

Paul's Advice on Spiritual Gifts: *An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14*

(Revised 7/19)

P.G. Nelson

One of the issues that divides evangelical Christians today concerns spiritual gifts. This issue also divided the church at Corinth, and led the Christians there to write to the apostle Paul about it. Here I present a new exposition of his reply in 1 Corinthians 12–14.¹ In this I seek to draw out the meaning of each section as accurately as possible, and to trace the logic of his argument from beginning to end. The result not only establishes how Paul dealt with the issue at Corinth, but also resolves the controversy over spiritual gifts today.

Exposition²

Introduction (12:1)

¹Now about the spiritual [things], brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written in response to a letter that he had received from them asking him for his advice on a number of matters (7:1a). One of these matters had to do with 'spiritual [things]' (v. 1a).³ Paul wants the church to have a clear understanding of these (v. 1b).

From what Paul goes on to say in verses 4–10, 'spiritual [things]' refer to spiritual *abilities*, which he describes as 'gifts' of the Spirit, hence the usual rendering, 'spiritual [gifts]'.

The sign that someone has the Holy Spirit (12:2–3)

²You know that, when you were Gentiles, [you were] being led away, however you were led, to the voiceless idols. ³Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking in [the] Spirit of God says, 'Jesus [is] accursed', and no one can say, 'Jesus [is] Lord', except in [the] Holy Spirit.

Paul begins by making a key point. He specifies what it is that characterizes all those who have the Holy Spirit, and distinguishes them from all those who do not. His presentation turns on the word 'Therefore' at the beginning of verse 3, and may be paraphrased: 'You remember how, when you were pagans, you were somehow led into submitting yourselves to idols. You will understand, therefore, when I tell you that the influence of the Holy Spirit on a person shows itself in the submission of the person to Jesus as Lord. No one speaking by the Holy Spirit calls Jesus "accursed", and no one can call Jesus "Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. It is the ability to confess Jesus as Lord that shows whether someone has the Holy Spirit or not.'

¹ This is based on my booklet, *An Apostle's Advice on Spiritual Gifts and Manifestations*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1996), now out of print. For a review of previous work, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

² Translations are as literal as idiom will allow.

³ Gk. *tōn pneumatikōn*. I take this to be neuter as in 14:1.

In putting forward this test, Paul evidently has in his mind a sincere confession of Jesus as Lord, and not of the kind Jesus warned against in Matthew 7:21–23. Paul always preached for such a confession (Acts 26:20), and many of the Corinthians had so confessed (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

One Spirit, many different gifts (12:4–10)

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, and the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of workings, but the same God who works all [things] in all. ⁷But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit to the profiting [of all]. ⁸For to one through the Spirit is given a word of wisdom, and to another a word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another [acts of] faith in the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing in the one Spirit, ¹⁰and to another workings of power, [and] to another prophecy, and to another discerning of spirits, to another kinds of tongues, and to another interpretation of tongues.

Having specified what all those who have the Holy Spirit display in common, Paul goes on to stress the great variety of abilities that the Holy Spirit inspires in different Christians. The list he gives of these (vv. 8–10) is not a complete one (cf. Rom. 12:6–8, Eph. 4:7–11, 1 Pet. 4:10–11) and has evidently been selected with the problems at Corinth at least partly in view. The nature of some of these abilities becomes clearer later.

The Christian community is like a body with many different parts (12:11–13)

¹¹Now the one and the same Spirit works all these things, apportioning to each one individually as he wills. ¹²For as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so also [is] Christ; ¹³for indeed in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all given one Spirit to drink.

Paul likens a company of Christians with many different abilities to a body with many different parts (v. 12). His basis for saying this ('For') is that all have experienced the same Spirit working in their lives, and therefore all form part of the same company (v. 13).⁴ The diversity within this company is therefore like the diversity within a body: there are many different parts, but all the parts belong to each other and make up a single whole (v. 12).

Paul draws important lessons from this in the verses that follow.

Those who do not have spectacular abilities should not feel inferior on this account (12:14–18)

¹⁴For indeed the body is not one member but many. ¹⁵If the foot says, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body', not for this [reason] is it not of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear says, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body', not for this [reason] is it not of the body. ¹⁷If all the body [was] an eye, where [would be] the hearing? If all [were] hearing, where [would be] the smelling? ¹⁸But as it is, God set the members, each one of them, in the body as he wanted.

