

Decent and in Order

1 Corinthians 14:1-40

Teacher's Guide

Introduction: When the Volume Gets in the Way

Have you ever watched a live news panel go completely off the rails? The host asks a question, one guest starts to answer, another interrupts, then someone else raises their voice to be heard. Suddenly, all of them are talking at the same time. You hear phrases, catch a few arguments, but the message gets lost in the noise. Eventually, the host throws their hands up and says, “One at a time, please!”

It's not that anyone lacked passion or intelligence. But when everyone's trying to speak at once, no one really hears anything. Volume replaces clarity. And the conversation collapses under the weight of its own chaos.

That's exactly what was happening in Corinth.

Spiritual gifts—especially tongues and prophecy—had become a stage for self-expression rather than a platform for edification. People were speaking over one another, chasing spiritual moments, and calling it worship. The result wasn't depth—it was disorder. The church was noisy, emotional, and spiritually shallow.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul doesn't dismiss the gifts—but he does redirect them. He reminds the church that the goal of every gathering isn't individual excitement—it's corporate strengthening. If love is the motive (as we saw in chapter 13), then *building others up* is the mission.

Worship isn't about who gets the spotlight—it's about whether God's people are built up. Paul isn't trying to tame the Spirit. He's trying to make room for Him by calling the church to order, clarity, and love. When gifts are used rightly, the church is strengthened, unbelievers are convicted, and God is glorified—not through noise, but through truth.

Because the most spiritual person in the room isn't the one who draws attention—but the one who helps others draw near to Christ.

Starter Question:

Why do you think worship—especially when it involves strong emotions or spiritual gifts—can sometimes shift from building up others to spotlighting personal expression?

Possible Answers:

- Our culture often equates emotion with authenticity, so the louder or more dramatic it feels, the more “real” it seems.
- We can forget that worship isn’t just personal—it’s also meant to edify the body.
- It’s easy to chase spiritual moments that feel powerful to us, even if they don’t actually help anyone else grow in faith.

I. Speak to Strengthen Others

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. 2 For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. 3 On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. 5 Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (1 Corinthians 14:1–5, ESV)

What’s Going On Here?

Love Leads the Way

Paul hasn’t changed the subject from 1 Corinthians 13—he’s applying it. Love is not a standalone sermon; it’s the operating system for how spiritual gifts should function in the church. Before we pursue any gifting, we’re told to *pursue love*. That word “pursue” in Greek (διώκω) is strong—it means to chase after, to run hard after something. This isn’t passive affection. It’s active, intentional love aimed at others’ good.

Then Paul says, “*Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts,*” especially prophecy. This balance is key. The Corinthian church was rich in spiritual experiences, but poor in spiritual maturity. They desired gifts, but often forgot why the Spirit gives them—to build up the church. Gifts are not trophies. They’re tools. And love is the toolbelt that holds them all in place.

Tongues vs. Prophecy: What's the Difference and Why Does It Matter?

In Corinth, speaking in tongues had become the spotlight gift. It was dramatic. It felt supernatural. It captured attention. But Paul gently redirects their attention to what's more helpful: prophecy.

- **Tongues**, in this context, refers to speaking in a Spirit-given language that the speaker hasn't learned. It's a valid gift—but when used without interpretation, it only benefits the speaker (*"he utters mysteries in the Spirit"* v. 2).
- **Prophecy**, on the other hand, is Spirit-empowered speech given to strengthen, encourage, and comfort others. It might include foretelling future events, but more often, it involves proclaiming God's truth in a timely and convicting way.

The contrast is simple but crucial: tongues without interpretation are unintelligible to others. Prophecy is immediately understandable. One builds up *the individual*. The other builds up *the church*. Paul's not saying tongues are bad—but if the goal is edification, prophecy does more good in the public gathering.

The Real Goal: Build Up the Church

Three times in these five verses, Paul uses the phrase *"build up."* That's the focus. That's the measure of a spiritual gift's usefulness in corporate worship. Not how impressive it looks. Not how emotional it feels. But how clearly it strengthens the body of Christ.

