

# First Corinthians 14:1-25

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We are all familiar with the problems which existed in the Christian congregation in the city of Corinth. We know about these problems through the inspired letters which were written to this congregation by the Apostle Paul. We know, for instance, that there were divisions in the congregation (1 Cor 1:10ff). Some of the people (3: 3ff) had apparently failed to heed the admonition to “be in the world, but not of the world.” Others did not have a clear picture of the Christian ministry (3:5ff). There was gross immorality that went unchecked (5:1ff). There were lawsuits between Christians (6:1ff). There were misunderstandings about marriage (7:1ff). The matter of Christian liberty was not clear to many (8:1ff), while the same was true regarding the role of women (11:2ff). The Lord’s Supper was abused. (11:17ff). People were ignorant in the area of spiritual gifts (12:1ff), and the resurrection of the dead was actually denied by some (15:1ff).

Spiritual immaturity seemed to be predominant among the Corinthian Christians. This was true especially in the matter of spiritual gifts and the Corinthians’ use of such gifts among fellow believers and unbelievers. Of particular concern was the gift of speaking in tongues. The Apostle Paul treats this subject in detail in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians. The exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:1-25 is the subject matter of this paper.

As was mentioned previously, one of the problems that existed in Corinth was a misunderstanding of spiritual gifts and their use in the church. In chapter 12 the Apostle Paul had instructed the Corinthians about spiritual gifts in general. In chapter 13 Paul demonstrated the necessity of love in using spiritual gifts. With that preparation Paul begins chapter 14: “Pursue love and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially that you prophesy.” The content of these 25 verses speaks of the overall importance and usefulness of prophecy over speaking in tongues. Here, in the very first verse, the apostle tips his hand and lets the Corinthians see right away which gift is more useful in the church. Paul may have done this, as one commentator suggested, in answer to a question that was put to Paul by the Corinthians.

In beginning verse one with the word *ἀγάπην*, Paul is actually summing up the previous 13<sup>th</sup> chapter with one word. Paul wanted love “to have gifts that are of effective use in the church,” as Lenski states. The gift that is mentioned here is prophecy, *προφητεύητε*. Prophecy can be looked upon in two ways in the Bible. First, prophecy means “the receiving and communicating of direct and specific messages from God.” We think of the Old Testament prophets, for example. Those men revealed God’s will and His message to people. In some cases the prophets’ messages contained the foretelling of future events. In the second place prophecy is that title which is attributed to any preaching or teaching of God’s Word. In that sense then you and I are involved in the work of prophecy when we teach a Catechism Class, or lead a Bible Class or preach a sermon. That people are involved in this second type of prophecy is clear from the Apostle Peter’s quotation of the prophet Joel on the day of Pentecost: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17).

Paul now proceeds to explain why the Corinthians should desire the gift of prophecy. Verses 2-5: “For the one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. For no one understands him; he speaks mysteries with his spirit. (2) But the one who prophesies speaks to men for their edification, encouragement and comfort. (3) The one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. (4) I wish that all of you spoke in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edification.” (5)

Verse two brings us the curious phrase *λαλῶν γλώσση*. The translation of this phrase is quite simple: “speaking in a tongue.” The meaning is not quite as simple. Obviously, all speaking and speech involve the use of the tongue, so we are confronted here with another meaning of the word “tongue.” Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Thayer list the translation “language” for *γλῶσσα* in their lexicons. Even this discovery does not settle the matter of the meaning of the verse. There are some who take *γλῶσσα* to be intelligible foreign languages. Others see the word denoting mysterious, heavenly utterances. We see the situation as being the former. The Pentecost account in Acts 2 gives evidence that *γλῶσσα* means foreign languages that were understood by others. Nothing is indicated in 1 Corinthians to prevent us from translating *γλῶσσα* as being intelligible foreign languages, such as in Acts 2. In an article on glossolalia Professor Joel Gerlach writes: “The weight of evidence seems to favor those who interpret *γλῶσσα* as an intelligible foreign language. We personally feel their conclusion is the correct one. It is a reasonable conclusion reached on the basis of sound principles of interpretation.” Gerlach continues: “While we are not sympathetic toward those who include ecstatic utterances in their understanding of tongues in Corinth, we acknowledge the possibility of it. Exegetically the question must be left open.”

