–Save This Page as a PDF–

The Word that Builds Up
14: 1-5

The Word that Builds Up DIG: What does it mean to prophecy? Why was it a more desirable gift than tongues? What did Paul mean by the term edifying, or building up the church? What mistake were the members of the Corinthian church making? Why would he say he wished that everyone spoke in tongues? What is the guiding principle throughout this teaching?

REFLECT: What is your primary spiritual gift? What is your secondary spiritual gift? How do you use it (them) to build up others in the Body of Messiah? Have you ever seen your particular giftedness abused by anyone? How can God's Word correct those abuses? Do you feel like you know God's Word well enough to combat false teaching or abuses in the Body?

Prophesying declares God's infallible Word, much like today's preachers and teachers.

The Corinthians had so abused **the gift of tongues** (Greek: *glossei or glossais*, meaning *tongue* or *tongues*) that **they** rivaled Babel in confusion of speaking, and **the apostle** devotes an entire chapter to address the problem which was so representative of **their** sinfulness. **The tongue-speaking** in **Chapter 14** was commonly used in **Paul's** day to describe **pagan gibberish** (**to see link click Ce – The Pagan Background of Counterfeit Spiritual Gifts**). Emotionalism all but neutralized **their** rational senses, and selfish exhibitionism was common, with everyone wanting to do and say his or her own thing at the same time. Services were bedlam and chaotic, with little worship and little **building up** of the Body taking place.

Because of the extreme carnality in the church at **Corinth**, we can be sure that much of the **speaking in a tongue** was counterfeit. **The believers** there were in no **spiritual** condition to properly use true **spiritual gifts** or properly display true **spiritual** fruit. How could a congregation so worldly, opinionated, selfish, cliquish,

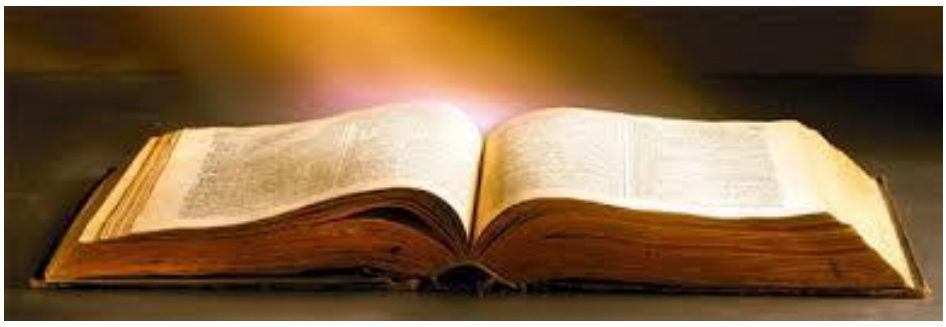
envious, jealous, divisive, argumentative, arrogant, disorderly, inconsiderate, gluttonous, immoral, and defiling of the **Lord's** Supper possibly exercise **the gifts of the Spirit**? For **them** to have done so would have defiled every biblical principle of **spirituality**. You cannot walk in **the Spirit** while continually exercising in the flesh; you cannot swim in the toilet and come up smelling like a rose.[439]

*Dear **Holy** and Pure Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that there is nothing that is even the slightest bit unclean in **You**. **You** totally can be trusted to always be pure in **Your** every thought. It is such a comfort to know for sure that **You** never stray from complete holiness. **You** never have the slightest interest in anything that is forbidden. **You** are a shining beacon of pure light **(John 8:12, 9:5)**! **You are holy. For I am ADONAI your God, the Holy One of Isra'el, Your Savior (Isaiah 43:3). You** want those who love and trust **You** to be like **You** and so **You** desire them to be **holy**.*