Paul even says, *"I want you all to speak in tongues,"* showing he's not dismissive of the gift. But he immediately adds, *"even more to prophesy."* The point isn't which gift is more spiritual—it's which one is more helpful in context.

In today's terms, Paul might say: Don't confuse emotional impact with spiritual effectiveness. Don't elevate personal experiences above corporate encouragement. And don't assume that just because something feels powerful, it's building anyone up.

Bottom Line: Clarity is an Act of Love

In a worship setting, intelligibility matters. Speaking words that others can understand isn't just good communication—it's an expression of love. The goal is not for people to walk away impressed by your gift, but for them to walk away strengthened in their faith.

Paul's pastoral wisdom here still applies: desire the gifts, but don't miss the point. Speak to strengthen others. Let love set the direction, and let edification set the standard.

Discussion Question:

Why does Paul place such a high value on clarity in corporate worship?

Possible Answers:

- People can't grow from what they don't understand.
- God's Word is meant to be proclaimed and applied—not obscured.
- Confusion creates distance from God, not intimacy with Him.

II. Make Worship Understandable

6 Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? **7** If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? **8** And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? **9** So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. **10** There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, **11** but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. **12** So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

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

20 Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. **21** In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the

Lord.” 22 Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. 23 If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (1 Corinthians 14:6–25, ESV)

What’s Going On Here?

Clarity Builds the Church (Verses 6–11)

Worship that no one understands doesn’t edify—it isolates. That’s the point behind the illustrations of unclear music, confusing trumpet calls, and foreign speech. No matter how sincere the delivery, unintelligible words create spiritual distance instead of connection. In the gathered church, clarity isn’t optional; it’s a vital expression of love. When God’s truth is spoken in ways people can grasp, the church is built up and God is rightly honored.

Private vs. Public Use of Gifts (Verses 12–19)

Some spiritual gifts serve best in the quiet of personal devotion. Speaking in tongues, for instance, may enrich private prayer—but without interpretation, it offers no benefit to others. That’s why Paul says he’d rather speak five clear words to instruct than ten thousand in a tongue no one understands. In public worship, intelligibility trumps intensity. The aim is not personal experience but corporate strengthening.

The Other Person Matters (Verses 16–17)

You might be offering heartfelt praise, but if no one can understand you, they can’t say “Amen”—they can’t be encouraged or lifted by your worship. That disconnect reveals the deeper issue: when our focus turns inward, we lose sight of the body. Spirit-filled worship never forgets the person next to us. It seeks not only to express love for God but to build up the people of God with words they can receive and rejoice in.

Worship That Reaches the Outsider (Verses 20–25)

Imagine someone exploring faith stepping into a service. If they're greeted by a wall of confusing speech, they may leave feeling alienated. But if they hear clear, convicting truth that reveals their heart and points to God's presence, they're drawn in. Spirit-led clarity can move someone from skepticism to surrender. That's the power of edifying worship—it doesn't just bless believers; it helps unbelievers see that God is among us.

Grow Up in Your Thinking (Verse 20 and Isaiah quote in verse 21)

Immaturity chases flash and spectacle. Maturity pursues what helps. The Corinthians needed to grow up in how they thought about worship—not to lose passion, but to gain perspective. Paul calls them to be innocent in wrongdoing but wise in discernment. Real spirituality isn't measured by dramatic moments—it's revealed in whether others are strengthened by what we say and do.

Discussion Question:

How can our church services reflect both spiritual depth and clarity?

Possible Answers:

- Keep God's Word central and clearly explained.
- Use music and prayer that draw attention to Christ, not the performance.
- Make space for testimony and encouragement that edifies others.

III. Bring Order to the Gathering

26 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. **27** If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. **28** But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. **29** Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. **30** If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. **31** For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, **32** and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. **33** For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. (1 Corinthians 14:26–33a, ESV)

What's Going On Here?

