Paul and Spiritual Gifts: Reflections on I Corinthians 12-14
by Bert Dominy

Paul's most detailed discussion of spiritual gifts is a response to questions addressed to him in a letter from members of the Corinthian church (12:1; cf. 7:1; 8:1). The exact nature of these questions is not known, but it can be reasonably inferred that, among other things, they raised a question about speaking in tongues (glossolalia). Evidently some members of the congregation who experienced this gift made exaggerated claims for it. It seems to have been regarded as the gift par excellence, the indisputable evidence of possession of the Spirit, the authentic mark of superior spirituality. Bruce observes that the Corinthians' question "had been framed in such a way as to imply that the surest sign of the presence and power of the Spirit was glossolalia."1 Similarly, Hurd remarks:

They had maintained that glossolalia is the main (or only) evidence of possession by the Spirit. If an apostle, for example, speaks in tongues, then he can be known to be spiritual. In general, only those Christians who have this gift are to be classed as spiritual.2

The structure of Paul's argument seems to support this assessment. After analyzing chaps. 12-14, Fee concludes:

Similar to the long arguments of chs. 1-4 and 8-10, where Paul begins by addressing the larger theological issue raised by the Corinthian position before he moves to a specific response to the problem at hand, so here, chs. 12-13 in a more general and theological way lead to the correctives of ch. 14. These correctives, with their running contrast between tongues and prophecy and the concomitant plea

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for intelligibility for the sake of edification, followed in turn by the concern for the ordering of spiritual gifts in the assembly, especially tongues, make it clear that this gift is the culprit.³

A further insight into the nature of the problem, as well as Paul’s method of dealing with it, may be seen in the use of the term pneumatikon in 12:1. In this context the word can mean either spiritual gifts or spiritual persons (cf. 14:1, 37). The difference is minimal since spiritual persons are those who have received certain spiritual gifts (especially glossolalia). It is possible that this term was used by the Corinthians to indicate their superior spiritual status. As spiritual persons (pneumatikoi) they vaunted their possession of the Spirit (pneuma).⁴

Paul does not reject pneumatika as a term for spiritual gifts. But his own preferred designation is charismata. Spiritual gifts are to be understood as gifts of God’s grace, not evidences of man’s achievement. They are expressions of God’s grace and power, and they witness to the supreme gift (charisma), the gift of life in Christ (1:4-7; cf. Rom. 5:15f., 6:23). By placing them in the category of charismata, Paul sought to put the question of spiritual gifts in a wider context, to ground it in a theology of grace, and thereby to correct inadequate notions of spirituality.

The Spirit and Christ’s Lordship (12:1-3)

These verses form the foundation for Paul’s more detailed discussion of gifts in the rest of the chapter. He begins by reminding the Corinthians of their pagan past when they were used to being “led astray to dumb idols” (v. 2). The point of the reference is that it is not the fact of inspiration or ecstasy


that is important, but the content of the utterance it produces. There are inspired utterances other than those produced by the Holy Spirit. Ecstatic utterances can come from many stimuli, but "the character of the stimulus must be inferred from the substance of the utterance."6 Certainly, the Spirit of God could never inspire the cry "Jesus be cursed."6

The basic criterion for discerning the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is the simple and intelligible confession "Jesus is Lord" (v. 3). It is only through the activity of the Spirit that one can speak genuinely of Christ's lordship. By this confession a person is identified as a Christian, and by it the earliest Christians distinguished themselves from both pagans and unbelieving Jews. The significance of this confession for Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts has been stated by Barrett:

The true Christian watchword is, Jesus is Lord. . . . It is true not because it is the right orthodox formula but because it expresses the proper relation with Jesus: the speaker accepts his authority, and proclaims himself the servant of him whom he confesses as Lord. . . . It is this relation . . . with which Paul is concerned here: inspiration as a religious phenomenon is in itself indifferent, and gains significance only in the context of Christian obedience.7

It is essential to note the close relationship which is implied here between the lordship of Christ and the Spirit. Paul's statement is that "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (v. 3). If it is the Spirit alone who can create in a person a genuine response to Christ as Lord, then the Spirit belongs to the essence of Christian experience. For Paul this means that no Christian can be without the Spirit (Rom. 8,9, 14). In this fundamental sense every Christian is a spiritual person (pneumatikos).

