

# 1 COR. 14:1-40

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6. Command to be enthusiastic about the gift of prophecy (14:1-5) – **Pursue love, and be enthusiastic about the spiritual things, but rather that you prophesy.** <sup>2</sup>**For the man who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands [him]; by the Spirit he speaks mysteries.** <sup>3</sup>**But the man who prophesies speaks to men [words of] upbuilding and encouragement and comfort.** <sup>4</sup>**The man who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the man who prophesies builds up the church.** <sup>5</sup>**Now I wish you all to speak in tongues, but more that you might prophesy. And greater is the one who prophesies than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may receive upbuilding.**

a. In v. 1 Paul essentially repeats the exhortation of 12:31 in light of his discussion of love. He commands them to follow the way of love and to be enthusiastic about the spiritual things, which command he immediately qualifies with the clause "but rather that you prophesy." This means something like "or more precisely, that you prophesy." In other words, contrary to the frequent rendering "*especially* that you prophesy," he is not urging them to be enthusiastic about gifts in general but, as in 12:31, to be enthusiastic about the *greater gifts*, which are here represented by the gift of prophecy. This is supported by the following:

(1) The exhortation in 12:31 was that they be enthusiastic about the *greater* gifts. 1 Corinthians 14:5 identifies prophecy as a greater gift than tongues (referring to an assembly setting).

(2) They already were "enthusiasts (zealots) of spirits" (14:12), which probably refers to their passion for the gift of tongues. So it would not make sense for Paul to urge them to be enthusiastic with regard to gifts in general.

b. The reason they are to be enthusiastic about the gift of prophecy instead of the gift of tongues is that the man who prophesies speaks understandable words of edification, comfort, and encouragement and therefore builds up the church. On the other hand, the man who speaks in a tongue is not understood and therefore builds up only himself, not the church. In an assembly setting, the emphasis is on building up the church.

(1) Tongues is the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign language one previously did not speak. It is exemplified in Acts 2:4-11. Those that gathered in response to the sound like a violent wind were amazed because they heard the believers, a group of Galileans who had been given the gift of tongues, speaking in a variety of recognizable human languages.

(2) The reason tongues were not understood in the Corinthian worship assembly is not because they were gibberish but because the worshipers

undoubtedly spoke Greek (possibly some Latin) and the tongue-speaker was miraculously uttering a language other than Greek. Worship assemblies tend to be monolingual because people do not go where they cannot understand the language.

(3) If the gift of tongues in Acts 2 was different from the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians, as some claim, one certainly would have expected Luke to indicate a distinction. After all, Acts was composed after 1 Corinthians and Luke would have been aware of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians from his extensive travels with him.

c. Some other observations about tongues

(1) The one speaking in tongues spoke *to God, not to men* (1 Cor. 14:2). It thus was a form of prayer or praise to God (see 14:14-17, consistent with Acts 2:11 and 10:46) in which God was addressed in a foreign language. Since much of what passes for tongues in today's charismatic movement is, after being "interpreted," directions to the church, it does not seem to square with the gift of tongues as revealed in the N.T. (in addition to being gibberish rather than human language).

(2) The one speaking in tongues spoke "mysteries by the Spirit" in the sense that neither he nor those assembled understood what he was saying. That is why the gift of interpretation was necessary (1 Cor. 14:13, 19, 27-28). The miracle was the fact the person spoke in a language he did *not* know. That is why Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:14 that when one prays/speaks in a tongue one's "mind is unfruitful." The tongue-speaker was not involved in cognitive articulation; rather than speaking words with his mind, the tongue-speaker was voluntarily uttering sounds by the Spirit (see, 14:18-19).

(3) The man speaking in tongues "builds up" *himself* (1 Cor. 14:4). Paul may here be using "builds up" in a negative way, saying that the one who speaks in a tongue in the assembly builds up his status in the group at the expense of the loss of benefit to others. Or he may mean that, despite not knowing the meaning of the words he was uttering, the individual experiences a personal peace or even euphoria through this Spirit-generated, subconscious praise and prayer to God.

d. Paul is not opposed to tongue speaking; on the contrary, he'd like them all to have that gift (which he knows will not happen - see, 12:28-30), but his definite preference in the assembly is for prophecy. It is greater than tongues, unless tongues are interpreted, because it is intelligible and thus benefits its hearers.

