

# First Corinthians

August 3, 2025

Chapter 14

## The Matters of Worship Services – Part 3

“Guidance for Worship in the Church”

Chapter 14: 14 - 25

### (c) Example of Improperly Edifying Self (14:14-17)

Paul will now present examples of incorrectly uplifting oneself rather than the Church. Verse 14 – 17.

*<sup>14</sup> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> What is the outcome then? 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. <sup>16</sup> Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? <sup>17</sup> For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified.*

Paul starts with a personal note. His primary language was likely Aramaic, just like Jesus. As a Jew, he also knew, read, and spoke Hebrew. While living in the Roman Empire and interacting with government officials as a Pharisee, he was familiar with Greek, although it was not his main language.

In this passage, Paul discusses praying in a language he understands, but which the Corinthian congregation does not. When he prays in that language, his “*spirit prays*.” It serves as communication with God; however, Paul states, “*my mind is unfruitful*.” The Greek term for “*unfruitful*” conveys the idea of being *barren or lacking thought*. This indicates that Paul does not need to consciously think about speaking to God in one of the languages he knows well. Now, we must connect this with the following verse.

Verse 15b. “*I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with my mind as well; I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with my mind also.*” In verse 14, Paul informs us that he does not need to think about what he is saying when he prays in a language he understands. In verse 15, Paul states, “Since I do not need to think about what I am saying in the language I am praying, I can focus and reflect on what I want to say”. As Paul prays “*with the spirit*,” with the Holy Spirit within him, he can also contemplate with his mind what he wishes to pray and what the Holy Spirit intends for him to pray. Furthermore, because of the way he communicates with God in his prayers, he sings to the LORD in the same manner.

In verse 16, Paul shifts from sharing his personal testimony to addressing someone who is about to speak to the Corinthian congregation. He asks, “*Otherwise, if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who occupies the place of the ungifted say ‘Amen’ at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you are saying?*” What does he mean?

In verse 16, Paul tells the speaker in front of the Church that while speaking in an unknown language may enhance their connection with God, it does not offer any blessing to the person in the pew. When Paul refers to the person in the pew as “ungifted,” the Greek term for “*ungifted*” means *unlearned*. This simply indicates that the people in the pew have not learned or understood the language of the speaker.

I earned a music degree from Dallas Baptist College in 1978. As part of the program, we listened to countless operas and arias in their original languages. We also frequently visited the opera house at Fair Park, near Cotton Bowl Stadium. Although I appreciated the beauty of the music, I never understood a word that was sung, leaving me unaware of the plot or storyline of the production. Ultimately, I felt I gained nothing from the experience.

In 1825, Franz Schubert composed seven songs based on Walter Scott's poem, *The Lady of the Lake*. One of them, titled "Ellens Gesang III," opens with the words "Ave Maria," meaning "Hail Mary." These initial words led to Schubert's melody being used in the Roman Catholic prayer to Mary. During my college years, I learned that the new rendition was called "Ava Maria," yet I was unaware of the entire song's lyrics, subject, or storyline. Over the years, I would hear it sung during church services, but I never participated. At the song's conclusion, people, especially those from the Catholic Church, would utter "Amen." I didn't understand why they said "Amen" until later. I considered myself "ungifted" and didn't realize why I should say "Amen." I was shocked years later when I discovered that the song's content was the Roman Catholic Prayer to Mary. If you're unfamiliar with Church history, the theology behind that song contributed to the dark ages of the Church when educated individuals in the pews revolted against ministers who sought to elevate Mary, urging prayers to her instead of praying directly to God. Consequently, church leaders withdrew education from common people. Within two generations, the knowledgeable became the ignorant. As Paul would say, the "gifted" turned into the "ungifted." When someone doesn't understand a word spoken in a foreign language, how do they know when to say "Amen?" They don't.

In verse 17, Paul states, "*For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified.*" In other words, "Your message before the LORD is good, but it does nothing for the people in the pew." To sum it up, it is self-edifying, not Church-edifying.

**(d) Example of Properly Edifying the Church (14:18-19)**

Now, Paul provides an example of how to properly edify the Church: verse 18.

<sup>18</sup> *I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; <sup>19</sup> however, in the Church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

Interpretation: First, Paul speaks more languages than any of the saints associated with the Corinthian Church.

Second, Paul believes it is more important to speak a few carefully chosen words that convey the Gospel than to use ten thousand words in a language that no one knows or understands.

**(e) Example of Improper Thinking in the Church (14:20)**

Once again, Paul points his apostolic finger at the Jewish saints in Corinth.

<sup>20</sup> *Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.*

Paul is not being rude with this statement; he is being factual. At this point in the study of this letter, it is clear that Chloe's message to Paul must have indicated that the source of the troubling issues in the Corinthian Church was rooted in the mindset of the Jewish "Brethren" saints, rather than the Gentile saints. Paul has addressed all the problems in the Church concerning the "brethren." Now, Paul urges them to change their way of thinking: "...do not be children in your thinking...." Though they may be adults, they are immature in their thinking.