Interpreting *γλῶσσα* as intelligible foreign languages, it is quite understandable then for Paul to say that whoever speaks that way “does not speak to men, but to God. For no one understands him; he speaks mysteries with his spirit.” If this paper, for example, were being presented in Italian, there could be a rare individual or two here who could gain benefit from the presentation by knowing that foreign language, but most would not understand what was being said. (We sincerely hope that this is not the case with the English version.) The apostle says that is what was happening when some of the Corinthians spoke in tongues: most of the people did not understand what was being said.

What a difference there is in the case of prophecy, as Paul writes in verse three. When one person speaks the truths of God’s Word in a language that can be understood by others, then there is “edification, encouragement and comfort” taking place. It only follows then that “the one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but the one who prophesies edifies the church” (verse 4). Paul finds prophecy to be of more importance than speaking in tongues because of its greater usefulness to the church.

Speaking in tongues probably appealed to the Corinthians because, as Professor Gerlach wrote, “Corinth was plagued by a spirit of rampant individualism. Certain members of the congregation wanted to be soloists and virtuosi rather than members of an ensemble.” Paul wanted these people to see that they could accomplish so much more by prophecy—by proclaiming to people in the common language the message of God’s Word.

Paul did not want the Corinthians to get the impression that he was degrading the gift of speaking in tongues to the point of their not using that gift. So, he states in verse five: “I wish that all of you spoke in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy.” Paul continues: “The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edification.” Again, the preference of prophecy is due to its greater value to the church.

We should note that Paul never directed the Corinthian Christians to seek the gift of speaking in tongues, such as is the case in Pentecostal churches today. “Prophecy, by contrast,” writes Frederick Dale Bruner, “edifies the church. Paul, therefore, could urge the seeking of the gift of prophecy because the goal of this gift was beyond the seeker.”

Although this first section speaks of only the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues, it would be well for us to consider briefly in the area of other gifts the point which Paul has just made. As the apostle pointed out in chapter 12, there are different gifts. We do not all have the same gifts. What we want to do as God’s grateful children is to become aware of our gifts and then use them in the service of the church. Gifts which are used for only our benefit really are of minor importance in comparison with gifts that are used for the service of others. We learn from this section that it is proper for us as pastors to encourage our members to develop the gifts which they have been given and to use those gifts unselfishly in the service of others.

Paul now brings the truth of the matter home when he writes: “As it is, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what benefit will I be to you, unless I speak to you by revelation or by knowledge or by prophecy or by teaching? (v.6) Even lifeless things that produce a sound, either a flute or a harp, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? (v.7) And if the trumpet produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? (v.8) So also you, unless you utter intelligible speech, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air (v.9). There are, undoubtedly, many kinds of languages in the world, and yet none of them is without meaning (v.10). Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the one who is speaking, and the one who is speaking will be a foreigner to me (v.11). So also you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church” (v.12).

Paul begins verse 6 with the phrase *Νῦν δέ*, a phrase which Robertson calls here the emotional use of the adverb. The emotions are involved because Paul is now proceeding to bring the truths of the previous verses into the context of the Corinthian situation. Paul even brings himself into the argument: “As it is brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what benefit will I be to you, unless I speak to you by revelation or by knowledge or by prophecy or by teaching?” The point is clear: if Paul came to the Corinthians and spoke to them in a foreign language, he might feel good, but they would not receive any benefit from his unknown speech. Paul wanted the Corinthians to see that speech is intended to convey meaning to others.

This point is made clear in the following verse (v.7) where Paul uses an example to which the Corinthians could easily relate. The playing of musical instruments, such as the flute or the harp, are not really enjoyed or understood by others unless there is a distinction in the tones. The parents of any beginning piano player could probably attest to this universal truth.

Not only is the distinction of tones necessary for recognizing melodies and enjoying songs, but it is also essential for more important matters, such as is mentioned in verse 8: “And if the trumpet produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?” The trumpet was an all-important means of communication for armies in Paul’s day. The trumpet was used to gather soldiers, to call them to battle and to sound the signal for advancing or retreating. Obviously, it was important that the trumpeter play distinct, clear notes so that the proper message would be received by the soldiers. If the tones on the trumpet were unclear, only chaos and confusion could result.

