

Spiritual Gifts

First Corinthians Chapters 12–14

David Gooding

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1 Corinthians 12

Tonight, as I understand my brief, I am to begin leading our thinking on chapters 12–14 of 1 Corinthians. For me to get through each of these three chapters in just a half an hour would obviously require a miracle. They deal with topics that go deep into the hearts of believers, over which there has been much difference of thought and practice in these past years. Doubtless I shall please some of you in some things, and displease you enormously in other things, and therefore we shall all need grace to bear with one another. Above all, I shall need more than human grace to remember the exhortation that is given to us in chapter 13, lest my remarks become merely a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

In order to fulfil my brief tonight, what I want to do may appear very selfish at first sight: I'm not going to invite general discussion. It's not because discussion isn't valuable, nor because I suppose that I must be right in everything I say and it needs no discussion. That's far from the truth. In dealing with these topics, I think it is helpful first of all to get a bird's eye view of them. It is so easy to come to these chapters fastened on a verse or two, and then to go off at a tangent, discuss all kinds of things, and get it all muddled up. To watch the apostle dealing with these problems is in itself a very instructive thing. By the time we are finished, we shall see that chapters 12–14 form one long, coherent argument, and, being a spiritual argument, it is balanced.

As we read chapter 12, we shall find its general emphasis lying on one side; namely that you cannot say of any gift that you don't need it. You cannot say of any member of the body, 'You are not necessary' (see v. 21). But when we come to chapter fourteen, we shall find the opposite emphasis to balance that (see v. 1). Some gifts are more important than others, and we are to seek some, and not others. So we need to see all three chapters together and the many different arguments that Paul brings to bear upon the topic. So, what I hope to do is to point out those different arguments and observations as best I can, show how they follow one another, and what is their general drift.

First argument and observations: 12:1–3

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit.

It is not really an argument but a basic statement; something we must be aware of as background knowledge when we come to think about this matter of spiritual gift. 'Now concerning *spirituals*,'—the Greek leaves it open whatever way you translate it: spiritual people, or spiritual gifts—'brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led' (vv. 1–2). We have to keep this background knowledge in the front of our minds.

Notice the words 'led astray'. In the paganism in which many of these Greek Corinthians had been brought up, they already knew the power of *ecstatic* religion. Notice the form of it: 'You were carried away—you were led astray.' Ecstatic experience is not confined to Christianity. In the Muslim world today, you will find among the Sufis¹ a great deal of ecstatic experience: visions, trances, dancing in the spirit, and whatnot. In Greece, there were religions like the worship of Bacchus, much patronised by women and led by young men, where at certain times they would go up the mountains, get back to nature, so to speak, and *enjoy* (if that is the right word) various forms of ecstatic experience. They would sing as a group, with the most wonderful, beautiful, musical sounds, with nobody leading, but somehow managing to sing in harmony. If it happened today, in some quarters it would be called *singing in the Spirit*.

That is not peculiar to Christianity. Paul asked the believers to remember that, even in their unconverted days, some of them had been carried away by this kind of religious experience. If ecstatic experience is to be found in other religions and not just in Christianity, how would you decide between the two? How would you recognize the true thing from the false? That is absolutely basic, particularly in pagan societies.

The answer is given in verse 3. Among other tests, you will know the difference by the doctrinal content of what is said by the people who are under whatever power it is. 'I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.'

Obviously, anybody who wanted to, even the worst atheist under the sun, could say 'Jesus is Lord' and not mean it. Paul isn't talking of what people might say in their calmer moments; he's talking about what people say when they come under the influence of some kind of spirit and make ecstatic utterances, such as prophecies or speaking in tongues. When they are engaged in this ecstatic experience, how would you know the difference between what is true and what is false? You will know it by the doctrinal content of what they are saying. If somebody, under the power of whatever spirit it is, confesses that Jesus is Lord, then you will know it is of the Holy Spirit.

But experience will also tell you that you must be very careful. Many evil spirits are prepared to say 'Jesus is Lord', meaning *a* lord. If you question them more deeply whether Jesus is the *only* Lord, of course they would not confess that. If anybody speaking under the influence of some ecstatic impulse says, 'Jesus is accursed,' that is not of God. You will see how basic and fundamentally important this is. Presently we shall find that gift is primarily given for the communication of God's truth, for comfort and edification.

¹ Sufism: mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. (Britannica.com)

What is conveyed doctrinally is exceedingly important, which is why, when it comes to the matter of speaking in tongues, Paul discusses it at length in chapter 14, and insists that in the church you must be certain of what is being said. The only way you could possibly decide whether it was of God or not, is by knowing what is being said at that particular moment. We shall see that, even when it is a case of prophecy, you don't just accept what is said because the man says, 'I am a prophet', and 'thus says the Lord', and so on. Even when the prophets have spoken, the rest will be called upon to use their spiritual judgment and criticize what is said in the spirit of Christian charity and grace, but with firmness—'Is it in accordance with the faith?' And if that is true of prophecies, it will be even more true of speaking in tongues. You must always insist on knowing what is being said publicly. That is exceedingly important. It is basic, as you'll see from Paul's observations.

Second argument and observations: 12:4-11

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. (vv. 4-6)

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (vv. 7-11)

The Holy Spirit apportions a variety of gifts: vv. 4-6

We notice that all the Trinity is involved in this matter of gifts, and that there is not just one gift, but *varieties* of gifts. Some people will content themselves with the evangelist. To their minds, he's the supreme man. It is good to praise the evangelists, but however important they are, it's not the only gift. There are other gifts; there are *diversities*. We must accept that diversity itself is not a bad thing, it's a good thing. It stems from the holy Trinity.

Different people have different gifts: vv. 7-11

Not only are there varieties of gifts in general, but not everybody has the same gift. It could have been that there were all sorts of different gifts, but one person had the lot, and the next person didn't have any. So the second set of verses is making the point that not only are there different gifts coming from the Trinity, but the Holy Spirit distributes them in such a fashion that different people have different gifts: 'who apportions to each one individually as he wills' (v. 11).

Every genuine gift is from God

Notice, then, the sovereignty of the holy Trinity in these things; both in the fact that the Trinity is involved in the giving and the working: ‘the same Spirit’; ‘the same Lord’; ‘the same God who empowers them all in everyone’ (vv. 4–6). Because a man is a powerful evangelist, we are not to suppose that he is somehow a better favourite of God than the one who is a prophet, for instance. It’s the same God working behind them both. And the man who is neither a prophet nor an evangelist, but a *help* in the church, or, given to the governing of the church, is no less energized by God than the one who might be used of God to do a miraculous healing.

Why is it important to get hold of that? It has always been important, but in these last twenty years, people have been inclined to think that *supernatural gifts* are more important.

I once was in a place where this matter was being urged, and I was encouraged to accept a supernatural gift.

I said, ‘If I’m anything at all, perhaps I am a teacher. If I came to your assembly, would I be regarded as charismatic?’

They said, ‘Oh, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because we’re talking about *charismata*.’

One of the words for gift is *charisma*. It simply means, ‘something that is given to you’. An elder in the church, a godly man who is leading the church and spending hours at what is mostly humble routine work, is as much *charismatic* and has as much a supernatural gift as the man who can speak in tongues—and far more useful, as we shall see in chapter 14. The idea is quite false that some gifts are charismatic and some are not. The gift of a teacher is charismatic, if it’s a genuine gift from God. If it’s not given by the Holy Spirit, nor empowered by the Holy Spirit, it is useless. That is a very important point to get hold of, isn’t it? It will give a wrong attitude to spiritual gifts, if we allow folks to get away with the notion that only some gifts are charismatic.

Evangelist, pastor and teacher, prophet, an elder in the church—*helping, administrating*: these are all God-given gifts by the same God, worked and energized by the same Spirit. Because it’s sometimes difficult for us to recognize that what you might call *the routine things* are worked by God, and we are enticed by what seems spectacular and miraculous, we get our values and sense of the supernatural wrong.

Not everybody has the same gift, so what determines it?

‘All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills’ (v. 11). To my little heart, that’s a tremendous comfort. Ultimately, of course, it’s the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. I know you’re going to tell me that, in a later verse, Paul tells the church at Corinth to seek this gift and the other gift; but ultimately we shall bow to the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit to ‘apportion to each one individually as he wills.’ Surely we would be unwise to distress people by urging them to seek gifts that the Holy Spirit never intended to give them. We would be much more powerful people, if we really believed in our hearts that we are what we are by the grace of the Lord Jesus. In his sovereign pleasure he has chosen me and put me where he wants me to be in the body. If I am what he has made me—

not trying to be something else, and in the place that the Lord has put me—then I am pleasing the sovereign Holy Spirit, and in that conviction I am more likely to be a powerful worker.

Third argument and observations: 12:12–31

One body with many members

That is the thrust of the rest of this chapter. There are diversities of gifts; not everybody has the same gift.

The analogy of the human body

For just as the body is one [that is, the physical body] and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with *the Christ*. (v. 12)

That is how we should translate the end of that verse.

As you have often observed, it says that the human body is a unity, and yet it is a plurality. Any human body has got many members, but it is still one body. To have a body at all, you've got to have many members. That's what you mean by a *body*. A body is something singular: one body. But it wouldn't be a body if it had just a chest and no head, no legs, no arms and just a torso. You would hardly call that a body, would you? To be a body, it's got to have many members. On the other hand, having many members, it remains only one body.

If that is so in the physical world, it is even more so in the spiritual world. Notice verse 12: 'So also it is with *the Christ*.' It is not simply 'Jesus', but 'the Christ'. What is meant by 'the Christ'? In this context, it means the head of the body, the Lord himself, and all his members forming the one great body, which Scripture calls 'the Christ'.

How is this great unity achieved?

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (v. 13)

So now we come across a much quoted verse, and a much used phrase, understood in many different ways. Very often when people are discussing it they talk at cross purposes. They use the phrase 'baptized in the Spirit', but one person means one thing by it, and another person understands it quite differently, so they never get a meeting of minds because they are taking it to mean different things.

How shall we decide what it means?

Whatever our theories are in general we'll want to see it in its context, and you will notice that there is not just one action in the verse, but two. 'For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' Not one, but two aspects of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, you will notice that Paul informs the Corinthians that *all* of them have experienced both these things—all have been baptized, and all have been made to drink. It's

not that some of the believers have been baptized in the Spirit and some haven't, or some believers have been made to drink of one Spirit and some haven't; it's all of them.

They'll forgive me, because they're now in glory, but from this epistle you would get the impression, perhaps, that some of them weren't always living as really spiritual men and women should live. Paul had to tell them that, in spite of their gifts, many of them were downright carnal. So severe are some of his views that they didn't like it, but I'm sure they'll all agree with him now. While they were so full of strife and envy and jealousy, and fighting one another, and proud and boastful, and so forth, and so on, Paul could say to them that they have all been baptized in one Spirit. Notice that this is not an exhortation— 'You *ought* to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit'—but rather, 'You *have been,*' and 'you *have all been* made to drink'. So the next thing we shall observe is that somehow being baptized in one Spirit, and being made to drink of one Spirit, has got something to do with the body.

What's it got to do with the body?

'For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (v. 13). What has the baptism in the Spirit got to do with the one body? In a very fundamental sense, being baptized in the Spirit and being made to drink of the Spirit is the very means by which you got into the body, if you're in the Body of Christ at all.

