

Speech Therapy: Training Our Tongues to Build Up Others

1 Corinthians 14:1–25 | 03.26.2017 | Body Life @OBC

When I came to the end of HS, I was a new Xian, a novice Bible reader, and a lonely-hearted boyfriend. My GF was going to a different college and I needed a way for her to remember me.

So what did I do . . . I went to the local Christian bookstore and found the perfect gift.

It was a heart pendant, split in two—one for each of us to wear.

Written on the back was **Gen 31:49**.

Surely you are familiar with it . . . it's the most romantic verse in the Bible.

“The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight.”

It's a beautiful verse, right? One that captures the heart of a couple who is torn apart?

Well, don't race off to buy your own necklace. The context may paint a different picture.

If you read Genesis 31, you will not find a romantic love story . . . but an ugly conflict between two conniving men—Jacob and Laban. Jacob was the trickster who swindled his father's blessing from Esau and Laban was the equally manipulative father-in-law who promised Jacob Rachel and then gave him Esau. . . . Well, let's just say there was some bad blood between them.

Verse 49 therefore comes in the context of a covenant that threatens harm to each other, if one or the other crosses the other in the days ahead.

It gives the verse a completely different feel. Listen to it again.

“The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight.”

Well, no wonder that relationship didn't work out. I had no idea what I was doing.

Here's the point . . . and it's not about dating relationships and the horrible Xian trinkets.

The point: Context Matters. Context Defines. Context frames how you read a verse.

If you come to a verse from the side, like I did w/ Gen 31:49, you can make it say anything. But if you read the Bible straight through . . . its true meaning comes to light.

This is most especially true with 1 Corinthians 14.

If you come to **1 Cor 14** from the side or if you read it in light of some Spiritual experience, you are likely to read it as a positive guide for using tongues . . .

But if you come to 1 Corinthians 14 by way of 1 Corinthians 1–13, you must see that the whole of the letter is a loving corrective for misguided practices of the Corinthians.

Ch. 14 is NOT a positive instruction for employing tongues. It is a corrective to a church whose is misusing this gift. It is a chapter moving away from tongues, not towards it.

So to avoid skewing Paul's point, we need to follow the path Paul takes to get to ch. 14.

As we've seen, ch. 14 comes after a lengthy discussion about love in chapter 13, a subject that actually goes all the way back to 8:1 – **knowledge puffs up, love builds up.**

Love that unites believers in X is a theme through chapters 8–14.

THEN . . . **ch. 14** also stands parallel to chapter 12 with its discussion of spiritual gifts.

In chapters 11–14 is addressing a number of features in Corinth's worship gatherings and he twice focuses on spiritual gifts—first in ch. 12, now again in ch. 14.

In chapter 12 he has already indicated tongues is not as important as the C's think it is if anything, over-attention to this spiritual gift is a symptom of some larger problems.

What are those problems?

There are at least four problems Paul has been addressing. They all show up in ch. 14 and they help frame his discussion about prophecy and tongues.

1. Immaturity

For all the gifts the Corinthians have received, they are an immature lot. **Remember what he says in 3:1–4.** Divisions are a mark of immaturity. And so is an over-exuberance in gifts.

In ch. 14, Paul calls them to grow up. **Look at vv. 20.** He wants them to understand what they are doing . . . and thus he gives only a few direct imperatives and he asks numerous questions. His questions are meant to produce wisdom and maturity . . . and to overturn a misuse of gifts.

2. Misuse of Gifts

Put negatively, this chapter is meant to help the Corinthians rightly understand the place of prophecy and tongues.

For instance, v. 4 says, **"The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church."**

While some commentators take this "building up himself" to be a positive trait. **I don't.** The whole problem with Corinth was the use of tongues to build up oneself, which is a fundamental misuse of gifts.

In our psychological age, where self-esteem is an intrinsic good, it may make logical sense to say, "If someone builds up themselves, they're individual strength better serves others."

This may have some truth in it . . . but it is certainly NOT what Paul has in mind. The Corinthians misused their gifts by focusing them on themselves . . . and Paul is writing to show how this is both a mark of immaturity and lovelessness.

3. Lovelessness

Paul's focus on love is most evident in ch. 13 as he explains that love is greater than any spiritual gift.

But Paul has not limited his discussion of love to that chapter. Earlier he says, "knowledge puffs up . . . love builds up"

And in 1 Corinthians 10:32, he defines the way in which we glorify God as serving others.

10:31 = "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all things to the glory of God."

He follows up by saying, "**Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.**"

This friends is love . . . like Christ, we love when we lay down our interests and seek the benefit of others.

