

Paul's Advice on Spiritual Gifts:
An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14

P.G. Nelson

One of the issues that divides evangelical Christians today concerns spiritual gifts. This issue also divided the church at Corinth, and led the Christians there to write to the apostle Paul about it. Here I present a new exposition of his reply in 1 Corinthians 12–14.¹ In this I seek to draw out the meaning of each section as accurately as possible, and to trace the logic of his argument from beginning to end. The result not only establishes how Paul dealt with the issue at Corinth, but also resolves the controversy over spiritual gifts today.

Exposition

Introduction (12:1)

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written in response to a letter that he had received from them asking him for his advice on a number of matters (7:1a). One of these matters had to do with 'spiritual abilities' (1a).² Paul wants the church to have a clear understanding of these abilities (1b).

The sign that someone has the Holy Spirit (12:2–3)

Paul begins by making a key point. He specifies what it is that characterizes all those who have the Holy Spirit, and distinguishes them from all those who do not. His presentation turns on the word 'Therefore' at the beginning of verse 3, and may be paraphrased: 'You remember how, when you were pagans, you were somehow led into submitting yourselves to idols. You will understand, therefore, when I tell you that the influence of the Holy Spirit on a person shows itself in the submission of the person to Jesus as Lord. No one speaking by the Holy Spirit calls Jesus "accursed", and no one can call Jesus "Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. It is the ability to confess Jesus as Lord that shows whether someone has the Holy Spirit or not.'

In putting forward this test, Paul evidently has in his mind a sincere confession of Jesus as Lord, and not of the kind Jesus warned against in Matthew 7:21–23. Paul always preached for such a confession (Acts 26:20), and many of the Corinthians had so confessed (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

One Spirit, many different gifts (12:4–11)

Having specified what all those who have the Holy Spirit display in common, Paul goes on to stress the great variety of abilities that the Holy Spirit inspires in different Christians. The list

¹ This is based on my booklet, *An Apostle's Advice on Spiritual Gifts and Manifestations*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1996), now out of print. For a review of previous work, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

² Gk. *tōn pneumatikōn*. I take this to be neuter as in 14:1.

he gives of these (8–10) is not a complete one (cf. Rom. 12:6–8, Eph. 4:7–11, 1 Pet. 4:10–11) and has evidently been selected with the problems at Corinth at least partly in view. The nature of some of these abilities becomes clearer later.

The Christian community is like a body with many different parts (12:12–13)

Paul likens a company of Christians with many different abilities to a body with many different parts (12). His basis for saying this ('For') is that all have experienced the same Spirit working in their lives, and therefore all form part of the same company (13).³ The diversity within this company is therefore like the diversity within a body: there are many different parts, but all the parts belong to each other and make up a single whole (12).

Paul draws important lessons from this in the verses that follow.

Those who do not have spectacular abilities should not feel inferior on this account (12:14–20)

Paul speaks first to those at Corinth who did not have the spectacular abilities that some of the others had, and who felt that they were not part of the church as a result. 'The foot may be less impressive in what it can do than the hand, and the ear less impressive than the eye, but they are nevertheless part of the body, and the body could not function without them. So likewise members of the church with less spectacular abilities should see themselves as being as important to the church as those with more striking ones.'

Those who do have spectacular abilities should not feel superior (12:21–26)

Paul now turns to those at Corinth who possessed spectacular abilities, and felt themselves to be superior to those who did not. He points out to them that, in the human body, it is the parts that seem weakest that are the most vital (22), and it is the parts to which we attach the least honour that we dress up most splendidly (23–24a). More importantly ('But'),⁴ God has deliberately designed the human body so that there might be a balance between its different parts: the more important parts have been given less honour, and the less important parts more honour (24b). In this way all the parts of the body have an equality which makes them work together in harmony (25–26). 'So likewise,' he implies, 'those with the more spectacular abilities should recognize their equality with those with less spectacular ones, since the latter's, though less striking, are more vital.'

The right attitude to different gifts (12:27–31a)

Paul completes his use of the analogy of the body and draws out his final lessons from it. The church is made up of a variety of different people, possessing a variety of different gifts (28). These gifts have an equality of the kind described in verses 21–26. The more useful are the less spectacular and vice versa. In terms of usefulness, 'God has placed in the church first

³ The precise interpretation of verse 13 has been much discussed. Its general sense is, however, clear, and this is sufficient for the present purpose. There is only 'one' Holy Spirit. Therefore 'all' who have received the Spirit have the same Spirit. They therefore form 'one' body, the company of those in whom the Spirit is working. However big the differences between them may be, all are included – 'whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free'.

