

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Church - The Body of Christ and Its Hope: 1 Corinthians 14

In Genesis 11 we read of the generations from Noah who, from pride in their own ability, coupled with the fear of being scattered to the four corners of the world, decided to build a tower to heaven and thus make a name for themselves. This pride certainly did not take account of the majesty of the Creator. The folly of what they were doing could never be understood by them but, in any case, the whole project was brought to a conclusion when God intervened and confounded their language. Up to this time, all had spoken the same language and easily understood each other but from that moment onward, they found themselves divided by language. What they had feared in their unbelief in God, took place. The building was halted and they were scattered and, since that time, man has lived in the world, speaking many different languages. What trouble Babel has caused!

Today we will concentrate our thoughts on 1 Corinthians 14. We have noticed that from chapter 11 of this letter, the Apostle Paul has been teaching the believers how the Church should act when it comes together. The church, as seen in Scripture, is a group of living vibrant believers in the Lord Jesus, who has saved them from the penalty of sin, and they assemble together to worship Him and learn more together of what the Word of God teaches, thus known as the assembly, or church. In earlier chapters, we have considered Paul's teaching concerning the coming together for worship, the provision of the many varied gifts among the members, the great need of love as the real motive power for Christian behaviour. Now the apostle turns to conduct of the gatherings. Much has already been written in the earlier chapters of the problems of this assembly. Now it would seem that there is another. During these early days of the Church of God, we learn that God used individuals in a special way by use of 'a tongue'. In their pride, these Corinthians had found a special place for speaking with a tongue. It apparently gave them satisfaction to speak in this way but Paul saw that this could well be misplaced and a balance was needed to guide these believers to a proper understanding of ministry in the assembly, or the church.

Let us notice some key points, before we look more specifically to some of the details.

1. Re-emphasising all that is said in the previous chapter, Paul stresses the need of love as the motivating force at all times. The first verse acts as a link between chapters 13 and 14. The apostle stresses that this motivating force is vital to suitable ministry. If this is not so, the message becomes dry and with little meaning or urgency.
2. A key point for us to note is, that in the assembly, whatever is said must be for all to **understand**. If this is not so, then the speaker has failed in his task. It is vital that, if we are to learn, then we must first understand. There may be a variety of ages and social standards within the company and the message needs to be helpful to all.
3. A further purpose in meeting together for ministry is for edifying, that is, to **build up** believers. The word for 'edifying', or 'profit', is used at least 22 times in this chapter. The Greek word used is 'oikodomein' and this means 'to build a house'. Therefore, it is with a view to building the spiritual house which the Lord has set up that the spiritual gifts given are to be used for profit in the building.

These points are vital as we work through the chapter.

The chapter may be summarised in the following sections:

1. The value of prophecy as a gift to be desired, verses 1-13.
2. The need for understanding, verses 14-25.
3. Instructions for public participation, verses 26-40.

We have already commented on the first verse. The display of love is vital to every form of gathering, in any assembly of God's people. In the study of the previous chapter, we found that without love there would be utter failure. May we always be ready to ensure that, as far as we are concerned, this part of the epistle is put into practice!

**The value of prophecy as a gift to be desired.**

There are two methods of speaking discussed in these verses. These are:

**Prophecy.** In Old Testament times prophecy was generally limited to foretelling the future, whether this was imminent or far-distant. Some so called prophets were not prophets at all and their words were empty. For instance, in 2 Chronicles 18, Jehoshaphat and Ahab agree to call the prophets to advise if they should go to war. Their collective response was to go. Jehoshaphat was unhappy with this and a true prophet, Micaiah was eventually called. He was the only one who brought a message from God. The writings of prophets given in the later books of the Old Testament all give prophecies which God has endorsed as His words with their inclusion in Scripture. In the New Testament, however, the emphasis of the word 'prophecy' is rather 'to speak in the place of God, as the mouth piece of God, with the message of God for the moment, in a language understood by all'. The apostle believes this to be a worthwhile gift of greater benefit in the work of the assembly.

The second method is to speak in **a tongue**. Perhaps we do not now know too much as to the nature of this gift. It appears to be one which was available to the early Church. Both Paul and Luke consistently use one word to describe this as a foreign language. We get the clear evidence of this in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit was first received at Pentecost we find they 'began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance', verse 4. Then we learn in verse 6 'that every man heard them speak *in his own language*', that is, their native tongue. The disciples' speech was not unknown but clearly met the need of everyone in Jerusalem at that time. We believe that the consistency of the word used in Scripture demonstrates that the use of a tongue concerns a known language and Scripture does not anywhere allow for an 'ecstatic utterance'. In the Assembly in Corinth in particular, where all spoke the same language, there was little value in the use of another language because it was not needed. The Apostle did recognise the value of a true gift of tongues in its proper place but, where its usefulness was out of place, the Corinthians were not speaking with profit and he disapproved. We believe that the special gifts of which we read in 1 Corinthians have largely been replaced, because the whole Bible has now been completed, see 13:8. However, the conditions still exist where the points relating to speaking in the Assembly, made by the Apostle, are necessary.

We can now follow what the apostle is saying in chapter 14. In this first section Paul speaks by comparing one method with another and how useful this is to follow the argument. We will give some headings as we proceed.

