of things with no objective reality. Those at Corinth, steeped in a philosophical mindset, would know the truth of his claim that the emotive, or purely subjective, without the

undergirding intellectual objective truth would profit them nothing. To the Corinthians, this should be common sense.

(2) An illustration of musical instruments (vv. 7-9)

The second reason in Paul's argument that tongues are unintelligible is an illustration of musical instruments. The three instruments that Paul chose would immediately be recognized as to the purpose they served in biblical times. The "**flute**" and the "**harp**" were both instruments that were used in the temple, the palace, or in some other public celebration. The "**bugle**" or "trumpet" on the other hand was used for call for a gathering or to sound an alarm.

Ezek. 33:1-10

Numbers 10:1-10 – The LORD spoke further to Moses, saying, ² "Make yourself two trumpets of silver, of hammered work you shall make them; and you shall use them for summoning the congregation and for having the camps set out. ³ When both are blown, all the congregation shall gather themselves to you at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ⁴ Yet if *only* one is blown, then the leaders, the heads of the divisions of Israel, shall assemble before you. ⁵ But when you blow an alarm, the camps that are pitched on the east side shall set out. ⁶ When you blow an alarm the second time, the camps that are pitched on the south side shall set out; an alarm is to be blown for them to set out. ⁷ When convening the assembly, however, you shall blow without sounding an alarm. ⁸ The priestly sons of Aaron, moreover, shall blow the trumpets; and this shall be for you a perpetual statute throughout your generations. ⁹ When you go to war in your land against the adversary who attacks you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the LORD your God, and be saved from your enemies. ¹⁰ Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first *days* of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the LORD your God."

Paul's point is that each of these instruments is known by the tone they produce. They are intelligible. Imagine the chaos if the bugle produced an unintelligible sound in a time to prepare for battle, or if a man ran out with a flute to hearken a retreat in battle. If the instrument was not recognized, the entire nation could suffer. Paul equates this to an unintelligible tongue. "**Unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.**"

(3) A reference to various languages (vv. 10-11)

(4) An application of the proposition (v. 12)

2. Tongues are irrational (vv. 13-20)

(1) The faculty of understanding is not involved (vv. 13-15)

(2) **They are a stumbling block to the ungifted (vv. 16-17)**

(3) **The apostle's own experience proved it (vv. 18-19)**

III. The Proposition Applied (vv. 20-25)

Having stated his proposition that prophecy edifies the body while uninterpreted tongues only edified self and then given two series of argument to support this proposition, Paul shows them how to apply the proposition.

1. Negative and positive imperative (v. 20)

“Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.” As we have seen in other places in this letter, Paul often uses the term **“brethren”** (which also includes sisters) to introduce a sensitive subject. It is an affirmation by Paul that he believes their testimony of faith, that they are part of the family of God, before he graciously but firmly rebukes them.

Paul then issues two commands, one negative and the other positive. First, he says, **“do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants.”** Paul again stresses the importance of knowing over feeling. He implores them to stop acting like children in their thinking, pursuing the wrong things for the wrong reasons. His thoughts echo that of the prophet Jeremiah, **“For My people are foolish, they know Me not; they are stupid children and have no understanding. They are shrewd to do evil, but to do good they do not know”** (Jer. 4:22). Their flaunting of tongues showed their immaturity and demeaned those that did not have the gift. In doing so, Paul says they were acting in an evil way. So Paul here again exposes their lack of knowledge and their motive as well. As one writer put it, **“The Corinthians were more interested in entertainment than in education. They preferred the spectacular of tongue-speaking to the specifics of doctrinal issues”** [Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 498]. Does this sound familiar in our day?

He then follows with the positive, **“but in your thinking be mature.”** Paul tells them to grow up!

2. Negative and positive outcomes (vv. 21-25)

Paul quotes Is. 28:11-12 to solidify his argument and to encourage these at Corinth to pursue prophecy by showing the effects it had on the congregation over against those of tongues. **“In the Law it is written, “BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,” says the Lord.”** This is a warning from the Lord through the prophet Isaiah. The Israelites had mocked the simple message from the mouth of God that the prophet had delivered to them, as though it were meant only for children. So the Lord would deal with them in another manner, through the lips of the Assyrians. The **“strange tongues”** of a pagan nation would be the judgment of God for Israel's unbelief. This judgment was accomplished in 722

B.C. when the people of Israel were taken into captivity by the Assyrians. This was God's judgment for the unbelief. A similar fate awaited their brothers to the south when Judah was overtaken by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Paul's point in sharing this with the Corinthians is to show them that tongues were often meant for judgment, as was the case with Isaiah's prophecy. So how does this relate to the current situation at Corinth?

vv. 22-25

v. 22 – No less than eight different interpretations. Best, not always at all times.

v. 23 – Rather than a sign of great spiritual power, just the opposite, they would think you were mad. They would further be confirmed in their unbelief by the actions of the Corinthians. The unknowing and the unbeliever would look at this strange phenomenon and their negative feelings about Christianity would be justified. They were nothing more than raving lunatics!

Conversely –

v. 24-25