



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 14:1-19

Topic

Paul tells the believers in Corinth that their emphasis on uninterpreted tongues is wrong because all speaking in the public assembly of the church must be understood by everyone if it is to be profitable to build them up

Title

*"Tongues Depressors"*

## Introduction

I've been joking about starting a support group for folks who have been made to feel inferior because they do not have the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues.

Since we've been discussing the gifts many of you have told me about your personal experiences. Over the years I've heard far too many such accounts. They run the gamut from simply feeling weird in a service where everyone was speaking with tongues simultaneously to those who were told that speaking in tongues was the universal sign you'd been filled with the Holy Spirit and to those who were practically forced to 'receive' the gift.

Tongues is *not* a gift for every believer. It is *not* the sign that you are a Christian; it is *not* the sign that you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

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*It is not even a sign of spiritual maturity.* It is a gift that is distributed to some members of the body of Christ according to the will of the Holy Spirit.

Since it is a gift you can't learn how to speak in tongues. No one can help you learn how to do it by giving you certain words to release your faith. It must be given to you.

What **is** tongues all about? That depends on where it is exercised. It's private exercise in your devotions is very different from its public exercise in the meetings of the church.

We're going to look mostly at its public exercise in the meetings of the church because that is the context of chapter fourteen.

In verse six Paul asked, "What shall I profit you?" In other words, "What kind of public speaking in the Church will profit you and build you up?" The answer is a word he used nine times in this chapter in various forms: "Understood," "understand," "understanding." In the assembly of the church, you must *only* and *always* speak with understanding in order to profit others and build them up.

The Corinthians had lost sight of building-up others in their meetings. Paul's counsel to the Corinthians can help us to not lose sight of building-up others in our meetings. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 When You Speak In Church Say Something That Will Edify Everyone, and #2 When You Speak In Church Say Something That Everyone Will Understand.

#1 When You Speak In Church  
Say Something That Will Edify Everyone  
(v1-14)

At the end of verse twenty-six you read, "Let all things be done for edification." "Edify" means *to build up*. You should *only* and *always* exercise your gifts in ways that encourage the spiritual growth and progress of others in the assembly.

This is so important that Paul uses the word "edify" in one form or another six times in this chapter and it is implied in everything he says even when he is not using the word.

Let's see the Bible-way to build-up using the speaking gifts God gives us.

1 Corinthians 14:1 Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

"Pursue love" summarizes chapter thirteen. "Desire spiritual gifts" summarizes chapter twelve. If you desire spiritual gifts in the context of love you will want to "prophesy" in the public assembly.

Bear in mind that a major problem in their public worship services was that everyone was speaking in uninterpreted tongues simultaneously. It was so weird that young believers and nonbelievers left church thinking the Corinthians were "mad," as in crazy.

1 Corinthians 14:2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.

Paul defined the gift of "tongue[s]" as an unknown language by which a believer speaks to God. It is the supernatural enabling to worship God through prayer and praise in an unknown language you have not naturally learned.

"In the spirit speak[ing] mysteries" emphasizes that the meaning of the language is not immediately understood by anyone except God. Thus, if you speak in tongues in the assembly, "no one understands" you. By definition, speaking in tongues *by itself* cannot edify other believers since your words are a "mystery" to them.

In passing we should note that by Paul's definition speaking in tongues is never God speaking to you; it is you addressing God with prayer and praise. If you are in an assembly and someone speaks in tongues and then it is interpreted by them or someone else as a message from God, that isn't biblical.

1 Corinthians 14:3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.

Prophecy is totally different. It is immediately understood and can build-up others.

In fact, it must build-up others if it is really from God. It “speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.” These are all slightly different ways of describing being built-up by the exercise of the gift of prophecy:

- Prophecy “speaks edification” in that it focuses my attention on a specific message from God. It tells me where to build at that moment in my spiritual life.
- Prophecy “speaks exhortation” in that it reminds me I am empowered to obey the message from God. It thus motivates me to keep on building.
- Prophecy “speaks comfort” in that I realize God is speaking to me to encourage me in my walk. The spiritual building going on in my life is not a burden because I am partnered with a loving God Who will complete the work He has begun in me.

One thing to notice about the gift of prophecy as Paul understood it. It was more about the present than the future. It was a means by which God could take His Word and apply it in an immediate sense. It can be a foretelling of the future but it seems most often to be a forth-telling of God’s Word.

This is why I think a powerful but often overlooked way to exercise prophecy is to simply be directed to a Scripture, to a Bible verse or verses.

Even if it isn’t something God has already said, if it is a ‘word’ purported to be from God, then we simply judge what is said by His already revealed Word. Either way, the gift of prophecy depends upon and is anchored by the written Word of God.

1 Corinthians 14:4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

There's no wiggle room here. Speaking in tongues builds you up and it does not build-up others. Thus in public it is to be subordinated to the gift of prophesy which builds up everyone.

The apostle Paul said that the way to build-up others is to speak in ways they can understand. I may think otherwise.

- I may think that hearing an assembly of believers speak with tongues simultaneously is a beautiful thing that can build-up others. *But I am wrong!*
- I may say that I am, in fact, built-up by such a phenomena. *But I'd be wrong!*

The inspired Word of God says that the words spoken church, in public, must be understood in order to edify.