1. **Be intelligible**, verses 2 and 3. When speaking in an unknown tongue the speaker could not speak to men but only to God because God understands all things and man cannot understand what is spoken in an unintelligible way. But speaking as the mouthpiece of God is of real value because it builds up, it encourages, it comforts. These three elements are vital for the wellbeing of believers everywhere but are not effective if what is said is not understood.
2. **Build up**, verses 4 and 5. Who is built up when speaking in an unknown tongue in the assembly? Only the speaker himself and this is valueless to the assembly, unless an interpreter is present. An interpreter must first be able to speak the same language as both speaker and hearer. There can only be one known translation and then, only then, can the assembly be built up. The real basis of building up is by bringing a message from the Lord Himself, and this shows why the gift of prophecy is so helpful.
3. **Be definite**. Verse 6. To Paul the need for profit to the assembly was not first due to speaking in a tongue but in bringing the truth of God: by revelation, particularly for the apostle before the New Testament was written; by knowledge, having understood the truth and how to apply it; by prophesying, speaking as the mouthpiece for God; and by doctrine, the teaching of the truth of God which has been received.
4. **Be clear**. Verses 7-11. A mix of sound does not necessarily give the tune which is being played. It is important that the tune is heard and all the music fits around the clarity of that tune. The trumpet was used to call men to battle. If that sound was unclear, who would prepare themselves to fight? The message given in the Assembly must be communicated in the same clear way, otherwise it is nothing but speaking to the air! There is a purpose in every sound but a lack of clarity makes that sound useless.
5. **Be positive**. Verses 12-13. Let us note the words 'seek' and pray'. If we have a real desire for spiritual blessing, we will 'seek' that what is done is for building up the assembly. Even if conditions necessitated speaking in a tongue, that same desire will encourage prayer that interpretation may be given. For that, prayer is required that interpretation is not done as by a robot but by the Holy Spirit's intelligent translation for those present.

**Demand for understanding**, verses 14-25.

Between verses 14 and 21 the word 'understanding' is given at least once in almost every verse. To the apostle, the need for understanding is paramount because it is the only means of learning. This applies, not only to what may be said by way of an address or sermon, but also in singing and praying. It is most important for the assembly to be built up.

Referring to prayer, Paul first illustrates this by suggesting that if he prays in a foreign language which he does not understand, then he himself does not benefit by it. In his prayer, the apostle makes clear that he must pray in an understandable way. By this, he not only encourages himself but others, who do not have the same degree of learning, will also benefit by that prayer. Prayer in a collective way must be for building up of all, verse 17. There is a further point in verse 16. In the case of that other person, not only is he encouraged but the whole company is encouraged because he, however unlearned, has so appreciated the prayer, that he can say 'Amen'. Do you say 'Amen' when a prayer is concluded? Has the one who has prayed spoken for you and you have been encouraged and built up by it? Further, our verse 15 tells us that we pray with the spirit and we pray with understanding. It is not possible, as Paul suggests in his illustration in verse 14, for a person to pray and have no understanding of what he is saying. His spirit controls what he is saying.

As to singing, the apostle adds: 'I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also', verse 15. There is no mention in Scripture of singing in a tongue. Were the Corinthians even trying this out? Paul insists that this God-given heart-warming faculty, which almost everyone has, is certainly to be exercised. In singing he will use his full understanding for the encouragement of all. What a joyous purpose singing has in this way! Sometimes we hear a form of singing where the words seem to be meaningless, sometimes the loud music blanks out all sense of the words and may even restrict our desire to sing. The apostle says 'I will sing...with the understanding'.

Paul enforces this need for understanding by his insistence that five words with his understanding was of more value than anything said, even in a tongue, without understanding. This is stressed again by his plea to the Corinthians to 'grow up', be men.

Now we proceed to the purpose of speaking, verses 23-25. Tongues had a particular purpose, as indicated in Acts 2, to which we have referred. They were specifically for use outside the assembly, verse 22. They were particularly intended to draw others through the Gospel to Christ. This is the whole purpose. Within the church, tongues were unhelpful and destructive, verse 23, and prophecy much more beneficial. A direct word from the Lord has a great power. It can bring an errant believer to realise that 'God is in you of a truth', verse 25. Another soul is brought back to the truth and he falls down in worship to God. This is, surely, of such importance today. It is so refreshing to see the power of God at work through His Word and in the church.

**Instructions for public participation**, verses 26-40.

Two verses bring the main message to the Corinthians, as to all who study this epistle.

Verse 33 - 'God is not the author of confusion, but of peace'.

Verse 40 - 'Let all things be done decently and in order'.

Within the assembly gatherings there must be a proper sense of order and not confusion. This does not necessarily mean that the whole programme has to be arranged, as the apostle makes clear within this section. But there is a warning. There was a whole mixture of activity rife in Corinth where all in the assembly were taking part, and probably in a disjointed way. This was not edifying, building up. It was made up of self-willed individuals desiring to hear their own voice but was not helpful to the assembly generally. So the apostle gives some guidance.

- If it is necessary to speak in a foreign tongue, there must be an interpreter, verse 27.
- If no interpreter is available, that person should remain silent, verse 28.
- There should be a limit on the number of speakers, verse 29.
- Those who speak, do so one by one and certainly not at the same time, verse 31.
- The one who speaks must control himself, so that others will learn, verse 32.
- It is essential that order in the house of God is demonstrated in Corinth as in all other assemblies, verse 33.

Having made clear the proper order and ministry of men in public gatherings in the assembly, two verses are given on the part of women. The presence and help of women in the assembly is vital and valuable but, as to public speaking, Paul instructs that the woman should maintain silence and she is not to speak. This matter is dealt with more fully in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 where reasons are given. Time prevents giving more details in this talk.

Finally, it is sad sometimes to hear some of these matters being passed over as being only related to the period in which Paul lived and even that it really does not matter. Yet, because we believe that all Scripture is God-breathed, it is important that we take careful note of what Paul writes. In 7:12, the apostle says, 'But to the rest speak I, not the Lord...' But here in chapter 14, he reinforces what he has said by telling the Corinthians: 'If any man think himself to be ... spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you are *the commandments of the Lord*', verse 37. This epistle and this chapter, have the seal of the Lord's approval on them by being included in the whole Bible. Let us value this highly!

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