

## MacArthur Study Bible, 1 Cor 14

**13:13 love.** The objects of faith and hope will be fulfilled and perfectly realized in heaven, but love, the God-like virtue, is everlasting (cf. [1 John 4:8](#)). Heaven will be the place for the expression of nothing but perfect love toward God and each other.

**14:1 Pursue love.** A command for every believer. Because lovelessness was a root spiritual problem in the Corinthian church, the godly love just described should have been sought after by them with particular determination and diligence. **desire spiritual gifts.** Love does not preclude the use of these enablements. Since Paul has addressed not desiring showy gifts ([12:31](#)) and not elevating one over the other ([12:14–25](#)), some might think it best to set them all aside for unity's sake. Spiritual gifts, on the other hand, are sovereignly bestowed by God on each believer and necessary for the building of the church ([12:1–10](#)). Desire for them, in this context, is in reference to their use collectively and faithfully in His service—not a personal yearning to have an admired gift that one did not possess. As a congregation, the Corinthians should be wanting the full expression of all the gifts to be exercised. “You” is plural, emphasizing the corporate desire of the church. **especially ... prophesy.** This spiritual gift was desirable in the life of the church to serve in a way that tongues cannot, namely, by edifying the entire church (v. [5](#)).

**14:2–39** Although it is not indicated consistently in some translations, the distinction between the singular *tongue* and the plural *tongues* is foundational to the proper interpretation of this chapter. Paul seems to use the singular to distinguish the counterfeit gift of pagan gibberish and the plural to indicate the genuine gift of a foreign language (see *note on v. 2*). It was perhaps in recognition of that, that the King James Version (KJV) translators added consistently the word “unknown” before every singular form (see vv. [2](#), [4](#), [13](#), [14](#), [19](#), [27](#)). The implications of that distinction will be noted as appropriate. Against the backdrop of carnality and counterfeit ecstatic speech learned from the experience of the pagans, Paul covers 3 basic issues with regard to speaking in languages by the gift of the Holy Spirit: 1) its position, inferior to prophecy (vv. [1–19](#)); 2) its purpose, a sign to unbelievers not believers (vv. [20–25](#)); and 3) its procedure, systematic, limited, and orderly (vv. [26–40](#)).

**14:2 he who speaks in a tongue.** This is singular (see *previous note*; cf. vv. [4](#), [13](#), [14](#), [19](#), [27](#)), indicating that it refers to the false gibberish of the counterfeit pagan ecstatic speech. The singular is used because gibberish can't be plural; there are not various kinds of non-language. There are, however, various languages; hence when speaking of the true gift of language, Paul uses the plural to make the distinction (vv. [6](#), [18](#), [22](#), [23](#), [29](#)). The only exception is in vv. [27](#), [28](#) (see *note there*), where it refers to a single person speaking a single genuine language. **no one understands him; ... in the spirit he speaks mysteries.** The carnal Corinthians using the counterfeit ecstatic speech of paganism were not interested in being understood, but in making a dramatic display. The spirit by which they spoke was not the Holy Spirit, but their own human spirit or some demon; and the mysteries they declared were the type associated with the pagan mystery religions, which was espoused to be the depths that only the initiated few were privileged to know and understand. Those mysteries were totally unlike the ones mentioned in Scripture (e.g., [Matt. 13:11](#); [Eph. 3:9](#)), which are divine revelations of truths previously hidden (see *notes on 12:7*; [Eph. 3:3–6](#)). **does not speak to men but to God.** This is better translated, “to a god.” The Gr. text has no definite article (see similar translation in [Acts 17:23](#), “an unknown MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

god"). Their gibberish was worship of pagan deities. The Bible records no incident of any believer ever speaking to God in any other than normal human language.

**14:3 prophecies.** In dramatic contrast to the bedlam of counterfeit tongues was the gift of genuine prophesy or preaching of the truth (*see note on 12:10*). It produced the building up in truth, the encouragement to obedience, and the comfort in trouble that God desired for His church. Spiritual gifts are always for the benefit of others, never self.

