

BUILD UP THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Key Truth:

The goal of all grace-gifts is to build up the church.



Just days after talking with you about car brakes, I was driving our van and heard a terrible grinding sound that made me gringe. Grinding usually indicates the brake pads are so worn they are tearing grooves into the rotors.

I thought to myself, “Here you are claiming to know how to work on brakes and you didn’t hear the warning tabs!”

Before the pads wear down to the point they damage the rotors, the warning tab scrapes the rotor and makes a high pitched screech. That screech is a signal. It is meant to get our attention.

I was kicking myself. How had I missed the sign? I know better. I know the sound.

Much like warning tabs on brake pads, the grace-gift of tongues was a divine sign God used to get the attention of unbelievers.¹ This is one of the reasons why, as we will study today, the Apostle Paul taught the Corinthians that speaking in uninterpreted tongues during the meeting of the church was inappropriate (1 Cor. 14:20-25). The grace-gift of tongues was a divine sign for unbelievers, not believers. In Acts 2 we have a clear historical illustration of tongues being deployed as a divine sign for unbelievers.

Please turn with me to Acts 2:1-13.

On Pentecost, 33AD, God deployed the grace-gift of tongues to get the attention of unbelieving Jews gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish feast.

THE GRACE-GIFT OF TONGUES DEPLOYED ON PENTECOST 33AD

(Acts 2:1-41)

The historical context is the Jewish Feast of Weeks, 33AD. (We refer to this as Pentecost.) Fifty days prior Jesus had been crucified, buried and resurrected. Thousands of Jewish pilgrims from throughout the Roman Empire were once again in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

Acts 2:1-13 (ESV)

¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” ¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹ Some suggest specifically Jewish unbelievers prior to 70AD.

Acts 1:15 indicates that the number of believers in Jerusalem at this time was about 120. Verse 4 reveals that on this day they were filled by the Holy Spirit and enabled to speak in a variety of tongues. Verses 8-11 make clear these tongues were distinct, human languages. Keep in mind these Jewish pilgrims did not need to be evangelized in their mother tongues; they were at least bilingual if not trilingual. In addition to their heart language, they also spoke Greek, the trade language of the Empire and they may have spoken either Hebrew or Aramaic as part of their Jewish heritage. God's purpose for deploying the grace-gift of tongues was not to evangelize these men through tongues, but to get their attention. The miracle of tongues was a sign of God's presence. In verse 12 we see that the grace-gift of tongues accomplished its purpose in getting their attention:

¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

This was exactly what the grace-gift of tongues was meant to accomplish; to get the attention and pique the interest of unbelievers. Engaged by the miracle of tongues, this crowd went on to be evangelized by Peter. Peter probably preached in Greek and 3000 came to faith (Acts 2:41)

Acts 2 is key to understanding the Apostle Paul's statement that the grace-gift of tongues is a sign for unbelievers, not believers (1 Cor. 14:20-25).

Paul makes this statement within the larger context of 1 Corinthians 14 where he is giving instructions to the Corinthians about how tongues should be exercised in the meeting of the church. Paul's overall instruction is that uninterpreted tongues should not be spoken in the meeting of the church. He gives two reasons for this limitation. The first reason is that uninterpreted tongues do not build up the church.

PROPHECY BUILDS UP THE CHURCH, UNINTERPRETED TONGUES DO NOT (1 Corinthians 14:1-19)

In 1 Corinthians 14 the Apostle Paul applies what he taught in chapters 12 & 13. The context is the meeting of the church. The Corinthian worship service was highly participatory giving opportunity for various members of the church family to exercise their grace-gifts.

The focus is on the grace-gifts of prophecy and tongues. Those who exercised their grace-gift of prophecy did so in the language they shared with the church family, Greek. Those who exercised their grace-gift of tongues did so in the human language enabled by the Holy Spirit, but if it was not interpreted, it was not understood by either the church family or the speaker.

Paul did not prohibit speaking in tongues in the meeting of the church, but they were to be spoken only when interpreted. Without interpretation, the grace-gift of tongues does not build up the church.