Two complementary experiences

Let's start with water, like John the Baptist did. When you were baptized in water, you were put into the water—you go into the water. When you were baptized in one Spirit, you go into the Spirit. John baptized in water by putting people in the water; Christ baptizes in the Spirit by putting people in the Spirit (see Luke 3:16). That's clear enough: when you're baptized in water you go into the water, and when you're baptized in the Spirit you go into the Holy Spirit. When you are made to drink of water, the water goes into you; when you're baptized in water you go into the water. There are two sides to it, aren't there?

You will all have observed how a fish survives. If you take out a lovely red salmon (you shouldn't!) and put it on the bank, it gasps and dies. Why? Because, for a fish to live, two things have got to happen. The water has got to be in the fish, and the fish has to be in the water. To be a live human being, you've got to be in the air, and the air in you. If you're in the air but there's no air in your lungs, you'll die. You've got to have both. That's the secret of this body hanging together. If the oxygen in the air outside comes into my lungs but doesn't penetrate to the bottom of my finger, my finger will fall off with gangrene. You must have it simultaneously. To have a body, it's got to be in the air, and the air in it.

And to be a member of the Body of Christ, simultaneously you must be in the Spirit and the Spirit in you. Thank God for the assurance that every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is in the Body of Christ. How did they get there? By that double thing: they were baptized in the Spirit, but when they trusted Christ he put them in the Spirit and the Spirit is in them—he gave them to drink of his Spirit. If either of those things is not true, they wouldn't be in the Body at all.

Confusing the basic gospel

That is why, if I may say so, it is enormously important for us to be careful about our biblical technical terms. We're not going to make people offenders for a word, are we? They want to encourage us to be more spiritual. We know what they mean, and we do need the exhortation to be more spiritually minded. We need to be *filled with the Holy Spirit*, and more and more to be *led by the Holy Spirit*. In our church gatherings, we need to recognize the sovereignty of the presidency of the Holy Spirit. But it is a pity when some people use the term 'baptized in the Spirit', or, 'being filled with the Spirit', because it confuses what lies at the very heart of the gospel. You're not in the Body of Christ at all, unless you have been baptized in the Spirit and have been made to drink of the Spirit.

To tell true believers that they haven't been baptized in the Spirit could be the beginnings of a dangerous thing, for you are using biblical terminology to say that they're not really in the Body at all. In all our desire to live spiritual lives, we mustn't forget the basic gospel of our salvation. *Every* believer has been baptized in the Spirit, has been made to drink of the Spirit, and is therefore in the Body of Christ.

Paul's observations

Now Paul is going to make some deductions from that, and some exhortations. Very often people divide themselves into two groups: those with inferiority complexes, and those with superiority complexes; those who feel they're no good, and those who feel that there's never been anything like them since the Flood! They're all dear brothers and sisters in Christ. We have to put up with each other and our different personalities and temperaments.

1. People who feel inferior: vv. 14–20

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (vv. 14–20)

Take the foot. Not being able to look down very far, he has to look up, and he looks at the hand. He can see how much more able and dextrous a hand is than a foot. Being more manipulative, it can do so much more than the foot. So the foot decides, 'I'm not a hand, and therefore I'm not of the body.' This is the inferiority complex, so it's a great comfort for me to observe the mistake the dear old foot is making.

How did you get into the body?

To come straight to the application, how does a foot get into a physical body? Is there a stock of feet in the supermarket—bony feet, chubby feet, flat feet, arched feet—all kinds of feet?

The maker of the body comes along and says, 'I'm building a body, and I'd like a foot. Which of all these is the best foot? You have to be a very good foot in order to get into the body. If you were not a foot, but an eye, you'd have a bigger chance of getting into the body.'

Is that how it came about? Do you have to be a good foot to get into the body? Better still, do you have a bigger chance of getting into the body if you are an eye?

You say, 'Don't be so silly. You've got it all the wrong way round. You get into the body first, and then you discover you are a foot.'

You didn't get into the body because you are a good foot, did you? Here's the foot, saying something silly but it doesn't realize it, 'Because I am not the hand, I'm not in the body.' How did it manage to be a foot, if it wasn't in the body to start with? It had to be in the body first, before it could be a foot.

This is a very important thing, because people sometimes confuse their gift with their salvation. I've known young men particularly, so wanting to get a gift because they feel that if they got a gift it would prove to them that they were saved. That's got it all the wrong way round; we don't get assurance that we're in the Body because of our gift. It's the other way round: we are put into the Body of Christ by our great Lord and Saviour at our conversion. It's given to us, and we're in the Body; and being in the Body we presently discover what we are, 'foot, hand, eye', or whatever.

You say, 'I don't feel much good.'

Don't you, really? How are you able to feel anything at all? Who is this 'I' that you talk about? 'I don't feel much good' —who is this?

'Well,' you say, 'that's me.'

And how did you come to be 'me'? Did you make yourself? No, ultimately, you are a creature of God, aren't you? God made you, and the same God who made you put you in the Body when you trusted Christ. You wouldn't be able to feel that you're not much good unless first of all he'd made you. That's the right way round. If I say to myself, 'I don't feel very good—look at that splendid and successful gifted man over there, I wish I was like him.' But then I have to stop and think that this 'I' that doesn't feel much good is the creation of God, now redeemed and put into the Body by Christ.

That is the cure for any inferiority feeling. Therefore, 'if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body"' (v. 16), it's talking nonsense because it already is an ear and already in the body, even if it isn't an eye. Did the eye get into the body by being a good eye? No, it got into the body because God put it into the body. 'But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose' (v. 18). So I can sit back in my seat and say, 'Fancy that, I'm in this Body simply because I trusted Christ, and the gift I have is because it pleased God.'

And then, lifted up with a feeling of temporary equality, I say, 'Look at Billy Graham. He only has to open his mouth and say half a syllable, and a hundred get converted. By the time he's at the end of his sermon, a thousand or two have got converted, and the man has led more than a million to Christ.'

Half a minute, he's an evangelist! What was he put in the Body for, and how, and what decided it? It was because it pleased God that he should be an evangelist.

Someone may say, 'How did I come to be a toe nail?'

Well, that pleased God as well.

‘Really? So Billy Graham pleases God by being an evangelist, but I please God by being a toenail?’

On that level, we’re all equal. It pleases God, my brother, my sister, that you are where he’s put you in the Body. There is no greater joy in the whole of creation than pleasing God; it’s the highest significance that anybody could have.

There was a BBC programme at one stage. It said, ‘If you weren’t you, who would you like to be?’ I pondered it a lot, and decided that if I weren’t me, I should be myself! Why would I want to be anybody else, because in the end I could only please God by being me. It pleased him to make me who I am. He gave me my position in the Body and gave me my gift.

What a gospel this is. It calms our nerves and gives us Christian poise and confidence that, however little our gift may be, it’s put there by God, and we please him by being what he’s made us to be.

Then there is the other consideration. ‘If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body’ (vv. 19–20). What an absurd body it would be if, instead of having feet and hands, it only had hands. It wouldn’t be a proper body. Where would the body be if every member was a hand? It would be grotesque. If the eye was the only member there was, wouldn’t it be absurd? We’ve got to be different in order to be a body.

2. People who feel superior: vv. 21–31

On the other hand, from verse 21 onwards we’ll come to the other side. Paul has a word with those who feel superior, as distinct from inferior. I don’t know whether you ever succumb to that at all. In my experience most people belong to the first section. Some belong to the second, I suppose.

The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ (v. 21)

The eye is a marvellous gift, a far more intricate mechanism than the hand; but many people would prefer to lose a hand than an eye. It would be silly for the eye to say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ or the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ Of course, the notion that I don’t need other people’s gift is stupid in the first place. And then it could be pride and silly self-confidence. We need all the gifts, and the notion that we could dispose of some is quite foolish. So now we’re coming round to the other side, to people who think that, because they’ve got some very big gift, they don’t need others. But they do.

In fact, if you look at the physical body and you take human instinct, those members that seem to be more feeble are necessary.

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (vv. 22–25)

I've got some very curious organs inside me, and when they X-ray me they stand back with horror. Those that seem to be weaker are also necessary. If they were to say, 'I'm more feeble and the others just put up with me', is that really so? No, they can all say, 'I'm actually necessary.'

What a marvellous gospel it is, my dear brothers and sisters. If you are Christ's, heaven wouldn't be complete without you. You are necessary. Why do you think God gave the blood of his Son for you, if you're not necessary? When it comes to instinct, we do our best to hide those parts of the body that are less honourable, or give more honour to them, so that there should be no division in the body. Nature teaches us that. In the Body of Christ, you can't say that you don't need the other gifts. Even the weaker and less honourable parts are necessary, and should be surrounded with greater honour.

There is a mutuality in suffering

'If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together' (v. 26). There is a community of life. We don't always realize that in our pleasures. When the stomach is enjoying a beautiful dinner in a five-star hotel, it's inclined to forget the feet because they're under the table. What have feet got to do with enjoying a good supper? If the big toe is full of rheumatism, even the stomach won't enjoy the dinner. Is it not so? In the body there is a common life, and therefore a common sensitivity to pain. When one member suffers, all suffer; and if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

Sometimes, when people have been working hard for the Lord and haven't seen many conversions, and then they hear that God has blessed remarkably in other countries, the tendency is to get a bit discouraged. 'I've been working hard for the Lord; why don't I see the blessing that the Lord gives elsewhere?'

Well, my brother, I understand exactly how you feel. I preach sermons and nobody gets converted. Other folks take my sermons, preach them, and folks get converted. It's in the Lord's sovereign hand. Does it matter in the end who does the preaching, when folks get converted? If we're in the same Body, then the success of the gospel is ours, isn't it? We are the same Body, and we had a part in it, praying and sustaining them, perhaps by a gift, perhaps by being present. We are part of the same Body, and if the Lord honours them by seeing great fruit in their work we share the honour. The members of the Body aren't in competition with one another. This is not the world; this is the church. It is the Christian Body. There isn't competition, or there shouldn't be. All the members rejoice if one member is honoured.

Some gifts are higher than others

Every member is necessary, but as you come to the end of the chapter there's going to be a change.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues?

Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (vv. 27–31)

The answer to all those questions is no. Let me go through it again and note what is said. ‘First, apostles—are all apostles?’ Well, of course not. ‘Second, prophets—are all prophets?’ No. ‘Third, teachers—are all teachers?’ No. ‘Do all work miracles?’ Of course not. ‘Do all possess gifts of healing?’ No.

I notice he doesn’t say, ‘Do all possess the gift of tongues?’ He says, ‘Do all speak with tongues?’ The answer, my dear brothers and sisters, is no. It’s a pity if the leaders in some quarters have encouraged everybody to speak in tongues. Scripture says the opposite. ‘Do all speak with tongues?’ No. ‘Do all interpret?’ No, of course not.

So there are different gifts, and Paul says, ‘But earnestly desire the higher gifts’ (v. 31).

Did you notice the change? Every gift is necessary, so in Paul’s day that would have involved *tongues*, wouldn’t it? All were necessary, but some are greater than others.

You say, ‘In what sense are some gifts greater than others?’

Well, look at the body. Is your heart necessary?

You say, ‘Of course it is.’

Is your little finger necessary?

You say, ‘Of course it is.’

The little finger has a tremendous grip, more than any other finger on the hand. Even a baby’s little finger has a tremendous grip. Yes, it is necessary. Could you live without your heart?

‘Oh no,’ you say, ‘you couldn’t live without your heart.’

Could you live without your little finger?

You say, ‘If you had to, you could.’