The point of the illustrations is now made in verse 9: “So also you, unless you utter intelligible speech, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.” It’s interesting to note that the verb that Paul uses for “utter” in this verse is the same that he had used in the previous two verses—*δῶτε*. Paul did this to show that the illustrations he used were comparable with the situation in the Corinthian congregation. Just as musical instruments needed to produce clear tones to benefit others, so the speech of the Corinthians had to be clear (and in a language known to all) in order to benefit others. Lenski observes: “We at once see what Paul means: tongues merely make a sound in the hearer’s ears, but revelation, etc., convey a meaning that is easy to understand.”

Paul advances in thought from musical instruments to human voices in verse 10: “There are, undoubtedly, many kinds of languages in the world, and yet none of them is without meaning.” Ever since Babel there have been different languages. Most recent sources indicate that there are approximately 3,000 spoken languages in the world today, excluding dialects. Although we ourselves may be familiar with only a few of these languages, yet the other languages (of which we are ignorant) have meaning to those who can understand them. They communicate thoughts to others who speak the same language.

Those who do not understand what someone is speaking in another language feel left out of the picture, as Paul writes in verse 11: “Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the one who is speaking, and the one who is speaking will be a foreigner to me.” To the Greek way of thinking anyone who spoke something other than Greek was a *βάρβαρος*, a foreigner. The non-Greek person’s language sounded like baby talk to the Greek. The point which is made in this verse has been made before by Paul: whenever someone speaks, that person should think of the benefit which others are to receive from his speech.

If someone speaks in a tongue (in an unknown, unintelligible language), no benefit is being derived by the listeners, unless there is interpretation. The listeners are really foreigners because they do not understand the speaker. And conversely, the speaker is a foreigner to the listeners, because he is not understood by the others.

As Paul did in verse 9, so here he brings the truth home to the Corinthians: “So also you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church” (v.12). There was never a question whether the Corinthians were “zealous for spiritual gifts.” They were very zealous. The problem was that they were zealous for “spectacular” gifts, like speaking in tongues, gifts which would draw attention to themselves, but which would give little benefit to others. Paul does not want the Corinthians to lose their zealousness or enthusiasm; he simply wants them to redirect their zealousness in other channels: i.e., in other ways that would help build up the church.

Word order is always important, and the word order in verse 12 places the emphasis on the edification of the church. Paul said literally: “So also you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, *for the edification of the church* seek to abound”—*πρὸς τὴν οἰκοδομὴν τῆς ἐκκλησίας ζητεῖτε ἵνα περισσεύητε*. While the Corinthians were desirous of spiritual gifts, they were to become more zealous for those gifts that were not self-seeking, but which would help build up fellow Christians.

In the next section Paul makes his encouragement even more specific: “Therefore, let the one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret (v.13). For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful (v.14). What, then, is to be done: I will pray with my spirit and I will also pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit and I will sing with my mind” (v.15).

Paul’s concern has been that people are to receive benefit from other people’s speech. That is the reason why Paul writes in verse 13: “Therefore, let the one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.” Obviously, if a person were speaking in a foreign language, he would not be understood by others. In that case, Paul says, the person should pray that he might be able to interpret in the language known to the people what he had said in the unknown language. That way the people would receive edification.

As he has done before, Paul includes himself in illustrating the truth: “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful” (v.14). Here is the ironic twist: clarity and understanding are essential not only to the hearers, but also to the speaker! Paul states that when interpretation is lacking even the person speaking in tongues can be left with little or no spiritual benefit. That is true because the speaker’s spirit may be involved in his speech, but his mind is not.

To understand this situation, we need to look at the words which Paul used. The apostle is distinguishing between *πνεῦμα* and *νοῦς*. Luther writes that *πνεῦμα* “is the highest and noblest part of man, which qualifies him to lay hold of incomprehensible, invisible, eternal things; in short, it is the house where faith and God’s Word are at home.” On the other hand, *νοῦς* has been defined as “the intellective faculty, the understanding.” Paul’s statement then means that by speaking in tongues (in an unknown, foreign language) he may be involved spiritually but not intellectually. He may rejoice knowing that God is using him and his gifts, but he is deriving little benefit for himself. His mind is *ἄκαρπος*, “barren, unfruitful.”

