

"Bodybuilding 101" 1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Introduction

- My senior year in college a bunch of guys, like twenty of us, each chipped in a couple bucks to purchase the marquee pay-per-view heavyweight fight that year. I don't even remember who fought now; Holyfield, Tyson, Foreman, Bowe. It doesn't really matter. I just remember sitting in this dirty, cramped college house nicknamed "The Pit," crowded around this tiny little television, watching these two boxers slug it out. Ahhh, the good old days.
- When I read 1 Corinthians 14 the image that comes to mind is that of a heavyweight fight. Seriously, this chapter is a heavyweight bout between two gifts of the Spirit, tongues and prophecy. The Corinthians believed speaking in tongues was the undisputed heavyweight champ of spiritual gifts. Paul believed prophecy was better and chapter 14 is the fight. Albeit on paper and with words—it's a fight.
- Let me say right up front that the subject of miraculous gifts is unfortunately a hot button issue. It polarizes Christians. It's emotional. It has caused fights and split churches. It's no wonder Paul inserted right smack in the middle of his discussion of spiritual gifts a whole chapter on love. And so as we think about these things this morning love has to be our guide. What's Paul's advice to the Corinthians? It's not enough to simply seek the greater gifts, chapter 12 verse 31, you've got to love, chapter 13. As he begins chapter 14 *follow the way of love*. Pursue love like a hunter pursuing prey.¹ Chase after it. More than you're chasing after the gift. Spiritual gifts without love are worthless.
- And conversations about the gifts without love are worthless. For those of you here who are interested in Christianity, you're investigating who Jesus is and you've observed Christians fighting over this or anything else. Let me say I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the way our behavior as Christians has given Christ a bad name.
- For those of you who have already made up your mind on this issue or are confused about the miraculous gifts, my portrayal of this passage as a fight is not meant to polarize things. One of the good things about watching a fight is that it diffuses all desire to fight. Fights are ugly. My goal as we look at 1 Corinthians 14 is to observe, learn, discuss, talk, clarify, and question, but keep the fight on the pages of scripture. Let Paul and the Corinthians fight over these things. This issue is not worth getting rankled over. May [Chrysostom's](#) maxim guide us. "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ." Amen?
- Before boxers step into the ring there is a "weigh in," right? The media, the boxers, their entourages gather in a room for some questions, answers, and the weigh in itself. The boxers step onto the scales, they face each other—there's a lot of sizing up, a lot of pre-fight analysis as to who's going to win. In the case of 1 Corinthians 14 and these two heavyweights, tongues and prophecy...

Proposition

- **The pre-fight analysis says that the gift that most edifies wins**

¹ Thisleton, p. 1082.

- For Paul the most important principle regarding spiritual gifts is how the use of a gift builds up, constructs, or strengthens the body of Christ. **The gift that most edifies wins.** In 12:7, flip back to 12:7, Paul gives the overarching principle for all spiritual gifts; they are given for the *common good*. Spiritual gifts are given to individuals, yes, but every gift is meant for a larger group of people. There is a corporate—community aspect to the use and exercise of spiritual gifts. *For the common good.*
- Flip forward to chapter 14. I want you to notice the number of times Paul mentions the word edify in the section we are going to look at this morning. Verse 3. Verse 4. Verse 5. Verse 12. Edify. Edify. Edify. Edify. Edification is the benchmark. Edification meaning the qualitative, Christ-like growth of the church.² In a heavyweight fight the guy who punches harder usually wins. In this fight Paul says, the gift that most edifies, that’s the gift that wins.
- In fact, this is a good principle to keep in mind as we think about our corporate worship services. Do the constituent parts of our services edify the body? As **Gordon Fee**, a Pentecostal himself and one of the preeminent scholars on 1 Corinthians, as he says “The point of everything in corporate worship is not personal experience in the Spirit, but building up of the church itself. . . The building up of the community is the basic reason for corporate settings of worship; [the] corporate gathering [is not the place] for a thousand individual experiences of worship.”³
- Now to the fight itself.

Organizational Sentence

- **There are two rounds in this heavyweight prizefight between tongues and prophecy**
- **Round number one**, verses 1-5. **Round two**, verses 6-12. It’s actually over pretty quick. T.K.O. in two rounds.

Transition

Round 1, **verses 1-5**. Listen. *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. 2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophecy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.* Round 1? Goes to prophecy. Why? **Because as a gift it strengthens, encourages and comforts.** As a gift, it’s just more edifying than speaking in tongues.

Main Points

- The reason Paul has this conversation with the Corinthians, pitting tongues and prophecy against each other in this two round fight, was because the Corinthians probably believed those who spoke in tongues were superior Christians.⁴ So Paul squares them off together in the ring to see which will win. There’s nothing wrong with speaking in tongues. Paul’s not

² Garland, p. 633.

³ Fee, p. 667.