7. Speaking in tongues does not benefit the hearers (14:6-13) – **“But as it is, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how shall I benefit you, unless I speak to you either in revelation or in knowledge or in prophecy or [in] teaching? <sup>7</sup>Likewise, when lifeless things give a sound, whether a flute or a harp, if they do not give a distinction to the sounds, how will what is being played on the flute or harp be known? <sup>8</sup>For indeed if the trumpet gives an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? <sup>9</sup>So it is with you; unless you give a recognizable word by the tongue, how will what is being said be known? For you will be speaking into the air.**

<sup>10</sup>There are however many kinds of languages in the world, and none is without meaning. <sup>11</sup>Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the one speaking and the one speaking [will be] a foreigner in my [view]. <sup>12</sup>So it is with you; since you are enthusiasts of spirits, desire to abound for the upbuilding of the church. <sup>13</sup>So then, let the one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

a. Paul says that if he comes to them speaking in tongues, thus conforming to their view of spirituality, he will not be of benefit to them. He will only benefit them if he prophesies or teaches them or if he reports to them a revelation or some knowledge.

b. Paul presses the point with an analogy involving musical instruments. Just as speaking in tongues prevents one from knowing what is being said, so making indistinct or unrecognizable sounds on an instrument prevents one from knowing what is being played. To illustrate the point, if one sounds a battle call by playing an indistinguishable tune on the trumpet, no one will prepare for battle. In other words, the message to prepare for battle will not have been communicated and the people will not have been benefited.

c. The same holds for their speaking in tongues. Unless they speak in their own language, no one will know what they are saying. They will be speaking into the air, i.e. speaking but not communicating.

d. Given that there are many different kinds of languages in the world, if I do not know the meaning of a particular language, the speaker and I will be foreigners to each other. In other words, we will not communicate; we will not understand the *message* in each other's vocal sounds.

e. The same holds for the Corinthians. If they supernaturally speak in a language that the hearers do not know, they become foreigners to each other. They cannot convey the meaning behind their sounds.

f. Because they are so enthusiastic about spiritual gifts (the one in particular), they should direct that enthusiasm toward gifts that build up the church; they should desire to abound in *those* gifts. And in keeping with that focus, the one who has the gift of tongues is told to pray for the ability to interpret, as it is only interpreted tongues, understood speech, which can edify others.

(1) Judging from 12:10, 12:30, and 14:27-28, the norm is for the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation to be given to *different* individuals. Yet, the one who has the gift of tongues is here most likely told to pray for the ability to interpret. ( I say "most likely told" because, as Fitzmyer notes [p. 515], it is possible an indefinite subject should be supplied, in which case the tongues-speaker is not told to pray the *he* may interpret only that *someone* may interpret.) If the tongues-speaker is directed to pray that *he* be given the ability to interpret, he presumably would do so in case others with the gift of

interpretation (14:27-28) were unable to join the assembly or unwilling to exercise their gift. Otherwise, their interpretation would provide the edification necessary for this miraculous gift to be exercised in the assembly. Notice this is a prayer that acknowledges the importance of edification in the assembly and the fact edification requires intelligible speech.

(2) I do not believe Paul is thereby commanding all Christians to pray to receive various spiritual gifts. The command was addressed to those who had already received the gift of tongues. It was a command for them to pray for the complementary gift or ability that was needed to make their existing gift beneficial to the assembly. One cannot assume Paul's instruction applies to gifts generally, especially given that he nowhere instructs praying for other gifts. I do not believe the Spirit is still giving the gift of tongues, and I am not aware of any other gift that requires an additional gift in order to be exercised in the assembly, so I would not insist that Christians pray for specific spiritual gifts based on this verse.

(3) I would, however, encourage Christians to seek to optimize their gifts for the blessing of the body. Their gifts to be diligently exercised rather than neglected. Recall that Paul told the Thessalonians not to "quench the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19) and commanded Timothy not to *neglect* the gift that was in him (1 Tim. 4:14). He later told him to *rekindle* the gift of God that was within him (2 Tim. 1:6).

