

First Corinthians

July 27, 2025

Chapter 14

The Matters of Worship Services – Part 2

“Guidance for Worship in the Church”

Chapter 14: 5 - 11

(4) The Purpose for Interpreters in the Church (14:5)

Paul speaks of the need and purpose of interpreters in the Church. Verse 5.

’ Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the Church may receive edifying.

The Corinth Church was small compared to the city's population, which was approximately 90,000 at that time. The two ports managed cargo from around the world, employing workers from various regions. As the administrative capital of the Roman province of Achaia, these ports were vital to the Roman Empire. Julius Caesar and Caligula planned to build a canal between the two ports, but both died before starting the project. Before this letter's time, ships were still pulled out of the water at one port while fully loaded, then transported across four miles of land and launched back into the sea at the other port. However, at the time of this letter, the city was flooded with workers digging the canal, sent by Nero. The canal was four miles long and 81 feet wide, excavated 24 feet below sea level. Additionally, at the time of this letter, the workers were far from the water line, having just begun digging a 300-foot trench to the water line, 81 feet wide, through rock. The work started with Nero sending over 6,000 Jewish prisoners from Israel to dig.

Nero was present to swing the pickaxe and remove the first basket of soil, after which the workers began their tasks. Soon, laborers from all corners of the Roman Empire joined the project, bringing diverse backgrounds and a multitude of languages. Greek and Latin were the dominant languages in the Roman Empire. Latin was prevalent in the Western Empire, including Britain, France, Spain, Italy, and North Africa. Meanwhile, Greek was predominant in the Eastern Empire, encompassing Greece, Turkey, Macedonia, Syria, and Egypt. However, each of these imperial territories featured a rich variety of languages and dialects. Examples of these languages and dialects included Punic, Coptic, Aramaic, Syriac, Messapic, Albanian-Messapic, Phrygian, Graeco-Phrygian, Albonoid, Illyric, Armenian, Gaul (French), Irish, Welsh, Breton, Scottish Gaelic, Cornish, Manx, Hiberno-English, Shelta, Beurla Reagaird, Lepontic, Celtiberian, Hispano, Galatian, Noric, Cumbric, Pictish, and, of course, Hebrew.

Remember what we learned about these languages and Wycliffe's original English translation of the Scripture in 1380. In Chapter 12, verse 10, we discovered that the word “language” was considered vulgar in English at the time. One hundred years before Wycliffe translated the Scripture into English, an Anglo-French author, Bartholomew Glanville, stated in 1240 AD that any tongue that was not your tongue was vulgar language. Therefore, Wycliffe did not use the word “language” in his translation. At that time, each of the languages I listed above were referred to as “tongues.” Instead of asking “What language do you speak?” people would ask, “What tongue do you speak?” This had nothing to do with a physical tongue in the mouth; it was about the words you spoke from the mouth.

With that context in mind, the congregation faced an abundance of languages in the city when Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian Church. How do you conduct a service in a predominantly Greek-speaking church when Christians from every corner of the Roman Empire come to visit? At that time, the services included singing, a message from the pastor, and a fellowship meal. Additionally, the LORD's Supper was celebrated occasionally. However, unlike today's services where testimonies are restricted, each service, every Sunday, featured testimonies from the congregation. Anyone who wanted to share their testimony was welcome to do so. This leads us to the issue in the Corinthian Church: who do you allow to speak, and who do you exclude?

Paul says, *"Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues."* He wishes that all the saints could speak the various languages present in the Corinth Church, but that was impossible. Paul does not intend to belittle the significance of personal testimony about the LORD, which serves to encourage others. However, he must differentiate between personal testimony and the delivery of the Gospel message concerning the saving work of Jesus Christ through a preacher, which holds precedence in the service. Paul states, *"but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues...."* Preaching is of greater importance. Is Paul altering the established order of the service? Is he removing the time for personal testimonies? We must remember that personal testimony was also part of the service in a Jewish Synagogue at that time. In every village, Paul would attend the Synagogue on the Sabbath and wait for the testimony time so he could speak. When he spoke, he shared the Gospel message with the Jews. The Christian Church at that time also provided an opportunity for anyone, whether a member or visitor, to give a word of testimony. But what if that person does not speak the predominant language of the congregation?