⁴ Morris, p. 186.

anti-tongues here. Far from it. In fact in [verse 18](#) he *thinks God that he speaks in tongues more than the Corinthians*. But in terms of the edification factor you can't even compare speaking in tongues to prophecy. It's like putting a super heavyweight in the same ring as a strawweight, the lightest weight class in professional boxing. No contest.

- Speaking in tongues, Paul says, only edifies the speaker, [verse 4](#). *He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself*. It's a one man deal. Whereas prophecy, [verse 3](#), *strengthens, encourages, and comforts* so that, [verse 4](#), *he who prophesies edifies the church*. To quote [Chrysostom](#) again, "What a difference between one person and the church."⁵ That's why Paul can say in [verse 5](#), *I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues*. Jab. Jab. Uppercut. Standing eight-count. Round 1 goes to prophecy.
- The hard part about these verses is not what they say. That seems pretty clear. The most important gifts, measured by Paul's principle in verses 1-5, are those that build up the church. And of the two Paul talks about in this section prophecy is better at building up the church than speaking in tongues. That doesn't mean those who have the more important gifts are more spiritual. Spirituality is determined by Christ-like sacrificial love. No love equals spiritual zero—regardless of the gift you have. If you're keeping a scorecard though, right now, prophecy is ahead.

Transition

In Round #2, it's pretty much more of the same. Round #2, [verses 6-12](#), also goes to prophecy. Why? Because of the **intelligibility factor**. Listen. *Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? 7 Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? 8 Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? 9 So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. 10 Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. 11 If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. 12 So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

- I think another reason Paul has this conversation with the Corinthians, pitting tongues and prophecy against each other in this two round fight, was because the Corinthians were speaking in tongues without someone to make their words intelligible. And so Paul describes four different situations, there are four punches in this round. All the punches relate to intelligibility—to being understood. Understanding is critical to edification.
- In [verse 6](#), Paul sets up a hypothetical situation in which he comes to the Corinthian church speaking only in tongues. Round 2, punch 1. *Now, brothers*, or in other words, let's look at the facts. *Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?* He could come speaking in tongues but what good would it do? No one benefits from something

⁵ Reinecker, p. 434.

they can't understand.⁶ As an alternative, Paul suggests, it would be far better if he came to them with an intelligible message—something that edifies more than just one person—like a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction.

- In [verse 7](#), he gives a second illustration of a flute or harp playing music. Round 2, punch 2. *Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes?* In other words, music without tone or discernable notes is just noise. Back in college a world renowned flautist came to campus for a performance called “Extended Techniques for the Alto Flute.” I wish I had a recording. It would have been the perfect illustration for the point Paul’s trying to make here. For an hour this woman, not doubt a gifted musician, slapped the keys, chortled into her flute, and attacked our ears with the most hideous “music” I’ve ever heard. It was just awful. It was unintelligible. It was of no value.
- In [verse 8](#), Paul gives the illustration of a trumpet or bugle trying to sound out a call to battle without a clear, discernable melody. Round 2, punch 3. *Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?* Just imagine a trumpet calling out taps in the evening or reveille in the morning but with no clear, discernable melody that sounded like taps or reveille. If the melody is unintelligible melody you’re not going to get the results you’re looking for. If taps doesn’t sound like taps no one is going to go to sleep. If reveille doesn’t sound like reveille no one is going to wake up. It’s impossible for something that’s unintelligible to edify. [Verse 9](#). *So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.*
- Finally, [verses 10-11](#), and the illustration of speaking foreign languages. Round 2, punch 4. Tongues is on the ropes. *Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. 11 If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me.* If you’ve ever traveled to a foreign country where everybody around you is speaking a foreign language you’ll understand exactly what Paul is saying here. Speaking in tongues without someone to make those words intelligible actually creates a sense of alienation. It drives wedges between people; it makes brothers and sisters in Christ foreigners to each other. The word Paul uses for foreigner sounds like the word barbarian. Speaking in tongues, which was a matter of pride for the Corinthians, turned out as the means of making them nothing more than barbarians to one another.⁷ That’s why Paul is so adamant in [verse 19](#) when he says, *But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.* It’s over. Prophecy wins by T.K.O. in the second round. **The post-fight analysis shows the gift that the most edifying gift has in fact won.** Paul, you’ve made your point.
- The most important gifts, measured by Paul’s principle in verses 1-5, are those that build up the church. The most important gifts, measured by Paul’s principle in verses 6-12, are those that are intelligible and can therefore build up the church. And of the two gifts Paul talks about in this section prophecy is by far the better gift at building up the church than speaking in tongues. I like how [John Stott](#) puts it. “The most important gift today, measured by Paul’s principle that we should excel in those that build up the church, is teaching. Nothing builds

⁶ Garland, p. 635.