Paul addresses immaturity in some way from Chapter 3 to this chapter. In Chapter 16:13, Paul tells them to “*act like men.*” His point is clear: since leaving Judaism, the Jewish saints in Corinth have not grown in their Christian faith. Notice that Paul mentions three stages of growth in this verse: children, infants, and the mature. They should have matured in their Christian journey by now, given all the mature saints who have ministered in the Corinth Church by this time; yet they remain children in their thinking. It was time for them to snap out of it and become mature. Therefore, Paul offers two thoughts for their transition by telling them, “*...in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.*”

When Paul says, “*in evil be infants,*” he means to *be innocent in the face of evil*. He wants them to embody qualities like meekness, modesty, and humility and to be free from pride, vain glory, hypocrisy, bitterness, envy, and malice. He encourages them to be tender-hearted and ready to forgive, harboring no thoughts of harming others. Infants do not intentionally commit evil acts.

But to the saints in Corinth, especially the Jewish saints, Paul says, “*...in your thinking, be mature.*” Other translations say, “*...in your thinking, be men.*” As grown men, think with good sense and prudence, free from divisions and dissent.

We understand that Paul is addressing the Jewish saints in the Church, based on his subsequent statement.

#### (6) Languages Instruct Men – But Not All Listen (14:21)

Undoubtedly, the Jewish saints wanted changes within the Corinthian Church that conflicted with their standards and heritage. While the specifics remain unclear, it likely pertains to the words spoken by the Gentiles in the Church. To capture their attention, Paul references the Old Testament Law. The essence of the Law indicates that languages instruct people; however, not everyone listens.

<sup>21</sup> *In the Law it is written, “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,” says the Lord.*

This verse holds little significance for the Gentile saints. While they may respect it, its impact on them is not as profound as it is for a Jewish saint. Paul’s words originate from Isaiah 28:9-12. According to *Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers*,

The passage there refers to the refusal of Israel to hearken to Jehovah when He spoke to them with clearness and simplicity, and His judgment on them taking the form of declaring that He would make a foreign people—the Assyrians—be His mouthpiece to them in the future, in a language which they knew not. It is as if the Apostle said: Remember there was a time in Jewish history when an unintelligible language was a sign sent by God, and proved unavailing as regards the conversion of Israel.

The LORD sent Assyria as His chastising army to correct the thinking of the Jews living in the Northern Kingdom. Ninety percent of the Jews did not listen, while ten percent did. Those who listened called upon the name of the LORD. He physically saved them by bringing them to safety in Assyria. The other ninety percent died on the land in the Northern kingdom. He also saved the ten percent spiritually because they had made Him their LORD.

Why did Paul include this Old Testament text here? He intends to use it as a transition to convey his message to the Jewish saints in Corinth.

**(a) Languages Instruct Non-believers to Believe (14:22a)**

Just as the LORD sent Assyria to teach the Northern Kingdom, languages guide non-believers to become believers in Corinth. Verse 22a.

*<sup>22a</sup> So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers;*

Languages “are for a sign.” What does Paul mean when he uses the word “sign?” The Greek word (semeion) signifies confirming, *corroborating*, or *authenticating*. In Paul’s usage, it indicates that languages serve to draw the attention of non-believers to the Gospel so they can become believers. Hearing the Gospel in their language will be confirmed, corroborated, and authenticated in their hearts, leading them to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Those who already believe do not need languages; they have already heard and accepted the message in their language. Now, to mature, they require something different.

**(b) Preaching Instructs Believers Not Non-believers (14:22b)**

Non-believers need to hear the Gospel in their own language to become believers; however, once they become believers, they require prophecy (preaching). Preaching instructs believers rather than non-believers. Verse 22b.

*<sup>22b</sup> but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.*

Prophecy conveys and reinforces the revealed truth of the Gospel in everything that Jesus taught. Believers need this for their growth and maturity in the LORD. Hearing the preaching of the Word of God serves as confirmation, corroboration, and *authentication of the expectations* the LORD has for a saint's maturity.

**(c) Languages - What Non-believers Think (14:23)**

Languages: what do non-believers think when they attend a church service and hear people speaking in every language imaginable?

*<sup>23</sup> Therefore if the whole Church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?*

When visitors arrive at the Corinth Church, saints from around the world are present, speaking in their native languages. An unbeliever who understands none of these languages may think the saints of the Church are “mad!” Crazy. Senseless. Absurd. Ridiculous. Ludicrous. The term “mad” can encompass any of these feelings and many more.

**(d) Preaching – What Will Non-believers Do (14:24-25)**

But if a non-believing visitor comes to the church and hears the preaching, what will they do?

*<sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; <sup>25</sup> the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.*

However, if a non-believer attends a worship service at the Corinth Church, where everyone speaks at least one common language and knows how to share the Gospel in that language, someone will be able to share the Gospel with him. Paul tells us that this person will become a believer, a saint of the LORD. In such a Church, as described here, “*God is certainly among*” the saints present.