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6Bruce, I & II Corinthians, p. 118.
7What evoked this kind of utterance is not known. Hurd, The Origin of I Corinthians, pp. 193-194, observes: "It seems hardly likely . . . that if cries of 'Jesus be cursed!' had filled either the church or the synagogue, the Corinthians would have been at a loss to know whether such an utterance were of the Holy Spirit." Bruce, I & II Corinthians, p. 118, argues that "by means of this extreme example adduced for the sake of argument," Paul is insisting "that no false or unworthy statement can ever be attributed to 'the Spirit of God'." Numerous attempts have been made to imagine a situation in which this curse could actually have taken place. For a concise survey of opinions see Jack W. MacGorman, The Gifts of the Spirit (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), pp. 24-26.
The Nature and Source of Spiritual Gifts (12:4-6)

Three items call for attention in these verses. First, there is the threefold repetition of the word "varieties." Against the tendency to overvalue one spiritual manifestation, Paul emphasizes the diversity of the Spirit's endowments. The rich variety of spiritual gifts should preclude exclusive preoccupation with any one of them. No single endowment should be designated as the gift.

Second, there are three terms used to describe the Spirit's gifts. They are charismata (v. 4), diakoniai (v. 5), and energemata (v. 6). These are not separate categories; rather, each term illuminates the others.

Charismata is from the same root as the Greek word for grace (charis). The term designates "that which is bestowed by God's favor, freely and graciously given." The gracious activity of the Spirit contradicts any attitude of superiority.

Diakoniai means "services" or "ministries." As "services" spiritual gifts involve responsibility for the edification of others. They are designed for ministry, not for indulgence. Käsemann argues that the real test for the genuineness of spiritual gifts is "not in the fact that something supernatural occurs, but in the use which is made of it. No spiritual endowment has value or rights or privileges on its own account. It is validated by the service it renders."

Energemata means "workings" or "energies." The thought is that of God's power in action or "ways in which the divine power is applied." Thus, a charisma which is given for the purpose of service or ministry can be further described as a manifestation of divine power.

Third, the word "same" is used three times. The diversity of the gifts is contrasted with their one source. Paul attributes charismata to the Spirit, diakoniai to the Lord, and energemata to God. However, the fact that he can attribute all these gifts to the Spirit (12:11) or to God (12:28), shows that the trinitarian pattern is a way of stressing the divine origin of the gifts.

The divine origin of the gifts and the fact that they are manifestations of divine power raises the question of their relation to the natural order. What is the relation of divine

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gift and natural talent? How miraculous are the gifts? It is by no means certain that Paul would agree with the distinctions implied by these questions. The sharp dichotomy between natural and supernatural which characterizes modern thought is largely the product of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and should not be read uncritically into Paul's thought. Nevertheless, the fact that some spiritual gifts seem more unusual or miraculous while others are comparatively mundane makes the question worthwhile.

Bittlinger contends that Paul makes no distinction between natural and supernatural gifts. Rather, the apostle sees all of a Christian's activities as "saturated with the Spirit." For Bittlinger, therefore, a charisma means that "a gift is manifested when being set free by the Holy Spirit, my natural endowments blossom forth glorifying Christ and building up His church."10

Stott takes a similar approach. He does not deny the obviously supernatural nature of some gifts. But he believes that "the same God is God of creation and new creation, working through both his perfect will."11 Because of this, spiritual gifts can in some instances "dovetail with natural endowments."12 In such instances the nature of the gifts is to be discerned "in the heightening, the intensification, the 'Christianizing' of a natural endowment already present, or at least latent."13

A warning against confusing charismata with natural ability is issued by Dunn. He argues that "nowhere does charisma have the sense of a human capacity heightened, developed or transformed."14 He believes that Paul thought of all the gifts as supernatural. "The character of transcendent otherness lies

10Arnold Bittlinger, Gifts and Graces: A Commentary on I Corinthians 12-14, trans. Herbert Klassen (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p. 70. John Koenig doubts, however, if Paul would have agreed with such a broad definition. He writes: "It seems to allow for no specific moments for acknowledging the Spirit's presence. Probably the apostle would say that while a believer's entire life — apart from lapses into rebellion against God — may be construed as charismatic, some moments are more charismatic than others."


12Ibid., p. 83.

13Ibid., p. 94.

14Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit, p. 255.
at the heart of the Pauline concept of charisma.” Dunn acknowledges, however, that charisma may make use of natural abilities. “But the charisma itself can properly be exercised only when it is recognized as the action of the Spirit.”