So some gifts are greater than others. It’s no good hiding the fact, is it? I shall have to admit that I’m not Billy Graham. He has a far greater gift than I’ve got, but because I’m secure in my position in the Body of Christ I can afford to say that.

If you and Billy Graham were on a boat that was about to go down, and the lifeboat had only one place, who would you give it to?

You say, ‘I can go home to glory and nobody would miss me. Give it to Billy Graham.’

Why? Because you recognize his gift is bigger, greater, and therefore in that sense more important? How would you measure what is more important? That’s going to be the subject of chapter 14, where we shall be told how and why it is that some gifts are more important; how we may judge which they are, and seek those gifts.

1 Corinthians 13

We are currently studying 1 Corinthians 12–14. All three chapters speak about spiritual gifts, a topic which, unfortunately, has led to much disagreement amongst the Lord's people in different centuries, and not least in our own. So, what we are trying to do these evenings is to come back to Scripture to see what considerations the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to bring before us on this exceedingly important topic.

And again, what we are trying to do is not to take a verse here and there, but to see the message as a whole, recognizing that all three chapters deal with this topic of spiritual gifts. In so far as we can, to see how all the detail fits together and presents us with exceedingly balanced, sane, and practical instructions on this important matter, as you would expect with anything coming from the Holy Spirit.

Last week we attempted to cover chapter 12, and I have to confess the obvious: I did all the talking. Doubtless, that left you with pressures building up ready to explode, if you had been given the slightest opportunity. I have to disappoint you tonight, because I'm going to talk again. The pressure will really be mounting up for the ensuing weeks, and do keep it mounting up. You mustn't let me get away with things that might seem okay at the start, but upon further inspection are not right. And certainly you mustn't let me get away with things that are obviously not right from the very start. The organizers tell me that they're going to give you the opportunity for general discussion of these matters, but I shall talk again tonight because I personally think it is important that we should not just fasten on a verse here and there, and using it as a springboard, go all round the world into all sorts of other things. We shall try first to consider this whole topic in the context that the apostle himself discusses it.

Summary of chapter twelve

Let's begin by very briefly casting an eye over chapter 12, just to see where we've got to. We noticed in verses 1–3 that the basic test by which to judge all spiritual gifts is by their doctrinal content. In particular, what do they say about the person of the Lord Jesus? That is to say, when people come under the influence of whatever spirit it is, their message is to be judged by the doctrinal content of what is said about the person of the Lord Jesus.

Secondly, in verses 4–11 we noticed that there are varieties of gifts. In the first part, in verses 4–6, it is the same Holy Trinity who gives and empowers those different gifts. And then, in verses 7–11 we noticed that not only are there different gifts, but the same person doesn't normally have them all. The Holy Spirit gives to each one different gifts, as he wills.

Then we noticed in verses 12–26 that Paul talks about those in the Body of Christ who feel themselves *inferior*. To use the analogy, 'If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do

not belong to the body" . . .'. Translate that into the realities that he's talking about, and one person says, 'I'm not an evangelist, so I'm not in the body.' Or another person says, 'Are you a prophet? No? Well, you're no good then.' That cannot be said. It is nonsense for the foot to say, 'Because I'm not a hand, I'm not in the body'. You don't get into the body by being a foot, and you don't get into the Body of Christ by being a prophet, nor by speaking in tongues. You get into the Body by this double process: by being baptized in one Spirit into one body by the blessed Lord Jesus, and made to drink of one Spirit by the Lord Jesus (see v. 13).

Paul explicitly affirms that all believers have both been baptized in the Spirit, and made to drink of the Spirit. If both operations had not happened simultaneously, they wouldn't even be in the Body. For its existence, a body depends simultaneously on both those operations. So I mustn't say, 'Because I'm not an apostle, I'm not in the Body.' And I mustn't let anybody tell me, 'Because you're not a teacher, you are not in the Body.' And if I were to say, 'I wish I were a teacher, and then I could be sure that I'm in the Body', no I couldn't. It's the other way round.

Then he deals in verses 21–26 with those who feel they are *superior*. Because they've got a gift, they think they don't need others who have different gifts. 'The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"' (v. 21). Put that into the real situation. The prophet cannot say, 'I'm a prophet, so I don't need the evangelist.' And the teacher cannot say of any of those gifts listed at the beginning of the chapter, 'I don't need you.'

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. (vv. 8–10)

They are all necessary, says Paul, for a complete Body.

Finally, in verses 27–31, as we came to the end of the chapter last week, we noticed that, while all are necessary, not all the gifts are equally important. My little finger is necessary in order to have a complete body, but it isn't as important as my heart. I could survive without my little finger, but I would find it very difficult to survive without my heart. Some gifts are more important than others.

You say, 'Hurry up and tell me, because I want to know which are more important.'

You do indeed, for verse 31 now exhorts us to 'earnestly desire the higher gifts.' I take the verb here to be an imperative, not merely a statement that you do desire, but, you are *to desire*.

You say, 'Wait a moment, sir, if the giving of gifts is at the sovereign disposal of the Holy Spirit himself, what's the good of my praying for anything?'

And I suppose, if God is sovereign in the salvation of souls, what's the good of praying for souls to be saved? We don't take that view, do we? At least, I hope we don't. Even though he is sovereign, he reserves the right in his grace to listen to our requests. He doesn't guarantee that he'll always give us everything we think we need, but we are to desire earnestly.

We are to desire earnestly, therefore, the higher gifts. Some will say that the verb is not only imperative, it's in the plural. That means it's not the individual seeking, but the whole church. Well, that is true. If a church got together, and decided it could do with an evangelist

or a teacher, why not wait on the Lord? But isn't that also possible for an individual? You'll get an example in chapter 14. If somebody speaks in tongues and it makes no sense to the congregation, he's told to pray that he may translate it, so it's open to the individual to desire. Then we are told to desire the *higher* gifts.

You say, 'Which are the higher gifts?'

Well, of course I'm not going to tell you that yet, because the Holy Spirit doesn't. He introduces a whole chapter with thirteen verses before he gets round to telling us which are the greater gifts. That chapter is, of course, the very famous chapter to do with love.

You say, 'Why is he doing that? I thought he was talking about spiritual gifts? Love is all very nice, but what's it got to do with spiritual gifts? Why doesn't the man keep to the point? He's as bad as some other preachers we have! When he started on spiritual gifts, why doesn't he keep on talking about spiritual gifts, and not go on to some other thing, about how marvellous love is?'

What has love got to do with spiritual gifts?

As you see from the opening words of chapter 13, it's got everything to do with gifts. In fact, if you are thinking about gifts, this is one of the fundamental things to get hold of—what has love got to do with gifts, and in particular what has it got to do with seeking gifts?

Why would you seek any gift?

You say, 'I would like to be an evangelist; that's what I'm seeking.'

God give us more of them. Tell me, why would you seek the gift of an evangelist?

You say, 'I enjoy preaching the gospel. You should hear me in my bedroom some Thursday nights after I get home from the meeting and there's nobody around. I preach the gospel in my bedroom and I enjoy it immensely.'

But is that why you want the gift—so you can preach? If that's all you want it for, you'll be in a very dangerous place. Why? Because the basic principle, if you're seeking a gift, is that your motive must be love. That doesn't mean love for yourself, it means love for the other person. What would you seek a gift for? Well, if you seek it for your own gratification, listen now to what the inspired apostle says. 'If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal' (v. 1). I'm not doing it because I love the other fellow.

I don't know whether you like sounding brass; it gets on my nerves. It's a clashing old sound. I won't be unkind, but I've been in many a Buddhist temple, and suddenly you get frightened out of your life. Somebody gets a mighty great hammer, beats it on a gong, and you've never heard the likes of it. So it is when somebody in the church uses a gift that is without love, not considering how it will help, and not loving the other person.

'And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge . . .' (v. 2). Paul is laying it on thick and heavy, isn't he? There isn't anybody this side of the glory who would ever understand all mysteries and all knowledge, not even Paul himself. He says later on, 'We know in part' (v. 9). Suppose we had all knowledge. Well, my dear brother, my good sister, in heaven you will have all knowledge and you'll know all mysteries. Suppose you

already have 'all faith, so as to remove mountains'—a super-duper George Muller—'but have not love, [you are] nothing' (v. 2). Utterly insignificant.

You say, 'Surely, it signifies something? I've just moved that big mountain!'

If you did it merely as an exhibition of what big muscles you've got, and it wasn't done out of love for anybody else, you are insignificant. So what, if you moved the mountain?

'What does it mean, then, "if I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned", is that a gift?' (v. 3).

Yes, it can be. There is a gift of *liberality*, isn't there? God has given to some the gift of being stewards of material goods in a special way. But suppose I give away all my goods to feed the poor, and give my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Notice the care with which the inspired apostle speaks. This is inspired, you know; the language is exceedingly exact. He says here, 'If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing' (v. 3). It doesn't say that other people don't profit.

Suppose you are a multi-millionaire, and you give five million dollars to the poor of Kabul just to get publicity for yourself and your businesses, that won't profit the folks in Kabul, will it? Yes, it will. The hungry and the starving will profit immensely from your five million dollars' worth of medicines and goods, whatever your bad motive was. It won't do you any good—'you gain nothing', but it may be a great help to them.

So Paul pushes home this fundamental lesson that must guide me in two things.

1. I must ask myself, 'Why do I desire this gift? Am I being moved by the love of God? How will I love people by it, and how will it benefit them?'

2. Whatever my gift is, to see that I always have the grace to exercise it in love.

And that's a thing in which we're not always one hundred percent successful. At least, I know I'm not. When I'm visiting somewhere, and I've just finished preaching, sometimes I say to myself, 'If they ask me about Northern Ireland again, I'll tear my hair out.' Or, 'If they ask me about the sons of God and the daughters of man in Genesis 6, oh, wow.'

It is a good question, you know, but if you want to travel this world and teach the word, it doesn't matter whether you're preaching from the prodigal son, the book of the Revelation, Proverbs 8, or Ezekiel, when you're finished and you say, 'Any questions?'—'What do you think about the sons of God in Genesis 6?'

It's so often asked, I've promised myself that I'll have a tape recorder made, with an answer that I can switch on, and say, 'There's my answer.' That wouldn't always be nice, would it? There are some earnest young students, and to them this is a very big thing. They have just discovered it, and if you didn't take their question seriously you could slight them, and in the extreme case put them off Bible study forever. They've just begun to get keen and take God's word seriously. 'Love is patient and kind' (v. 4).

Don't ask me how I know it; I know it by a thousand and one experiences. You've finished speaking and sit down, and feel you've made a mess of the whole thing. Then the next brother gets up and gives a brilliant thing. Afterwards in the cafeteria everybody's saying, 'Wasn't that a marvellous message?' Yes, it was, and 'love does not envy or boast.' So you've made a mess of it, that's too bad. But what are you doing it for? In the use of our gifts, then,

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (vv. 4–7)

Important as those descriptions are, I shall not now dwell upon them at any greater length. I have my eye on the clock, and if too many more weeks go by and you don't get a chance to contribute, I shall be in real trouble.

Gift is partial but faith, hope, and love are permanent

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (vv. 8–13)

'There will come a day,' says Paul, 'when you won't need prophecy any more. You won't need tongues or special knowledge; all that will pass away and cease. At best it is only a temporary device, whereas there are certain things that will never pass away, and these are faith, hope, and love. All three are permanent, *but the greatest of them is love.*' So this is another motivation in my attitude to gift: love will always be needed.