⁴ The precise interpretation of verse 13 has been much discussed. Its general sense is, however, clear, and this is sufficient for the present purpose. There is only 'one' Holy Spirit. Therefore 'all' who have received the Spirit have the same Spirit. They therefore form 'one' body, the company of those in whom the Spirit is working. However big the differences between them may be, all are included – 'whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free'.

Paul speaks first to those at Corinth who did not have the spectacular abilities that some of the others had, and who felt that they were not part of the church as a result. ‘The foot may be less impressive in what it can do than the hand, and the ear less impressive than the eye, but they are nevertheless part of the body, and the body could not function without them. So likewise members of the church with less spectacular abilities should see themselves as being as important to the church as those with more striking ones.’

Those who do have spectacular abilities should not feel superior (12:19–26)

¹⁹Now if all were one member, where [would be] the body? ²⁰But as it is, [there are] indeed many members but one body, ²¹and the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, or again the hand to the foot, ‘I have no need of you’. ²²But much rather, the members of the body seeming to be weaker are necessary, ²³and [members] of the body we think to be less honourable, these we clothe with more abundant honour; and [so] our uncomely [parts] have more abundant comeliness, ²⁴[of which] our comely [parts] have no need. But God blended together the body, giving more abundant honour to the [member] lacking, ²⁵in order that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. ²⁶And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with [it], or a member is honoured, all the members rejoice with [it].

Paul now turns to those at Corinth who possessed spectacular abilities, and felt themselves to be superior to those who did not. He points out to them that, in the human body, all the members are needed (vv. 19–21). Moreover, it is the members that seem weakest that are the most vital (v. 22), and it is the members to which we attach the least honour that we dress up most splendidly (vv. 23–24a). More importantly (‘But’),⁵ God has deliberately designed the human body so that there might be a balance between its different parts: the more important parts have been given less honour, and the less important parts more honour (v. 24b). In this way all the parts of the body have an equality which makes them work together in harmony (vv. 25–26). ‘So likewise,’ he implies, ‘those with the more spectacular abilities should recognize their equality with those with less spectacular ones, since the latter’s, though less striking, are more vital.’

The right attitude to different gifts (12:27–31a)

²⁷Now you are [the] body of Christ and members as part [of it]. ²⁸And God placed some in the church, firstly apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then [works of] power, then gifts of healing, helps, leadings, kinds of tongues. ²⁹[Are] all apostles? No. All prophets? All teachers? All [workers of] power? ³⁰All have gifts of healing? All speak with tongues? All interpret? ^{31a}But earnestly desire the greater gifts.

Paul completes his use of the analogy of the body and draws out his final lessons from it. The church is made up of a variety of different people, possessing a variety of different gifts (v. 28). These gifts have an equality of the kind described in verses 21–26. The more useful are the less spectacular and vice versa. In terms of usefulness, ‘God has placed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, acts of support,⁶ acts of guidance,⁷ and different kinds

⁵ Gk. *alla*. This usually means ‘But’, but can also mean ‘Indeed’ (e.g. John 16:2), and this would make good sense here.

⁶ Gk. *antilēmpseis*.

⁷ Gk. *kubernēseis*.

of tongues.’ God does not want everyone doing the same thing, so the coveting of other people’s gifts is not particularly to be encouraged (vv. 29–30); if there is to be any coveting, it is to be of the more useful gifts (v. 31a).

That Paul is not merely listing the gifts in verse 28, but ranking them in order of value, is shown by verse 31a and 14:1–5.

A better way still: having a loving concern for others (12:31b–13:3)

^{31b}And yet I show you a superior way.

^{13:1}If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become [like] clinking copper or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³And if I give away all my goods, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Paul takes his advice one step further (12:31b). More important than gifts is the way in which they are used, and the motives for using them. Without the right motive, whatever we do, however spectacular, is worthless (13:1–3). This provides us with an even better test of which gifts to seek and which not (cf. 14:1–5).