⁴ Gk. *alla*. This usually means 'But', but can also mean 'Indeed' (e.g. John 16:2), and this would make good sense here.

apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, acts of support,⁵ acts of guidance,⁶ and different kinds of tongues.’ God does not want everyone doing the same thing, so the coveting of other people’s gifts is not particularly to be encouraged (29–30); if there is to be any coveting, it is to be of the more useful gifts (31a).

That Paul is not merely listing the gifts in verse 28, but ranking them in order of value, is shown by verse 31a and 14:1–5.

A better way still: having a loving concern for others (12:31b–13:3)

Paul takes his advice one step further (12:31b). More important than gifts is the way in which they are used, and the motives for using them. Without the right motive, whatever we do, however spectacular, is worthless (13:1–3). This provides us with an even better test of which gifts to seek and which not (cf. 14:1–5).

The word Paul uses for the right motive is *agapē*. This may be defined as ‘a deep and practical concern for the welfare and honour of another’. There is no word in modern English that fully expresses this: ‘love’ puts too much emphasis on the emotional aspect, and ‘charity’ is too narrow. In the present context ‘care for others’ is perhaps the nearest we can get.

What care for others means (13:4–7)

Paul draws out some of the qualities of *agapē*. His list suggests that he has some idea of what was going on at Corinth, and of the extent to which the difficulties that the Corinthians were having over spiritual gifts were being caused by their wrong attitudes to each other.

Care for others is lasting, gifts are not (13:8–12)

To establish the priority of *agapē* over the different gifts, Paul shows that the latter are only temporary while the former is enduring. He first states this (8) and then presents an argument for it (9–12): ‘Our knowledge is incomplete and our prophecy partial. Something that is incomplete or partial becomes obsolete when the corresponding perfect thing comes. This is what happens when we grow up: when we are children we talk, think and reason like children; when we become adults we discard our childish ways of doing these things. This is what will happen to prophecy, for our present ability to see is very limited compared with the sight that we will have one day. The same is true of our knowledge.’

The precise point at which the gifts will cease has, of course, been much debated. On the basis of verse 12, some believe that it will be when the Lord comes. Verse 13, however, seems to say that faith and hope will continue after the gifts have ceased, which seems to set the time before the second coming (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7, Rom. 8:24–25). From this, some argue that the gifts served only a very temporary purpose, and came to an end after the full revelation of the NT had been given. The issue is a difficult one to settle on the basis of verses 12–13 alone, and I will discuss it later. Paul’s advice to the Corinthians is for the situation in which the gifts are still in operation, and his reference to the cessation of gifts is to establish the priority of caring for others.

⁵ Gk. *antilēmpseis*.

⁶ Gk. *kubernēseis*.

Care for others is greater even than faith and hope (13:13)

Paul rounds off the preceding section and adds one more point about *agapē*: that it surpasses even faith and hope.

Prophecy is more helpful to others than speaking in tongues (14:1–5)

Having established that caring for others is the virtue that Christians should aspire to above all others, Paul now spells out the better approach to spiritual abilities that he promised in 12:31b, and applies this to the issue that was evidently causing most difficulty at Corinth – the question of which is superior, speaking in tongues or prophecy. He says: ‘Make caring for others your top priority. Covet spiritual abilities with the care of others in view. On this basis, covet prophecy more than speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues only edifies the individual – unless someone interprets – whereas prophecy helps others and builds up the church.’

What Paul means by ‘tongues’ (*glōssai*) and ‘prophecy’ (*prophēteia*) in 1 Corinthians 12–14 we can only infer from what he says about them. He everywhere assumes that the Corinthians knew what he meant by these terms. Indeed they had probably used them themselves in their letter to him. From what he has said so far we learn that:

- Tongues at Corinth were unintelligible to those who heard them (‘no-one understands’, 14:2). To be understood they had to be interpreted (12:10, 14:5).
- Paul uses the word ‘prophecy’ more in the broader sense of ‘speaking for God and interpreting his ways’ than in the narrower sense of ‘foretelling the future’ (see 11:4–5, where he uses it to cover all religious utterance other than prayer).
- Paul distinguishes the ministry of a prophet from that of an apostle, putting it second to the latter in his ranking of gifts (12:28). He also distinguishes it from the ministry of a teacher, which he places below it in his list of gifts. Elsewhere he distinguishes it also from the work of an evangelist and of a pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11). These distinctions still leave a wide area of speaking ministry, however, from alerting an individual to danger (Acts 21:10–11) to bringing encouragement to a church (Acts 15:32) or warning to a community (Acts 11:27–28). Paul has the second of these activities particularly in view here (3–4).