While recognizing the validity of the question, Koenig warns against pursuing it too rigorously. He concludes that Paul “does not seem to care whether we label a given event, act or talent natural or supernatural. He is far more concerned about whether the Spirit’s working can be recognized in it and acknowledged.”

The Variety of the Spirit’s Gifts (12: 7-11)

Before illustrating the diversity of the Spirit’s endowments Paul makes it clear that each person in the congregation is equipped to minister in some meaningful way. “To each is given some manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (v. 7). Every Christian is a recipient of God’s grace (charis) and is given some spiritual gift. No one is excluded. In this fundamental sense all Christians are charismatic. The significance of each person is thereby affirmed. But if the importance of the individual is stressed, it is not at the expense of the community. To the gifted members of the Corinthian church who felt superior to their fellow believers Paul emphasizes that gifts are bestowed “for the common good.”

The choice of gifts listed in vv. 8-10 may have been determined by the actual situation in Corinth. It is not presented as an exhaustive list nor as a model list for all churches. When it is compared with similar lists in the New Testament its representative nature becomes clear (cf. Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:7-12; I Pet. 4:10-11). After comparing I Cor. 12:8-10 with Rom. 12:6-8, Dunn concludes that

The variety of terminology and the overlap between different gifts (prophecy and exhortation; service, helpful deeds, sharing, caring, and giving; utterance of wisdom, utterance of knowledge, and teaching) makes it clear that Paul has in mind a wide range of charismatic phenomena and that these lists are only a selection of typical and often not very

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15Ibid.
16Ibid., p. 256.
17Koenig, Charismata, p. 106.
clearly circumscribed manifestations of grace.\textsuperscript{18}

It is possible that some gifts might appear in one church and not in another, and new gifts might be given as different forms of ministry are required to meet new and changing situations. Given the creativity of God and the dynamic human situation, rigorous uniformity of endowment and experience is not to be expected. It is enough to know that whatever the gifts, they "are inspired by the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (v. 11).

\textit{Spiritual Gifts and the Body of Christ (12:12-31)}

\textit{Membership in the Body (12:12-13)}

The exercise of the various gifts by members of the church is compared to the functioning of different parts of the body. A variety of limbs and organs does not endanger the unity of the body. But no one bodily function can be regarded as the only legitimate expression of the body’s life. The same is true of the church. Diversity is essential, but no one gift or ministry can be regarded as the sole evidence of the Spirit’s work.

All Christians are members of Christ’s body and recipients of the Spirit because “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (v. 13). One becomes a member of the body of Christ through faith-union with Christ, a union effected through the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{19} Baptism is the public witness to this reality. Paul’s reference here is to the experience of becoming a Christian, at which time one receives the Spirit. The phrase “made to drink of one Spirit” refers to the same experience using a different figure. The point is that the Spirit is received when one becomes a Christian.

\textit{Unity and Diversity in the Body (12:14-26)}

The figure of the body with its different members is applied here in a practical way. The emphasis is that every part of the


\textsuperscript{19}Bruce, \textit{I & II Corinthians}, p. 121, and Barrett, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, p. 268, interpret the Spirit as the element in which one is baptized. Brunér, \textit{A Theology of the Holy Spirit}, p. 294, interprets the Spirit as the agent by whom one is baptized.
body has its unique contribution to make to the whole. Discord among the members leads to anarchy.

Verses 14-17 may reflect a sense of inferiority which “lower” parts of the body could feel in relation to “higher” parts. Likewise, v. 21 may point to an attitude of superiority displayed by the more prominent members. Paul insists, however, that there is no place for inferiority or arrogance. Every member needs every other member. This is so because “God has arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (v. 18). Thus, true unity is possible only as a result of diversity. As Käsemann writes: “For while like entities can only cancel each other out and render each other superfluous, unlike entities can perform mutual service and in this service of agape can become one.”

Therefore, no member should depreciate another because “God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (vv. 24-25).

Gifts and Ministries in the Body (12:27-31)

In a second list of gifts or ministries the most important ones are designated by numerical order: “first apostles, second prophets, third teachers” (v. 28). Barrett contends that this threefold ministry is the most important for Paul because by it “the church is founded, and built up.” The other gifts are not numbered “possibly because, though Paul can place all the remaining gifts on a lower level . . . he does not feel that he must, or wishes to distinguish narrowly between the lower gifts.”

Seven questions, amounting to a third list of gifts, follow in vv. 29-30. Each question is preceded in Greek with the negative particle me, indicating that the answer “No” is expected. The questions begin with “Are all apostles?” and end with “Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” By the use of these rhetorical questions Paul drives home the fact of diversity in unity in the church and explodes the notion that all “spiritual” persons must manifest one particular gift.