Participation with Purpose

Paul is giving the Corinthians a picture of a vibrant, Spirit-filled worship gathering—not one dominated by a single personality or platform, but one where many believers contribute. Someone brings a hymn, another a teaching, another a revelation or a word in tongues. It's an active, participatory church. But Paul adds a vital qualifier: *“Let all things be done for building up.”* That's the governing principle. That's the spiritual litmus test for everything that happens during worship.

Paul isn't trying to stifle participation. He's trying to protect edification.

This verse doesn't discourage variety—it defines its purpose. Every contribution, no matter how sincere or spiritual, must serve the whole body. The church gathering isn't a spiritual open mic. It's not about expression for expression's sake. It's about making sure people leave stronger in the faith than when they came in.

Order Isn't Restriction—It's a Reflection of God's Character

To help the Corinthians put this into practice, Paul gives two very specific guidelines:

1. **If someone speaks in tongues**, there must be interpretation. And even then, only two—or at most three—should speak, one at a time. If there's no interpreter, the speaker should remain silent and speak privately to God (v. 28). That's not censorship. That's wisdom. Unintelligible speech may feel spiritual, but it doesn't build up unless it's made clear.
2. **If someone prophesies**, the others should listen and “weigh” what is said (v. 29). That means testing it against Scripture, discerning the Spirit's voice, and ensuring that what's shared is consistent with God's truth. And again—only two or three, and in turn. Even those receiving fresh revelation are called to yield the floor when another is speaking.

Paul's concern is not about controlling people—it's about reflecting the nature of the God they're worshiping. *“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”* That statement isn't just a theological point. It's a practical foundation for how worship should feel: ordered, reverent, focused, and peaceful—not chaotic, competitive, or confusing.

Prophecy is Not a Free Pass

Another key phrase in this section often gets overlooked: *“the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets”* (v. 32). In other words, being “led by the Spirit” is never an excuse for being out of control. True spiritual inspiration never overrides self-control or respect for the gathered body. Paul is teaching that Spirit-filled people can—and must—choose to speak in a way that serves others, not themselves.

So if someone says, “I just had to speak—I couldn’t help myself,” Paul’s response would be: That’s not how the Spirit works. The Holy Spirit doesn’t create chaos. He produces fruit—and one of those is self-control.

When Everyone Plays Their Part the Right Way, the Church Grows

Paul’s vision isn’t sterile, silent church services. It’s participatory, Spirit-led worship with structure and intention. He’s not suppressing gifts—he’s stewarding them. And when we embrace this principle, the result is beautiful: people are strengthened, truth is heard, chaos is replaced by peace, and God is honored not just in the content of our worship—but in the way it’s offered.

Discussion Question:

What are some practical ways churches today can pursue both freedom and order in worship?

Possible Answers:

- Set healthy boundaries for what happens during the service.
- Equip leaders and members to use their gifts responsibly.
- Keep the focus on edification, not emotionalism.

IV. Submit to God’s Design

As in all the churches of the saints, 34 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. 35 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.

36 Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? 37 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. 38 If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. 39 So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:33b–40, ESV)

What's Going On Here?

A Controversial but Crucial Command

Paul's instruction that "*the women should keep silent in the churches*" (v. 34) has often been misunderstood, but in the context of the whole letter—and especially chapter 11 where women are clearly praying and prophesying publicly—it's clear that Paul is not prohibiting all speaking by women in the church. Instead, he's addressing a specific kind of speech: **authoritative evaluation of prophecy**, which involves doctrinal judgment and spiritual oversight (vv. 29–32).

According to a complementarian view, which is affirmed in the **Baptist Faith and Message (2000)**, **men and women are equal in worth and dignity before God, but are given distinct and complementary roles** in the home and in the church. In the church, the role of **pastoral leadership and authoritative teaching** is reserved for qualified men (see also 1 Tim. 2:11–14, 1 Tim. 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9). Paul's words in this passage uphold that order—not to demean women, but to ensure that worship reflects the good design of God.

This is about submission to God's structure, not about spiritual value or giftedness. Women are clearly gifted by the Spirit and are called to pray, prophesy, and serve meaningfully in the church. But the role of interpreting and weighing prophecy in the gathered body—as a function of spiritual authority—is to be exercised by men who meet the biblical qualifications for leadership.