The word Paul uses for the right motive is *agapē*. This may be defined as ‘a deep and practical concern for the welfare and honour of another’. There is no word in modern English that fully expresses this: ‘love’ puts too much emphasis on the emotional aspect, and ‘charity’ is too narrow. In the present context ‘care for others’ is perhaps the nearest we can get.

What care for others means (13:4–7)

⁴Love is patient, love is kind, is not jealous; love is not boastful, is not arrogant, ⁵does not behave indecently, does not seek its own, is not easily provoked, does not keep account of evil, ⁶does not rejoice over wrong, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul draws out some of the qualities of *agapē*. His list suggests that he has some idea of what was going on at Corinth, and of the extent to which the difficulties that the Corinthians were having over spiritual gifts were being caused by their wrong attitudes to each other.

Care for others is lasting, gifts are not (13:8–12)

⁸Love never fails; but whether [there be] prophecies, they will be finished with, or tongues, they will cease, or knowledge, it will be finished with. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will be finished with. ¹¹When I was an infant, I spoke like an infant, I thought like an infant, I reckoned like an infant, [but] when I became a man, I finished with infantile things. ¹²For now we see [as] by a mirror, in a riddle, but then, face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall fully know as indeed I am fully known.

To establish the priority of *agapē* over the different gifts, Paul shows that the latter are only temporary while the former is enduring. He first states this (v. 8) and then presents an argument for it (vv. 9–12): ‘Our knowledge is incomplete and our prophecy partial. Something that is incomplete or partial becomes obsolete when the corresponding perfect thing comes. This is what happens when we grow up: when we are infants we talk, think and reason like infants; when we become adults we discard our infantile ways of doing these things. This is what will happen to prophecy, for our

present ability to see is very limited compared with the sight that we will have one day. The same is true of our knowledge.’

The precise point at which the gifts will cease has, of course, been much debated. On the basis of verse 12, some believe that it will be when the Lord comes. Verse 13, however, seems to say that faith and hope will continue after the gifts have ceased, which seems to set the time before the second coming (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7, Rom. 8:24–25). From this, some argue that the gifts served only a very temporary purpose, and came to an end after the full revelation of the NT had been given. The issue is a difficult one to settle on the basis of verses 12–13 alone, and I will discuss it later. Paul’s advice to the Corinthians is for the situation in which the gifts are still in operation, and his reference to the cessation of gifts is to establish the priority of caring for others.

Care for others is greater even than faith and hope (13:13)

¹³But now abides faith, hope, love, these three; and [the] greatest of these [is] love.

Paul rounds off the preceding section and adds one more point about *agapē*: that it surpasses even faith and hope.

Prophecy is more helpful to others than speaking in tongues (14:1–5)

^{14:1}Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual [things], but rather that you may prophesy. ²For he who speaks in a tongue speaks not to people but to God; for no one understands [him], but in spirit he speaks mysteries. ³But he who prophesies speaks to people [for] edification and encouragement and consolation. ⁴He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies a church. ⁵Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but rather that you may prophesy; and greater [is] he who prophesies than he who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Having established that caring for others is the virtue that Christians should aspire to above all others, Paul now spells out the better approach to spiritual abilities that he promised in 12:31b, and applies this to the issue that was evidently causing most difficulty at Corinth – the question of which is superior, speaking in tongues or prophecy. He says: ‘Make caring for others your top priority. Covet spiritual abilities with the care of others in view. On this basis, covet prophecy more than speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues only edifies the individual – unless someone interprets – whereas prophecy helps others and builds up the church.’

What Paul means by ‘tongues’ (*glōssai*) and ‘prophecy’ (*prophēteia*) in 1 Corinthians 12–14 we can only infer from what he says about them. He everywhere assumes that the Corinthians knew what he meant by these terms. Indeed they had probably used them themselves in their letter to him. From what he has said so far we learn that:

- Tongues at Corinth were unintelligible to those who heard them (‘no-one understands’, 14:2). To be understood they had to be interpreted (12:10, 14:5).
- Paul uses the word ‘prophecy’ more in the broader sense of ‘speaking for God and interpreting his ways’ than in the narrower sense of ‘foretelling the future’ (see 11:4–5, where he uses it to cover all religious utterance other than prayer).
- Paul distinguishes the ministry of a prophet from that of an apostle, putting it second to the latter in his ranking of gifts (12:28). He also distinguishes it from the ministry

of a teacher, which he places below it in his list of gifts. Elsewhere he distinguishes it also from the work of an evangelist and of a pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11). These distinctions still leave a wide area of speaking ministry, however, from alerting an individual to danger (Acts 21:10–11) to bringing encouragement to a church (Acts 15:32) or warning to a community (Acts 11:27–28). Paul has the second of these activities particularly in view here (vv. 3–4).