And God has given us gifts therefore to make concrete this kind of loving service.

And so Paul corrects us and reminds us of love's importance when he says, "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."

This is the main point of the chapter. All that we say about prophecy and tongues, must fall under this banner . . . God calls us to actively, attentively, aggressively . . . pursue love.

And the way we do that . . . is to build others up!

4. Need for Upbuilding

This I believe is THE greatest problem in Corinth . . . the immature Christians were tearing one another down and not building one another up.

We see this main focus by looking at how Paul keeps coming back to this point

v. 3 v. 4 v. 5 v. 12 v. 14 v. 17 v. 19

So this whole chapter is devoted to showing how the Corinthians can use their tongues—the flap of flesh in their mouth—to build others up with gospel instruction.

Whatever you believe about the gift of tongues . . . we all need to see God calls us to use our tongues ... OR fingers (keyboard) ... OR our hands (sign language) ... to build others up.

This is the repeated the message in 1 Cor 14 . . . and it becomes the main lesson for us.

If you have come to know God through his Word . . . you must use your words to point people to him. This is what love looks like . . . and what the church is commissioned to do.

Four Speech-Therapy Exercises

So then . . . we are going to look at the gifts of tongues and prophecy, . . .
. . . and how those two gifts relate to the greater goal of love and mutual up-building.

To see that we will consider these 25 verses under 4 headings = 4 speech-therapy exercises.

Like a child who struggles to use his or her tongue to form the right sounds,
. . . we all need to learn how to enunciate gospel truth with gracious and patient love.

Because of its place and time, some of what we will see has application for Corinth alone.

But most of what Paul says to them has enduring application for us.

So let's dive in.

1. The Corinthians Needed to Speak Prophecy More Than Tongues (vv. 1–5)

When Paul gave the command to pursue love and seek the gifts,
. . . he immediately turned his attention to prophecy.

Throughout the whole chapter he sets this gift over against tongues.
For him prophecy is greater than tongues. And this is the first point we must consider.

But even before considering what this means . . . we should define our terms.

PROPHECY was a spiritual gift whereby the recipient is enabled to speak inspired words for God, by God, to God's people.

We see this in v.4, where Paul says the **one who prophesies speaks TO PEOPLE for their up-building and encouragement and consolation.**

In the days of Paul, prophets came alongside the apostles to proclaim the gospel. They are at work throughout the book of Acts and the NT.

As we saw in 1 Corinthians 12:7, God granted gospel wisdom and divine knowledge to the apostles. The prophets, who followed, extended the ministry of the apostles. And they too received spiritual gifts to proclaim gospel truth.

NT prophets include teachers in Antioch (Acts 13:1), men like Silas and Judas (Acts 15:32), Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10) who foretold of Paul's arrest and the four daughters of Phillip who were said to prophesy.

As I understand it, Paul commends prophesying not just as general ability to speak truth. **That would be something that continues today.** Rather, prophesying in the NT is a particular gift related to the founding of the church.

That's why Paul is so adamant about prophesying over tongues.

As **Ephesians 2:20** says, the church is built on the apostles and prophets.

And **Ephesians 3:5** confirms these foundation stones are NOT the OT prophets, but rather a NT prophets who with the Apostles have received God's gospel revelation.

Now . . . that's a lot of data . . . but I share it to support this claim:

Paul's admonition to prophecy over tongues is not directly applicable to us today.

He's not saying that speaking truth is better than tongues. He's saying that prophecy as a gift of revelation is greater than tongues . . . and that the Corinthians should seek that.

We must remember, revelatory gifts ended within a generation of the apostles death.

Today, we tell and retell the words of the apostles and prophets, but that is distinctively different from what we have in 1 Cor 14.

So... **1 Cor 14** offers many applications . . . but I don't believe ongoing prophecy is one of them.

So that's prophecy, but what about tongues?

TONGUES is a spiritual gift whereby God grants ability to prophesy in another language.

As ch. 14 makes clear, tongues is NOT an angelic language or some meaningless guttural sound. Rather, tongues could be interpreted – it contained meaning.

As **v. 10** says, **no language is without meaning**. So it was with tongues.

And . . .

As Acts 2 demonstrates, tongues were granted as a sign that the Spirit had come.

When the Spirit was poured out, those who received the spirit spoke in tongues.

. . . That is . . . they spoke words from God in other unknown languages.

. . . Therefore, while there are differences between 1 Corinthians 14 and Acts,

. . . one similarity is that genuine tongues are intelligible languages.

We might even say that tongues when interpreted are very similar to prophecy.

That being said . . . prophecy is unmistakably better.