⁷ Morris, p. 189.

up the church like the truth, and we desperately need more Christian teachers all over the world.”⁸ And so Paul concludes with similar words we’ve heard throughout this section, [verse 12](#). *So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

Transition

Again, the hard part about these verses is not what they say but what they mean and how they are applied. What does it mean to prophesy? How is prophesy related to knowledge, words of instruction, revelation or for that matter just plain old preaching? What is speaking in tongues? Is it the ability to speak unlearned languages or an angelic language? Is tongue speaking in 1 Corinthians the same as what’s recorded in Acts 2 or the same as what’s experienced now? And the money question, are the miraculous gifts valid for today? I’ll try to answer all these questions next week as we continue this discussion in verses 13-25.

- For the moment though, I want to spend a few minutes talking about how we can and should relate to each other when it comes to areas where there is theological disagreement. One of the things I appreciate most about the Free Church is that in our ranks there are those who believe the miraculous gifts are still valid and there are those who believe they aren’t—and somehow we find a way to work together for Christ and His Kingdom. “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ.” The problem though is trying to determine which things are essential and which are non-essential.
- Let me suggest to you a pyramid to help us navigate different theological views. [SHOW SLIDE] This isn’t my creation this comes from one of my colleagues, another Free Church pastor Mark Andrus. I think it’s helpful. Mark suggests that we think about differing theological views like this pyramid. “How do we decide which theological views are *dogma* and therefore indisputable; which are *doctrine* and thus well-established; which are *theory* and open to vigorous debate; and which are mere *speculation* and warrant little more than curiosity?” Mark suggests this pyramid of theological thought where the apex of the pyramid represents theological dogma; those truths that have the highest exegetical certainty, the greatest theological importance, the strongest biblical evidence, and the most uniform historical agreement. This is important. As a theological view decreases in certainty, importance, emphasis, or agreement it also slides down the pyramid from dogma toward speculation.
- So, for instance. We’re close to Christmas. Let’s try this with the virgin birth of Christ. Where should this be placed on the pyramid toward the bottom, speculation? Or toward the top, dogma? There is wide historical agreement on this issue, from the early church to now. So it’s more than speculation. There is also tremendous emphasis on this in Scripture. It’s prophesied in the Old Testament. It’s the bedrock of the birth narratives in the gospels. So it’s more than theory. Its importance is undeniable. The virgin birth of Christ is the linchpin in the argument for Christ being fully God and fully man. And without the deity of Christ things like Christ’s substitutionary atonement come into question. So it is highly important. So it’s at least doctrine. But it’s also exegetically sound. Meaning, there are solid grammatical-historical reasons for believing this teaching. Therefore, something like the Virgin Birth of Christ ranks high on the pyramid. It’s dogma. Indisputable.

⁸ John Stott, "CT Classic: Basic Stott," Interview by Roy McCloughry, *Christianity Today* (1-8-96).

- Now let's try this with the miraculous gifts. This time let's start at the top. All the key passages on the miraculous gifts are highly debated. In some cases, every word is debated. And there are sound exegetical arguments both for and against the gifts continuing. It's certainly not dogma. How theologically important is it? Keeping all of salvation history in perspective, the issue is really not that important. I like how [Millard Erickson](#) puts it. "In the final analysis, whether the Bible teaches that the Spirit dispenses special gifts today is not an issue of great practical consequence. For even if he does, we are not to set our lives to seeking them. He bestows them sovereignly; he alone determines the recipients, 1 Corinthians 12:11. If he chooses to give us a special gift, he will do so regardless of whether we expect it or seek it. What we are commanded to do is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 5:18. This is not so much a matter of getting more of the Holy Spirit; presumably all of us possess the Spirit in his entirety. It is rather, a matter of his possessing more of our lives. Each of us is to aspire to giving the Holy Spirit full control of our lives."⁹ Personally, I don't believe this issue falls into the category of doctrine. What about scriptural emphasis? How much does scripture emphasize the miraculous gifts? I would argue not that much. Scripture talks about them, yes. Are they emphasized? Maybe. That might be debatable. How about historical agreement. The only thing unanimous is that there is no uniform historical agreement on the issue. Christians throughout the centuries have been all over the place on this issue.
- So what can we conclude? This issue probably falls somewhere between theory and speculation. It means that when you and I speak about this issue, when we talk about it and when we debate it, hopefully basing all our arguments from the word of God, that we do so with much grace—much charity knowing where this falls out on the pyramid. For the third time this morning, "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ." May the grace of Christ season all our speech as we talk with one another about these things.

Conclusion

- Let's wrap things up. Do you remember this cartoon from two weeks ago? Some of you may have missed it because of the snow. Bob Hirschy showed this cartoon in a slightly different context. I want to use it again to illustrate the point about gifts that edify. To me the picture of this guy is the Corinthian church. Highly developed in one particular gifts but in total the whole body wasn't all that edified by their imbalance. May God give us balance so that we're a well rounded congregation. Let's pray.

⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 881.