We shall learn more about tongues and prophecy from later verses. Meanwhile we continue to follow Paul's argument. He has stated that prophecy is more useful than speaking in tongues (vv. 1–5). He now goes on to argue for this at some considerable length (vv. 6–25). The Corinthians evidently regarded speaking in tongues very highly, and needed help to value it correctly.

Tongues convey no meaning to others (14:6–12)

⁶But now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you, except I speak to you either in a revelation or in knowledge or in prophecy or teaching? ⁷Even lifeless things that give a sound, whether pipe or harp, if they do not give a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what [is] being piped or what [is] being harped? ⁸For indeed if a trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for war? ⁹So also you, unless you give a clear word through the tongue, how will it be known what [is] being said? For you will be speaking into air. ¹⁰There are, it may be, very many kinds of voices in [the] world, and no one is voiceless; ¹¹if, then, I do not know the meaning of the voice, I shall be to him who speaks a foreigner, and he who speaks a foreigner to me. ¹²So also you, since you earnestly desire spiritual [things], seek to abound in the edification of the church.

Paul stresses the ineffectiveness of tongues for the purpose of communication. Someone speaking in a tongue is like a musical instrument that is not giving out a clear tune (vv. 7–8). He or she comes across to listeners like a foreigner whose language they do not understand (vv. 10–11). The word Paul uses for a foreigner is *barbaros*, barbarian. This meant someone who did not speak Greek or share Greek culture (cf. Rom. 1:14). As Greeks, those who could speak in tongues at Corinth would not like to have thought that they came across to others in this way.

Paul continues his appraisal of tongues in verses 13–25. The main division in the text comes between verses 19 and 20. However, in verse 20 Paul leads into what he is going to say in verses 21–25 by rounding off what he has said in verses 13–19. For the purposes of exposition, therefore, verse 20 is better taken with the preceding section.

Speaking in tongues does not develop one's mind (14:13–20)

¹³Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵What then is it [to be]? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the mind also. ¹⁶Otherwise, if you bless in [the] spirit, how will one who occupies the place of the uninstructed say 'Amen' at your giving thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. ¹⁸I give thanks to God [that] I speak in tongues more than you all; ¹⁹but in church I would [rather] speak five words with my mind that I may also instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. ²⁰Brothers, do not be children in [your] thinking, but in malice be infantile, and in [your] thinking be mature.

Paul continues the argument of the previous section – that it is more helpful to others to speak intelligibly than it is to speak in tongues – but at the same time he introduces a new thought: that speaking intelligibly is also more helpful to the person who is speaking.

In introducing this new point, Paul gives us a vital insight into the nature of speaking in tongues. In verse 14 he says, ‘if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind (*nous*) is unfruitful.’ This description, coupled with the inability of listeners to understand what is being said (v. 2), identifies speaking in tongues as the activity in which worshippers give expression to their inner thoughts and feelings by using their organs of speech without engaging their conscious minds to put what they are feeling into words.⁸ The resulting sounds are speech-like, but unintelligible to others. This is the ‘speaking in tongues’ of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians today. Confirmation of this identification will be found under verses 21–25, together with a comparison with speaking in tongues in Acts.

Paul’s primary concern about speaking in this way is that it is unhelpful to others (v. 13, following on from the previous section; vv. 16–19). He is also concerned, however, that it leaves speakers’ minds ‘unfruitful’ (v. 14). This means that their minds do not develop in the way in which they would do if they trained themselves to put their inner thoughts and feelings into words. Paul says that it is better to use one’s mind (v. 15) and develop one’s thinking (v. 14). He concludes: ‘Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking: rather, in respect of wickedness be infants, and in your thinking be adults’ (v. 20).

