



COMMENTARIES ON “I CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 14

1 Corinthians chapter fourteen continues the topics of the previous two chapters: spiritual gifts and love. Concluding his thoughts from chapter thirteen, St. Paul tells the Corinthians Christians to both pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, but especially the gift of being able to prophesy (14:1). This is all tied into his larger point of being united in the body of Christ: the Christians should desire the gift of prophecy because it will equip the individual Christian to instruct and build up the larger group of Christians.

To better explain this point, the apostle uses the example of a person who is gifted to speak in different kinds of tongues (see 12:10). A person speaking in a tongue that is incomprehensible to the people around him or her is empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak mysteries, but no one can understand them (14:2); the person therefore edifies only himself or herself (14:4). In contrast, the person who prophesies “speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men” (14:3), and therefore benefits everyone in the congregation (14:4). As St. John Chrysostom says, “The difference between tongues and prophecy is precisely the difference between benefit to the individual and benefit to the entire church.”

It is for this reason that St. Paul wishes that all could speak with tongues, but he also points out that being able to prophesy is greater because it does not require another individual who has been gifted in the interpretation of tongues to interpret what is being said (14:5). This is a significant issue when it comes to the gift of tongues: the gift requires that either the speaker or another Christian who is present have an additional gift to explain what the person with the gift of tongues has said. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains St. Paul’s point in verse six:

If he were to come to them the next time doing nothing but speaking in tongues, how would that profit them? It would be useless unless he supplemented it with the use of other gifts, such as a word of revelation (sharing a vision that had been revealed to him), knowledge (interpreting the Scriptures to show them how to live; see 12:8), prophecy (passing on a message from God), or teaching (transmitting the catechesis of the Church). Mere speaking in tongues itself would be useless, as they can see.

To further clarify his point, the apostle uses the analogy of musical instruments. Flutes and harps, for example, when played together must be harmonious in the melody they play, because it would otherwise be impossible to discern the song that was being performed (14:7). Likewise, a trumpet was used to summon an army into battle but, if it played only strange sounds rather than the clarion call to battle, the army would be uncertain of the orders it was expected to fulfill (14:8). A Christian who speaks in tongues without interpretation suffers from the same problem: people will not know what is spoken, and the Christian will therefore be doing nothing more valuable than speaking into the air (14:9). There are many different languages, but if one does not understand the language being spoken, then each person will remain no more than a foreigner to each other (14:10-11). To avoid such problems and complications in communication, Christians should be zealous for gifts that enable them to provide edification for the church (14:12).

The Christian who speaks in a tongue should therefore pray for the the gift of interpretation (14:13), because praying in a tongue without interpretation is unfruitful for the understanding (14:14). St. Paul then says that he will pray and sing with both the spirit and with the understanding, because otherwise others could not say “Amen” (meaning that they confirm or agree with what has been said) at his thanksgiving (14:15-16). It should be noted that St. Paul is not disparaging the gift of speaking with tongues; in fact, he thanks God that he speaks with tongues more than the Corinthian Christians (14:18). Nonetheless, he would rather speak five words with his understanding, that are intelligible and edifying to all, than 10,000 words in a tongue that no one could understand (14:19).

To emphasize the importance of understanding in the Christian life, the apostle encourages them to be mature in their understanding of Christian teaching and the spiritual life (14:20). The situation of the Corinthians at this time is somewhat analogous to that of the Israelites when they were taken captive by the Assyrians (14:21, loosely quoting Isaiah 28:11): the Israelites did not believe God and thus were forced to hear in captivity a language that they could not understand, and the Corinthians are likewise weak in their understanding and thus cannot grasp what is being said in tongues. Therefore, unlike prophecy - which is intended to edify and enhance belief - tongues in the Corinthian church are a sign for unbelievers that confirms them in their unbelief (14:22). A non-Christian hearing the Corinthian Christians speak in different tongues will think them to be insane, while a unbeliever who hears prophetic teaching may be convinced by the teaching and “convicted” (or convinced) of his or her sinfulness and need for the God Who is present among the Christians (14:24-25). Ambrosiaster explains what happens:

When he (meaning the unbeliever) sees that God is being praised and that Christ is being adored and that nothing is disguised or being done in secret, as happens among pagans, he will understand clearly that this is true religion.

In keeping with the need for the exercise of the spiritual gifts to facilitate understanding, St. Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to sing, teach, speak and interpret in an orderly fashion that promotes edification (14:26). Those who speak in different tongues must do so in turn and wait for the interpretation (14:27); moreover, if no one is present who has been given the gift of interpretation, then those who have the gift of speaking in different tongues, then those persons should refrain from exercising this gift in the worship service (14:28). Prophecy should similarly be orderly, with each person with the gift speaking in turn while the others discern the full meaning of the message being given (14:29-31); in fact, to those who would claim that they cannot restrain themselves from immediately proclaiming the message God has given to them, St. Paul says that “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (14:32).

The point of all this, St. Paul emphasizes, is that Christians should not place the blame on God when they become out-of-control during their worship, because God is the author of peace (14:33).

In verses 34-35 St. Paul returns to the subject of women in the church (which he previously addressed in 11:3-16). In this case, women are commanded to refrain from judging the prophecies given by prophets, but instead, if they have questions, to speak with their husbands about these things outside of the church. The point is not that the Corinthians women were forbidden from any speech during the worship services, and it is not to say that women were forbidden from prophesying at all - early Christian

commentators like Origen note that Philip's daughters prophesied (Acts 21:8-9), as did Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22) - but instead that they were to maintain what was at that time appropriate behavior for women. To those who would argue that Christian freedom allowed the Corinthians to overturn all social conventions, St. Paul reminds them that they are not the originators of the Gospel, nor were they the exclusive recipients of the Gospel message (14:36). The Corinthians women must therefore adhere to the standards maintained in the rest of the Christian world at that time.

It is easy to imagine that, at the end of all these instructions, some Corinthian Christian might have objected, "Who are you to make these rules?" St. Paul anticipates this question and says that, if anyone considers himself to be a prophet or spiritual, then that person must acknowledge that what he has written are the commandments of the Lord (14:37). To those who willfully choose to disregard what the apostle has said, however, St. Paul simply throws up his hands and says, "Let him be ignorant" (14:38).

He concludes with a quick summary of the chapter: Christians should desire to prophesy, and they should not be forbidden to speak with tongues, but all things should be done decently and orderly (14:39-40).