

Paul now seeks to correct how the Corinthians were exercising their spiritual gifts, focusing on the gift that they seemed to be abusing the most: the gift of tongues. Due to this gift's visible and dramatic nature, the Corinthians seemed to desire it above the other gifts. Paul emphasizes that the true value of a spiritual gift is demonstrated in its ability to edify the church, not in how much it benefits its possessor.

1 Follow after charity, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but rather that ye may prophesy.

In light of the previous chapter where Paul emphasized the importance of love above spiritual gifts, he now puts things in perspective. The Corinthians should "follow" (pursue) love and that they also should desire to exercise the spiritual gifts that God has given them. However, he gives the gift of prophesy a priority over all of the other spiritual gifts, particularly over the gift of tongues.

2 For he that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth *him*; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries. 3 But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men *to* edification, and exhortation, and comfort.

"For he that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth *him*" – In chapter 12, Paul explained that the purpose of spiritual gifts was to edify the church. Later in this chapter Paul also points out that the purpose of the gift of tongues is to be a sign to unbelievers (v. 22). Paul states that tongues are of little benefit to the church when there is no one to interpret what the tongues speaker has said (vs. 27-28). Without someone to interpret, the only Person that could understand him would be God.

"howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries" – The tongues speaker could be speaking great gospel truths or revelation, or it could be gibberish. However, without an interpreter, no one would know, not even the speaker himself. He may be praying in the spirit but his understanding is receiving no benefit (v. 14).

"But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men *to* edification [*building up*], and exhortation [*encouragement*], and comfort" –

Prophesying in the NT church referred to speaking for God, including both the foretelling of future events and the preaching of the word of God. In contrast to the gift of tongues, someone exercising the gift of prophesy speaks in the common language understood by the church so that the church can understand and be strengthened, encouraged and comforted.

4 He that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church. 5 I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater *is* he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.

"He that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church" – Paul directly contrasts the gift of tongues with the gift of prophesy. Tongues benefit only the speaker (primarily in an emotional sense) while prophesying benefits the church.

"I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied" – While Paul does not discourage speaking with tongues, he states that his preference is that the Corinthians would prioritize the gift of prophesy.

"for greater *is* he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying" – Paul clearly states that the gift of prophesy has more value to the church than the gift of tongues. The only exception would be if someone were present that was able to interpret the tongues so that the church could benefit.

6 Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine?

Paul illustrates the weakness of the gift of tongues. If he came to the church and only spake with tongues, how would it benefit the church? Obviously, the church would hear the sounds of his voice but would gain nothing from the experience since they would not be able to understand him. The only way he could benefit the church would be if he spoke normally to give revelations, knowledge, prophecies (preaching), or teaching, because then they would be able to understand and learn.

7 And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? 8 For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? 9 So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.

Paul stresses the importance of conveying information in the matter of speaking in tongues. Someone playing a musical instrument must do so in an orderly manner order to convey the information of a melody or rhythm. If a random series of notes are played, no one would be able to recognize that a song is be played. In Paul's day, a trumpet was blown in a certain way in order to alert soldiers that they needed to assemble for battle. If the specified signal was not blown correctly the soldiers would not recognize that they needed to prepare for battle. Paul applies the same principle to speaking in tongues. If no one understands what is being said, the speaker is "speaking into the air" with no further impact than a temporary noise.

10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them *is* without signification. 11 Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh *shall be* a barbarian unto me.

The Greek word for "voices" is *phone* (phon-ay), and it refers to any kind of sound. It's the Greek word where we gets English words such as "telephone" and "phonograph." There are all kinds of sounds in the world, each with their own meaning and significance. Paul seems to be referring to human voices here, because he says that if he doesn't understand the language, then the person speaking would be like a foreigner to him since they cannot communicate. There would be no conveying of information.

12 Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual *gifts*, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.

Paul wants the Corinthians to keep these things in mind. He wants them to direct their zeal for spiritual gifts toward the goal of edifying the church rather than putting on a show to benefit self.