Paul addresses this issue by stating, *"unless he interprets, so that the Church may receive edification."* Who interprets? The one giving the testimony! Paul indicates that if the person delivering the testimony can express what they wish to convey, they should translate it for the congregation. For example, certain phrases and expressions in one language do not translate well into English. For instance, if you say in Spanish, *"Hablar sin pelos en la lengua,"* it means "To speak frankly or to pull no punches" in Spanish. However, the literal translation into English is "To speak without hairs on your tongue." This literal translation does not work. Here's another example: in Spanish, if you say *"Dar Calabazas,"* it means to "stand someone up on a date." But the literal English translation is "Give Pumpkins." One more for good measure: if you say in Spanish, *"Por Si Las Moscas,"* it means "Just in case." However, the literal word-for-word translation in English is "for if the flies." Many times during services, I have heard someone giving testimony in broken English say, "In my language, we say it like this...." Then, they will do their best to communicate it in English. Rarely is the English version as meaningful as it is in the original language. Nevertheless, Paul asserts that if the individual can provide the translation, they must do so to strengthen the congregation's faith.

Paul doesn't just leave the instructions there; he also aims to explore the language used in the Church.

(5) The Problem of Speaking Languages in the Church
(a) Useless Sound (14:6-8)

In verse 6, Paul discusses the issue of speaking in tongues within the Church by comparing it to meaningless sounds.

⁶ But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching? ⁷ Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? ⁸ For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

This passage's main point is Paul's use of "profit" and "distinction." "Profit" means *benefit, help, or usefulness*. If Paul arrives in Corinth and speaks to the Church in a language no one understands, what benefit, help, or usefulness is his message to the congregation? None! Why? Because he is not being "distinct." "Distinction" means *difference, separation, or being set apart*. It refers to distinguishing between different things.

Common across armies throughout history, the trumpet became the key communication instrument on the battlefield. A short melody signaled the troops to charge, while another indicated it was time to retreat. There was the lights-out melody at night, the alarm for danger, and the morning wake-up tune. The soldiers knew these melodies by heart. But what would they do if the trumpet played a melody the troops had never heard before? This unfamiliar melody was not part of their training and signified nothing to them. For all practical purposes, it was a foreign language. Someone in the army would need to explain this new melody either through revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching. They would need to convey it in the troops' language so that they would understand its meaning the next time they heard it. Thus, the new melody would become a clear signal to the troops.

(b) Clear Sound (14:9-12)

To contrast the meaningless sound with the clear sound, Paul states in Verse 9 - 12,

⁹ So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me. ¹² So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the Church.

Considering the commentary on languages, Chapter 14, verses 9 to 11 are clear. In summary, Paul states that if the congregation does not understand the words spoken during the service, those words are merely sounds that hold no benefit or significance for either the saints or non-believers.

Paul returns to the spiritual topic in verse 12: "*So also you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the Church.*" It's important to note that the word "gifts" is not present in the Greek; it is an addition and interpretation by the translator. We will not consider it part of our understanding of Paul's words here.

Paul says, "*So also you since you are zealous of spiritual*" What is Paul alluding to now? The key word is "zealous." It means *enthusiastic, fervent, or a devoted supporter*. The word comes to us today as "jealous." In Paul's time, it was used to describe individuals who were fervently committed to their beliefs or causes, sometimes to the point of being militant or radical. Thus, we return to one of the troubling issues in the Corinthian Church: the divisions and conflicts within the congregation, particularly among the immature members, specifically the Jewish believers. Paul's point is that if you want to be passionately devoted to your spiritual life in Christ, you must "seek to abound for the edification of the Church."

In verse 12, Paul suggests a prayer about languages as a caution regarding what he has expressed thus far.

¹³ *Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.*

Consider the term “*pray*” in this verse. It is the common Greek word for “prayer.” Praying involves communicating with God and represents a deliberate act of speaking to Him with reverence and devotion.

What does Paul mean when he says, “*pray that he may interpret*”? Let’s set the scene to explore his meaning.

In a small, remote village in Albania, the LORD has used a pastor to guide each person to Him. In that village, everyone speaks a language unique in the world—Albanian-Messapic. Nevertheless, the pastor’s success in advancing the cause of Christ has gained worldwide attention, thanks to some church members who speak other languages and can testify to the marvelous ministry there. Currently, the pastor is on a trip. A representative has arranged for him to speak at your Sunday service in Pasadena, Texas. He arrives unaccompanied. Unfortunately, no one is able to communicate with him, as the Albanian pastor speaks only Albanian-Messapic and not a word of any other language.

However, he is guided to the chair where he will sit. The service begins, and the congregation sings and prays. When it is his turn to speak, a finger directs him to the pulpit. He delivers a message in Albanian-Messapic that lasts an hour, but no one comprehends a word.

Paul says, “*Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.*” Is the Albanian pastor meant to pray to the LORD for a miraculous, on-the-spot English translation during his one-hour sermon? Is that what Paul means? I think not. We will revisit this chapter later when Paul provides guidance for this situation.

What does Paul mean when he says, “*Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret,*” in the context of verses 9–13? For the Church in Corinth, if a pastor or anyone visits and shares a testimony in their secondary Greek language, they should “*pray that*” their testimony is translated correctly into Greek. That is Paul’s intent in verse 13.

13 *Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.*