We shall learn more about tongues and prophecy from later verses. Meanwhile we continue to follow Paul’s argument. He has stated that prophecy is more useful than speaking in tongues (1–5). He now goes on to argue for this at some considerable length (6–25). The Corinthians evidently regarded speaking in tongues very highly, and needed help to value it correctly.

Tongues convey no meaning to others (14:6–12)

Paul stresses the ineffectiveness of tongues for the purpose of communication. Someone speaking in a tongue is like a musical instrument that is not giving out a clear tune (7–8). He or she comes across to listeners like a foreigner whose language they do not understand (10–11). The word Paul uses for a foreigner is *barbaros*, barbarian. This meant someone who did not speak Greek or share Greek culture (cf. Rom. 1:14). As Greeks, those who could speak in tongues at Corinth would not like to have thought that they came across to others in this way.

Paul continues his appraisal of tongues in verses 13–25. The main division in the text comes between verses 19 and 20. However, in verse 20 Paul leads into what he is going to say in verses 21–25 by rounding off what he has said in verses 13–19. For the purposes of exposition, therefore, verse 20 is better taken with the preceding section.

Speaking in tongues does not develop one's mind (14:13–20)

Paul continues the argument of the previous section – that it is more helpful to others to speak intelligibly than it is to speak in tongues – but at the same time he introduces a new thought: that speaking intelligibly is also more helpful to the person who is speaking.

In introducing this new point, Paul gives us a vital insight into the nature of speaking in tongues. In verse 14 he says, ‘if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind (*nous*) is unfruitful.’ This description, coupled with the inability of listeners to understand what is being said (2), identifies speaking in tongues as the activity in which worshippers give expression to their inner thoughts and feelings by using their organs of speech without engaging their conscious minds to put what they are feeling into words.⁷ The resulting sounds are speech-like, but unintelligible to others. This is the ‘speaking in tongues’ of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians today. Confirmation of this identification will be found under verses 21–25, together with a comparison with speaking in tongues in Acts.

Paul’s primary concern about speaking in this way is that it is unhelpful to others (13, following on from the previous section; 16–19). He is also concerned, however, that it leaves speakers’ minds ‘unfruitful’ (14). This means that their minds do not develop in the way in which they would do if they trained themselves to put their inner thoughts and feelings into words. Paul says that it is better to use one’s mind (15) and develop one’s thinking (14). He concludes: ‘Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking: rather, in respect of wickedness be infants, and in your thinking be adults’ (20).

Paul’s concern that speaking in tongues leaves speakers’ minds unfruitful does not mean that he saw no value in speaking in this way. He acknowledged that those who worship in a tongue edify themselves (4a) and express their feelings well (17a), and he thanked God that he could speak in tongues himself (18). His point is not that speaking in tongues is valueless, but that there is in general a *greater* value in speaking ‘with the mind also’ (15).

Speaking in tongues is not a sign for Christians (14:21–25)

Paul makes one more point about speaking in tongues. He begins with a quotation from Isaiah (21). This may be translated:⁸

‘With other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people, and in this way they will indeed not listen to me,’ says the Lord.

The context of this passage is the rejection of Isaiah’s teaching by Judah’s religious leaders on the grounds that his language was baby-like (Is. 28:9–10). So God warns them that he will speak to the nation in a language that will really sound baby-like, i.e. the language of a foreign invader (Is. 28:11–13; Paul’s quotation is a summary of this).

⁷ Cf. Andrew B. Newberg, Nancy A. Wintering, Donna Morgan, and Mark R. Waldman, ‘The measurement of regional cerebral blood flow during glossolalia: a preliminary SPECT study’, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 148 (2006), 67–71.

⁸ *Oude* is usually rendered ‘not even’ here, but ‘not indeed’ makes better sense, as in John 8:42, Rom. 8:7, 1 John 2:23.

The point Paul takes from this is that God does not use unintelligible speech to speak to the obedient but to the disobedient, to drive them further away from him. ‘So then,’ he says, ‘tongues do not act as a sign for believers but for unbelievers’ (22a). By this he means that tongues *strengthen the unbelief* of unbelievers, who take them as a sign that their unbelief is right (23). ‘On the other hand,’ he says, ‘prophecy is a sign for believers and not for unbelievers’ (22b). This is because the latter’s unbelief is weakened when they hear prophecy being spoken (24–25).

