

Exegetical Notes – 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

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Introduction: In this Chapter, Paul continues his discussion of spiritual gifts. Here, he addresses specifically the gift of tongues. There are two basic principles which guide Paul's thinking: (1) Everything that is done in worship must bring glory to God; and (2) Spiritual gifts are given for the common good of the church.

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Verses 1-5

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. ³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

- In chapter 13, Paul has explained the way Christians are to live in relationship to one another. Christians are to love each other as God loves the Church. He has explained that the gifts of the Holy Spirit unite the Church into one body when they function properly. Therefore, Christians should desire Spiritual Gifts and use them to benefit the whole people of God.
- Paul then compares two specific Spiritual Gifts, prophecy and speaking in tongues. Prophecy is the gift of explaining or expositing the word of the Lord. A prophet is not a future teller. He is one who says to the people of God, "this is what God says." Prior to the giving of the New Testament, the prophet worked differently than he does today. In our time, the prophet explains the Scripture to the people of God. Tongues, as used here, is the

gift of speaking in a “language” which no one, not even the speaker of that language understands. It is often referred to as a prayer language.

- Paul says that the gift of prophecy edifies the entire congregation. But the gift of tongues only edifies the one who speaks, since not even the speaker understands what is being said. While the edification of the speaker of a tongues language indirectly benefits the congregation, prophecy directly benefits all who hear.
- Paul says that he values the gift of tongues but believes the gift of prophecy to be more beneficial.

Verses 6-12

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? ⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

- Paul says that speaking in tongues, whether the language is a prayer language or a foreign language is of little value unless there is someone present who can interpret the language.
- Therefore, Christians should desire spiritual gifts that edify the congregation rather than those which only edify one person.

Verses 13-17

¹³ For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. ¹⁶ Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say “Amen” to your

thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?¹⁷ You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.

- Paul says that the person who speaks in tongues should pray for the spiritual gift of interpreting tongues for the sake of edifying the people of God. Without this interpretation an “inquirer,” a person who is just learning about who Jesus is, will have no idea what is happening and so will not be edified by the event.

Verses 18-19

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

- Here, Paul acknowledges that he speaks in tongues in private, but in worship he would rather speak to explain the Scripture to the Church than to speak in tongues.

Verses 20-24

²⁰ Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. ²¹ In the Law it is written:

***“With other tongues
and through the lips of foreigners
I will speak to this people,
but even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord.”***

²² Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³ So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? ²⁴ But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, ²⁵ as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

- Here, Paul hints at the problem in Corinth. Apparently, some people there are thinking like children and without sober judgement about spiritual gifts, especially the gift of tongues. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 28:49. This passage is echoed in Isaiah 28:11-12. The point of these passages is that God will use foreign nations to bring judgment on His disobedient people.

People who speak a language which God's people do not understand will be a sign to God's people that God's judgment is about to fall. But God's people will not listen to these languages. Those who know God will not listen to the tongues which are spoken to them in warning of judgment. Thus, tongues are for believers, to warn them of impending judgment.

- If any unbeliever comes into the congregation and hears people speaking in languages which no one understands, they will simply be confused by what is going on. Tongues are for believers not for unbelievers.
- It would be more beneficial for an unbeliever to hear the word of God explained. When an unbeliever understands the word of God, they will repent of their sins and be saved. They will know who God really is and what He has done for them.

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