(4) The fact our assemblies are to build up the saints does not mean they are not about worshiping God. It simply means that God desires to be worshiped in a way that edifies the community of faith (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 14:16-17). The prayer, praise, and thanksgiving that are addressed and offered to him, as well as the instruction he gives to us, builds up the church as we express and hear that adoration and as we humbly submit to his word. That is why the Spirit through Paul insists that it all be done in intelligible speech.

8. Only words that edify are fitting for the assembly (14:14-19) – <sup>14\*</sup> **If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup>What then is [the way]? I will pray with the spirit, but I will also pray with the mind; I will sing with the spirit, but I will also sing with the mind. <sup>16</sup>Otherwise, if you are blessing [God] with the spirit, how shall the one occupying the place of the unlearned say the "Amen" at your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? <sup>17</sup>For you certainly are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up. <sup>18</sup>I give thanks to God [that] I speak in tongues more than all of you, <sup>19</sup>but in church I want to speak five words with my mind, that I also may instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.**

a. I follow the NET in thinking "For" at the beginning of v. 14 was not part of the original text. It is missing in the oldest manuscript of 1 Corinthians (P<sup>46</sup>) and in some other significant manuscripts (but is present in other significant manuscripts). Without that conjunction, it makes better sense to connect v. 13 to the preceding paragraph and begin a new paragraph at v. 14.

b. Paul says that if he prays in a tongue his spirit prays but his mind is unfruitful. In other words, his spirit, his inner being, is uttering under the influence of the Holy Spirit a foreign language that his mind does not understand. As Ralph Martin puts it (quoted in Garland, 640), "'words' . . . are formed by a spiritual upsurge requiring no mental effort." It is noncognitive speech, something that operates outside of his normal mental processing. That is why interpretation is necessary.

c. What then is the way to go? Paul says he will pray and sing with his spirit, meaning in tongues, but he will *also* do so with his mind, meaning in intelligible speech. In other words, he will not elevate tongues-speaking to a superior way of praying and praising such that the one who has that gift is obligated to exercise it at all times, to pray and praise *only* in that manner. Rather, as one who has the gift of tongues, he will pray and praise with tongues and without tongues, depending on what is appropriate in the circumstance.

d. Otherwise, meaning if he insisted on praying and praising exclusively in tongues, he would be doing so in the assembly, and those who did not understand the language, which often would be everyone, could not "Amen" the thanksgiving that had been uttered in the tongue. The tongues-speaker would indeed be giving thanks, but the others are not built up because they do not understand the words of thanksgiving he is offering. (Again, you see that our praise directed to God edifies others as they listen in on it.)

e. Paul's attitude on the matter is summed up in vv. 18-19. Though he speaks in tongues more than all of them do, in the assembly he would rather speak five intelligible words, to instruct others, than ten thousand words in an uninterpreted tongue!

9. As with believers, speaking in tongues will not benefit unbelievers but prophesying will (14:20-25) – <sup>20</sup>**Brothers, do not be children in thinking; rather, in evil be infants, but in thinking be mature.** <sup>21</sup>**In the Law it is written, "By men of other tongues and by lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, and not even this way will they listen to me," says the Lord.** <sup>22</sup>**So then, tongues are meant as a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers, but prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.** <sup>23</sup>**Therefore, if the whole church gathers together at the same place and all are speaking in tongues, and unlearned ones or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are insane?** <sup>24</sup>**But if all are prophesying, and some unbeliever or unlearned one comes in, he is convicted by all, is judged by all.** <sup>25</sup>**The secrets of his heart become apparent, and so, falling on [his] face, he will worship God, declaring, "God is really among you."**

a. In v. 20 Paul urges them to grow up in their thinking on this subject. The place to be immature or undeveloped is in the practice of evil, not in one's understanding.

b. Paul has already argued that uninterpreted tongues are of no benefit to the other *believers* in the assembly because they do not understand what is being

said. On the other hand, intelligible speech, such as prophecy, builds up the gathered believers because it communicates truth to them.

c. The point of this paragraph is that the same distinction applies with regard to *unbelievers* who may visit the assembly. Speaking in tongues will not benefit them but prophesying will. That this is Paul's point is clear from the illustrations in vv. 23-25.