*You so graciously give your righteousness to those who love you. **He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21)**. **Your** righteousness is not just an outward coat to be put on and then off, rather it is a total change of heart that seeks to live following **Your** example of complete **holiness**. Thank **You** for sending **the Holy Spirit** to convict of sin **(John 16:7-11).** What a privilege it is for believers to have **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** living within to **teach** and **guide**. **But the Helper, the Ruach Ha'Kodesh whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything and remind you of everything that I said to you. (John 14:26). The Ruach** helps by always speaking **the Truth (John 16:13)** so believers will know how to live righteously before **their** great **God and Savior**. Thank **You, Father God,** for sending **Yeshua** to die in our place as **the Lamb of God (John 1:29),** and for sending **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** to live **in** us **(John 14:17). You** are such a **holy** and awesome **Father**! It is a delight in pleasing **You** by trying to live my life following **You** in **Your holy** example. In **Yeshua's holy** name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

Here, **Paul** commands **the Corinthians** to **pursue love (14:1a).** The transition is simple and perfect. After what has been said about the value of **love** (see **Dj – The Permanence of Love**), above all else, **the Corinthians** should **pursue** (Greek: *dioko*, meaning *to follow , hunt* or *chase with intensity*) **love**. Lovelessness was by far **their** greatest problem, to which all the other problems addressed in **Paul's** first letter to the **Corinthian** church were related to in one way or another. The only strong affection many of **them** had was for **themselves**.

The fact that **love** is primary, however, does not mean that everything else is disregarded. So, **Paul** encourages them to **keep on eagerly seeking the things of the Spirit (14:1b). Love** is not a substitute for the other virtues, or even for good works, in fact, **love** is the great motivator, the only true motivator, of good works. It is also the great motivator of every **spiritual** ministry and of the proper use of every **spiritual gift**. The strong desire **the Corinthians** had for **gifts** was not wrong in itself, but wrong in that it was selfishly directed only toward **the better gifts (12:31)**, **the** showy and attention-getting **gift**s. **They** were right to have desired **spiritual gifts**, but **their** concern should have been for using **the gifts they** had, not for enviously wanting **the gifts** that others had. **Their** desire should have been to see **their gifts** minister to others, not to show off.



Especially seek to be able to prophesy (14:1c). The word for **prophesy** (Greek: *propheteuete*) is in the plural form, indicating that not all individuals should desire to **prophesy**, but that the whole congregation should desire that **someone prophesy** in **public worship**. It was more significant because **it** was able to accomplish what the true **gift of tongues** could not. Therefore, **it** does not refer to the office of a prophet like **Agabus** (see the commentary on **Acts Ck – Paul Went on to Jerusalem Despite Warnings**), which was unique to the apostolic era. **Prophesying primarily has to do with the declaration of God's infallible Word, not ongoing revelation** (see **Cp – The Gift of Prophecy**); **the task is one of forth-telling, not foretelling, much like today's preachers and teachers.** Thus, **it** is meant to communicate to others in rational, intelligent **language**, opposed to **ecstatic utterance**.

But, the type of **tongue-speaking the Corinthians** practiced did not **build them up** at all. **For someone speaking in a tongue is not speaking to people but to a god** (Greek: *theo*)**.** The Greek has no definite article, and such constructions usually are translated merely as **a god**, such can be seen in **Acts 17:23** where **Paul** writes in reference to **an unknown god** (*theo*)**.** The translation here of **a god**

is supported by the fact that the Bible records no instance of **believers** speaking to **God** in anything but normal, intelligible **language**. Even in **Yeshua's** prayer in the garden at Gethsemane (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Kx – The High Priestly Prayer**), in which **He** poured out **His** heart to **the Father**, when **deity** communicated with **deity**, **the language** is remarkably simple and clear. In fact, **Messiah** specifically warned: **Don't babble on-and-on like the pagans, who think God will hear them better if they talk a lot (Matthew 6:7). His** reference included the repetitious **pagan ecstatic utterance**, in which certain meaningless sounds were repeated over and over again. The instruction that **Yeshua** gave on prayer, is a model of simplicity and clarity (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Gy – Lord, Teach Us to Pray**).