**14:4 a tongue.** Again (as in v. 2), Paul uses the singular to refer to the pagan counterfeit gibberish and sarcastically (cf. v. 16; 4:8–10 for other sarcasm) marks its selfishness as some kind of self-edification. This illicit building up of self comes from pride-induced emotion which only produces more pride. **edifies the church.** *See note on 12:7.*

**14:5 all spoke with tongues ... that you prophesied.** Here the plural, “tongues,” appears as Paul was referring to the real gift of languages (*see note on v. 2*). Obviously this was not Paul’s true desire, even for the true gift, since the very idea was impossible and contrary to God’s sovereign distribution of gifts (12:11, 30). He was simply suggesting hypothetically that, if they insisted on clamoring after gifts they did not possess, they at least should seek the one that was more enduring and more valuable for the church. The only purpose tongues renders to the church is when it is interpreted (the normal Gr. word for translation). Wherever God gave the gift of languages, He also gave the gift for translation, so that the sign would also be edifying. Never was the gift to be used without such translation (v. 28), so that the church would always be edified.

**14:6 if I come to you ... what shall I profit?** Even an apostle who spoke in tongues did not spiritually benefit a congregation unless, through interpretation, his utterance was clarified so that the revelation and knowledge could be understandably preached and taught. Any private use of this gift is excluded for several reasons: 1) it is a sign to unbelievers (v. 22); 2) it must have a translator to have any meaning, even to the speaker (v. 2); and 3) it must edify the church (v. 6).

**14:7–9** Here, Paul illustrates his previous point about the uselessness of even the true gift apart from translation for the church to understand. If even inanimate musical instruments are expected to make sensible sounds, how much more should human speech make sense, especially when it deals with the things of God? *See note on v. 23.*

**14:10, 11** Paul simply points up the obvious: the purpose of every language is to communicate, not to impress and certainly not to confuse, as the Corinthians had been doing with their counterfeits. That was clearly the point in the first instance of tongues: Each heard the apostles speak in his own language (Acts 2:6, cf. v. 8). This section makes an undeniable case for the fact that the true gift of tongues was never some unintelligible gibberish, but was human language that was to be translated (v. 13).

**14:12** Again Paul returned to the issue of edification, central to all gifts (12:7).

**14:14–17** Paul continued to speak sarcastically (cf. v. 16; 4:8–10) about counterfeit tongues, so he used the singular “tongue” (*see note on vv. 2–39*), which refers to the fake gift. He was speaking hypothetically to illustrate the foolishness and pointlessness of speaking in ecstatic gibberish. The speaker could not understand, and what virtue is there in praying to God or praising God without understanding? No one can “Amen” such nonsense.

**14:16 uninformed.** From the Gr. word meaning ignorant or unlearned.

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**14:18 I speak with tongues more than you all.** Paul emphasized that by writing all of this, he was not condemning genuine tongues (plural); nor, as some may have thought to accuse him, was he envious of a gift he did not possess. At that point, he stopped speaking hypothetically about counterfeit tongue-speaking. He actually had more occasions to use the true gift than all of them (though we have no record of a specific instance). He knew the true gift and had used it properly. It is interesting, however, that the NT makes no mention of Paul's actually exercising that gift. Nor does Paul in his own writings make mention of a *specific* use of it by *any* Christian.

**14:19 teach others.** This is the general principle that summarizes what he has been saying, i.e., teaching others is the important matter and that requires understanding.

**14:20–25** This very important passage deals with the primary purpose of the gift of languages. Paul has clearly indicated that such speaking was not something for all believers to do, since it was dispensed sovereignly like all other gifts ([12:11](#)); nor was it connected to the baptism with the Holy Spirit which all believers receive ([12:13](#)); nor was it some superior sign of spirituality, but rather an inferior gift (v. [5](#)). Because of all that, and the corruption of the real gift by the Corinthians, the apostle gives the principles for its proper and limited operation as a sign.