Paul’s concern that speaking in tongues leaves speakers’ minds unfruitful does not mean that he saw no value in speaking in this way. He acknowledged that those who worship in a tongue edify themselves (v. 4a) and express their feelings well (v. 17a), and he thanked God that he could speak in tongues himself (v. 18). His point is not that speaking in tongues is valueless, but that there is in general a *greater* value in speaking ‘with the mind also’ (v. 15).

Speaking in tongues is not a sign for Christians (14:21–25)

²¹In the Law it is written, ‘In other tongues and in [the] lips of others, I will speak to this people, and not indeed so will they understand me, says [the] Lord.’ ²²So then, tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers, and prophecy [is] not [a sign] to unbelievers but to those who believe. ²³If, then, the whole church comes together in one place and all speak in tongues, and uninstructed [persons] or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? ²⁴But if all prophesy, and some unbeliever or uninstructed [person] enters, he is convicted by all, he is judged by all, ²⁵the hidden things of his heart become manifest, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God, and declare that God is really among you.

Paul makes one more point about speaking in tongues. He begins with a quotation from Isaiah (v. 21). This may be paraphrased:⁹

⁸ Cf. Andrew B. Newberg, Nancy A. Wintering, Donna Morgan, and Mark R. Waldman, ‘The measurement of regional cerebral blood flow during glossolalia: a preliminary SPECT study’, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 148 (2006), pp. 67–71.

⁹ Most translators render *oude* here ‘not even’, but ‘not indeed’ makes better sense, as in John 8:42, Rom. 8:7, 1 John 2:23. They also render *akouō* ‘hear’, but ‘understand’ is better, as in verse 2.

‘With other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people, and in this way they will indeed not understand me,’ says the Lord.

The context of this passage is the rejection of Isaiah’s teaching by Judah’s religious leaders on the grounds that his language was baby-like (Isa. 28:9–10). So God warns them that he will speak to the nation in a language that will really sound baby-like, i.e. the language of a foreign invader (Isa. 28:11–13; Paul’s quotation is a summary of this).

The point Paul takes from this is that God does not use unintelligible speech to speak to the obedient but to the disobedient, to drive them further away from him. ‘So then,’ he says, ‘tongues do not act as a sign for believers but for unbelievers’ (v. 22a). By this he means that tongues *strengthen the unbelief* of unbelievers, who take them as a sign that their unbelief is right (v. 23). ‘On the other hand,’ he says, ‘prophecy is a sign for believers and not for unbelievers’ (v. 22b). This is because the latter’s unbelief is weakened when they hear prophecy being spoken (vv. 24–25).

Paul’s conclusion that tongues are not a sign for believers – that they do not prove that someone has the Spirit of God upon them – means that speaking in tongues is not a supernatural ability, but a natural one that can be used under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or not, like other natural abilities. This confirms the identification of speaking in tongues given under verses 13–20, since worshippers in some pagan circles also speak in the way described there.¹⁰

Note that this identification implies that the ability to speak in tongues is not in itself a spiritual gift. It is a natural ability which becomes a spiritual gift when it is used under the influence of the Spirit (12:4–11). When it is used without the Spirit, the result is ‘as clinking copper or a clanging cymbal’ (13:1). If the ability to speak in tongues was itself a spiritual gift, speaking in this way would be a sign for believers, which Paul says it is not (v. 22a).

In certain important respects, therefore, speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians is different from speaking in tongues in Acts. In Acts 2:1–41, Luke describes how, on the day of Pentecost, the apostles were ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ and ‘began to speak in other tongues’ (vv. 1–4). He goes on to recount how pilgrims who had gathered in Jerusalem from different countries each heard the apostles speaking ‘in his own language’ (vv. 5–11). This gave Peter an opportunity to preach the gospel to them (vv. 14–41). The apostles were thus made to speak *more* intelligibly, not less.