There have always been disagreements about verses 8–13, so to be fair and even-handed I'd better tell you both major interpretations, and leave it to you to make up your mind which, according to the context, you think is the better interpretation. We're not two opposing sides; we're out for God's truth, so try to refrain from clapping when it's your interpretation!

What is 'the perfect'?

The first interpretation is held by very high-powered students of Scripture, like Professor Benjamin Warfield of America. Along with thousands of other highly responsible men and women, Benjamin Warfield has said that 'that which is perfect' (v. 10 KJV) is the completion of the New Testament Scriptures, the New Testament canon. The gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge were temporary, given until the canon was completed. When the canon was completed these temporary gifts ceased. Therefore, any tongues that came afterwards must, by definition, be spurious.

What support could you get from Scripture for that view? Well, let me quote Ephesians 4, where Paul is describing gifts. He is talking of the risen Christ: 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men' (v. 8). And here are the gifts:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the

unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (vv. 11–13)

That's what gifts are for, to bring you to spiritual maturity. When shall we come to mature manhood? 'You are children at the moment, but don't remain like that all your lives. Learn to be grown-up, not only morally and emotionally but in your doctrine,' says Paul.

So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. (vv. 14–15)

So the first interpretation says, 'This is the purpose of gift. The early churches did not possess the complete canon of the New Testament. All they had was an odd epistle of Paul, perhaps a bit of a Gospel, perhaps even an epistle from Peter. Some places had two letters from Paul, and some by this time might have had a bit of a collection, but certainly they hadn't the New Testament. Therefore, they needed the gifts in the church, and prophets in particular, through whom God could communicate his Christian truth. But when they got the complete revelation, they could stop being children.'

I wonder what you would say if I said to you, 'The trouble with you is, you're a lot of children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine'?

You would say, 'No, we're not, and we're thinking about cancelling your preaching commendation! What are you talking about? We've been in Apsley Street for fifty, sixty, seventy-odd years, and you say we're still children. Of course, we're not.'

The amount of our knowledge

So, some are saying, 'We have the whole canon to guide us, so we are no longer children. Whereas the early churches, not having the complete New Testament Scriptures, needed special gifts like prophecy and tongues to help them grasp orally God's New Testament truth. But when the canon was complete, the partial was done away. It is talking about the amount of our knowledge—how much we know. Do we know in part, or do we know the complete sum total? "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away" (v. 9). So, it is about the *amount* we know.'

The manner of our knowing

'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways' (v. 11). That's an illustration, not about the amount we know, but the *manner* of our knowing and thinking. Children have their own way of thinking, don't they? Some are very cute; they can spot hypocrisy far quicker than adults, who sometimes do not really mean what they say.

The medium through which we know

‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face’ (v. 12). As I think of those three things—the amount of our knowledge, the manner of our knowing, and the medium through which we know—the only way I can give them their full sense is by understanding ‘that which is perfect’ to signify the coming of the Lord and our going to dwell with him.

The amount

‘Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known’ (v 12). As he sat there writing this letter to the Corinthians, suppose Paul were talking about the completed canon, and the canon wasn’t complete. ‘When the canon is complete, I shall no longer know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.’ What would be the distance in knowledge between the time when he was writing this, and when he knew that the canon was complete? What wouldn’t he have known by this time?

Someone will say, ‘*Justification by faith*, because that’s in Romans.’

But even if he hadn’t written Romans yet, he’d preached it all round the empire. Paul would have known about justification by faith.

‘Did he know about *the Lord’s return*?’

He most certainly did. The letter to the Thessalonians was already written.

‘Did he know about *the church*?’

He most certainly did.

‘Did he know about *the Body of Christ*?’

Yes, he did.

‘What didn’t he know then? Wasn’t there was a bit out of Ephesians he hadn’t yet got?’

What was that?

‘Where we’re *seated in Christ in heavenly places*’ (see 2:6).

He’d already been up there to know, hadn’t he? According to 2 Corinthians, he had been called up to paradise.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. (12:2–4)

Anyway, let’s suppose he didn’t know that the church is already seated in the heavenly places in Christ, he knew about justification by faith, he knew about *sanctification*, he knew about the Lord’s coming, and he knew about the Body of Christ.

You say, ‘That’s equivalent to knowing only “in part”.’

So you’re saying that the difference between knowing all those other things, and knowing what’s in Ephesians, could be the difference between being a child and a grown up? I find that difficult to accept. Paul wrote a great deal of the New Testament, didn’t he? Even with all the great revelations that God had given to him, when he put the last comment in Ephesians he would still have said, ‘I know in part, and I’m looking forward to the day when *the perfect comes*.’

The manner

Well, the same thing applied: 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways' (v. 11).

How did you view marriage when you were five years old? When I came to Belfast years and years ago, a five-year-old proposed to me! When you were five years old, what did you think about marriage? You knew some things about it, but you didn't have a clue what marriage was really about when you were a child.

Tell me, what do you think about heaven?

You say, 'Well, it's going to be marvellous and wonderful, and I think about the golden streets and the pearls and things.'

Yes, my brothers and sisters, we think like children, don't we?

That's the best God can do with us at the moment. We believe all these lovely things that he's told us because they are real. They're meant to be taken as real, but we're told about many of them in the best language that God can use for now. When we get home, we shall find out how much bigger it all is. We see so many things now as children, but when we get home we shall see it as adults.

The medium

'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known' (v. 12). You must remember one or two technical things here. In the ancient world mirrors were not made of glass like they are now. They were made of copper, if you could afford one, and they were a very important part of one's household goods. The copper had to be beaten flat and made to shine. But when you looked at yourself in an ancient mirror, it played little tricks with you and distorted here and distorted there. 'Is that really me?' What looks like a big nose isn't a big nose; in reality it's quite a pretty nose! You have to interpret the old mirror. 'That spot on my head is not a spot at all, it's my ear.' Why are you interpreting the thing? Because you're looking through a mirror 'in riddles', says the Greek.

And it still needs to be interpreted, but when you get home what a delightful thing it will be to see 'face to face', my brothers and sisters. You will not need any interpretations then; you'll see it clearly. The canon of Scripture has been completed long since. Do you see everything clearly now without any need for interpretation? Let me say nothing derogatory about God's holy word, but is it all absolutely clear to you or does some of it have to be interpreted? After years of studying holy Scripture, good honest men and women of God disagree about this little bit and that little bit, because it isn't one hundred percent clear and it requires interpretation. Even though the full canon has come, we are still knowing God through a number of media. But when we see him we shall see him face to face. Oh what a lovely thing that is. Whatever you think of my interpretation, don't get too upset. Allow yourself the luxury of sitting back there a moment and saying, 'one of these days I'm going in to see the King.'

The primary purpose of having a gift

Remember, when you're exercising your gift, you're not playing about. God has given you a gift, but he's given it so that I may benefit from it. Why does it need to benefit me? Well, my brother, one of these days I've got to go in to see the King. You have the most serious business in hand, for now is the time for my training. Now is the time for my spiritual progress and my preparation for seeing the King.

If it got into my head a little bit more that I'm talking to my fellow believers as a teacher, I'd see to it that I wasn't just spouting theories, wouldn't I? It has got to save people and help them in the Christian pathway. It has got to help them face temptation and overcome it, and to lift their drooping hands (Heb 12:12). It has got to prepare them to go in to see the King in his glory. I must make sure that the purpose of using my gift is to help others, and not merely to help myself.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (v. 13)

1 Corinthians 14

Our task tonight is to get through 1 Corinthians 14, and I shall try to do that as best I can within the time available. Next week, God willing, we shall have our time of discussion. It would be a great help if you would write your questions and hand them in, so that we shall cover the matters arising in due and proper order and proportion.

Summary so far

Last week we spent quite a lot of time thinking about Paul's exhortation that we are to honestly seek spiritual gifts, and we noticed him advising us to desire earnestly the higher gifts (12:31). While all gifts are necessary – just as every member in the body, large or small, is necessary, some members of the body are more important than others. The heart is more important than the little finger. It is so with gifts; some of them are more important than others, and we are to seek earnestly the greater gifts, whether it is seeking them for ourselves personally, or as a church.

Just before we proceed, let us remind ourselves what we are talking about, and what it is in this context that we are seeking.

We are to seek gifts

We must distinguish here between *spiritual gifts* in the plural, and *the gift of the Spirit*, which is another thing altogether. Every believer has received the gift of the Holy Spirit: the gift of living water from the blessed Lord Jesus. Moreover, we don't have to get spiritual gift in order to be blessed ourselves. What do I mean by that? Well, you don't need the gift of an evangelist in order to hear the gospel, get saved, and be sure of it. You could read John 3:16 in your own bedroom, and the Holy Spirit could show you what it means. You believe it and are eternally saved and absolutely certain of salvation, without ever having received the gift of an evangelist. The vast majority of us are never going to receive the gift of an evangelist, I can tell you that now. I certainly haven't. We can be saved without having the gift of an evangelist.

Why would you want the gift of an evangelist? Not so that you can get saved yourself, but so that you can communicate the gospel to somebody else, so that they can get saved. If you haven't got the gift of an evangelist, you can help those who have.

Similarly, when it comes to making progress in the spiritual life, you don't have to have any gift for that. Take the gift of teacher, for instance. You don't have to be a gifted teacher to understand God's word; any believer can take the word of God, and the Holy Spirit is prepared to speak to them. You need the gift of a teacher if you're going to teach it to others, whether in the Sunday school, or with the *Mothers and Toddlers*, or wherever you teach it. What

you need the gift of teacher for is not to understand the word yourself, but to help others understand it.

A separate work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

Moreover, there is a very important work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that we need constantly to be seeking, quite apart from any gift. Paul speaks of it in Ephesians chapter one and chapter 3.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe . . . (1:15–19)

Paul is praying for the believers at Ephesus. They already had the Holy Spirit, but he prays that God will give them yet more of the Holy Spirit's work in their hearts, enlightening the eyes of their hearts, so that they might know these great and glorious blessings in a profound and spiritual way. We need to see these things, which are quite apart from gift. This is not gift. Gift is distributed to different people in different ways. Some have the gift of evangelist, some of being helps, some of being apostles, some teachers, prophets, and so on. Not all have the same gift. But what Paul is praying for here is open to everybody, without exception, and we should pray for it constantly.

Similarly, in chapter 3. These folks are believers; they have the Holy Spirit. There's not a doubt about it, but Paul prays:

that according to the riches of his glory [the Father] may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (vv. 16–19)

God give us never to be satisfied, but ever to be seeking, like that man in the parable the Lord Jesus told, who had a guest come in the middle of the night. Having no bread, he got up and went and knocked on the door of his next door neighbour and asked for loaves to put before his unexpected visitor. When the man from inside the door said, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed,' he kept on hammering until the man got up, and gave him the bread he needed (see Luke 11:5–8).

In that sense, we need, endlessly and constantly, without ever giving up as long as we breathe, to pray for the development of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. But that's not gift. In praying for those things for ourselves, we're praying for our own enlightenment and edification, and quite rightly so. But when we seek gifts, it is not a question of seeking them for our own edification, but primarily to help others.

The prime motivation in seeking gifts

And that is why, as we saw last week, when it comes to seeking gift, the prime motivation must ever be the great and infinitely superior way of love. Why would you want gift? The only legitimate motive for seeking and exercising gift is love; not loving yourself, but loving the other person.

