

09. 1 Corinthians 13:8 – 14:40



1 Corinthians 13:8-10

⁸Love does not come to an end.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;

as for tongues, they will cease;

as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;

¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

Paul now contrasts love with the three charisms which have featured most in this letter: prophecy, speaking in tongues and knowledge. Whatever the relative value of these gifts of grace and manifestations of the Spirit, unlike love which 'never ends', they all belong to this passing world. They are necessarily partial and incomplete.

I Corinthians 13:11

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

Paul contrasts God's gifts using the example of a child and a mature adult. Compared to love which belongs to maturity (perfection, fulfilment), speaking in tongues is like the babbling of a child; the enlightenment that comes with the gift of prophecy is like the thoughts of a child; the knowledge we receive now is like the reasoning of a child. If the Corinthians want to grow up and mature, let them seek love.

1 Corinthians 13:12-13

¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly [or ‘in a riddle’],
but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.

¹³And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.

Verse twelve takes us to one of the most important Old Testament texts relating to the gift of prophecy given to Moses: ‘When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord’ (Numbers 12:6-8).

The Hebrew text reads 'mouth to mouth', not 'face to face', and though there are two texts that leap beyond the accustomed limits and speak of Moses and God being 'face to face' (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 34:10), the Jewish commentators all agree that Moses saw only a reflection or image (the 'form' of God). Paul's 'in a mirror' captures this well.

The communication received by other lesser prophets was 'in riddles'. So it is with Christian prophets. Face to face seeing is for 'then' (the final age), not 'now'. Paul said earlier: 'anyone who loves God is known by him' (8:3). This knowledge that comes with communion in love will be perfect only 'then'.

Having ensured that the Corinthians will read his words within the context of love, Paul now turns to the precise issue concerning which they have sought his guidance. Paul has profound respect for whatever way the Spirit of Jesus chooses to manifest his presence. All gifts of grace are needed in the body that belongs to Christ, and each person is to be grateful for whatever gift he or she receives. However, Paul is presented with a situation in which the Corinthian community is impressed in a distorted way with the more spectacular gift of speaking in tongues. Those who have this gift are tending to think of themselves as superior to the others, and those who do not have it are anxious and envious. He has already indicated that he wants them to 'strive for the greater gifts' (12:31). It is to this that he now turns.

1 Corinthians 14:1-5

Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

Instead of focusing on speaking in tongues he wants them to recognise the greater importance and value of prophecy, because prophecy, in which revelation is communicated through intelligible language, is a gift given with a view to building up the community. In other words, it is given for others, and therefore more directly related to love.

In no way does Paul devalue speaking in tongues. It is a gift of grace and a most valuable gift of grace for it is a gift of prayer: a way of communing with God when one is drawn by grace beyond the limits of thought, of reason and logic. When a person speaks in tongues, he or she is 'speaking mysteries in the Spirit'. Drawn by grace into intimate communion with Jesus through his Spirit, a person is taken into the realm of mystery, and so of divine revelation.

However – and this is Paul’s point – one is also speaking mysteries in another sense: one’s words do not communicate with others in a comprehensible way. Since Paul’s focus here is on the Christian assembly, and on building up the community in love, on ‘**encouragement and consolation**’ (see also 1Thessalonians 2:12, 5:14), he emphasises the special value for the community of prophecy. This is the gift given by Jesus’ Spirit that enables a person to speak for Jesus; to speak the truth in love in a way that communicates revelation to others in a comprehensible way. It is less spectacular, and therefore less likely to tempt to arrogance the person who has the gift, or to envy, the one who does not have it. It is also more important when it comes to building up the community. Speaking in tongues is a gift given for one’s own personal communion with God. Prophecy is given for others. They are to remember that ‘not all things build up’ (10:23).

1 Corinthians 14:6-12

Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? It is the same way with lifeless instruments that produce sound, such as the flute or the harp. If they do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? So with yourselves; if in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different kinds of sounds in the world, and nothing is without sound. If then I do not know the meaning of a sound, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church.

The perspective within which Paul is writing is made abundantly clear in the opening sentence when he says: 'so that the church may be built up' – an expression he repeats in verse twelve. Those who are given the gift of speaking in tongues are taken beyond where words have meaning into a kind of interior silence. Mostly when the mind is silent, so also should be the lips. However, in certain cultural situations, there is an expectation that the prayer be shared. When this is the case, it finds expression in the rhythms of wordless speech or song. Using a number of illustrations, Paul makes the obvious point that such speech does not communicate meaning. Even though through the gift of speaking in tongues others can be attracted into a similar prayer, it remains true that this gift is a personal one.