Something similar seems to have happened in Acts 10:1–11:18, where Luke describes how the Holy Spirit fell on a company of God-fearing Gentiles while Peter was speaking to them (10:44–46). Peter later described the incident as being similar to what happened at Pentecost (11:15), and the reaction of the Jewish Christians who witnessed it (10:45) or who subsequently heard about it (11:1–18) is consistent with this. Some Jewish Christians had severe doubts about the inclusion of Gentiles in the Church, and would hardly have been reassured if the Gentiles to whom Peter preached had spoken in the same way that some pagan prophets did (cf. 23).¹¹ A similar

¹⁰ For references to speaking in unintelligible tongues outside Christianity, see David Christie-Murray, *Voices from the Gods* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Chap. 1. In contemporary Hindu worship, individuals occasionally go into a trance and speak unintelligibly.

¹¹ Greek mantic prophecy was obscure or unintelligible, and required interpretation (Christie-Murray, pp. 2–3).

consideration applies to the other reference to tongues in Acts (19:1–7): in this case those involved were followers of John the Baptist who needed to know that the one of whom John prophesied had indeed come.

Confirmation of the distinction between speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians and in Acts is provided by Mark 16:15–18, where Jesus tells the Eleven that certain ‘signs’ will accompany those who believe the gospel, one of which is that ‘they will speak in new tongues’. From the context it is clear that the kind of sign that Jesus had in mind is one that strengthens belief and weakens unbelief – a sign for believers. The tongues in Acts answer to this description – they were miraculous in character and fostered belief.¹² By contrast, Paul says of the tongues in 1 Corinthians that they are *not* a sign for believers (v. 22a).

That speaking in tongues at Corinth can be positively identified with speaking in tongues today means that Paul cannot have had in his mind in 13:8–12 that the gifts would cease when the NT had been completed. Although this does not settle the meaning of these verses, it does make their interpretation less critical. My own view is that verse 12 (‘then I shall fully know even as I am fully known’) means what it seems very clearly to mean – that the gifts will cease (vv. 8–10) when the Lord returns (cf. 15:20–24, 51–52). Verse 13 can be interpreted in a way that is consistent with this by noting that Paul does not say ‘faith and hope and love last for ever’ but ‘faith-hope-love lasts for ever’ (*menei pistis elpis agapē*). In other words, he does not treat faith, hope, and love as three separate attitudes, but as the three ingredients of a single attitude.¹³ Thus, although faith and hope do not last for ever (2 Cor. 5:7, Rom. 8:24–25), he can say that faith-hope-love lasts for ever because love lasts for ever. In this way he is able to raise faith and hope above prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, even though they share the transience of the latter (v. 8). At the same time, because they do not last for ever, he can say that love surpasses them (v. 13b).

Of the other gifts, that of apostle does not continue today. This was restricted to witnesses of the resurrection (9:1, 15:3–9). There can be little doubt, however, that prophecy, in the broad sense in which Paul uses the term, does continue today. Not all spoken ministry can be classed as teaching or evangelism. The right word from a hospital chaplain to a dying patient, or from a visiting preacher to a struggling church, or from a Christian broadcaster to a sinful nation, can only be described as prophetic.

Paul’s treatment of speaking in tongues can be extended to other spiritual phenomena, e.g. those associated with the Toronto Blessing (swooning, shaking, laughing, roaring, etc.). These too involve disengaging the conscious mind (v. 14), and are a sign, not that the Holy Spirit is working, but to unbelievers, strengthening their unbelief (v. 22). Similar phenomena occur outside Christianity.¹⁴

When you come together, let everything be done for the edification of one another (14:26)

²⁶What then is it [to be], brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a hymn, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

¹² They did not *impose* belief of course, cf. Acts 2:12–13.

¹³ Faith, hope, and love are closely associated elsewhere in the NT, e.g. 1 Thes. 1:3.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 75–80.

Having completed his comparison of prophecy and tongues, Paul now sets out some guidelines for the use of these in the church. He pictures gatherings of the church in a way adopted by the Christian Brethren for their Breaking of Bread. His general advice – let all be done for edification – follows what he has said earlier.

Instructions to those who speak in tongues (14:27–28)

²⁷If anyone speaks in a tongue, [let it be] by two or at the most three, and in turn, and let one interpret; ²⁸but if there is no interpreter, let him be silent in church, and speak to himself and to God.

Paul limits the number of those speaking in tongues to ‘two, or at the most, three’ (v. 27a). He insists that they speak one at a time (v. 27b), and that what they say is interpreted (v. 27c); otherwise they should not speak (v. 28).