(1) In v. 23, Paul says that if the whole church is gathered together and everyone (perhaps meaning every tongues speaker) is speaking in uninterpreted tongues, the unbeliever who visits will not be benefited; instead, he will conclude that the believers are insane. Since, in most every case, he will not understand what is being said, the meeting will be chaos and nonsense to him. You see this very effect in Acts 2:13 where some who could not make sense of the languages being spoken accused the tongues speakers of being drunk.

(2) On the other hand, in vv. 24-25, Paul says that if an unbeliever enters a church where people are prophesying, the truths that are being communicated among the believers will (quite possibly) convict that person of his sins and bring him to acknowledge the presence of God in the Christian community.

d. So far, so good. The difficulty is how these illustrations in vv. 23-25 relate to what Paul says vv. 21-22 (notice "Therefore" at beginning of v. 23). I think the illustrations of vv. 23-25 follow from vv. 21-22 in the sense explained below.

(1) In v. 21 Paul paraphrases Isa. 28:11-12 where God said to Israel that since they refused to heed his intelligible prophecy he would deliver a message to them in the form of the unintelligible speech of their Assyrian captors, and even then they would ignore it. (Notice that Paul here uses "the Law" as encompassing the Prophets, so the phrase can refer to more than just the Pentateuch.)

(2) In v. 22 Paul infers from this Scripture that the presence of unintelligible speech, such as tongues, is a sign to unbelievers of their refusal to hear. In other words, it signifies or symbolizes that truth to them, the fact they have refused to hear, and in that way is intended to serve as a kind of rebuke. The presence of prophecy, on the other hand, is a sign to believers of God's abiding presence (ERV, ASV, NAS, and ESV make express that "sign" is implied in the reference to prophecy).

(a) Consistent with what tongues signifies, the unbeliever refuses to hear that he refuses to hear. In other words, he rejects the message inherent in the presence of tongues, the rebuke of his refusal to hear. Just as the unbelieving Jews rejected the message inherent in the Assyrian language that surrounded them in captivity (notice v. 21b – "and not even this way will they listen to me"), so the unbelievers in Corinth would reject as insane God's message inherent in tongues.

(b) Consistent with what prophecy signifies (God's presence), it will even bring the unbeliever to recognize that "God is really among you."

e. So, if I am understanding Paul correctly, uninterpreted tongues, if permitted, would function in an assembly as a rebuke of the unbelief of any *unbelievers* who were present, but it would be a rebuke they would ignore. Rather than draw from those tongues a conviction of their unbelief, they, analogously to the Jews in Assyrian captivity, would continue not to listen to God (i.e., they would declare the people insane rather than accept the foreign languages as a message of their unbelief). Because they will not listen, uninterpreted tongues will be of no value to them, just as they are of no value to the *believers*. And therefore, uninterpreted tongues in an assembly cannot be justified on the basis of their effect on unbelievers, despite the fact they serve as a sign of unbelief to the unbelievers. They are a sign that will not be heeded.

f. This is not inconsistent with the positive effect tongues had on some unbelievers in Acts 2. Remember that here Paul is speaking about the effect of *unintelligible* speech, languages that are *not understood* because of the monolingual nature of their assemblies. Unbelievers who visited a Corinthian worship assembly normally would be locals who shared the same language as the believers (i.e., Greek and possibly Latin). Therefore, they would fare no better than the believers in understanding the various languages spoken when the gift of tongues was exercised. At Pentecost, however, the crowd that had gathered for the Feast was very cosmopolitan, so many different languages were understood. As I already mentioned, the unbelievers at Pentecost who did not hear a language they understood accused the believers of being drunk.

g. You may be wondering *why* the Spirit would empower certain Christians to praise God in the assembly in a foreign language only to require that praise to be translated into their native language in order to be permitted in the assembly. Why not skip the gifts of tongues and interpretation and have the Christians pray and praise exclusively in their native tongue, which required no translation?