At the end of our meeting last week, we hurriedly looked at the early verses of chapter 14, where Paul begins to point out—and he goes on pointing it out through many, many verses in this chapter—that, when it comes to seeking gift, the Holy Spirit says, ‘Don’t seek tongues, seek prophecy’. And if God has given you the gift of tongues, remember that unless it can be used to help other people, you mustn’t use it in church, and it can only be used to help other people if it is translated into language they can understand (see vv. 1–5).

Before we proceed, the coward in me tells me to call your attention to verse 18. We have heard Paul, at great length and in great detail, urging them not to use tongues in church. So much so that you might think he was against tongues. Then he tells us in verse 18, ‘I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.’

If you think your preacher tonight is very biased, and that accounts for what he’s saying, Paul wasn’t biased, was he? Yet he said, ‘Nevertheless, 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).

So then we come down to the particular arguments.

Two pairs of contrasts*Why seek prophecy rather than tongues?*

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. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. (vv. 2–3)

If you had the choice, what would you do? The Holy Spirit tells us that the one who prophesies is edifying, encouraging and consoling others. God doesn’t need that, but fellow believers do, so you should choose and seek a gift that will help fellow believers.

Who should be edified?

The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. (v. 4)

Given the choice, what would you go for? Edifying yourself, or edifying the church? We remember that the basic motivation in the use of gift has got to be love for the other person. Spirituality and love will mean that you’ll go for edifying the church, not yourself.

But you say, ‘It says that the one who speaks in a tongue does build himself up. There can’t be anything wrong in that, can there?’

Well, of course not. And anyone who uses the gift of evangelism edifies himself also. And I can speak about the only one I know: anyone who uses the gift of teacher edifies himself. Sunday school teachers know it, don't they? Or Bible class leaders, or evangelists. You have the children around you, and suddenly the Lord, by his grace, comes on the group. There's a quietness and a hush, and somehow you feel that God has helped you to get the message across. You sense in your spirit that it's gone home to the hearts of the children. You've made a lifelong impression; it's edified the children, and you. You go home walking on air, don't you? Of course you're edified. How could you preach the gospel to somebody with God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit without being edified yourself?

You say, 'But I'm not going to bother about the children. I'll just go into my bedroom and preach the gospel and then I shall be edified.'

Well, of course you can do that. Do soundproof the bedroom or people will think that you've gone a little bit cranky. Yes, certainly, you derive edification from preaching the gospel, but is that the prime reason the gift of evangelism is given? The prime reason for gift is to help other folks.

What would you think of a stomach that was so monstrously self-centred that all it cared for was to be full with cabbage and potatoes? It hadn't any concern for the other members of the body. The primary function of the stomach is not to enjoy itself, but to digest the food and send on the benefit to all the other members of the body.

Why is the gift of prophecy more preferable to the gift of tongues?

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 [*translates*], so that the church may be built up. (v. 5)

Some people have taken this verse to mean as follows:

1. 'My first wish as an apostle is that you all speak in tongues.'
2. 'I want you to prophesy.'

So they say that it is a positive exhortation from the apostle that all believers ought to speak in tongues.

It cannot mean that, ladies and gentlemen, for one very obvious reason.

And you say, 'What's that?'

In chapter 12 he told us that not everybody speaks in tongues. Everybody cannot possibly speak in tongues, any more than the body can be made up all of hands and no feet, all noses and no eyes, all chins and no ears. 'It cannot be like that,' says Paul.

In his sovereign wisdom, God gives a gift to this person, and another gift to somebody else. Are all apostles? Certainly not. Are all prophets? No. Are all teachers? No. Do all speak with tongues? No. He hasn't forgotten what he said in chapter 12 when he comes to chapter 14, has he? Surely not.

What is Paul saying, then? It's a strong way of saying, 'There's nothing wrong in tongues, *per se*,' but notice the preference, "but even more to prophesy".'

I remember a lady who, being asked about her birthday present, said, 'Chocolates are okay, but a little bit of perfume from Paris would be better.'

Through the inspired apostle, the Holy Spirit is saying that there's nothing wrong with tongues, but he wants you to go for prophecy. Why? Because 'the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues.' Why is he greater? Because the one who prophesies builds up the church, whereas, unless someone translates, the one who speaks in a tongue builds up nobody except himself.

Notice that I use the word *translate* and not *interpret*. I shall talk lower down in the chapter about why I suggest we should understand that word as meaning translation, and not just interpretation.

Paul's application of these principles

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? (v. 6)

His motivation is that he's thinking of how he can profit them. God conveys his truth to his people in various modes—revelation, knowledge, prophecy or teaching. But, as Paul is about to point out, he wants them to have the information in a language they can understand. Why would Paul come to them speaking in tongues, if they can't understand the tongue? When he can speak plain Greek to them, and they understand Greek, why would he start off by speaking in a tongue, and then translate it? What sense would there be in it? So he says, 'I'm going to make sure that what I say can be understood.'

Paul's analogy

If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? 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. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, 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. (vv. 7–11)

In an old-fashioned radio, if you're going to receive a message, two things have got to happen. First, the transmitter has got to be transmitting a clear signal that makes sense; and second, the receiver has got to be able to receive the signal that is transmitting. Both ends have got to work properly. It's no good if the beacon out there is giving out a nice signal, but your set has gone cranky and can't accept it. Nor is it the other way round; your set may be beautiful, but if the transmitter is jumbling the signal you won't get the message. Both the transmitter and the receiver have got to be as clear as they can possibly be.

There are things in life that must be clear in the signals they give. If you go to a farmyard, and there's an old barn door squeaking, what do you make out of that? Well, nothing in

particular, except that the barn door could do with some oiling. But as far as the noise is concerned, it isn't conveying any message. It isn't a language, it's just so much noise.

On the other hand, if you went to an Army camp, and you heard somebody playing a bugle, that's a noise. But it's more than a noise. There are no words but that particular order of notes is conveying a message. In my schooldays, if you heard them playing 'The Last Post', you would know to stand still. It is a message too deep for words. If you know the language of the bugle, you'll know that the Army is saying goodbye to one of its fallen comrades. It's a very moving message, and it mustn't be just a lot of noise. It's got to be a structured set of sounds, and it's got to come across clearly. If I just hear a babble of sounds, what use is it?

I expect, like me, you've been in many an airport and you're waiting for your flight. You don't want to miss it, and there's a 'ding-dong' — "British Airways announce the departure of their flight to . . . at gate . . .". It's absolutely useless. The transmitter isn't clear and it's just a babble of sound, not a real language.

That's the first point Paul is making. If somebody gets up in church and just makes a lot of sounds that are not of their language, it doesn't stand a chance of conveying anything. Secondly, the receiver has got to be able to understand the language: it has to make sense.

(Dr Gooding here quotes John 3:16 in Greek.)

I've spoken very clearly, but what's the good if the people listening don't know Greek? Paul says,

There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, 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. (vv. 10–11)

If an ancient Greek had come to Belfast, and heard you talking in your beautiful accent, he would nonetheless have dubbed you *barbarians* because the Greek word *bárbaros* is an onomatopoeic word that they used to describe somebody who spoke to them in a foreign language that they didn't know. They perceived him to be saying, 'bar, bar, bar', so they said he was *bárbaros*, a barbarian.² To them, he seemed to be speaking just a lot of syllables.

If I don't understand the language that is being spoken, the person who speaks will appear to me to be *bárbaros*, unintelligible. For God's truth to come across in church, so that people are edified, comforted, exhorted, built up in their most holy faith, the transmitter will have to be using a very clear language, and the receiver will have to know the language so that he can understand what's being said.

The difference between 'interpret' and 'translate'

So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. (vv. 12–13)

² Barbarian, word derived from the Greek *bárbaros*, used among the early Greeks to describe all foreigners, including the Romans. The word is probably onomatopoeic in origin, the 'bar bar' sound representing the perception by Greeks of languages other than their own. (Britannica.com)

What a lovely prayer to take to God on our knees. 'Oh Lord, help me to be a somebody that builds up the church.' Here, I'd better stop and justify my translation of that particular Greek word, *interpret*. The Greek word is *hermeneuo*, from which we get the English word *hermeneutics*. Like many words in English and Greek, it has a possible double meaning. This Greek word *hermeneuo* is like our English word 'interpret' and can mean two slightly different things.

For instance, if you're reading the Bible in English, somebody might say to you, 'I hear what you say; it's English and I know what the words are saying, but I don't understand what they mean. Would you please interpret it to me?' And so you interpret it to them.

If you're sitting with your unconverted friends, and they say, 'We don't know what this means, "You must be born again"'. How can a person be born again? We know the English words, 'you must be born again', and what those words mean, but what does it really mean?' So, continuing to use English, you interpret it to them.

But suppose somebody said, 'You must be born again' in Greek, and your friends are English-speakers, and don't know Greek. Before you could interpret the meaning in the first sense, you'd have to interpret it another sense, wouldn't you? First of all, you'd have to *translate* the Greek into English.

In English, we talk about the person who translates a speaker as an *interpreter*. I've suffered the process many times in my career. I jabber away in English and somebody else interprets me, in the sense that they *translate* it. The people who have been listening will know what I've said in their own language. It's gone from English to Belgian, or whatever. They may have to go along to their church elders and say, 'What on earth did he mean?' The elders take the Belgian translation, and they now interpret it in the other sense.

If somebody speaks in a tongue, what has to happen? Well, it's a foreign language, and before you can interpret it in the sense of telling them the meaning, you'll have to translate it. And here we've got to be grown-up men and women. One of the disconcerting things that has been shown in these many years is the kind of thing that Professor D. A. Carson mentions in his book on these chapters, and a kindly and well-balanced book it is. He tells in it how he and a friend went to a meeting where tongues were much used, and interpretations given. And his friend, a little bit naughtily perhaps, got up in the meeting and spoke the first verses of the Gospel of John in New Testament Greek. When he sat down, it was followed by an interpretation that had nothing to do with John's Gospel whatsoever.

Other serious people have recorded somebody speaking in tongues, and then taken the recording to different folks who claim to have the gift of interpretation. One interpreter has given one message, and another a completely different message. What do you feel about that kind of thing?

Some folks will say, 'You ought, surely, to take it for granted that, if the Holy Spirit moves somebody to give an interpretation, it is the right interpretation. What are you doing, trying to check it in such an ungodly fashion?'

Well, wait a minute. You've recorded me tonight on to a tape recorder. Funnier things have happened. The recording will go I don't know where, and folks will sit down and listen to it. Would you want them to say, 'Gooding is a teacher, so you don't have to question what

he says; you just take what he says absolutely'? Of course you wouldn't. Not on the peril of your life may you assume that just because someone is a teacher, everything he says is true.

It is important to test and understand what is being said

Paul tells us at the end of this chapter, 'Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said' (v. 29). It is not unspiritual. The Holy Spirit will insist on it, in all graciousness and love, of course, but with a serious sense of responsibility, that you check what has been said. Even if a man is a prophet you must test what he says, says Paul. If that is true of the gift of prophecy, how much more must it be true of the gift of tongues and interpretation of tongues?

Why must I be sure of what the man actually said in the language that he used? Well, because of the first basic principle that Paul enunciated in chapter 12. How will you ultimately judge whether a gift is of God or not? You can only judge it by its doctrinal content, and to judge a gift by its doctrinal content you must know what the original words meant.

It seems to me that we tend to fall into a way of thinking that tongues or prophecies are somehow supernatural, whereas evangelists and teachers are not supernatural. That is false. Chapter 12 reminded us that, whatever the gift, it is the same Holy Spirit and one gift is not more supernatural than another.