Since tongues in 1 Corinthians are not foreign languages, the interpretation of what someone says in a tongue does not involve the translation of words, but the provision of an explanation of what the speaker is seeking to express. To obtain such an explanation, the interpreter has to wait upon God to be given the sense of what the speaker is saying – just as a prophet has to wait upon God to be given the message that he articulates himself.

This understanding of the interpretation of tongues accords with the word that Paul uses in verse 2 when he says of a tongues-speaker that ‘no one understands him’. The word he uses is *akouō*, to hear. What he is saying is that no one can understand by *listening*. An interpreter may understand, but does so in a different way.

Instructions to those who prophesy (14:29–33)

²⁹And let two or three prophets speak, and the others discern; ³⁰but if [something] is revealed to another who is sitting, let the first be silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. ³²Indeed [the] spirits of prophets are under the control of prophets, ³³for God is not [a God] of disorder but of peace, as in all the churches of the holy ones.

Paul also limits the number of those prophesying to two or three (v. 29a). He again insists that they speak one at a time: when one is speaking, others should listen (v. 29b); and the one who is speaking should be ready to step down so that someone else can speak (v. 30). In this way all can have a turn (v. 31).

Paul adds that there is no reason why they should not be able to keep these rules. Pagan prophets may lose control of themselves, and this may be taken by their followers as being a sign of great inspiration: but Christian prophets always can, and always should, keep control of themselves (v. 32), for the God who is inspiring them wants gatherings of his people to be orderly and peaceful (v. 33).

Verse 29b tells us more about prophecy. This reads literally ‘and let the others discern’. Paul uses the same word here as in 12:10 (‘discerning of spirits’): it implies making a distinction between true and false. Paul envisages that not all the prophecy at Corinth will answer to his description in verses 22–25 (cf. 13:2). There may be false prophets (Mat. 7:15–20). Even the best of Christian leaders can sometimes make a mistake (cf. Gal. 2:11–16). What a prophet says needs to be carefully assessed before it is accepted.

Verse 33b adds little to verse 33a, so many scholars take it with verse 34. It does not lead easily, however, into the imperative of this verse, and the repetition of ‘in the

churches' is also awkward. Some manuscripts place verses 34–35 after verse 40,¹⁵ so separating verse 33b from verse 34.

Instructions about women speaking in church (14:34–36)

³⁴Let the women in the churches be silent, for they are not permitted to speak, but let them be submissive, as indeed the Law says. ³⁵But if they want to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. ³⁶Or did the word of God go out from you, or to you only did it come?

Paul concludes with instructions about the participation of women in worship. This section needs to be taken with 11:3–16. I have discussed this in detail elsewhere.¹⁶

What I am writing is from the Lord (14:37–38)

³⁷If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that [the] things I write to you are a commandment of [the] Lord; ³⁸but if anyone is ignorant [of this], let him be ignorant.

Paul anticipates that some at Corinth will question the instructions that he has given. He therefore affirms that what he is writing is from the Lord, and calls upon those who might think that they know better to recognize this (v. 37).

The precise meaning of verse 38 is uncertain. The verb Paul uses (*agnoeō* 'to not-know') can have different nuances, and in the main clause some manuscripts have *agnoeitai* (indicative) while others have *agnoeitō* (imperative). The most telling rendering is 'But if anyone does not know [that what I am writing is from the Lord], he is not known [by the Lord]' (cf. Mat. 7:21–23).

Concluding summary (14:39–40)

³⁹So then, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; ⁴⁰and let all things be done decently and in order.

Paul concludes his reply to the church's request for advice about spiritual abilities (7:1a, 12:1). The way he does so suggests that the church had asked him whether it should forbid speaking in tongues. His answer is, 'No. Instead of doing this, put the emphasis on prophecy. Make this the gift to be coveted; and ensure that everything is done in a decent and orderly way.'

Conclusion

The apostle speaks to us all.

© 2007, 2019 P.G. Nelson.

¹⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1971).

¹⁶ P.G. Nelson, *Paul's Teaching on the Ministry of Women*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1996); 'New Testament teaching on the ministry of women,' www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/women_nelson.pdf