Given the situation in Corinth it is probably no accident that speaking in tongues appears last in the three gift lists in

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*Käsemann, “Ministry and Community,” p. 70.


chap. 12 (vv. 8-10, 28, 29-30). Against an exaggerated emphasis on this one gift, Paul demonstrates the rich variety of the Spirit's endowments. Is it accidental that the gifts which head each of the lists are those which emphasize the intelligible proclamation of the gospel? Not likely! MacGorman has aptly summarized Paul's thrust:

All parts of the body are authentic but not all have equal value functionally. Similarly all spiritual gifts are valid but not all contribute equally to the essential life and mission of the church. For this reason Paul consistently magnified the charismatic gifts and ministries related to the proclamation and teaching of the gospel: apostles, prophets, and teachers. Also for this reason he just as consistently minimized the gifts of ecstasy.

Hence, Paul's advice: “But earnestly desire the higher gifts” (v. 31).

Love: The Medium for Expressing the Gifts (13:1-13)

Chapter 13 has sometimes been regarded as a digression from the main argument. Because it seems to be a self-contained unit, Barrett believes that “it may have been composed separately and polished, and inserted at this point.” He explains however, that “this does not mean that the chapter was not written by Paul, or that it was not intended by him to stand at this place.”

Bruce admits that it may have been an independent composition, but he stresses that it is so integral to the course of Paul's argument that “had it not lain already to hand, he must have composed something along the same lines to complete his demonstration that love surpasses the

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Iber understands the verb “seek” as an indicative rather than an imperative. Thus “you are seeking” describes the attitude of the Corinthians. The “higher gifts” which they are seeking are the more spectacular and ecstatic ones such as speaking in tongues. In this interpretation v. 31b, “But I show you a more excellent way,” describes Paul’s counter-response to the Corinthian position. See Gerhard Iber, “Zum Verständnis von I Cor. 12, 31,” Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 54 (1963): 43-52.

Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, p. 299.
Ibid.
richest spiritual endowments." Certainly, no serious interpretation of this chapter can overlook its centrality to the discussion of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church. It is not to be interpreted as praise of an aesthetic ideal but a pastoral exhortation aimed at changing the reader's conduct. As such it forms the essential bridge between chaps. 12 and 13.

It is significant that Paul does not regard love as one of the charismata. This does not mean that it is an abstract idea. Like the other spiritual gifts, love is the result of the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. It is "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Love is an essential part of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22f.) which enables a Christian to live effectively as a member of the body of Christ. Dunn observes that while it is impossible to experience love without charisma, "it is only too possible to experience charisma without love. Only when charisma is manifested as the expression of love will it benefit the individual or the community."

Life Without Love (13:1-3)

These verses illustrate concretely that love is the indispensable medium for the exercise of the Spirit's gifts. Paul begins with the gift valued so highly by the Corinthians. The "tongues of men" is a reference to ordinary human speech, but the phrase "and of angels" probably points to glossolalia. Paul is comparing the loveless exercise of this gift to the meaningless sounds produced by a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (instruments used to excite worshippers in some pagan cults).

"Prophecy," "knowledge," and "faith" (v. 2) may stand higher in Paul's view than speaking with tongues, but even they can become empty displays of egotism unless they are guided by love into serving others.

In v. 3 Paul exposes the vanity of every form of self-sacrifice which stops short of love. If one gives away all of his possessions, but lacks love, there is no advantage. Even the act of

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28Bruce, I & II Corinthians, p. 124. Against the view that chap. 13 was composed independently and inserted here see Ceslaus Spicq, Love in the New Testament, trans. Marie Aquinas McNamara and Mary Honoria Richter (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1965), 2:140-1.


30Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit, p. 294.
giving one's body to be burned is of no spiritual value if it is oriented to self rather than to God.\textsuperscript{81}

There is a progression in these verses ranging from speaking in tongues to martyrdom. Together they underline Paul's central thrust: no activity, however splendid, is genuinely Christian unless it is rooted in love.