Now Paul says: 'Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to [translate]' (v. 13). Why is that? 'For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful' (v. 14). Notice exactly what it says: '*my spirit prays.*' It doesn't say, 'if I pray in a tongue, *the Holy Spirit prays.*' Why is my mind unfruitful? Because I won't know what I've said myself unless it's translated, and, what is more, nobody else in the church will receive any fruit from it. Therefore, I must pray to be able to translate. Verse 15 goes on to say, 'So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.' Why is that?

'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?' (v. 16). That is, the man or woman who hasn't got the gift you've got.

You say, 'Well, here's a man in church, and he's spoken in tongues. I don't know what he's saying, but why can't I just sense in my spirit that it must be good and say Amen?'

'No, you mustn't,' says Paul.

Amen is not a frivolous word. Sometimes we don't say it enough, perhaps. We're all stoics in actuality. But sometimes people can say it too much. 'I used to beat my wife. Amen, praise the Lord.' That kind of thing is silly, isn't it? Saying Amen is a responsible thing to say. It means that you stand in absolute agreement with what has been said.

But how can you do that if you don't know what doctrine the man's been enunciating? You can't, can you? And how can the person who hasn't got that gift say the Amen at your giving of thanks, seeing he doesn't know what you're saying? 'For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up' (v. 17). We mustn't contradict Paul or the Holy Spirit, and say that it sinks into them by osmosis, whether they understand or not; the Holy Spirit says, 'If you don't understand, you are not edified.'

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. (vv. 18–19)

Think of the proportion. If Paul had to choose, he would rather say just five words in the language that people knew than ten thousand in a tongue, because those five words could edify them. Unless the people understood what they meant, the ten thousand words in a tongue wouldn't edify them one little bit.

Mature thinking

You may say, 'Gooding, you're getting very tiresome, and the time has almost gone. What do you think you've been doing for the last forty minutes? Why can't you be a bit more spiritual and dump all this reasoning, intellectualism, logic and arguing?'

I'm sure I wasn't out to trick you, but you can't have read the next verse. 'Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature' (v. 20). Unconverted people depend on their own fleshly wisdom instead of God's Holy Spirit. It is possible for believers to depend on their own knowledge or supposed wisdom instead of the Holy Spirit. That is carnal, but we mustn't go to the other extreme by abandoning reason and logic and giving way to emotion and spiritual urges. That is not spirituality.

The gracious Holy Spirit, who inspired this book, hasn't been unspiritual by arguing the case, has he? If we decide these arguments are tiresome, what we're saying is that the Holy Spirit has been very unspiritual. The Holy Spirit is inspiring this; it is the way he talks to us. He argues, using logic and analogy, and, insofar as any of us can, he wants us to grow up and be adults when it comes to intellect. That is not unspiritual.

To give up your moral judgment, your spiritual discernment, and just accept anything without checking it doctrinally because it comes to us as a spiritual gift, that's the very opposite of spirituality. So when it comes to tongues, we have to be grown-up.

What was the original purpose in tongues?

Paul gives us the purpose.

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.' Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. 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? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, 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. 21–25)

So we start with the basic principle. The purpose of tongues was as a sign to unbelievers, and the purpose of prophesying was for believers.

You say, 'If that's what Paul meant, he proceeds to contradict himself. Look what he says in verse 23: "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and

outsiders or unbelievers enter . . .”, isn’t that just the stuff to give them, if tongues are a sign to unbelievers? Instead of which Paul says, “will they not say that you are out of your minds?” There’s a big difficulty here. How does he first say it will be a sign for unbelievers, and then, when unbelievers come in and hear it, Paul says they will decide you’re crazy?’

As I understand it, the explanation is morally simple. Consider the first instance of tongues in holy Scripture. It’s Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost: ‘they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance’ (see v. 4). Presumably, they went out into the street and a crowd began to gather. Well, can you imagine it?

And they were amazed and astonished, saying, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.’ And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others mocking said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’ (vv. 7–13)

There they are, all one hundred and twenty, each with a separate language. What a babble that would be, and when the crowd came along, some said, ‘They’re drunk’. But as they began to shuffle around, somebody from Pamphylia said, ‘That man there is speaking in my language.’ And someone who came from Rome said, ‘That chap there is speaking classical Latin.’ Somebody else found another one speaking Syriac, and another the language of Phrygia. They could see that the people who were speaking were Galileans, who had never learned these exotic tongues. It was a self-evident miracle, and the speaking in tongues became a sign to the unbeliever. Why? Because the unbeliever could understand the language that was being spoken in the tongue.

If you had not been able to understand any of those languages, you would have gone off with the impression that they were drunk, or mad, or something. The reason why it was a sign to unbelievers depended on the unbeliever being able to understand it, and saying it was a miracle was a very powerful sign.

But imagine if you can that you are in Corinth with the church there, in the upper room, or wherever they meet. You’re all native Greek speakers. And here comes another Greek, an unconverted man who lives in the city. He’s heard about these odd Christian folks, and wonders what they get up to. One Sunday he decides to see what happens, so in the door he comes. He only knows Greek, he knows you are Greeks and all of you speak Greek. But, instead of hearing you speak Greek, he hears you speaking in a lot of tongues. He doesn’t understand a word you’re saying. What conclusion will he come to? He’ll say, ‘Well, now I know they’re absolutely mad.’

You’re speaking in tongues, but though he’s an unbeliever it’s no sign to him. He doesn’t see it as a miracle, for he can’t understand the tongue and it’s absolutely unintelligible to him. Why should anybody who knows Greek speak in another tongue in front of a Greek? He’ll conclude you’re mad.

But if he comes in and you prophesy, he can understand exactly the Greek you're using because he knows Greek, and it's a word to his heart from the Holy Spirit. He'll be convicted and say that God is really among you (v. 25).

'Do not be children in your thinking,' says Paul, '. . . be mature' (v. 20). The basic thing must be for you to help others, and to help them they must understand what you are saying.

You say, 'But tongues do have a use; Paul admitted it at the early part of the chapter. "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God"' (v. 2).

Yes, Paul is not denying it, but what he's talking about now is what we do in church. So he says, 'What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up' (v. 26). The golden rule is that everything done must be done to edify the church.

'If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God' (vv. 27-28). What he does at home in his private devotions, that's up to him. But in church, if there's no one to translate what he says, the Holy Spirit's command is, 'let him keep silent and speak to himself and to God.'

Similarly, with the prophets.

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. (vv. 29-33)

So two or three prophets speak one by one, and when they have sat down the others have to judge what they have said. And hence the emphasis I sought to give earlier. Thank God for every spiritual gift, but we are not just to take what is said unquestioningly. We must judge what is said, to see if it is of God and true to what Scripture reveals. And if I have to do that with a tongue, first of all I must be sure that I have a correct translation of what was originally said.

At the end of this chapter that deals with gifts, there are some very important verses about the ministry of my sisters. We don't have time tonight, but next week we shall attempt to deal with that very important topic. I thank you for your charity and your patience.

1 Corinthians 14 and Questions

Tonight, I have been asked to comment on the final verses of chapter 14, and then to respond to a whole sheaf of questions that have been handed in to me.

Continuation of chapter fourteen

So, first, to comment on the final verses of chapter 14 that deal with one thing that Christian women are asked not to do. One of these days, what a lovely and healthy thing it would be to be asked to talk on all those things that Christian women are asked to do, can do, and in fact do. It would take two or three sessions to remind ourselves how much we owe to the ministry of sisters, right from our very birth to our deaths. The church is indebted to their enriching ministry and enormously hard work, as indeed is our own Apsley assembly here.

I think of the state of affairs, as I know it, on some mission fields, and the situations in which sisters, such as our dear, good friend Ruth Hadley, have worked, and people like Pearl Winterburn, pioneering in Zambia all by herself. As one goes around, one hears the repeated cry, 'But where are the men?' and I feel like hanging my head in shame. I don't know where they've got to, do you? It is so often left to women to be translating holy Scripture and pioneering the gospel in remote areas. Rather than talk about what the sisters are asked not to do, I feel I want to talk to the men about what they ought to be doing.

Let's begin the first topic by reading the verses. Let me point out that the paragraph, as Paul originally wrote it, starts halfway through verse 33. You may have an English translation that reads something like this, 'For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints', as though those final words, 'as in all the churches of the saints', were the end of verse 33, the end of the topic Paul had been dealing with, and with verse 34 we turn to a different topic. We do turn to a different topic in verse 34, but actually the end of the previous topic comes with the word 'peace' in verse 33. Nowadays it is generally agreed that the better punctuation puts a full stop at the word 'peace', and the next paragraph begins with, 'As in all the churches of the saints . . . '.

So let us read the paragraph.

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order.

In verse 35 many translations say ‘husbands’, and maybe that is the best way to translate it into English. The Greek word can mean a husband or a man, a male. In my humble estimation, it would be better to understand it as, ‘let them ask their own menfolk at home.’

What is it that Christian women are asked not to do?

Our first thing, then, is to notice what it is that the women are asked not to do. It is mentioned twice: once in verse 34, ‘For they are not permitted to speak’, and again in verse 35, ‘For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.’ So that we might understand at least some of the whys and wherefores, let’s notice the basic distinction that controls this particular exhortation. It is a question of the difference between the church on the one hand, and the home and other places on the other; a distinction that is important in the New Testament, not only in this matter but in other matters as well.

The distinction between the church and the home

Let me try to demonstrate that to you within the compass of these particular chapters. Look back to chapter 11, for instance, where, for the first time in this particular context, we meet this distinction between the church and the home, or elsewhere.

When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God . . . if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgement. (vv. 20–22, 34)

Here we notice this distinction between church and home. Something that would be inappropriate in church is perfectly appropriate in the home, of course. The experts tell us that, in some of the early churches, the believers had developed the custom of having a fellowship meal along with, and as part of, the Lord’s Supper. They were doing it in church, and it had led to grievous abuse, not least the fact that the distinction between the Lord’s Supper and the fellowship meal got obliterated, and nobody knew what was happening.

Therefore, Paul lays it down now that this business of having a fellowship meal along with the Lord’s Supper should cease. If it’s a question of having a meal to satisfy hunger, let it be done at home, and if it’s a question of the Lord’s Supper, let that be done in church. He made a very clear distinction between the two, and from a practical point of view, as well as from a spiritual point of view, it was very important and necessary.

Look again at some earlier verses in chapter 14. What might be perfectly suitable and appropriate for Paul to do in private or elsewhere, is different when it comes to the church.

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. (vv. 18–19)

Still keeping to this matter of speaking in tongues, Paul says,

If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. (vv. 27–28)

Please notice that his silence in the church doesn't stop him from worshipping. Some good women have said that if they cannot pray audibly in church they can't worship. But that isn't quite true. Here a man is told to be silent in the church. He has the gift of tongues, but if there is no interpreter he is to 'keep silent in church'. But that doesn't mean he cannot worship. Paul says he can 'speak to himself and to God' (v. 28). It doesn't cut off the possibility of worshipping the Lord if, for some reason, you cannot speak audibly in church.

We now meet the distinction again—what is very good and appropriate at home is not appropriate in church.

the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their [own menfolk] at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (vv. 34–35)

You will see that I am old; I'll not say old-fashioned. When I was young, importance was attached to formal and public things, as distinct from informal. If I have read the present day thermometer right, our modern generations are not so keen on the formal side of life, and much prefer the informal. It could be, then, that some would be impatient with the distinction between the formal church and elsewhere. Nevertheless, allow me to suggest that it remains of immense importance. There is such a thing as the official public meetings of the church, as distinct from all other kinds of meetings that are not official public meetings of the church, whether at home or elsewhere. And that is very important, for all sorts of reasons.