(1) I think the gifts of tongues and interpretation, like other miraculous gifts, were given to the early church to confirm or authenticate that the "Christian movement" was indeed of God. As put in Heb. 2:2-4: *For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, <sup>3</sup>how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. <sup>4</sup>God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*

(2) This authenticating function of miracles also is evident in Ex. 4:1-9 (regarding Moses) and 1 Kings 17:19-24 (regarding Elijah). For additional New Testament texts, see Mat. 11:20-23; Jn. 2:11, 3:2, 6:14, 7:31, 10:37-38, 11:47-48, 14:11, 20:30-31; Acts 2:22, 43, 14:8-11, 27; Rom. 15:18-19; 2 Cor. 12:12. This is not to say God cannot have other reasons for performing miracles; it is to stress that authentication of his representatives is a significant reason.

(3) So tongues was one of the miraculous works that confirmed the Christian movement was of God, and when interpreted, it *also* built up the church. But notice that the confirming or authenticating function of tongues was, by God's will, subject to the necessity of edification in the assembly. Even miraculous gifts were not to be exercised in that setting unless they could be exercised so as to build up the church by communicating truth.

(4) I think the cessation of the miraculous gifts is related to this authenticating function. I mentioned previously my online paper titled "[Some Thoughts on the Cessation of Miraculous Gifts](#)," which discusses the matter in more detail than I want to go into here.

(a) Let me just say that it is important to recognize that God did not promise always to provide Christians the same spiritual gifts. So he has left himself room to cease giving gifts in fulfillment of his purposes. Regarding tongues specifically, given that what is claimed today to be the gift of tongues, speaking gibberish, is not the gift of tongues described in Scripture, it certainly seems that the Spirit is no longer giving that gift.

(b) And it is reasonable to conclude (but not inescapable) that the Spirit ceased giving miraculous gifts because, when the New Testament was written, the confirming or authenticating function of those gifts continued through the inspired record of their having been given in the early church. For example, when guys on Dude Perfect make a video of some astounding feat, they do not keep repeating the feat to establish their ability to do it. They simply refer people to the video of their having done it. Once the Spirit's giving of miraculous gifts was recorded in Scripture, their confirming effect would continue through that absolutely trustworthy record of their occurrence. God may want us to look there rather than keep providing those gifts.

(c) It seems miraculous *revelatory* gifts like prophecy ceased with the completion and recognition of the New Testament for the additional reason that God intended his completed Scripture to be all sufficient for guidance and instruction. The fact the church is built *on the foundation* of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20) indicates the gift of prophecy would not continue, as foundations are laid only at the beginning.

10. The principle of edification applied to prophecy and tongues (14:26-33a) – <sup>26</sup>**What then is [the way], brothers? When you gather together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation; let all things be for upbuilding.** <sup>27</sup>**If anyone speaks in a tongue, [let it be] by two or at most three and one at a time, and let someone interpret;** <sup>28</sup>**but if there is not an interpreter, let him be silent in church, and let him speak for himself and to God.** <sup>29</sup>**And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others discern.** <sup>30</sup>**And if [something] is revealed to another who is sitting, let the first be silent.** <sup>31</sup>**For you can all prophesy one by one so that all may learn and all may be encouraged.** <sup>32</sup>**And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets,** <sup>33</sup>**for God is not [a God] of disorder but of peace.**



a. When Paul says "each one" has a song, a teaching, a revelation, etc., he does not mean that every individual worshiper has one of those things. Rather, he means that those things are distributed to different individuals – one has one thing to share with the congregation, another has another thing. As in 11:21, "each one" doesn't mean every single individual. Paul has been quite clear that not all in the congregation have speech gifts.

b. It is not clear what Paul means in saying that each one has a song or, more literally, a psalm. Since it's grouped with things that involve the exercise of spiritual gifts, it seems likely that he is referring to songs that some have composed or selected (e.g., from the Psalter) through the work of the Spirit. He doesn't say whether this was something for all to sing or for only one, but it confirms the importance of singing in the early church.

c. The upshot of all of this is that at Corinth, where many people had spiritual gifts suited for expression in the assembly, they needed to take care that all things be done for upbuilding. That is the controlling principle for the exercise of all gifts in an assembly setting. They must be employed in a way that serves that purpose of edification, the strengthening of the church.