Prophecy, on the other hand, was to be prioritized because it builds up the church.

1 Corinthians 14:1-19 does not require much explanation. These verses give us concrete answers how to conduct ourselves in the meeting of the church, but leave unanswered many other questions about the grace-gifts of prophecy and tongues.

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 (ESV)

¹ Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ² For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

⁶ Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? ⁷ If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ⁸ And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹ but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to

the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

¹³ Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. ¹⁶ Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

The principle is clear; if the church family cannot understand you, then you are not building them up so do not speak in tongues in the meeting of the church, unless you or someone else can interpret.

In verses 20-25 Paul gives a second reason that uninterpreted tongues should not be spoken in the meeting of the church: the grace-gift of tongues is a sign for unbelievers, not believers.

PROPHECY IS A SIGN FOR BELIEVERS, TONGUES ARE A SIGN FOR UNBELIEVERS (1 Corinthians 14:20-25)

As we read this paragraph, keep Acts 2 in mind. Through the miracle of tongues those men knew something extraordinary was happening and they wanted to find out what it was. That is the nature of a divine sign; to get our attention and to listen to what God is saying. It worked perfectly in Acts 2. The Apostle Paul reveals that the grace-gift of tongues is a divine sign for unbelievers intended to get their attention to find out what God is saying. The grace-gift of tongues is not meant for the church family.

On the other hand, prophecy is a sign for believers. The grace-gift of prophecy is the divine enablement to receive direct revelation from God of truths never before revealed. The first generation of the church did not have the New Testament; through the prophets God revealed truths to the early church which eventually were written down and collected into the New Testament. The grace-gift of prophecy was a divine sign for believers intended to get their attention to hear and obey God's voice.

With this background, let's read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25.

1 Corinthians 14:20-25 (ESV)

²⁰ Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹ In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." ²² Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³ If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ 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.

Just as in Acts 2, the miracle of tongues was meant to get the attention of unbelievers that something supernatural was happening to the end that they would want to know. And then through prophesy in the church meeting, or in the case of Acts 2, Peter's preaching, the unbeliever hears God's Word, hears the Gospel, comes under conviction and is saved.

Therefore, the meeting of the church was not the primary context for deploying the grace-gift of tongues. Tongues was to be deployed among unbelievers as a means of getting their attention that God is present and reaching out to them. Their curiosity piqued, unbelievers could then come to the meeting of the church and hear the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the language they shared with members of the church. In this way, the grace-gift of tongues was a supporting gift to the grace-gift of evangelism – used by the Holy Spirit to draw unbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ.

To summarize, the Apostle Paul taught the Corinthians that *building up the church* is the guiding principle by which to decide what should and should not be spoken in the meeting of the church. The grace-gift of prophecy should be exercised because it builds up the church. The grace-gift of tongues should only be exercised if someone is able to interpret; uninterpreted tongues should not be spoken because they do

not build up the church. Paul gave a further reason why uninterpreted tongues should not be spoken in the meeting of the church: tongues are a divine sign for unbelievers, not believers.

At present we do not struggle with this issue here at Grace Church. But this passage still drives home a relevant truth about our grace-gifts – *we are to use our grace-gifts to build up the church family*. This truth is both a motivator and a corrective. It is motivating to realize that I've been given a divine enablement to build up my church family and that Jesus will someday reward me for faithfully exercising my grace-gift to build up His church! This truth is a corrective for any of us who are passive and not serving or are serving out of pride. What are you going to say to Jesus when He asks why you didn't use your grace-gifts to build up His beloved church?

This passage also reveals the heart of God towards unbelievers. Just fifty days prior the Jewish leadership conspired with the Romans to have Jesus killed yet on Pentecost 33AD God deployed the grace-gift of tongues to reach out to the Jews, yet again, to bring them to salvation. The purpose of tongues as a sign to unbelievers reminds us that God desires that none should perish. Let us renew our prayers for the unbelievers in our network of relationships and let us always be ready to share our testimonies and the way of salvation through Jesus.