Paul’s conclusion that tongues are not a sign for believers – that they do not prove that someone has the Spirit of God upon them – means that speaking in tongues is not a supernatural ability, but a natural one that can be used under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or not, like other natural abilities. This confirms the identification of speaking in tongues given under verses 13–20, since worshippers in some pagan circles also speak in the way described there.⁹

Note that this identification implies that the ability to speak in tongues is not in itself a spiritual gift. It is a natural ability which becomes a spiritual gift when it is used under the influence of the Spirit (12:4–11). When it is used without the Spirit, the result is ‘as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal’ (13:1). If the ability to speak in tongues was itself a spiritual gift, speaking in this way would be a sign for believers, which Paul says it is not (22a).

In certain important respects, therefore, speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians is different from speaking in tongues in Acts. In Acts 2:1–41, Luke describes how, on the day of Pentecost, the apostles were ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ and ‘began to speak in other tongues’ (1–4). He goes on to recount how pilgrims who had gathered in Jerusalem from different countries each heard the apostles speaking ‘in his own language’ (5–11). This gave Peter an opportunity to preach the gospel to them (14–41). The apostles were thus made to speak *more* intelligibly, not less.

Something similar seems to have happened in Acts 10:1 – 11:18, where Luke describes how the Holy Spirit fell on a company of God-fearing Gentiles while Peter was speaking to them (10:44–46). Peter later described the incident as being similar to what happened at Pentecost (11:15), and the reaction of the Jewish Christians who witnessed it (10:45) or who subsequently heard about it (11:1–18) is consistent with this. Some Jewish Christians had severe doubts about the inclusion of Gentiles in the Church, and would hardly have been reassured if the Gentiles to whom Peter preached had spoken in the same way that some pagan prophets did (cf. 23).¹⁰ A similar consideration applies to the other reference to tongues in Acts (19:1–7): in this case those involved were followers of John the Baptist who needed to know that the one of whom John prophesied had indeed come.

Confirmation of the distinction between speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians and in Acts is provided by Mark 16:15–18, where Jesus tells the Eleven that certain ‘signs’ will accompany those who believe the gospel, one of which is that ‘they will speak in new tongues’. From the context it is clear that the kind of sign that Jesus had in mind is one that strengthens belief and weakens unbelief – a sign for believers. The tongues in Acts answer to this description – they

⁹ For references to speaking in unintelligible tongues outside Christianity, see David Christie-Murray, *Voices from the Gods* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Chap. 1. In contemporary Hindu worship, individuals occasionally go into a trance and speak unintelligibly.

¹⁰ Greek mantic prophecy was obscure or unintelligible, and required interpretation (Christie-Murray, 2–3).

were miraculous in character and fostered belief.¹¹ By contrast, Paul says of the tongues in 1 Corinthians that they are *not* a sign for believers (22a).

That speaking in tongues at Corinth can be positively identified with speaking in tongues today means that Paul cannot have had in his mind in 13:8–12 that the gifts would cease when the NT had been completed. Although this does not settle the meaning of these verses, it does make their interpretation less critical. My own view is that verse 12 (‘then I shall fully know even as I am fully known’) means what it seems very clearly to mean – that the gifts will cease (8–10) when the Lord returns (cf. 15:20–24, 51–52). Verse 13 can be interpreted in a way that is consistent with this by noting that Paul does not say ‘faith and hope and love last for ever’ but ‘faith-hope-love lasts for ever’ (*menei pistis elpis agapē*). In other words, he does not treat faith, hope, and love as three separate attitudes, but as the three ingredients of a single attitude.¹² Thus, although faith and hope do not last for ever (2 Cor. 5:7, Rom. 8:24–25), he can say that faith-hope-love lasts for ever because love lasts for ever. In this way he is able to raise faith and hope above prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, even though they share the transience of the latter (8). At the same time, because they do not last for ever, he can say that love surpasses them (13b).

Of the other gifts, that of apostle does not continue today. This was restricted to witnesses of the resurrection (9:1, 15:3–9). There can be little doubt, however, that prophecy, in the broad sense in which Paul uses the term, does continue today. Not all spoken ministry can be classed as teaching or evangelism. The right word from a hospital chaplain to a dying patient, or from a visiting preacher to a struggling church, or from a Christian broadcaster to a sinful nation, can only be described as prophetic.