(1) Christian assemblies are not about entertainment; they are about worshiping in ways that edify the saints. I couldn't agree more with the comments of Richard Foster, a scholar who has written extensively about spiritual life and growth ([http://www.renovare.org/readings\\_heart\\_to\\_heart\\_1999\\_nov.htm](http://www.renovare.org/readings_heart_to_heart_1999_nov.htm)):

Let's stop using a marketing approach to church life. The Church is *not* a vendor of religious goods and services but the Community of Faith, living in faith and through faith and by faith alone. We do not need to mimic the entertainment industry of our culture. We win people to Christ not by entertainment but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(2) The fact corporate worship is to be *evaluated* in terms of its effect on those taking part does not mean that it is not worship. It simply means that God desires to be worshiped in a way that edifies the community of faith (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 14:16-17). Alastair Campbell expressed the point well in his 1996 article in the journal *Churchman*:

The lesson is plain; worship is offered to God, but it can be evaluated only by reference to men and women. Practices that do not help those assembled cannot be justified by reference to their supposed reverence nor excused by saying that they were offered to God and not to man. The one who does not bless the brother or sister whom he can see, will not bless God whom he cannot see!

(3) Christian worship assemblies are not geared to non-Christians. Certainly non-Christians can benefit from edifying worship, but that benefit is incidental. Non-Christians cannot become the target or focus of the edifying effect of our worship. Yet I fear that, as John MacArthur has said, "unbelievers have become the number one church consultants in our world today."

d. Paul specifies what this means with regard to exercising the two gifts he's been focusing on, tongues and prophecy.

(1) If anyone speaks in a tongue, only two or at most three may do so, those two or three must speak one at a time, and someone must interpret what they said. If no interpreter is present, the tongue-speaker must remain silent in the assembly. In that case, he must speak to God inaudibly for his own benefit.

(2) The regulations of prophecy raise several issues:

(a) The restriction to two or three prophets is probably not a limitation on how many can speak per assembly, as in the case of the tongue-speakers, but only a limitation on how many can speak before the others examine or weigh their message. Paul does not say "or *at most* three" as he does in reference to tongue-speakers, and 14:31 suggests that all who have a prophecy will be given an opportunity to speak. Plus, the overall concern of the chapter is that tongues not dominate the assembly.

(b) The prophecies are examined or weighed to determine whether they truly are from God. This parallels what Paul wrote in 1 Thess. 5:19-21: *Do not quench the Spirit, <sup>20</sup>do not despise prophecies <sup>21</sup>but test everything, hold firmly to what is good.* See also, 1 Jn. 4:1. We are not told how or by whom this is done. It may well be that the community, aided by the gift of discerning spirits (12:10), evaluates how the message conforms to the Spirit of God within them. In that kind of process, you can see how those who delivered prophecies would occasionally be quizzed or challenged. This is relevant to understanding the discussion in vv. 33b-36 regarding the role of women.

(c) If a revelation is received by a prophet while another is delivering a prophecy, the one speaking is required to yield the floor. As explained in v. 31, this procedure allows all to prophesy in turn so that all may learn and be encouraged. Verse 32 indicates that such etiquette is possible because the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. And v. 33a makes clear that such prophetic discipline is not unspiritual, as some in Corinth no doubt thought, but is in keeping with the very nature of God; he is not a God of disorder but of peace (harmony and smooth working).

11. Women are not to participate in the prophetic process in the assembly (14:33b-36) – **As in all the churches of the saints, <sup>34</sup>let the women be silent in the churches, for it is not permitted for them to speak, but let them be in submission as even the Law says. <sup>35</sup>And if they want to learn something, let them question their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. <sup>36</sup>Or did the word of God go out from you or reach only to you?**

a. The context of this passage is Paul's discussion of how the gifts of tongues and prophecy are to be exercised in the assembly.

(1) The exercise of tongues is regulated in vv. 27-28. Only two or three individuals are permitted to speak in tongues and they are required to do so one at a time. If there is no one present to interpret the tongues for the congregation, the tongue-speaker is obliged to remain silent.