Because no one can understand. This states the difference with full clarity. **No one can understand them,** makes plain that this **gift** is different from that in **Acts 2** (see the commentary on **Acts Al – The Ruach Ha'Kodesh Comes at Shavu'ot**), where everyone understood.[440] **The** carnal **Corinthians**, however, were much more interested in the sophisticated than the simple. **They** did not care that **no one understood them**. **Their** concern was for the excitement and self-gratification of **uttering mysteries in the spirit (14:2 NASB).**

The mysteries Paul refers to here are the type associated with the pagan mystery religions, out of which many of the **Corinthian believers** had come (see **Ce – The Pagan Background of Counterfeit Spiritual Gifts**). Unlike **the mysteries** of the gospel, which are revelations of **God's plan kept hidden for ages** but now revealed **(Matthew 13:11; Ephesians 3:9)**, **the** pagan **mysteries** intentionally remained **mysterious**, as **unknown** truths and principles that supposedly only the initiated elite, like in a cult, were privileged to know.

The spirit to which **Paul** refers is not **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh**, but the person's own **spirit**, as implied in the Greek (locative case) and indicated in **the NASB** by **his spirit**. **Paul** does not discourage the legitimate use of **tongues (12:10)**, but is simply characterizing the uselessness of trying to counterfeit **them**. A **believer** who properly ministers a true **spiritual gift** doesn't speak to **an unknown god**, but ministers to others. **Someone teaching or preaching the Word builds up, encourages and comforts believers** in the Church **(14:3). Paul** wants nothing done in **public worship** that will unnecessarily drive unbelievers away.

Building up (Greek: *oikodomeo,* literally meaning *housebuilding*) is the benchmark by which to measure what goes on in **public worship**. This is the presentation of

divine truth which increases and strengthens faith and **spiritual** life. This **building up** of **believers** is accomplished by enlightenment, enabling the hearers to know and inwardly grasp divine truth, to assimilate it and to make it their own. Examples of this feature of **prophecy** are found in the doctrinal sections of **Paul's** letters, notably in **Romans Chapters 1** through **11** and **Ephesians Chapters 1** through **3**.

Encouragement (Greek: *paraklesis*) has a broad range of meanings, all of which have a personal dimension. It can refer to **exhortation (Philippians 2:1)**, **consolation (Second Corinthians 1:3-7)**, **assurance (Luke 2:25)**, and **encouragement (Romans 15:4-5**). This feature is well illustrated in the encouraging part of **Paul's** letters, most notably in **Romans Chapter 12** and **Ephesians Chapter 4**. We cannot say, however, that **building up** is the most important one and **encouragement** and **comfort** are merely an afterthought. All three work together.[441]

Comfort (Greek: *paramuthian*), deals with **the believer's** condition in this hostile and evil world where we must endure persecution and affliction of every kind. **It strengthens** weak knees and supports sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance **(First Peter 4:12-19; Hebrews 12:1-13)**. In **Acts 15:32 Paul and Silas** traveled through **the churches** of **Syria** and **Cilicia** to **strengthen** those **believers**, this epitomizes what **Paul** means by **prophecy**.[442] **Prophecy** is always meant to benefit others, be it **believer** or unbeliever.

Sarcastically, **Paul** points out that **a person speaking in a tongue** only **edifies himself (14:4a). The apostle** had used sarcasm before **(4:8-10)**, and **it** reached its height in **14:36, "Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?"** Because even true **tongues** must be interpreted in order to be understood, so **the counterfeit** could not possibly **build** anyone **up**, including the person speaking, without an **interpretation**. **They** cannot, therefore, be intended by **God** for private devotional use, as many Pentecostals and charismatics claim. Here, **Paul** is referring to the *supposed* value **the Corinthians** placed on **their** self-styled **tongue-speaking**. The satisfaction many of **the Corinthian believers** experienced in **their** abuse of **tongue-speaking** was *self-satisfaction*, which came from pride-induced emotion, not from being **built up spiritually**. The result was only **spiritual** pride.