1 Corinthians 14:5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Don't miss Paul's point. Whenever you speak in a public assembly of the church you're to do so "that the church may receive edification." That's why the gift of prophecy is to be preferred over the gift of speaking in tongues.

Paul gave a side-by-side comparison of two speaking gifts of the Spirit with regard to their ability to build-up others when exercised publicly. From the standpoint of public worship, prophesy trumps tongues because it can be understood by all.

Paul wished that they "all spoke with tongues." That tells us two things:

1. It tells us that he held the gift of tongues in high esteem. It was not an inferior gift; it just needed to be exercised properly.
2. It re-tells us that not every believer is given the gift of speaking in tongues. Earlier, in chapter twelve, Paul had clearly stated that tongues was not a gift for every believer.

We cannot deem tongues inferior or unnecessary. We cannot ignore it or say it has passed away.

But isn't for every believer. Don't stress over it. If you do have the gift, are you using it?

#2 When You Speak In Church  
Say Something That Everyone Will Understand  
(v6-19)

Carefully observe that Paul said regarding tongues, "unless he indeed interprets." As we'll see later in this chapter, speaking in tongues accompanied by the gift of interpretation is just as valuable to edify others as is prophecy. Paul's point isn't that one gift is inherently better than another gift. His point is that in public we are to be all about building each other up and to do that we must be understood.

These next verses clarify his point about speaking in ways all can understand.

1 Corinthians 14:6 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?

Paul had in mind uninterpreted tongues. The believers were speaking in tongues that no one understood and there was no interpretation.

It cannot "profit" me spiritually if you speak in uninterpreted tongues. It can profit me spiritually if you speak in a way that I can understand.

1 Corinthians 14:7 Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?

1 Corinthians 14:8 For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?

Musical instruments must make distinct sounds in order for you to understand the song being played. A military trumpet must make distinct

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sounds if you are to understand the order being given. In the same way, you cannot edify others unless they understand what is being said. When believers are gathered together there should be an emphasis on exercising gifts in a way that all can understand.

1 Corinthians 14:9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

Pardon the pun, but I think Paul was being a little ‘tongue in cheek’ when he said “you will be speaking into the air.” *They were wasting their breath.*

1 Corinthians 14:10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance.

1 Corinthians 14:11 Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me.

If someone speaks to you in a foreign language, you cannot understand them without an interpretation. It is frustrating and confusing. In that same way, when someone speaks in an unknown tongue, you cannot understand them without an interpretation. It is frustrating and confusing.

1 Corinthians 14:12 Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.

The believers who were out of order needed to be redirected. They needed to subordinate everything they said in public to the principle of building-up others. And the only way to build-up others is to speak in ways that can be understood by them.

1 Corinthians 14:13 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

1 Corinthians 14:14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.

It is so important to remember that Paul was talking about the public exercise of the gift of tongues. If you speak in tongues publicly, “pray that [you] might [also] interpret” so everyone can understand.

Because tongues it is a spiritual talk between your spirit and God's that bypasses your "understanding" some say that speaking in tongues even in private is, well, stupid. God says it builds you up to do so in private. Let's believe God and not our own arguments. Too often the premium we place on our own intellect becomes a stumblingblock in our walk with God. With the gift of tongues, even if I do not have it myself, I see that there is more to knowing God and loving God than my mere intellect can fathom.

1 Corinthians 14:15 What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.

Praying and singing "with the spirit" means praying and praising with the gift of tongues. Praying and singing "with the understanding" means praying and praising in ways that can be understood by everyone.

1 Corinthians 14:16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?

"Bless with the spirit" is a description of speaking prayer or praise to God in tongues. The "uninformed" seems to be a blanket description of anyone who hears you speaking in tongues but cannot understand because there is no interpretation. He or she cannot agree or disagree. He or she cannot respond at all since they cannot understand you.

1 Corinthians 14:17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

You must be understood in order to build-up others.

1 Corinthians 14:18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;  
1 Corinthians 14:19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul did not want to be misunderstood about the need to be understood.

When discussing the gift of tongues some conservatives say that it was the ability to speak in foreign languages you had not ever learned. Or that it



was simply a reference to speaking known foreign languages you had learned or could learn.

Paul said that if he spoke “ten thousand words in a tongue” neither he nor his hearers would understand what he was saying. Does that sound like a known foreign language? Earlier he had said that tongues was a language by which you spoke to God, *never* to men.

Paul was talking about the supernatural gift of speaking in a language unknown to himself, a language of prayer and praise to God. He exercised the gift even more than the Corinthians - *but not in public*. In public he would rather speak even a few words others understood so that they might be edified.

All of us tend to fall to one side or the other with regard to the exercise of spiritual gifts in general and tongues in particular.

- Some tend towards cessationism. Maybe tongues is still a gift, but we don't really care to have it or to hear it exercised in public. It seems to cause a lot of problems so we'd rather ignore it altogether.
- Some tend towards charismania. Regardless what we just read, we think a church service is dead unless everyone starts speaking in tongues! We tend to think every believer should have the gift, and that those who do are somehow more spiritual because they share a mystery language with God.

We don't have the biblical freedom to go to extremes. The gift of tongues is still given to some and not all in the body of Christ **and** we must exercise it in public according to the proper biblical principle that only what is understood by others can build them up.

Where are you at on the tongues continuum?