In verses 2–5 Paul makes this clear by way of three contrasts.

FIRST, he notes that tongues are not spoken to others but to God. Prophecy by contrast is spoken to others for their upbuilding, encouragement, consolation.

Now again, context matters. The contrast clearly makes prophesy better. But we get tripped when we read that “he utters mysteries in the Spirit.”

Far better to read this like the NAS translates it. These mysterious words are not inspired by the Holy Spirit. They are not some kind of private prayer language.

Rather, he is saying that when someone speaks in a tongue, their own spirit utters mysteries . . . **and the only one who might understand is God himself.**

For this reason . . . tongues should not be practiced. Rather, prophecy should be pursued because of the way it ministers to others.

This is the first contrast . . . the SECOND is like it. Verse 4 reads.

In our culture which prizes self-esteem, “building up self” sounds fine. But if you have been paying attention to 1 Corinthians . . . you already know—THIS IS THE PROBLEM. **The C’s lived for self. And Paul is in no way making provision for self-edification.**

He says don’t seek that which build up self. Pursue prophecy which builds up the church.

And FINALLY . . . Paul makes a conclusive comparison in v. 5. **READ.**

Whereas ch. 12 makes the point that all parts of the body are equal, he says here that prophesy is far greater than tongues. **How can he say that?**

He can say that . . . because he is trying to do away with tongues which might build up individuals. Prophecy builds up the whole church and this is what the church needs.

Now . . . I can’t help but make an application here. . . .

The church is not a stage for individuals to express themselves.

Yes, every member should find joy in exercising their gifts. But sometimes churches are held captive by the pet ministries and special interests of a few people.

In Corinth, mutual up-building suffered because so many wanted use their tongues.

We should learn . . . members of X’s household submit themselves one to another. With humility, we use our gifts to serve the church.

Sometimes this means we deny ourselves in order to build up others.

Other times we are called on to do things we don’t like.

Always . . . we are looking out for the good of others, not just ourselves.

2. All Christians Must Build Up Others with Their Tongues (vv. 6–12)

In these 7 verses, Paul makes 4 illustrations that are set up as 4 IF statements followed by 4 Q's

1. In v. 6, Paul asks if he comes speaking another language if it would benefit them?

He answers that unless he brings a word of revelation, knowledge, prophecy, teaching, he will not serve them at all.

Therefore, tongues which fail communicate with others are worthless.

2. Next, v. 7 gives us an illustration from the world of music. **If even lifeless instruments...**
3. **Verse 8** follows suit with an illustration from the battlefield—something the military veterans in Corinth would have understood—**If the bugle gives an indistinct sound...**

The point of both illustrations is to emphasize the futility of communications without clarity

Songs do not make sense unless there is a mind behind them to write lyrics and compose notes; armies do not fight battles unless there is a commander giving direction.

So too . . . any kind of spiritual up-building requires thoughtfulness and communication.

4. This is what we see in the last illustration. Paul questions, **If with your tongue . . .**

He answers by saying: **For you will be speaking into the air.**

The point of his rhetoric is plain . . . tongues without interpretation is meaningless. **It is babbling into the air.**

Ironically, whereas tongues were given at Pentecost to overturn the divisions caused by Babel . . . tongues in Corinth were continuing to divide the church.

So Paul says . . . you're not doing it right.

As vv. 10–12 state: Languages have meaning. And therefore, any kind of verbal utterance **WHATEVER ITS SOURCE** is meaningless to the hearer if it is not understood.

The result is that brothers and sisters in Christ will remain foreigners to each other.

He says emphatically (v. 12): **Since or B/C you are eager for the spirits (lit.), strive ...**

This word is so important . . . he doesn't spend his time talking about what is permissible or what is possible . . . he focuses on what is **BEST** . . . what is **BEST** for **OTHERS!**

In this way, he reframes the whole discussion. **What effect are your words having on others? Are you building up or tearing down? THINK ABOUT IT.**

If you are inclined to believe tongues continue . . . **how does that serve the church?**

If you believe tongues have ceased . . . **how are you using your tongue to serve others?**

For all of us . . . larger point extends a theme in 1 Cor: **SEEK the good of others in everything.**

Indeed, this is the way of Christ.

Jesus who was God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. Rather, he became a servant to all, even going to the cross and dying for undeserving sinners.

If anyone ever had the right to seek his own, it was the sinless son of God.

But instead, he laid down his life to save others. This is the good news of the gospel. This is what rescues sinners from death, hell, sin. And this is the model we follow.

In the church, we not only proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, we also live lives that look more and more like the Lord whom we love.