\textit{The Characteristics of Love (13:4-7)}

Paul describes the nature of love in these verses. He does this by citing fifteen characteristics of love: eight negative and seven positive. The description is by way of contrast to the manner in which the Corinthians exercised their spiritual gifts. As Brown states, "These verses are at once both a portrayal of what Christian love is and what the Corinthians are not."\textsuperscript{82}

Barr agrees that verses 4-7 speak to the situation created by the misuse of spiritual gifts. But he also perceives their wider relevance to the situation of the church as a whole. His comment is worth quoting in full:

The references to envy, pride, and irritability recall numerous strictures of these Corinthian failings in the course of the Epistle and gather meaning as we think of the party strife and social divisions that were disrupting the Corinthian community (e.g. 1.11 f., 3.1ff., 11.17ff.). And consider the words "doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own". There is surely here a reference to the improprieties and disorder prevalent at Corinth. Christian was hailing Christian before the heathen magistrates (6:1ff.); the women were causing scandal through lack of self-restraint and disregard of generally accepted standards of propriety (11.1ff.). And there were the disgraceful scenes when the Corinthians gathered together for the Lord's Supper (11.17ff.) and the confusion when the whole church came together and all spoke with tongues (14.23)\ldots The root of all these disorders is lack of \textit{Agape}, the loving consideration of Christian for Christian.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{81}Some mss. read, "and if I give my body so that I may glory." For the evidence for and against this reading see: Raymond Bryan Brown, "I Corinthians," \textit{Broadman Bible Commentary} (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 10:371; Barrett, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, p. 302; and Bruce, \textit{I & II Corinthians}, p. 126.


\textsuperscript{33}Barr, "Love in the Church," pp. 421-422.
The Permanence of Love (13:8-13)

The eschatological emphasis of these verses is unmistakable. Paul's contrast between the permanence of love and the transitory nature of charismata must be interpreted in terms of the "already" and the "not yet" of eschatology. "Love never ends" (v. 8) because it is grounded in God, and God is love. But the same cannot be said of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. These gifts, which enable the church to fulfill its mission between Christ's resurrection and his return, will come to an end. There will be no need for them in the presence of God.

In this present age prophecy and knowledge are partial and imperfect (v. 9). This does not mean that what is known of God is untrue, only that it is incomplete. But "when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away" (v. 10). The reference is to the parousia of Christ. The Spirit is the "guarantee" of the Christian's future inheritance (Eph. 1:13-14), and the gifts he bestows belong to this present era. They will not be necessary in the age to come.84

Two illustrations are used to contrast the present and future. The first illustration is the experience of growing from childhood to maturity (v. 11). Paul's purpose is to emphasize the discontinuity between the child and the mature person. The attitudes and actions which often characterize children are not appropriate to adult life. Adults must give up their immature ways. Paul is not suggesting that he is now mature enough to dispense with the Spirit's gifts (cf. Phil. 3:12). He is urging the Corinthians to see things in proper perspective, i.e., not to overvalue things which are transient and undervalue that which is eternal.

The second illustration contrasts seeing "in a mirror dimly" with seeing "face to face" (v. 12). The mirror further emphasizes the incompleteness of present knowledge of God. However, the limited vision of the present will give way to a complete vision in the future. Understanding of God will be direct, i.e., "face to face" (cf. Rev. 22:4). The final sentence of v. 12 reinforces the contrast. "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have fully understood." The change

84The "knowledge" that passes away is "a special kind of knowledge, a manifestation of the Spirit designed for the present requirements of church life (cf. 1.5; 12.8), in which the Corinthians were want to take undue pride..." (Bruce, I & II Corinthians, p. 127). The knowledge of God which is described in vv. 8-13, far from passing away, will be made complete.
from “know” to “understand” represents a change in the Greek text from the simple verb *ginoskein* to *epiginoskein* which in this context, is intensive in force “denoting the fullness of knowledge which comes from the unimpeded knowledge of God.”^35^

Paul concludes by singling our “faith, hope, and love” as the three enduring gifts. Faith here denotes trust, confidence; hope emphasizes the continuing nature of that confidence. But the greatest of these is “love” because God is love, and the manifestation of divine love in Christ is the foundation of faith and hope.^36^

*Spiritual Gifts and the Edification of the Church (14:1-46)*

In this chapter Paul applies the insights he has developed in the previous two chapters. In chap. 12 he indicated that the basic evidence of the Spirit’s activity was the confession “Jesus is Lord.” He then explained the nature and function of spiritual gifts. In chap. 13 Paul demonstrated that love is the essential medium for the expression of these gifts. In chap. 14 he provides directions for the use of gifts in the worship service. The discussion focuses on glossolalia and prophecy.