But a person prophesying edifies the congregation during **public worship**

(14:4b). That person uses **his gift** of **teaching or preaching**, as **all the gifts** are meant to do. **Their** purpose is certainly not to selfishly minister to ourselves, as some of **the Corinthian believers** thought **they** were doing by **uttering mysteries in the spirit**. Our **gifts** are to minister *to others* for the glory of **ADONAI**. **Each person is given the particular manifestation of the Spirit that will be for the common good (12:7).**[443]

Why then, many have wondered, did **Paul** say: **I wish you would all speak in tongues (14:5a)? He** has been warning **them** about **their** abuse of **tongues**, and is beginning a chapter devoted to showing the inferiority of **tongues**. Why would **he** have wanted the problem to be compounded by getting everyone involved? But **Paul** was wishing the impossible for the sake of emphasis. **He** knew that **all believers** do not have **the** same **gift**. **Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? or teachers? or miracle-workers? Not all have gifts of healing, not all speak in tongues, not all interpret, do they (12:29-30)? The apostle** certainly wasn't suggesting that **his** wisdom was greater than that of **the Ruach**. **He** was simply making it clear that **he** didn't oppose the genuine **gift of tongues**. It's as if **Paul** was saying, "If the **Ruach** chose to give every one of you **the gift of tongues**, it would be fine with **me**!"

But even more I wish you would all prophesy (14:5b). He knew that this would also be impossible, for the same reason that all having **the gift of tongues** was impossible. **His** point was that, if **they** insisted on clamoring after **the** same **gift**, it would be much better if **they** clamored after **prophecy**. Not only was **prophecy** superior to **tongues** in **building up** the church, but it was a longer-lasting **gift**, one which **Paul** knew would continue to be used by **the Lord** long after the true **gift of tongues** had **ceased** (see **Dj – The Permanence of Love**).

It is **the interpretive key to this chapter** to note that in **14:2** and **4 tongue** is singular (also seen in **14:13**, **14**, **19** and **27**), whereas in **14:5 Paul** uses the plural **tongues** (also seen in **14:6**, **18**, **22**, **23** and **29**). Apparently **the apostle** used the singular form to indicate **the** counterfeit **gift** and the plural to indicate **the** true **gift**. Recognizing that distinction may be the reason the King James translators inserted the word *unknown* before the singular. The singular is used for the **false gift** because gibberish is singular, it cannot be gibberishes. Therefore, I will be using the terms **speaking in a tongue, tongue-speaking, ecstatic utterance, the counterfeit** use of **the gift,** or **pagan gibberish** when the text uses the singular word **tongue** in the rest of **Chapter 14**. There are no kinds of **pagan ecstatic speech**, there are; however, kinds of **languages** in the true **gift**, for

which the plural **tongues** is used. The only exception is in **14:27**, where the singular is used to refer to a single man speaking a single genuine **language**.[444] Thus, I will be using the plural word **tongues** for **the** true **gift** in the rest of **Chapter 14** to distinguish the difference.

In any case, even a **believer** with the true **gift** of **tongues** was never to exercise it **unless someone** else **gives an interpretation. Paul** had already mentioned **interpretation of tongues** as a **spiritual gift (12:10)**. Therefore, everything spoken **in tongues** must be **interpreted so that the congregation can be edified (14:5c)**, and apparently by one **interpreter** other than the one who just **spoke in tongues**. The guiding principle throughout this teaching is that the pursuit of **spiritual gifts** must be joined with a pursuit of love for others. A **gift** or ministry that does not **build up** will tear down, no matter how **“spiritual”** it may seem. When we explain and apply **the Word of God** to individual lives, that is what **builds God’s Church**.