**14:20 in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.** Most of the Corinthian believers were the opposite of what Paul here admonished. They were extremely experienced in evil, but greatly lacking in wisdom. Yet mature understanding was especially essential for proper comprehension and use of the gift of tongues, because the conspicuous and fascinating nature of that gift made it so attractive to the flesh. He was asking his readers to put aside emotion and experience, along with the desires of the flesh and pride, to think carefully about the purpose of tongues.

**14:21 it is written.** In a freely rendered quotation from [Is. 28:11, 12](#), Paul explains that centuries earlier the Lord had predicted that one day He would use men of other tongues, that is, foreigners speaking unknown languages, as a sign to *unbelieving Israel*, who “will not hear Me.” These “other tongues” are what they knew as the gift of languages, given solely as a sign to unbelieving Israel. That sign was 3-fold: cursing, blessing, and authority. To emphasize the cursing, Paul quoted Isaiah's words of warning to Judah of the judgment from Assyria (*see note on [Is. 28:11, 12](#)*). The leaders thought his words were too simple and rejected him. The time would come, the prophet said, when they would hear Assyrian, a language they could not understand, indicating judgment. Jeremiah spoke similarly of the Babylonians who were also to come and destroy Judah (cf. [Jer. 5:15](#)). When the apostles spoke at Pentecost in all those foreign languages ([Acts 2:3–12](#)), the Jews should have known that the judgment prophesied and historically fulfilled first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonian captivity was about to fall on them again for their rejection of Christ, including the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) as it had happened in 586 B.C. under Babylonian power.

**14:22 Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers.** Explaining further, he says explicitly that all tongues are for the sake of unbelievers. In other words, that gift has no purpose in the church when everyone present is a believer. And once the sign served its purpose to pronounce judgment or cursing on Israel, and the judgment fell, the purpose ceased along with the sign gift. The blessing of that sign was that God would build a new nation of Jews and Gentiles to be his people ([Gal. 3:28](#)), to make Israel jealous and someday repent (see [Rom. 11:11, 12, 25–27](#)). The sign was thus repeated when Gentiles were included in

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the church ([Acts 10:44–46](#)). The sign also gave authority to those who preached both the judgment and blessing ([2 Cor. 12:12](#)), including Paul (v. [18](#)). **but prophesying is ... for those who believe.** In the completely opposite way, the gift of prophesying benefits only believers, who are able, by their new natures and the indwelling Holy Spirit, to understand spiritual truth (cf. [2:14](#); [1 John 2:20, 27](#)).

**14:23 Therefore if ... all speak with tongues.** As Paul explains in more detail later (vv. [27, 28](#)), even for unbelievers, even when the gift of tongues was exercised in its proper time in history, when it was dominant and uncontrolled in the church, bedlam ensued and the gospel was disgraced and discredited. **out of your mind.** The Gr. word means to be in an uncontrolled frenzy. When the real gift was used in [Acts 2](#), there was no madness, and everyone understood in his own language (v. [11](#)). In Corinth, there was charismatic chaos.

**14:24, 25 But if all prophesy.** This means to publicly proclaim the Word of God (*see note on 2:10*). “All” does not mean all at once (see v. [31](#)), but rather means that hypothetically if the cacophony of all the Corinthians could be replaced by all of them preaching the Word, the effect on unbelievers would be amazingly powerful, the gospel would be honored, and souls would be converted to worshiping God.

**14:26–40** In this last section on the topic of tongues, the stress is on how they were to be systematically limited for use in the church in an orderly way. For the sake of hypothetical discussion, it is noteworthy that even if one granted that the gift was still in use today, the modern movement would be totally discredited as illegitimate by its failure to follow the clear, controlling commands in these verses.