How can this situation be resolved? Paul explains in verse 15: “What, then is to be done? I will pray with my spirit and I will also pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit and I will sing with my mind.” Paul speaks here of two forms of speaking in tongues: praying and singing. However, the apostle says that he will avoid both praying and singing in another language unless interpretation follows. Lenski states: “This means that, as far as Paul is concerned, he will not speak with tongues unless he can also interpret, for when he is interpreting, the understanding is used.”

Paul had been using the first person, himself, as an example. Now, to drive the point home even further, Paul uses the Corinthians as proof that speaking in tongues without interpretation profits little: “Otherwise, if you bless in your spirit, how will the one who fills the place of the unlearned say the “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? (v.16) For you may give thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified” (v.17).

Speaking in tongues now takes a third form here. Previously, Paul had spoken of praying (v.14) and singing (v.15) in tongues. Now, speaking a blessing in tongues is listed. The Corinthians would easily understand Paul's point here. We today have no difficulty either in comprehending what Paul is driving at. If the Corinthians were to include a word of blessing in their service, but that blessing were spoken in a foreign language, how could someone not familiar with that language say "Amen" at the end? The answer is that person would have great difficulty in knowing when to add his consent in the "Amen" to the word of blessing. Again, clarity and understanding are essential for others to benefit from speech.

We should mention one word in verse 16 that has caused problems in understanding throughout the years. That word is *ιδιώτης* and has been translated in this paper as "the unlearned (one)." An *ιδιώτης* in the broad sense is "a person who occupies a private position in contradistinction from an official of some kind, or one who lacks technical or expert knowledge in contradistinction from an expert in some special line; hence in a broad sense he is a 'layman.'" In our context *ιδιώτης* describes a Christian who is unlearned in the subject of speaking in tongues. Paul, in the verse before us, does not merely call such a person an "unlearned one," but he uses the phrase "the one who fills the place of the unlearned"—*ὁ ἀναπληρῶν τὸν τόπον τοῦ ιδιώτου*. The idea is this: Paul told the Corinthians there were such people who did not understand speaking in tongues. The Corinthians were now to put themselves in the place of such unlearned people. The unlearned ones would not be able to participate in the worship service or feel a part of the congregation. One cannot help see a parallel in the Roman Catholic Mass which for years was spoken in a foreign tongue, unknown to most of the worshipers.

Paul is careful again not to degrade the gift of speaking in tongues: "For you may give thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified." Paul has no quarrel with the giving of thanks in a tongue (or, for that matter, the praying and singing done in a similar manner); what the apostle warns against is that by having no interpretation a person unlearned in the gift of speaking in tongues will not receive any spiritual edification. The concern to use spiritual gifts to build up one another, the body of Christ, is present once again.

The argument now comes full circle by Paul including himself in the example: "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you (v.18). However, in the church I would rather speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (v.19). The Corinthians had valued highly the gift of speaking in tongues, but they were not using that gift to serve the spiritual interests of others. Paul had stressed the greater importance of prophecy, that the church may receive edification. Paul had never meant to leave the impression that he was despising the gift of tongues. In fact in verse 18 he mentions that he himself had been blessed with that gift. "If you have reason to boast about speaking in tongues," Paul in effect said, "I have more." "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you" (v.18). I am not aware of any examples where we know specifically that Paul used this gift. However, we can safely assume that such a gift would have been highly advantageous for Paul and greatly appreciated by him as he traveled on his journeys.

Even though Paul had been blessed with that gift, he still was convinced that prophecy was of much more importance and value to the church: "However, in the church I would rather speak five words with my mind, that I may also instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue." Speaking in a tongue in an unknown foreign language) was surely more spectacular than prophecy (and this aspect of tongues appealed to the Corinthians), but Paul said he could accomplish so much more for the church by speaking a few words that people could understand.

Paul has dealt with the spiritual immaturity of the Corinthians at length. He has told them that they should be zealous for gifts that build up the church. Paul does not want the Corinthians to draw the erroneous conclusion that he is so disgusted with them that he has given up all hope for them. Accordingly, the apostle begins verse 20 with the warm word *Ἀδελφοί*. "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking, however, in evil be babies, but in your thinking be mature." When Paul had written the Galatians concerning their believing "another gospel," Paul was very harsh with them. Yet he addressed them as brothers throughout. Here too, Paul calls the Corinthians, people who had shown spiritual immaturity, brothers.