*The Priority of Prophecy (14:1-25)*

The opening statement, “Make love your aim and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts . . .” (v. 1), sums up the exhortation to love in chap. 13 and resumes the discussion of 12:31a (“earnestly desire the higher gifts”). Among the gifts to be sought Paul gives priority to prophecy.

Paul’s preference for prophecy is due to the nature of the gift itself. Prophecy is the Spirit-inspired proclamation of the will of God to a particular situation. As a manifestation of the divine will, prophecy is intrinsically related to revelation (cf. vv. 26-30). As a word of revelation, prophecy “would shed

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^36^ An attractive alternative to this interpretation is given by Ralph Martin. He notes that “faith, hope, love” form a triad well known in Paul’s letters (I Thess. 1:3; 5:8; Gal. 5:5-6; Rom. 5:1-5; Col. 1:4-5). He thinks that *meizōn* (“greatest”) should be given its normal comparative force and *touton* (“of these”) understood as a genitive of comparison. The article before *agape* (“love”) should be given its full force. The verse would then read: “so faith, hope, love abide; but greater than these three is the love (of God).” See his “Suggested Exegesis of I Corinthians 13:13,” *The Expository Times* 82 (1970-71): 120.
new light on the salvation event of Jesus Christ, or on the relation between the exalted Lord and his community . . . or would reveal some practical course of action for an individual or group.”

The value of prophecy is further enhanced by its intelligibility and its power to edify the congregation. Prophecy is addressed to the human understanding (“he who prophesies speaks to men,” v. 3). The prophet “edifies the church” (v. 4). Paul uses the terms “edify” and “edification” numerous times in this chapter (vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 16). This is a strong reminder that spiritual endowments are “for the common good” (12:7). Such an emphasis indicates that edification of the congregation functions along with Christ’s lordship (12:3) and love (chap. 13) as one of the basic criteria for distinguishing the genuine exercise of the charismata.

In contrast to prophecy, glossolalia is addressed “to God” (v. 2). The speaker “utters mysteries in the Spirit” (v. 2). This speaking is unintelligible and is not understood by the congregation (v. 3). Edification is primarily for the one who speaks, not for the church (v. 4). This description suggests that glossolalia functions primarily as a form of praying. As Spirit-inspired prayer it could be expressed as singing (v. 15), blessing (v. 16), or giving thanks (v. 17). Because of its essentially personal nature, speaking with tongues does not edify the congregation “unless someone interprets” (v. 5; cf. vv. 15, 27).

Because of their exaggerated esteem for this gift, Paul asks the Corinthians to judge what benefit they would receive if he came to them speaking only in tongues (v. 6). The answer is obvious. He could help them only if he spoke a message they could understand (“some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching”).

The need for intelligibility is reinforced by three illustrations. (1) If the harp or lyre do not produce distinct sounds there will be no recognizable melody (v. 7). (2) If the bugle does not clearly communicate the appropriate signal, the lives of the troops may be placed in jeopardy. (3) If one does not understand the language of another person, there can be no communication (vv. 10-11). If one utters sounds with no

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meaning, he will merely be "speaking into the air" (v. 9). The point is that since the Corinthians "are eager for manifestations of the Spirit" (lit. "zealots for spirits"), they should "strive to excel in building up the church" (v. 12). Thus if one does speak in tongues in the worship service he should pray for the ability to interpret (v. 13).

The contrast between "mind" and "spirit" in vv. 14-19 further clarifies the need for intelligibility in worship. "Mind" is a reference to the intelligence, understanding, the faculty of rational discrimination. The meaning of "spirit" in this context is more difficult. The RSV renders "spirit" with a small "s." Thus, the reference to "my spirit" could be understood as a non-rational dimension of the personality set over against the rational. This interpretation does not correspond to Paul's normal understanding of the term. Usually, "spirit" refers to man's capacity for self-awareness which includes the mind (cf. 2:10-16; Rom. 8:15f.). Bruce interprets the term here to mean "whatever part of me that exercises this spiritual gift."³⁸ The NEB translates, "the Spirit in me prays" indicating that it is the Holy Spirit praying through the individual.

Barrett's view is more complex, but is worthy of consideration. He believes that Paul's language is imprecise here because he is compressing into a few words three thoughts:
(1) the Holy Spirit is at work inspiring worship and prayer;
(2) the Spirit's work is crystallized into a specific gift; and
(3) "this gift is given in such personal terms to me that I can speak of it as mine—in short as my spirit, which, being what it is, operates through appropriate psychological channels independently of my mind."³⁹

If the exact reference of "spirit" is obscure, the point of the contrast is clear. Paul is describing an activity that excludes the understanding. Therefore, the sounds that are produced are unintelligible. As a result, they do not edify.