**14:26 each of you has.** It seems that chaos and lack of order was rampant in that assembly (v. [33](#)). It is interesting that no elders or pastors are mentioned, and the prophets were not even exercising control (see vv. [29, 32, 37](#)). Everyone was participating with whatever expression they desired “whenever” they desired. **a psalm.** The reading or singing of an OT psalm. **a teaching.** This probably refers to a doctrine or subject of special interest (v. [33](#)). **a tongue.** In the singular, this refers to the counterfeit. *See note on vv. 2–39.* **a revelation.** Some supposed word from God, whether spurious or genuine. **an interpretation.** This refers to that of a tongue’s message. **for edification.** This was Paul’s way of calling a halt to the chaos. Edification is the goal, (cf. vv. [3–5, 12, 17, 26, 31](#)) and the Corinthian chaos could not realize it (cf. [1 Thess. 5:11](#); [Rom. 15:2, 3](#)).

**14:27, 28** These verses provide regulations for the exercise of the gift: 1) only two or three persons in a service; 2) only speaking in turn, one at a time; and 3) only with an interpreter. Without those conditions, one was to meditate and pray silently.

**14:29–31** Since Paul’s pastoral epistles (1, 2 Tim.; Titus) do not mention prophets, it seems evident that this unique office had ceased to function in the church even before the end of the apostolic age. When Paul wrote the Corinthians, however, prophets were still central to the work of that church (cf. [Acts 13:1](#)). Here he gave 4 regulations for their preaching: 1) only two or three were to speak; 2) the other prophets were to judge what was said; 3) if while one was speaking, God gave a revelation, the speaker was to defer to the one hearing from God; and 4) each prophet was to speak in turn. *See notes on [Eph. 2:20](#); [4:11](#).*

**14:32** Not only were the prophets to judge others with discernment, but they were also to have control over themselves. God does not desire out-of-spirit or out-of-mind experiences. Those who received and proclaimed the truth were to have clear minds. There was nothing

bizarre, ecstatic, trance-like, or wild about receiving and preaching God's Word, as with demonic experiences.

**14:33 confusion.** Here is the key to the whole chapter. The church at worship before God should reflect His character and nature because He is a God of peace and harmony, order and clarity, not strife and confusion (cf. [Rom. 15:33](#); [2 Thess. 3:16](#); [Heb. 13:20](#)). **as in all the churches.** This phrase does not belong in v. [33](#), but at the beginning of v. [34](#), as a logical introduction to a universal principle for churches.

**14:34, 35 women keep silent in the churches.** The principle of women not speaking in church services is universal; this applies to all the churches, not just locally, geographically, or culturally. The context in this verse concerns prophecy, but includes the general theme of the chapter, i.e., tongues. Rather than leading, they are to be submissive as God's Word makes clear (*see notes on [11:3–15](#); [Gen. 3:16](#); [1 Tim. 2:11–15](#)*). It is not coincidental that many modern churches that have tongues-speaking and claim gifts of healings and miracles also permit women to lead worship, preach, and teach. Women may be gifted teachers, but they are not permitted by God "to speak" in churches. In fact, for them to do so is "shameful," meaning "disgraceful." Apparently, certain women were out of order in disruptively asking questions publicly in the chaotic services.

**14:36, 37** Paul knew that the Corinthians would react to all these firm regulations that would end the free-for-all in their services. The prophets, tongues-speakers, and women may all have been resistant to words, so he anticipated that resistance by sarcastically challenging those who put themselves above his word, and thus, above Scripture by either ignoring it or interpreting it to fit their predisposed ideas. If anyone was genuinely a prophet or had the true spiritual gift of tongues, he or she would submit to the principles God had revealed through the apostle.

**14:36 did the word of God come ... from you?** *See notes on [1 Thess. 2:13](#); [2 Tim. 3:15–17](#); [2 Pet. 1:19–21](#).*

**14:38 ignorant.** That is, anyone who does not recognize the authority of Paul's teaching should himself not be recognized as a legitimate servant gifted by God.

**14:39 do not forbid ... tongues.** Legitimate languages were limited in purpose and in duration, but as long as it was still active in the early church, it was not to be hindered. But prophecy was the most desirable gift to be exercised because of its ability to edify, exhort, and comfort with the truth (v. [3](#)).

**14:40** *See notes on v. [33](#).*