The distinctiveness of a church

A church is a place where you are a member, but if necessary you can be excommunicated. The earlier chapters of this epistle have shown us the exceeding importance of this very grave function. If someone who claims to be a believer has so misbehaved as to drag the honour of Christ in the dust, and cause even the Gentiles shock and dismay at his behaviour, then the man is to be excommunicated. Why? Both for the Lord's sake, and for the sake of the testimony of the church. If the church, officially and publically, allows that kind of behaviour to go on, they might as well pack up preaching the gospel. For example, if you let someone who has been convicted in the courts of child abuse come into your assembly, and be a member of it, people are not going to send their children to your Sunday School, nor are they going to listen to your gospel. Whereas, if you have an informal group that has no inside or outside, like folks do in some places, and content yourselves with just that, you have no safeguard against scandal.

I remember being invited to such a group. In their zeal for the gospel, they had a man who professed conversion speaking informally in the drawing room. Then they thought it would be a good idea to hold the Lord's Supper, and so they did. Shortly after that the man was in prison for crime. What kind of a testimony is that?

So the formal public meetings of the church are very important, even if they meet in a house. Gaius is mentioned in Romans 16:23. He was a wealthy man with a big house, so the church met in his house, and that can often happen.

But suppose, for some reason, the assembly decided that it was going to give up this hall and meet in brother Tompkins' house. So he kindly opens his house to the assembly. What's the situation now? Well, that's important.

Let's take two different examples.

1. On certain evenings brother Tompkins invites some believers round to his house, and they have a Bible study. Why shouldn't he? It's his own house, he's invited the folks, and it's his meeting. I turn up at the door.

He says, 'Hello. It's nice to see you, but I'm busy this evening. I've got a meeting in my house.'

And I say, 'Yes, I know you have. They're all Apsley folks and I know them all, so I should like to come in.'

He might say, 'But I'm sorry, you're not invited.'

'I have a right to join you.'

'What do you mean? We're reading Scripture, this is my house and it is a private meeting. If I don't invite you, you're not free to come in.'

He's perfectly within his rights, isn't he?

2. But suppose brother Tompkins has opened his house for the church to meet in; that's a very different story. I turn up at the door, and say, 'I want to come in.' If he says, 'You're not coming in, this is my house and I don't like you,' I shall say, 'It's a meeting of the church, and it's not for you to decide who comes. That's for the elders of the church to decide.'

Disasters have happened in that kind of situation. A church has been meeting in somebody's building on the person's own premises, and then he suddenly decides that because it's on his premises he's going to control what the church does. That is disastrous.

If he says, 'This is my house, and I'm not going to have that doctrine taught here,' is it for him to decide, or the elders to decide? If it's a church meeting, it's for the elders to decide what is taught in that gathering.

Many times I've noticed it all down the years. There are little meetings in people's houses, and they teach all sorts of funny things. Because it's in a private house, then the man says, 'You can't control it.' Well, if it is a private meeting, that is so. But if it's a meeting of the church, that's a very different thing.

So it isn't a question of the building you meet in, or how many people are present. When the New Testament talks of *church*, it's talking of an official meeting of a church, whatever that meeting is for.

Anna, the prophetess

Paul's apostolic direction is that the women should not speak in the official meetings of the church, and he was doing what the Jews had done in contemporary Judaism. You will remember Anna, who is mentioned in Luke 2:36–38. She was recognized by her nation as a prophetess, a woman of tremendous presence and respect. She had been a widow for I don't know how many years. This God-fearing woman exercised her ministry in the temple. When Joseph and Mary brought in the child Jesus, first of all Simeon received the child and spoke about him. Anna came in at that very moment, and she spoke about him to those that stood around, who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. You will see that she fulfilled her ministry in the presence of men.

But notice where she was when she was exercising her gift. She was in one of the courts in the temple where there would have been numbers of people around, such as today it would be at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. If you have been there, you will know what you find. There's a man up against the Wailing Wall, bending at his prayers in that fashion as they do. Here's another group, holding forth in praise; others are showing what they've bought in the market; and another group is holding a *bar mitzvah* ceremony. All sorts of things are going on.

It would have been like that in the courts of the temple in our Lord's day. There would be a group like Mary and Joseph, coming up with a little turtle dove in a cage to give to the priest, and they're going to talk to the priest. Others are saying their prayers, and others are having a word with relatives who have just come up from the country, and so on. In one of the colonnades of the temple, Anna was frequently to be found exercising her ministry as a prophetess. What she didn't do in Judaism was to exercise her ministry as a prophetess in the formal ceremonies of the temple, nor in the meetings of the synagogue. There was a distinction between the formal meetings of the temple and the synagogue, and other less formal places. That was known to Paul from his youth up, and he now insists on a similar distinction in the Christian communities.

So, what is it that Christian women were not to do? You've seen the reason for the distinction, now what is it they were not to do? Well, honestly and before the Lord, as far as I read the verses, they say quite plainly that they were not to speak in church. Various other suggestions have been made. Let's consider two of them.

1. Directions are given in chapter 11 as to how a woman should behave when she is praying and prophesying, as also directions are given for how a man should behave when he is praying and prophesying. Because many people have thought that the praying and prophesying concerned is necessarily to be done in church, and only in church, they have then felt that there must be some contradiction between chapter 11 that talks about women praying and prophesying, and chapter 14 that says they should not speak in church, for how can you prophesy without speaking?

It seems to me that there is no contradiction. Women certainly prayed and prophesied, and on occasions before men, but not in church, any more than Anna did. The exercise of prayer and the gift of prophecy were not confined to the church.

As we've also seen in the case of the man with the gift of tongues, if there's no interpreter he doesn't exercise his gift in the church. He exercises it elsewhere, but not in the church.

2. Because some people have felt there is somehow a contradiction, they have suggested another meaning to the word 'speak' in verses 34–35. When I was a boy it used to be said that the word doesn't really mean *speak*, it means *chatter*. '... the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to chatter.' What a remark! If you ponder it for a moment, you may decide that such an interpretation is a gratuitous insult to the women.

'Oh yes,' they said, 'in these early assemblies, the women would be chatting all through the meeting. So Paul is saying that they're not to chatter.' I think that's an explanation thought up by the men. Who else would have offered such an insult to the women?

The last time I was in the Jewish synagogue in Belfast I was sitting among the men and the women were elsewhere, so I cannot tell you whether the women chattered or not. I can inform you that the men chatted all the way through. Now and again, they said, 'Amen' and things like that, to make out that they were following what was being said or read. But for the most part they were discussing their holidays, and their yachting, and their friends, and when George saw Michael over the way he got up and walked across and had a word with him. And thus it went on, all the while the Law was being read.

It isn't just women who chatter. If Paul had wanted to stop chattering, it wouldn't have been just the women he would have talked to, so that explanation won't do.

2. In more recent times, the most widespread view that I know of is rather complicated, but I owe it to you to tell you about it. It says that the key to understanding these verses at the end of chapter 14 is to read them in their immediate context, from verse 29 onwards.

'Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent' (v. 29–30). If a prophet was moved to give a prophecy, they didn't say, 'That's of the Holy Spirit, so it must be right.' No, the rest were to judge and examine what the prophet had said, to see whether it was right or not; whether it was doctrinally true or not. That could involve asking him what he meant because it didn't sound quite right, and you didn't quite understand it. The prophets were to prophesy and the others were to judge, presumably publicly, in the course of the meeting. So there would be conversation, as there is in our Bible Reading for instance.

So they say, 'That's what the verses mean. The women are allowed to speak in church, in order to pray and prophesy themselves, but when it comes to examining and judging the other prophets, they're not allowed to take part in that.'

Why not? I must put their answer as fairly as I can, and not make it sound ridiculous. Suppose a man was a prophet and he gave a prophecy, and when he sat down people started to judge. If the women were allowed to enter into this public judging, the man's wife might start questioning him and she might use the occasion to put him down a peg or two. That wouldn't do because, even if he's got it wrong, he mustn't be humiliated in public. So some would say that the married women must keep silent in church, because Paul is afraid that they might publicly put their husbands down a peg or two, so they should ask their husbands at home (v. 35).

I suppose there might be women who would take the occasion, but would it be such a common thing that Paul would think it necessary to legislate against them? And why only the

married women? Do you suppose Paul is saying that, because they are married, senior Christian women mustn't join in the judging, but a young, newly converted, single sister may? Surely that would be foolish. I must leave you to decide on that matter.

Then they say that the reason they're not allowed to question the prophets is because, in the course of questioning, they might stray into the dangerous area of teaching, and that isn't permitted according to 1 Timothy 2:12. They could ask a very subtle question, 'Did you mean that? Didn't you really mean this?' And before you know where you are, they're not examining the prophets, they're putting across their own views and teaching in the church. Therefore, to stop them teaching, they're not allowed to speak in this context. But wait a minute. If that were the true answer, if the woman herself is allowed to prophesy in church, and she is examined as to what she has said, wouldn't she be teaching?

Such explanations are seriously given by men and women who have thought about these things before the Lord, so I must not slight or misrepresent them. For my part, however, it seems to me that the explanations do not hold.

For what reason? It is possible for somebody to ask a question without any ulterior motive whatsoever; not wanting to teach, not wanting to put her husband down, or anything, but simply to ask, 'What does that really mean?' And if she does want to learn anything, let her ask her menfolk at home. Why? Because it is a shame for women to *teach* in the church? No. Because it is a shame for women to *speak* in the church (v. 35).

The reason that is given

This is the apostle's sense of decorum. I don't need to remind you that I didn't write it. 'It is shameful,' says verse 35. What does he mean by *shame*? What kind of category of thing is he talking about? The other place he uses the phrase is in 11:6. 'If it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven . . .' (KJV). For a woman, to be shorn or shaven would be a shameful thing. It's the same word: it's an *indecorous* thing for a woman to speak in church.

There I want to leave it. One of these days I might be given permission to speak about all the marvellous occasions where women are not only allowed to speak, they need to speak. Situations where mere men teachers in the church couldn't. I think of the tremendous task that is laid upon the senior women of a church, to train and teach the younger ones (see Titus 2:3-5). If ever we need a battalion of serious godly women to do that task, it is nowadays.

In first century churches, when people got converted out of raw paganism, they needed to be told how Christianity would apply to home life. To go no further, in a society where fornication was thought to be normal, nobody ever questioned it was wrong. As you'll see from the New Testament, they had to be taught Christian ideas and how they applied to the running of the home. Women were to love their husbands, and husbands and children were taught how they must behave. In our day and generation, we've gone back to pre-Christian paganism, and if I may say as a bachelor, it is my humble opinion that it is the women of any society who control its morality.

I was brought up in a society where men, godless though they were, wouldn't swear in front of a woman. Now the women themselves swear, just listen to Woman's Hour on BBC 4. It's much to their shame. When women say it's okay, men don't need any encouraging in that direction.

How does Christianity apply to these tremendous things in the family? What can a bachelor like me say in public about it? When you come across believers and assemblies and Christian Unions where, under pressure of modern circumstances, the Lord's people are tainted with the immoralities of the world, God give us women who will give themselves to the teaching and training that only they can do in the church, let alone all those other things.

Questions

Thank you for your questions. Three questioners have raised the same matter, so let that be given precedence.