Paul’s treatment of speaking in tongues can be extended to other spiritual phenomena, e.g. those associated with the Toronto Blessing (swooning, shaking, laughing, roaring, etc.). These too involve disengaging the conscious mind (14), and are a sign, not that the Holy Spirit is working, but to unbelievers, strengthening their unbelief (22). Similar phenomena occur outside Christianity.¹³

When you come together, let everything be done for the edification of one another (14:26)

Having completed his comparison of prophecy and tongues, Paul now sets out some guidelines for the use of these in the church. He pictures gatherings of the church in a way adopted by the Christian Brethren for their Breaking of Bread. His general advice – let all be done for edification – follows what he has said earlier.

Instructions to those who speak in tongues (14:27–28)

Paul limits the number of those speaking in tongues to ‘two, or at the most, three’ (27a). He insists that they speak one at a time (27b), and that what they say is interpreted (27c); otherwise they should not speak (28).

Since tongues in 1 Corinthians are not foreign languages, the interpretation of what someone says in a tongue does not involve the translation of words, but the provision of an explanation of what the speaker is seeking to express. To obtain such an explanation, the interpreter has to

¹¹ They did not *impose* belief of course, cf. Acts 2:12–13.

¹² Faith, hope, and love are closely associated elsewhere in the NT, e.g. 1 Thes. 1:3.

¹³ Cf., e.g., E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), 75–80.

wait upon God to be given the sense of what the speaker is saying – just as a prophet has to wait upon God to be given the message that he articulates himself.

This understanding of the interpretation of tongues accords with the word that Paul uses in verse 2 when he says of a tongues-speaker that ‘no one understands him’. The word he uses is *akouō*, to hear. What he is saying is that no one can understand by *listening*. An interpreter may understand, but does so in a different way.

Instructions to those who prophesy (14:29–33a)

Paul also limits the number of those prophesying to two or three (29a). He again insists that they speak one at a time: when one is speaking, others should listen (29b); and the one who is speaking should be ready to step down so that someone else can speak (30). In this way all can have a turn (31).

Paul adds that there is no reason why they should not be able to keep these rules. Pagan prophets may lose control of themselves, and this may be taken by their followers as being a sign of great inspiration: but Christian prophets always can, and always should, keep control of themselves (32), for the God who is inspiring them wants gatherings of his people to be orderly and peaceful (33a).

Verse 29b tells us more about prophecy. This reads literally ‘and let the others discern’. Paul uses the same word here as in 12:10 (‘discernings of spirits’): it implies making a distinction between true and false. Paul envisages that not all the prophecy at Corinth will answer to his description in verses 22–25 (cf. 13:2). There may be false prophets (Matt. 7:15–20). Even the best of Christian leaders can sometimes make a mistake (cf. Gal. 2:11–16). What a prophet says needs to be carefully assessed before it is accepted.

Verse 33b could be taken with verse 33a, but it adds little to this, and ties in better with the next section.

Instructions about women speaking in church (14:33b–36)

Paul concludes with instructions about the participation of women in worship. This section needs to be taken with 11:3–16. I have discussed this in detail elsewhere.¹⁴

What I am writing is from the Lord (14:37–38)

Paul anticipates that some at Corinth will question the instructions that he has given. He therefore affirms that what he is writing is from the Lord, and calls upon those who might think that they know better to recognize this (37).

The precise meaning of verse 38 is uncertain. The verb Paul uses (*agnoeō* ‘to not-know’) can have different nuances, and in the main clause some manuscripts have *agnoeitai* (indicative) while others have *agnoeitō* (imperative). The most telling rendering is ‘But if anyone does not know [that what I am writing is from the Lord], he is not known [by the Lord]’ (cf. Matt. 7:21–23).

¹⁴ P.G. Nelson, *Paul’s Teaching on the Ministry of Women*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1996).

Concluding summary (14:39–40)

Paul concludes his reply to the church's request for advice about spiritual abilities (7:1a, 12:1). The way he does so suggests that the church had asked him whether it should forbid speaking in tongues. His answer is, 'No. Instead of doing this, put the emphasis on prophecy. Make this the gift to be coveted; and ensure that everything is done in a decent and orderly way.'

Conclusion

The apostle speaks to us all.

© 2007 P.G. Nelson. Reproduced by permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in December 2007 by Peter Nelson.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