The purpose of this discussion is made clear in v. 15: "What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also." In this way, the whole personality is involved in worship. Spiritual gifts are no less spiritual because they involve the understanding. Otherwise, "how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the 'Amen' to your thanksgiving

³⁸Bruce, I & II Corinthians, p. 131.
³⁹Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, p. 320. Italics Barrett's.
when he does not know what you are saying?” (v. 16). Paul indicates that in the ability to speak in tongues, he surpasses all the Corinthians. But in the strongest terms he discourages their use in congregational worship: “. . . in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19).

In the following paragraph (vv. 20-25) Paul urges the Corinthians to consider the possible effects of glossolalia and prophecy on the outsider or unbeliever. If such a person enters the assembly and everyone is speaking in tongues, “will he not say that you are mad?” (v. 23). Glossolalic worship may be meaningful to the participant, but it is likely to make the unbeliever contemptuous. If, on the other hand, the unbeliever enters and the congregation is prophesying, “he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (vv. 24-25). In this way the evangelistic efficacy of prophecy is highlighted vis-a-vis glossolalia.

The difficult part of the passage is found in vv. 21-22. Paul quotes a version of Isa. 28:10-11 in which God says to Israel, “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, . . .” In context this passage refers to rebellious Israelites who had refused to obey the intelligible words of the prophet. God sent “men of strange tongues,” i.e., the Assyrians, as judgment on his people. Still they refused to obey. “Thus,” Paul concludes, “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.” The question is, In what sense is glossolalia a sign for unbelievers and prophecy a sign for believers? The logic of Paul’s argument is difficult to follow, but it seems best to understand vv. 21-22 in light of the effects described in vv. 23-25. If glossolalia makes the unbeliever contemptuous of what is happening in the congregation, then its effect as a sign would be negative. It leaves him in his unbelief. If, on the other hand, one is converted as a result of prophecy, it is for believers in the sense that it is the instrument that leads one from unbelief to faith. Stendahl remarks that

Paul's point is that the church owes the outsiders and unbelievers more than a mere negative sign toward their judgment. It owes them the full opportunity of repentance
and the chance to recognize fully that God is truly in the midst of the assembly.  

In spite of all that Paul says about the superiority of prophecy, however, he can still write, "Now I want you all to speak in tongues . . ." (v. 5) and "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all . . ." (v. 18). The appearance of this positive assessment of glossolalia in a chapter devoted to the priority of prophecy has evoked widely different responses.

According to Fee, for example, Paul's argument is not that tongues are inferior to prophecy but that "in church intelligibility is preferred to non-intelligibility" because it edifies the whole community. When Paul urges the Corinthians to seek the "higher gifts" (12:31) he is not pointing "back to a list of gifts they should desire in the order he has given them." He is anticipating his emphasis on intelligibility and edification in chap. 14. Since tongues when interpreted becomes intelligible it can be regarded as "one of the "higher gifts" in church."

Both Barrett and Green believe that Paul's statements indicate a genuine appreciation for tongues as a gift that edifies the individual. They admit, however, that it is inferior to prophecy. Nevertheless, tongues, when interpreted, can edify the church because interpretation "had the effect of turning tongues into prophecy."

Two observations are in order at this point. In light of the contrasts which Paul makes between the two gifts, it is difficult to believe that he includes glossolalia, even when interpreted, in the category of "higher gifts." Indeed, such a classification...
could easily have worked against the very corrections he was trying to make. It is equally difficult to comprehend the equation tongues plus interpretations equals prophecy. The orientation of tongues (to God, not to men) and its function as prayer militate against this identification. Because all gifts are from God, all gifts have the potential for edification. This does not justify equating them with prophecy.

A very different interpretation of Paul's words is advocated by Chadwick. He argues that "The entire drift . . . of I Cor. xii-xiv is such as to pour a douche of ice-cold water over the whole practice." But if Paul had denied the validity of glossolalia, he would have put a barrier between himself and those whose views he was trying to correct. Thus

Paul must fully admit that glossolalia is indeed a divine gift; but, he urges, it is the most inferior of all gifts. But Paul does more than admit it. He asserts it: [I give thanks to God that I speak in tongues more than all of you (XIV. 18).] No stronger assertion of his belief in the validity of this gift of the Spirit could be made; and in the context it is a master-touch which leaves the enthusiasts completely outclassed and outmanoeuvred on their own ground.