(2) Paul begins to regulate the exercise of prophecy in v. 29. Two or three prophets are permitted to speak and the others are instructed to weigh carefully their message. As I previously mentioned, the purpose of this weighing was to test whether the message was in fact from God (see, 1 Thess. 5:19-21; 1 Jn. 4:1), and it probably included some kind of oral examination of the prophets.

(3) Verses 39-40 are crucial to a proper understanding of Paul's instructions about women because they reveal that he has not changed subjects. He is still discussing the exercise of tongues and prophecy in the assembly, so his instructions about women speaking must be understood as part of that discussion, not as a new and unrelated topic.

b. Since the discussion of tongues concluded at v. 28, no reader would think that Paul had returned to that subject without some clear indication of an intent to do so. Therefore, the context strongly suggests that vv. 33b-36 somehow relate to prophesying. In that light, the most natural reading of this passage is that Paul is prohibiting women from participating in the prophetic process during the worship assembly. (As explained in the discussion of chapter 11, I believe the female speech that took place in the community worship assembly was prayer, though probably not the leading of prayers on behalf of the assembly. My understanding of 1 Tim. 2:8-10 is available [here](#).)

(1) This means that women are forbidden to prophesy or to weigh (orally challenge) the prophecies that have been delivered by others. The rationale for the prohibition is the same as in 1 Tim. 2:11-14: women in the assembly are to express their divinely ordered submission to male leadership by refraining from authoritative speech. This explains the universality of the command, the statement that women are obligated to be in submission, the reference to the Law,<sup>1</sup> and the strong tone of moral condemnation.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul does not identify a specific text from the Old Testament (note that his use of "Law" can be broader than the Pentateuch – e.g., 1 Cor. 14:21) that expresses the principle of male leadership, but he probably has in mind a text like Gen. 2:21-23 in which Eve is shown to have been created after Adam and out of Adam and to have been named by Adam. In 1 Tim. 2:13 Paul cites the fact Adam was created first as a basis for male leadership in the church (see also, 1 Cor. 11:8-9). This is consistent with the Old Testament pattern of "primogeniture," the idea that the firstborn in any generation in a human family has leadership in the family. Other texts certainly could have factored into Paul's reference to the Law. For example, in Gen. 3:16 God tells Eve that as part of the curse her desire will be for her husband, probably meaning that woman in her fallen nature will desire to dominate her husband (see the use of "desire" in Gen. 4:7), contrary to God's created order, and that this desire generally will go unsatisfied because the husband has

(2) Verse 35 poses no problem for this view. It had apparently been made known to Paul that some women were publicly quizzing the prophets and were thus engaged in weighing their messages. (Questions were a common way for teaching and challenging in the ancient world.) This practice was defended by the claim that the women were only seeking to learn which, after all, was the purpose of prophecy (14:31). Paul exposes this claim as a pretext by making clear that if the women were truly interested in learning rather than in teaching, they could accomplish that outside the assembly by questioning their husbands at home. Paul's instructions in 1 Tim. 2:11 on *how* women are to learn (in quietness and in all submission) appear to address a similar concern.

c. It might be useful to state my understanding by way of a paraphrase of 14:33b-36:

As in all the congregations of the saints, the women must refrain from participating in the prophetic process in the assemblies, for they are not permitted to speak authoritatively but must be in submission as even the Law says. And if they want to learn something, they should question their own husbands at home rather than use that as a pretext for correcting the prophets, for it is shameful for a woman to speak authoritatively in the assembly. Did the word of God originate with you, or reach only to you?

d. Many evangelical scholars recognize that 14:34-35 prohibit women in the assembly from weighing, orally challenging, the prophecies delivered by others, but they reject the idea that the prohibition includes prophesying itself because they believe Paul in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 acknowledged implicitly that women are permitted to prophesy in the assembly as long as they wear the appropriate covering when doing so. For example, Ciampa and Rosner write (p. 721):

Despite the fact that the most recent reference to "speaking" had to do with prophesying, it does not seem possible that prophecy is the specific form of speech from which Paul is prohibiting female participation, given his discussion of it in chapter 11 (which indicates that women may prophesy as long as they do so with their heads covered).