Question 1

According to 1 Corinthians 12 the Holy Spirit administers the gifts. 1. How I can be receptive to the Holy Spirit doing this work of giving the gift? 2. How I can recognize the gift he gives me?

I'll take part 2 first. How can I recognize the gift God gives me? I've been asked this question many times—how do I know what gift I have? I should have thought the answer, in part, is:

1. We discover what our gift is in the spiritual realm, just like our hands and feet discover what their gifts are in the physical realm. How do we discover whether we have any gift for music, cookery, dressmaking, or for anything? We discover it as we grow.

Similarly in the Body of Christ. We're put into the Body of Christ at our new birth, and as we grow it seems to me that things will naturally happen and we shall perceive what kind of gift we have.

2. We need to get a very wide idea of what the gifts are. One of the gifts mentioned in the list is *helps* (1 Cor 12:28 KJV), and what vast possibilities there are for people who really want to do something. It isn't just the man who stands and preaches publicly who has a gift.

There is a vast field for helping others. We heard recently of the missionary need in Tanzania. There is much to be done and we could get working, gift or no gift. We could write to missionaries. We could become part of their teams, in the sense that we're home-based members of a team, and get to know about this particular group of missionaries and what their needs are, and set about working for them. If we wanted to make some extra cash for them we could find some time to do it, couldn't we? Deny ourselves some recreation, perhaps, and do extra work to make a little bit of money to support them. There are a thousand and one things we could do, with a little ingenuity.

So, to part 1: How can I be receptive to the Holy Spirit? Well, by encouraging other folks.

'And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?' declares the LORD. 'But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, "You shall not prophesy."' (Amos 2:11-12)

I suppose we should all prefer to have the Apostle Paul preaching at every meeting of the church, but you wouldn't develop many other preachers that way, would you? To be frank,

if you're going to develop preachers, you've got to be prepared to listen to the beginners. We must be aware of the gifts of other folk, and seek to encourage and develop them. As my elders know, they're always on the lookout for people who are showing gift, so as to encourage them to exploit it.

Question 2

Now we come across a very big question. It is mentioned a number of times, and I will do my best to be miraculously brief. It runs like this in one version:

Does the theory that some gifts are for now, and others, such as sign gifts, were for times past, hold any weight?

The Scripture quoted to illustrate what the question means is Hebrews 2:3–4.

how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

And the question, basing itself on that verse and similar verses, says, now,

Isn't it possible to argue that sign gifts were given in the days of the early church to validate the gospel, God bearing the early preachers witness by these gifts? But when the gospel was validated we no longer needed the signs, and therefore the signs have disappeared. Is there any weight to that idea?

My first answer is, of course there is. Three weeks ago I quoted Benjamin Warfield, that tremendous Biblical scholar from America. He held that view, and to this day so do a great many more of his particular persuasion. There is a sense in which they're biblically right, because one of the gifts mentioned in the New Testament has ceased forever: the gift of an apostle. Let me quote you the definitive Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 15:5–9 Paul is pointing out that our Lord Jesus appeared in resurrection first of all to Peter, who was the first of the apostles, of course. Then to the twelve, then to more than five hundred brothers at once. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all to Paul — 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me' (v. 8). Paul says that he is the last apostle; beyond him there were no other apostles, in the classical sense of that word.

In 1 Corinthians 9 he appeals to his qualification. The necessary qualification for an apostle in the classical sense is that he had seen the Lord. 'Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord' (vv. 1–2).

And in 2 Corinthians 12 he says that the apostles were marked out by the doing of certain signs. 'The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works' (v. 12).

If you read Acts very carefully, particularly the early chapters, you'll find that not all the believers went around doing miracles; it was the apostles who did the signs. Notice how

carefully it is said: 'Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles' (5:12).

God did special signs to validate the apostles. Why is that important? Well, we need to know who the apostles are because of the doctrines we're meant to believe. Who has the authority to lay down Christian doctrine? Listen to Paul, 'I, Paul, say to you' (Gal 5:2). What right has he to talk like that? If I stood out in front of you and said, 'I, David, say to you,' you'd say, 'It's about time you went home!' I don't have that authority, but Paul did because he was an apostle in the classical sense.

He was the last of them, and those apostles were validated by special signs. If everybody could go around doing signs, you wouldn't know who were apostles and who weren't, would you? In that sense, signs have ceased. But you will notice that tongues and prophecy were not the signs of apostles. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 that many spoke with tongues and prophesied. They weren't the signs of an apostle.

Some say that 1 Corinthians 13 was a slightly different thing. 'As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away' (vv. 8–10). 'The perfect' was the completion of the canon. Well, if that's what it means, tongues, prophecies and knowledge have ceased. But on the earlier occasion I gave you reasons for thinking why I do not believe that that is what Paul is saying. As far as I'm concerned it refers not to the canon, but to the coming of the Lord.

Question 3

Although tongues and prophecies are mentioned extensively in chapters 12–14, are they examples of how we should treat gifts in general? That is, we are to go for the greater gift, or is there some other reason for it?

I want to agree with the first reason given there, because they do not only give practical instructions about those gifts, they do teach us the basic principle, to go for the bigger gifts. That is, those that edify the church.

Question 4

Many Christians exercise faith at some time; help other Christians; teach somebody else; witness to an unbeliever—that is, evangelize; test the spirits; pray for healing, and so on. In these cases every Christian exercises many gifts, but is not given all these gifts by the Spirit of God. Does this imply that there is a two-tier system operation in this area?

Well, I wouldn't have put it like that myself, but I think I know what you mean. For instance, now and again I try to do the work of an evangelist, as Timothy was told to do. No one is more conscious than I am that I'm not an evangelist, and if I were preaching the gospel in Apsley and Billy Graham turned up, the elders would not be slow in saying, 'Now, David, you are a marvellous preacher, but please sit down tonight, and let a real evangelist take over.'

We all do our bit to evangelize, without being evangelists. And if you'd like to call that a two-tier system, I have no objection to it. What is more, sometimes what our gifts are depend on what locality we are in. A dear brother in Tanzania who's been converted for only a year and a half, may be called upon in his own community to be teacher, pastor, evangelist, and everything else under the sun, and he'll do it effectively. Whereas, if he came to Belfast tomorrow, he would scarcely be an elder, nor would he lead an evangelistic campaign in the middle of London. It partly depends on where you are in the body.

Question 5

When a man speaks in tongues, do you believe that he speaks one of the thousands of languages spoken on our planet, or could he be speaking with the tongues of angels? It seems to me that Paul allows for the fact that a man could be speaking with the tongues of angels.

My only comment on that would be, if a man speaks in the tongues of angels, it's got to be a proper language. Sometimes people say, 'You can't ask for all these languages that are spoken in tongues to be translated, because some of them could be the language of angels.' If I don't know Russian I can't understand it either, but it's a real language. It isn't just so much noise. If a person were to speak in the tongues of angels, wouldn't that be a real language too, and not just so much noise?

To think that Michael the archangel says 'Bah, bah' and makes a lot of noise that isn't a language would be very irreverent, wouldn't it? Angels speak languages no less sophisticated than ours. Be assured that they do; they have had a long time to do it. If it's a general language and God the Holy Spirit gives the translation, he could translate angel language just as much as human language. This is no ground for people to say that you can't demand a translation of it. It's very important that you do.

Question 6

I have often wanted to quote John 3:16 in French and listen to the translation. Would I be tempting God—putting God to the test in a sinful exercise? Or would I be pleasing the Lord by testing the spirits?

My answer is that you would be pleasing the Lord by testing the spirits. 'Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1). That is a very important principle.

It seems to me that there is a very prevalent unspoken idea that, somehow, when people speak in tongues it is evidently a direct miracle of the Holy Spirit and you must not question it. That is not so, my brothers and sisters. It is an absolutely false diagnosis of the situation. Speaking in tongues is just like any other gift.

You wouldn't say of a teacher, 'He is led by the Holy Spirit, and we mustn't question what he says, otherwise we should be sinning against the Holy Spirit.' But you *must* question what a teacher says. Just because a man has the gift of a teacher, it doesn't mean that every time he teaches it's the Holy Spirit speaking. A teacher can be wrong; he can be carnal. You *must* test what he says. And because we are frail human beings, even when the Lord uses us, it doesn't

mean that everything is one hundred percent correct. Ninety-five percent could be correct, but there could be something that is incorrect.

Says Paul, 'For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays' (1 Cor 14:14). It's not necessarily that the Holy Spirit prays. When you test a teacher, or somebody speaking in tongues, you are not questioning the Holy Spirit; you're questioning whether that person is really saying what the Holy Spirit meant to say, and if he is speaking by the Holy Spirit or not. You wouldn't be insulting the Holy Spirit if you questioned what I say tonight; and to suppose that, just because somebody speaks in a tongue, it is the Holy Spirit, is an exceedingly dangerous thing. We must 'test the spirits'.

First Corinthians has made the point that we must make sure whether what is being said is of God, or not. Whether it is true, or not. That means that we must understand the translation, and be sure that it is a translation. Not to do so opens one up to all kinds of error.

If somebody gets up in a church and speaks in tongues, and there are five others speaking in tongues at the same time, you may know that it isn't of the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit has forbidden it. If somebody speaks in a tongue constantly, and there's no interpreter, that's not of the Holy Spirit either. It contradicts holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit himself says, 'in your thinking be mature' (see 1 Cor 14:20).

Question 7

Should we say that the whole thing of tongues is ridiculous?

No, of course not, unless you're prepared to call Paul ridiculous. He spoke in tongues more than anybody.

Question 8

Was it because the church became unspiritual that gifts like tongues and healings dropped out?

No, that isn't true either. One reason they dropped out was because the Lord's people listened to the Holy Spirit saying, 'Don't seek tongues, seek prophecy,' and they obeyed the Holy Spirit. That's why they dropped out. Instead of encouraging vast multitudes of people to speak in tongues, we should encourage them to do what the Holy Spirit tells us to do: not to seek tongues but prophecy.

Let me finally say that we all do need to be more aware of the Holy Spirit. Excuse an old man reminiscing, but when I first came to Ireland there were great conferences that were left open because the belief was that the Holy Spirit was the Lord President of the meeting, and he would guide. Then I found the local feeling was that these occasions were being abused by people who rushed to speak or pray, and were evidently not guided by the Holy Spirit. So that type of meeting fell out of favour, and was thought to be 'old Brethren teaching', to use a curious phrase.

That was a pity, because, when it started, it was a genuine attempt to let the Holy Spirit be the Lord President. Now we have a generation that is trying to rediscover that, saying we

should be conscious of the presidency of the Holy Spirit. Of course we should. Shame on us, if we just organize meetings and are not conscious of the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit.

So let nothing I say be construed as discouraging people from waiting on God and knowing more about the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their ministry for the Lord. No, we need to know more about that, and at the same time we do need to hear the Holy Spirit's own judgment and to go for those gifts that edify the church.

Shall we pray.

Oh Lord, we have listened to thy word through the imperfect lips of thy servant. There are many things, Lord, that we need to think about. Give us grace in the coming days to do as thy Holy Spirit has exhorted us to do; in love and gratitude to love thee with all our minds, and rigorously investigate if this is indeed the true interpretation of thy word. Give us all ever-increasingly in our hearts to be ready to obey what thy word actually says.

Lord, we pray that, above all things, thou will fulfil to us thy gracious promise. In promising thy Holy Spirit, thou didst say, 'whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.'³ Help us so to know him as a reality in our life and work, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

³ John 14:17.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.