So we must use our words to build up others . . . **which means we must think B4 we speak.**

3. All Christians Must Think Before They Speak (vv. 13–19)

In verses 13 Paul begins with a statement that tongues must be interpreted. And he explains why in vv. 14–19.

First, in vv. 14–15 he stresses the importance of the mind in prayer and praise.

Again, v. 14 is easily misunderstood. Unfruitful here is not a reflection on the individual, but the impact that prayer in tongue has on others.

If the Cs prayed only in the Spirit, it would have no positive effect on others. Unfruitful.

By contrast, Paul says in vv. 14–15, he prays and sings with his mind. Indeed, since the believer has received the mind of Christ, it only makes sense that true prayer engages the mind. It never circumvents our thoughts.

Thus, we must think before we pray, sing, praise. Paul is not creating space for some trance-like experience. He is doing the opposite. He is telling them to engage their mind when they worship together.

For if they do not, v. 16 says, outsiders will not be able to give praise to God.

Likewise, v. 17 says, the other person will not be built up.

Therefore, while Paul himself has experienced tongues (v. 18), he will only do what instructs others—i.e., he will use mind to build up others. Thus he says in v. 19 . . .

In particular: Paul is saying that tongues must have interpretation.

In principle: We can glean that we must think before we speak. We must pray & praise according to truth, and we must use our minds to build others up with our speech.

All Christians Must Grow Up Stop Thinking About Themselves Only (vv. 20–25)

The last point takes up verses 20–25, where Paul makes a final plea for the Cs to grow up.

Verse 20 says . . . **Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants . . .**

This command fits with the aim of the whole chapter. While children are innocent with regards to evil, they are also unaware of how self-centered they are.

It is rare for a child to think first of others. Sadly, it is becoming increasingly rare for adults to think first of others. Our culture, like Corinth's, teaches us to think first of ourselves.

In Corinth, tongues only exacerbated this problem. So Paul says in return, stop thinking like children . . . Grow up, be mature in your thinking, understand what tongues are for.

What are they for? First, he appeals to the Law, specifically Isaiah, where he quotes 28:11

READ v. 21. . . . In Isaiah, this verse promised judgment on Israel for their deaf ears.

Because they would not listen to God's Word, God said he would speak through foreigners. And according to Paul this is what has happened.

In the mouths of Gentiles, Jewish unbelievers have a sign from God that judgment awaits unless they repent. Meanwhile, the prophecy offers a word of salvation to J + G alike.

This is exactly what Paul says in **v. 22** . . . **READ**

Paul teaches us an important lesson . . . not only tongues ineffective without interpretation, they are also a sign of judgment.

Therefore, Paul makes his final comparison between tongues and prophecy in the corporate worship service. **READ vv. 23–25**

Repeating his point . . . he stresses the impact of prophecy.

If tongues are spoken it will lead outsiders – the uninitiated – to question the sanity of the church. Indeed, I might say this has happened in some charismatic circles today.

Instead of hearing a rational word of truth, unbelievers are confronted with a strange paranormal experience of tongues and spiritual gifts.

Paul says, far better to prophesy, where divine truth is communicated to the mind.

In fact, so great is the impact of a church devoted to biblical prophecy, he says that the visitor's heart is disclosed . . . and his mouth may confess that God is really with them.

Truly. . . . Is this not what the Corinthians should want? It should be, but such an approach will mean growing up.

It will mean thinking of others and not just themselves. It will mean prioritizing the Word of God over personal experience . . . and seeking the good of the church.

And this brings us back to the problems that Paul is aiming to correct . . .

In Corinth . . . like today . . . the temptation for cafeteria-style Christianity is great.

We like what we like and we want to experience what we want to experience.

And churches don't help . . . instead of tying themselves to the mast of Scripture . . . they preach a little Jesus and organize themselves around personal experience.

This might include tongues . . . or it could include dozens of other self-edifying things.

But friends . . . that's not church!

True worship is not expressing yourself however you want.

True worship is humbly coming under God's Word and responding in faith and practice according to Scripture.

Church is not a place for individuals to take turns in the spotlight.

Church is all about Jesus Christ . . .

And what we learn from 1 Corinthians 14 is that mutual upbuilding motivated by love and practiced according to truth is *THE* way God's people grow together.

So . . . in all the talk about tongues . . . don't miss this fact

God commands you to seek the well-being of other and to use all of your gifts, resources, energy, and skills for the upbuilding of the church.

If we do that . . . we will experience God in ways that no ecstatic utterance can reproduce

Therefore brothers and sisters . . .

Pursue love . . .

Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially speaking gospel truth.

And look for every way you can to build up others.