That the Corinthians were guilty of spiritual immaturity is indicated by what Paul says in this verse: “Do not be like children in your thinking.” The Corinthians had acted like children, *παιδία*, when they desired the gift of tongues, but then used it only for their own interests and not for the edification of the church. W. Robertson Nicoll writes: “It is characteristic of the child to prefer the amusing to the useful, the shining to the solid.” Albert Barnes states in his commentary that, “Children admire, and are astonished at what is striking, novel, and what may be of no real utility.” These statements about children seem to describe the Corinthians and their zealously for novel, spiritual gifts.

Paul tells the Corinthians that if they were going to be immature (really “babies”) it should be in the area of sin: “In evil, be babies.” “To be a babe is to be even less than a child; a babe can do nothing at all” (Lenski). Thus, the Corinthians were to be ignorant and unlearned (as a child) when it came to sin but grown-up in their thinking: “But in your thinking be mature”—*τέλειοι*. Paul is taking great pains to encourage the Corinthians to become spiritually mature—to realize that gifts of God are used properly when they are used in the service and interests of others.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to “be mature in their thinking” because their continued spiritual immaturity in the use of the gift of speaking in tongues could have an adverse effect upon others; their thoughtless conduct could antagonize others. Paul explains that possibility in verse 21 by quoting freely from Isaiah 28:11—“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 then they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord” (v.21).

The Law here has the wider meaning of the whole Old Testament and has reference to the book of Isaiah. In the context of the Isaiah passage, the people of Judah were not listening to the Lord’s prophets. They were not heeding the calls to repentance. Instead, their hearts were set on sin and other gods. In the Isaiah reference the Lord told His people that if they would not listen to Him when He was speaking clearly to them, then he would speak to them “with foreign lips and strange tongues”—*ἐν ἑτερογλώσσοις καὶ ἐν χείλεσιν ἐτέρων*. That speaks of the Assyrian invasion which followed. The Assyrians would soon overrun the land, and the people of Judah would be hearing a language that they could not understand. But even this would not draw the people of Judah to their senses and turn them to the Lord: “‘Even then they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord.” The Isaiah reference is used by Paul in this way: the people of Judah were not helped at all by being surrounded by others that spoke a foreign, unintelligible language. In fact, hearing that language from foreigners only antagonized them more.

The same situation roughly was taking place in Corinth. Many of the people in the Corinthian congregation did not understand when a person was speaking in tongues. That was not the worst part; what was worse was that unbelieving visitors were being hardened even more in their unbelief because of the “strange tongues” and the “lips of strangers” in the Corinthian congregation. Paul said that this situation could be eliminated by the Corinthians becoming more mature in their thinking.

This harmful effect upon unbelievers causes Paul to conclude in verse 22: “So then tongues are a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers; prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.” Charismatics would turn this verse around to say: “Tongues are a sign, not for unbelievers, but for believers.” However, Paul does not say that. Paul writes that tongues are a sign for unbelievers in the sense that tongues harden them in their unbelief. People who reject Jesus Christ and the Gospel are strengthened in their conviction by hearing people talk in a language which they cannot understand. In this way, tongues are a sign for unbelievers, We have another example of a sign producing negative results in Luke 2:34. There aged Simeon speaks of Jesus: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against.” Other examples of such signs can be found in Mt 12:39, 16:4, and Jn 2:18-22.

Frederick Dale Bronner lists a recent example of speaking in tongues which confirmed and strengthened unbelief:

I once attended a large breakfast sponsored by the Pentecostal group, the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International. A local high school choir had been invited to participate in the

program. After the choir's number the festivities became increasingly Pentecostal. Soon, to our embarrassment, the high school students, who were seated conspicuously near the head table, began gradually to leave one large hall until almost all of them had gone. Discourteous as this departure unquestionably was, I felt that it provided, nevertheless, a symbol of a disturbing fact. Many are turned away from the Christian faith by the irrational Pentecostal manifestation of it.

When no interpretation is provided, as Paul has pointed out, speaking in tongues offers little benefit and can often have a negative impact upon others, such as this example indicated.

While tongues are a sign for unbelievers, Paul goes on to say that "prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers." Prophecy, as we recall, can mean any relating of the truths of God's Word. This verse does not mean that God is opposed to sharing the Word with unbelievers. What this verse does say is that God is opposed to the wickedness and hardness of unbelievers. On the other hand, God supplies His believers with prophecy—messages from His Word that strengthen them in their faith. These messages are helpful only when they are spoken so that all can understand.