Verses 13-25: Paul continues to explain that speaking in tongues has little benefit unless someone is present that can interpret what is being spoken. Paul admits that praying in tongues may give him a temporary emotional thrill but he derives no permanent benefit because his mind learns nothing from the experience. Thus, whether praying or singing, he will also do them with his understanding (not in tongues) so that others will understand and benefit as well. Paul admits that he practiced speaking in tongues, but that he would rather speak 5 words that could be understood by the church than 10,000 in tongues, because then the church would benefit. Paul then points out that the purpose of tongues are for a sign to unbelievers (as it was on the Day of Pentecost – Acts 2) rather than believers, and then only if there is an interpreter.

26 How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. 27 If any man speak in an *unknown* tongue, *let it be* by two, or at the most *by* three, and *that* by course; and let one interpret. 28 But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

Paul begins describing how the gift of tongues should be practiced in the church. Sadly, most churches that practice speaking in tongues today do not follow the instructions that Paul gives here. Paul seems to frown on the idea of letting everyone contribute to the service every time the church meets. Things should be done in an orderly manner so that the whole church derives the benefit. He limits those who speak in tongues to three at the most during a service and that they each should take a turn, followed by an interpreter. If there is no one able to interpret for him, then a tongues speaker should keep his utterance between himself and God. Obviously, if God wanted the man to speak then He would have provided an interpreter. The purpose of Paul's instruction may be to handle instances where the source of the tongues is the flesh and not the Holy Spirit. These instructions recognize that the church is composed of fallen, imperfect human beings.

29 Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. 30 If *any thing* be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. 31 For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.

“Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge” – Paul also limits the number of prophets allowed to speak in a service to three. These are the men with the gift of prophecy who are able to speak a revelation from God. Understanding how easily false doctrine can get into the church, the other prophets were to judge what was being said to verify that it actually was coming from God.

“If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace” – If God has also given another prophet something to say, then the first speaker should allow this prophet a turn to speak. He should not allow his pride to compel him to take all the time for himself.

“For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted” – All prophets will eventually get a chance to speak (if not the current service then perhaps the next) so that the church can benefit from the gifts given to each of them.

32 And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. 33 For God is not *the author* of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.

Chaos in the church cannot be blamed on God, because the prophets still have control over themselves. No one can say that they couldn't help themselves because the Spirit of God took over. Confusion does not come from God because His desire for the Corinthian church is for peace, as it is for all of the churches throughout the world.

34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law. 35 And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

Paul's command is not just for the Corinthian church, but for all of “the churches.” The context here is prophets, indicating that Paul was forbidding women from assuming the role of a prophet. The issue here seems to be one of authority, since he says that women should be “under obedience” as taught in “the law” (the writings of Moses - **Gen. 3:16b** “...and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee”). The authority of men over women was also the reason Paul gave to Timothy for forbidding women from speaking in public at church (**1 Tim. 2:11-14** “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression”). The shame is upon men for subjecting themselves under the authority of a woman, contrary to God's design.

36 What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? 37 If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. 38 But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.

“What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?” – Apparently the Corinthians believed that God was giving their church special attention because they were so much more spiritual than other churches. They thought their prophets were receiving special revelations from God not given to other churches.

“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” – If any of the Corinthians believed himself to be so spiritual or that he was a prophet, then they ought to be spiritual enough to recognize that the commands that Paul has been giving them came from the Lord Himself. Otherwise, he was not as spiritual as he thought himself to be.

“But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant” – If any man was ignorant enough to reject Paul's instructions and the fact that they came from the Lord, then he will remain spiritually ignorant.

39 Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. 40 Let all things be done decently and in order.

Paul summarizes this chapter by reminding them that the gift that they should seek was the gift of prophecy while not neglecting the gift of tongues (properly exercised). All of the gifts should be exercised “decently and in order” so that they benefit the church as much as possible.