There is no reason to doubt that Paul accepted glossolalia as a genuine gift or that he himself experienced the gift. Nevertheless, in the present context he does not urge the Corinthians to seek this gift. He diplomatically recommends curbs on its use in public worship and suggests alternate goals of seeking. Thus Brunner writes: "Both of these dialectical facts—of tactical retention and tactical substitution—deserve attention if Paul's own 'testimony' in these three chapters is to be understood."

**Guidelines for Public Worship (14:26-40)**

In the final section of the chapter Paul seeks to accomplish three related aims: (1) to introduce order into the worship service (2) while maintaining a wholesome spontaneity and (3) reaffirming the criterion of edification.

Each person is allowed to contribute to worship (v. 26).

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45 Ibid., p. 269. The words in brackets are a translation of the Greek text in Chadwick's article. Chadwick's position is followed by Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, p. 130.
Regulations are given for the use of tongues (vv. 27-28) and prophecy (vv. 29-32). Paul assumes that members, though inspired by the Spirit, exercise control over the use of their gift. There is no thought here of being seized or carried away against one’s will. Order is essential because “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (v. 33). He does not inspire chaos in the congregation.

The reason for imposing silence on women is not apparent from the context (vv. 34-36). Paul does not object in principle to a woman contributing to public worship. In chap. 11 he assumes that women might pray or prophesy, and he does not indicate that there is anything improper about it. The only condition he lays down is the wearing of a veil. Because of his concern for order, however, he could command a woman to be silent just as he could order a male prophet to be silent if his speaking was unedifying or disruptive (v. 30). It may be that Paul’s allusion here is to “a passion for discussion which could give rise to heated argument between a wife and husband.”

This may have occurred when speaking in tongues took place and interpretations were offered, or during a discussion of any one of a number of controversial issues. In any case, it would increase disorder in the church and threaten further contempt on the part of non-Christians.

Three summary statements conclude the chapter. (1) Paul is writing with apostolic authority. A true prophet and a truly spiritual person (pneumatikos) will recognize that what Paul has written “comes from the Lord” (vv. 37-38). (2) The priority of prophecy is reaffirmed, but speaking in tongues is not forbidden. (3) The Corinthians are urged to do everything decently and in order (v. 40).

Summary

It is evident from this passage that the church lives by the presence and activity of the Spirit. The Spirit, bearing witness to Christ as Lord, baptizes people into the body of Christ. He also gives gifts to each member of the church to enable them to function effectively as Christ’s body in the world.

The Spirit’s gifts are inclusive, not exclusive. They are given to all Christians, not to an elite corp within the fellowship. In this fundamental sense, all Christians are both “spiritual” and “charismatic.” No Christian can claim all of the

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Spirit's possible endowments. Hence Christians need one another. Together they can do more for Christ than any one of them can do in isolation.

There is no arbitrary limit to the number of the Spirit's gifts. God is sovereign and creative; therefore he can endow his people with those gifts which are necessary for ministry in any given age and circumstance.

The church receives the Spirit's gifts in the interim period, in the eschatological tension between what Christ has "already accomplished" and what he has "not yet consummated." These gifts, which make ministry possible now, will not be necessary in the consummation.

The Spirit's gifts must not be thought of as autonomous, separate from the one who gives. They are expressions of God's grace and power and point beyond themselves to the gift of life in Christ Jesus.

The mere exercise of "gifts" is not in and of itself an unequivocal sign of the Spirit's activity. Hence any evaluation of gifts and their function must involve the following criteria: (1) a clear witness to the lordship of Christ; (2) humble service rather than self-aggrandizement; (3) the spirit of Christian love; (4) the edification of the congregation.

With reference to glossolalia, the specific gift which evoked Paul's response in these chapters, the following comments are in order:

(1) Neither this gift nor any other gift is to be interpreted as a sign of superior spirituality.

(2) Paul's purpose is not to condemn the gift as such, but to correct its misuse.

(3) In terms of its effectiveness to edify the congregation as a whole and to serve the evangelistic ministry of the church, it is not one of the higher gifts.

(4) It is valued as a private gift for prayer and praise. Only through interpretation can it edify the congregation. Paul himself seems to have possessed the gift. But to those who exaggerated its significance, Paul made clear that while it could be helpful, it is neither normative nor necessary for all Christians.