(1) As I explained when teaching chapter 11, I do not think Paul authorized women prophesying in the assembly in 11:2-16. Paul acknowledged there only that women are permitted to *pray* in the assembly (not necessarily to "lead" prayers for the group); that was the issue precipitating the discussion. He included the reference to women *prophesying* because, though that was authorized only outside of the assembly, his ruling about the covering when praying in the assembly would by logic also be a ruling about the covering when prophesying outside the assembly. That is why I labored to make that point.

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the leadership role. In Gen. 18:12 Sarah referred to Abraham as "her lord," and for that reason Peter cites her in 1 Pet. 3:6 as a paragon of wifely submission.

(2) Because they recognize the context indicates the speech referred to in v. 34 relates to the prophetic process but mistakenly believe 11:2-16 authorizes women prophesying in the assembly, these scholars are forced into the odd claim that Paul allows women to *prophesy* in the assembly but forbids them from *weighing* the prophecies of others. In other words, they assert that prophesying is not unsubmitive but weighing prophecies (and teaching – 1 Tim. 2:11-14) is!

(a) To support this, they must claim that prophesying is somehow a less authoritative activity than weighing the prophecies of others, which leads them to claim that New Testament prophesying differs from Old Testament prophesying in that the former is fallible whereas the latter was not. (This fallible/infallible distinction is also used by those who claim the gift of prophecy has continued; it allows them not to take alleged prophecies as authoritative.) With numerous scholars, I do not believe that distinction is valid.

(b) Thomas Schreiner states in *Paul Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 363, "To sum up, there is no compelling evidence that New Testament prophets spoke both truth and error. Like the Old Testament prophets, they spoke the word of the Lord accurately." Indeed, Paul says in Eph. 2:20 that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, which suggests that the attempt to distinguish apostles from prophets in terms of infallibility is off base.

e. You should be aware that some modern scholars dismiss 14:33b-36 with the claim it was not originally written by Paul but was inserted into the text at a later date.

(1) They base this on the fact some later manuscripts have the verses after verse 40 instead of after v. 33a. Yet, all manuscripts have the verses in one location or the other. So it makes more sense to think they were original and then relocated after v. 40 by a later scribe who mistakenly thought they did not fit after v. 33a. If the original letter did not have the text, one certainly would expect some manuscript evidence of that fact (compare, for example, the manuscripts evidence regarding Jn. 7:53-8:11).

(2) It seems the dismissal of this text is driven in significant part by our culture's distaste for Paul's words and by supposed difficulty in fitting it with 11:2-16. D. A. Carson comments (*Showing the Spirit*, 124):

I confess I am always surprised by the amount of energy and ingenuity expended to rescue Paul from himself and conform him to our image. In any case, from a purely text-critical point of view, the evidence that these verses are original, and in their original location (and not, as in some manuscripts, with verses 34-35 placed after 14:40), is substantial.

f. Verse 36 is a rebuke. The word of God did not go out from them, meaning they are in no position to act as though they have some special or inside knowledge of God's will. Neither were they the only ones to whom the word of God came, meaning the

uniform practice of the other churches testifies against whatever irregularities they are entertaining.

12. Conclusion of regulation of prophecy and tongues (14:37-40) – <sup>37</sup>**If anyone thinks he is a prophet or is spiritual, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord; <sup>38</sup>but if anyone does not recognize [this], he is not recognized.**

<sup>39</sup>**So then, [my] brothers, be enthusiastic about the prophesying, and do not forbid the speaking in tongues, <sup>40</sup>but let all things be done properly and according to order.**

a. Verses 37-40 form the conclusion to the section begun in 14:26. In vv. 37-38 Paul admonishes those who consider themselves to be prophets or to be spiritual, those to whom his corrective measures specifically apply, to recognize what he has written as the command of the Lord and to act accordingly. Those who refuse to do so, who choose to rebel against the Lord's command, will not be recognized by the Lord.

b. In vv. 39-40 he sums up his discussion of prophecy and tongues by reducing it to a simple principle: be enthusiastic about prophecy and accept tongue-speaking, but as with all things in the assembly, do them in a fitting and orderly way.