In the final section of our assignment, verses 23-25, the apostle once again shows the importance of speaking intelligibly for the benefit of others: "Therefore, if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and unlearned men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? (v.23) But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an unlearned man enters, he is convicted by all, he is judged by all; (v.24) the secrets of his heart are known. So, falling on his face he will worship God, proclaiming, 'God is among you'" (v.25).

The Corinthians are used in Paul's example one more time for emphasis. If the Corinthians were to let their spiritual immaturity run rampant, and if they were all to speak in tongues, the results would be disastrous. It would be disastrous for anyone who happened upon that church service. A guest or visitor, an unbeliever or someone unlearned in the gift of speaking in tongues, all such people would be left void of any spiritual benefit by such an abuse of tongues. More than that, a nonmember would probably draw the conclusion that there was something seriously wrong with all those people.

However, if the Corinthians were to speak intelligibly, then it would be a different story. If speaking was done so that all could understand, then an unbeliever could hear the law. He would be convicted by all (v.24) that he truly was a sinner, in need of a Savior. His real, sinful nature would be revealed (v.25), and he would be led to give praise to God. "Look at the difference when people can understand other people talking," Paul is really saying. "If you want to continue to be spiritually immature and insist upon abusing the gift of tongues, go ahead, but you won't accomplish much. You may make yourselves feel good, but nobody else will benefit. Think of the good you could accomplish by a simple preaching of Law and Gospel so that people can understand."

Thus, Paul concludes this section in the same manner as he began—by indicating the greater importance and value of prophecy over speaking in tongues. Whereas Paul previously showed that understanding in speech was necessary for the edification of the church, in these latter verses he shows the necessity of speaking clearly for the sake of the unbelievers. Prophecy (clear messages of the truths of God's Word) could build up fellow Christians in the faith and it could also bring unbelievers to the conviction of their sin and the confession of their faith. For these reasons Paul declares that prophecy is to be preferred over speaking in tongues.

Our discussion of this portion of God's Word would not be complete, I suppose, without a very brief commentary on the Pentecostal and charismatic scenes. Even a casual observer of religious trends today can see that Pentecostal church bodies are one of the fastest growing religions in our country today. The Assembly of God churches stand out in this category. What one hears today in Pentecostal church bodies is not a known, intelligible language being spoken, but a mumbo-jumbo type of talk.

This section of First Corinthians does have something to say about the current imitation of the miracle which happened on the first Pentecost. Paul's concern throughout these verses has been the edification of the church, the spiritual interests of others. Upon examination of Pentecostal churches today, one does not see this same concern. Instead, one sees a seeking for one's own interest, the very thing against which Paul cautioned.

People who do not have the “gift” of speaking in tongues today are regarded by Pentecostals as being not really genuine Christians—they are viewed as lacking something in their spiritual lives.

During my vicar year I had the opportunity to hear firsthand a person “speaking in tongues.” The occasion happened to be an innocent shut-in call that turned into an eye-opening experience. An elderly lady who loved to watch TV evangelists asked me one day what our church thought of speaking in tongues. After we discussed this very section of 1 Corinthians 14, she matter-of-factly asked me, “Would you like to hear me speak in tongues?” “Why not?” I replied. It had been an uneventful morning so far. She then proceeded to close her eyes and talk, resembling in speech someone who was under the influence of alcohol. Her speech was repetitious, to the point of having little imagination.

When I asked her how she happened to learn how to speak like that, she responded by saying that she got the idea from one of the television shows she had been watching. She had gotten the message (and clearly so, from the standpoint of the show’s host) that if she were a true Christian she should be able to talk like the first Christians.

One wonders how many other people are being trapped in the same Pentecostal message. How many other people are being led to believe that they are second-class Christians? We would do well to encourage our people that they are complete Christians, fitted for unselfish service in Christ’s kingdom. Finally, for us as pastors, we can do no better work for our Lord than to deliver faithful messages of God’s Word in accord with Paul’s directives in this section: to strengthen Christians in their faith and to bring unbelievers to the knowledge and confession of their sins and the joy of their salvation. To that end, God help us.