For words which are essentially unintelligible to have revelatory value for others in the assembly, it will be necessary for the Spirit of Jesus to move either the person with the gift of tongues or another to interpret what it is that God is communicating through this inspired prayer. This is needed 'so that the church may be built up'.

The Corinthians are 'eager for spiritual gifts'. Well then, says Paul, don't be carried away with your fascination for the more spectacular gift of speaking in tongues. Rather, pray to God that he will give you the gift to be able, in intelligible words, to reveal what it is that the Spirit is saying to the community. In other words, 'strive especially that you may prophesy' (14:1).

1 Corinthians 14:13-19

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also. Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul is not simply speaking here of prayer. He is speaking of prayer which is expressed in sound, and in the assembly. He is declaring his preference for the kind of prayer which bears fruit in building up the community, and for this he clearly favours the sharing of prayer in intelligible words and not in the unintelligible speech of glossolalia.

What is the point, asks Paul, of others saying 'Amen' to your praise of God or to your prayer of thanks for the wonderful deeds of God when no one knows what you are talking about? If you are going to communicate your prayer to others, then you had better engage your mind as well as your spirit.

Paul begins by suggesting to those with the gift of speaking in tongues that they pray for the gift to be able to express what is revealed to them in intelligible words. He ends by expressing his preference, in the assembly, for the gift of prophecy in which the revelation is given for others and in words that convey meaning.

That Paul is not in any way down-playing the gift of speaking in tongues becomes obvious when he thanks God for having given him this gift. Nevertheless ‘in church’, that is to say in the assembly – and this is the whole point of his reply – five meaningful words that make sense to others and that convey God’s revelation to them, are of more value than ‘**ten thousand words in a tongue**’.

1 Corinthians 14:20-25

Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults. In the law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people; yet even then they will not listen to me,” says the Lord (Isaiah 28:11-12). Tongues, then, are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the unbeliever’s heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, “God is really among you.”

Paul is saying that while glossolalia may impress unbelievers, it does not inspire belief in the way that prophecy does. When nonbelievers join the Christian assembly (an interesting piece of information in itself) and hear tongues, their reaction is to think that the community is simply out of its mind. When, however, through words of prophecy, they find their inner heart being revealed, they experience the presence of God and the assembly as a place where God continues his saving action.

1 Corinthians 14:26-33

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

The editors of the New Revised Standard Version place this passage within brackets indicating a level of uncertainty as to whether it belongs to Paul's letter. The content is problematical and there are a number of problems with the text. The bulk of it, verses thirty-four and thirty-five, are found after verse forty in some manuscripts. This has led some to the suspicion that it might be a comment written in the margin by someone who wanted to introduce synagogue practice into the church, a comment mistakenly included as part of the text itself by a copyist.

A better suggestion, in my view, is to see this as Paul's expression of a view held by a faction in the Corinthian church, a view which he challenges in verse thirty-six.

³⁶On the contrary! Did the word of God originate with you?

Or are you the only ones it has reached?

Who are they to demand that the women be silent? Do they think they are the only one's inspired?

We should not be surprised that Paul would disagree with the sentiments expressed in verses 33-35. They can hardly be his words. If he is giving a command that women are to be silent in the assembly, why did he go to such trouble earlier to insist that when women prophesied in the assembly (one cannot prophesy in silence!) they must dress appropriately (11:3-16)? Furthermore, the reasons given in verses thirty-four and thirty-five have nothing to do with the very things that Paul has been stressing in this whole section. They do not argue from the basis of what builds up the church. They do not argue from love. Rather, the argument concerns the relative authority of husband and wife. Granted Paul's acceptance of a social order which he understood as being part of God's design (see 11:30), such thinking is not in itself entirely foreign to Paul, but it fits poorly here.

1 Corinthians 14:37-40

Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognise this is not to be recognised. So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order.

They have been especially eager to speak in tongues. Paul hopes that his words will have persuaded them of the superior value of the gift of prophecy. He is not suggesting that it is up to them to choose the gift they will receive. All is gift and we must be grateful for any gift that is offered to us. However, as Paul has argued, in the assembly they should recognise the special value of prophecy as a gift given precisely to build up the community. They have betrayed their immaturity by being like children in their fascination with the spectacular. Paul hopes that they will now think in a more mature way.