Submission Is a Calling for All

This command fits within the broader New Testament call for **all believers to live under God's authority** and to honor the roles He has assigned. Verse 35 encourages women to be eager learners and active disciples, but to do so in a way that honors God's structure both in the church and in the home. Paul expects men to lead, teach, and spiritually nurture their families and congregations with humility and faithfulness. Women are called

to support that leadership, not because they are less capable, but because God's design is both wise and good.

Correcting Spiritual Pride

Paul challenges anyone who thinks spiritual experience gives them the right to ignore God's design: *"Did the word of God originate with you?"* (v. 36). Some in Corinth were placing their personal preferences above biblical order. But Paul is clear—**true spirituality submits to Scripture**. Anyone who refuses to recognize the Lord's commands disqualifies themselves from being recognized as a true spiritual authority (v. 38).

Worship with Peace and Purpose

Paul finishes with balance: *"Earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order."* (vv. 39–40). The gifts of the Spirit are not to be shut down—but they are to be expressed within the boundaries of God's design. That includes honoring gender roles in leadership, maintaining clarity in worship, and pursuing peace in the body.

When worship follows God's order, it produces unity, spiritual growth, and reverence. The Spirit of God does not cause confusion—He produces peace. And peace flourishes when we joyfully submit to His design.

Discussion Question:

How do we balance reverence for God's design with grace in navigating difficult texts?

Possible Answers:

- By letting Scripture interpret Scripture.
- By submitting to God's authority, even when it confronts our preferences.
- By honoring different roles in the church without diminishing anyone's worth.

Living Out God's Grace

Pursue Gifts that Build Others Up (v.12)

It's good to desire spiritual gifts—but ask, “Who does this help?” This week, look for ways to speak words of encouragement, share truth, and build up someone else's faith. Ask God for gifts not to elevate yourself, but to bless the body.

 “So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.” (v. 12)

Guard Clarity in Worship (v.9)

Whether you're leading, teaching, singing, or serving, aim for clarity. Let everything point to Christ. Our services shouldn't be confusing or chaotic—they should invite people into the beauty of God's truth and grace.

 “If with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said?” (v. 9)

Honor Order as Worship (v.40)

God is not the author of confusion, but of peace. That truth isn't just about noise level—it's about submission to His authority. This week, reflect on areas in your life where God may be calling you to more order, more reverence, and more surrender.

 “All things should be done decently and in order.” (v. 40)

Listen Before You Speak

Whether in a worship service or a conversation, practice spiritual humility. Make space to listen for God's voice through others. Encourage those who speak wisely. And remember—some of the most Spirit-filled moments happen when we stay quiet long enough to hear.

Group Discussion Questions

- Why do you think Paul puts so much emphasis on clarity in worship?

- In what ways have you seen God use someone's spiritual gift to build up others?
- How can we encourage both freedom and order in our church gatherings?
- What spiritual gift might God be developing in you—and how could you use it for the church's good?
- How do we make room for the Holy Spirit to move without becoming chaotic or confusing?

Conclusion: Order That Reflects the Spirit

Worship that honors God doesn't chase chaos. It follows the Spirit's lead. And the Spirit never leads into confusion—He leads into peace.

Spiritual gifts aren't meant to spotlight the gifted. They're meant to strengthen the church. The goal isn't to impress anyone—it's to edify everyone, in a way that draws in the outsider, equips the believer, and glorifies Christ.

When God's people speak with clarity, yield in humility, and serve in step with the Spirit, the result isn't disorder. It's transformation.

Closing Prayer

Father,

Thank You for the gifts of Your Spirit and the grace that brings us together as Your people. Forgive us for the times we've made worship about ourselves—about emotion, attention, or control.

Help us pursue gifts that build up the church, speak truth with clarity, and serve with humility. Make our gatherings places of peace, not pride. Order, not chaos. Worship, not performance.

May our words be guided by Your wisdom. May our hearts be tuned to Your Spirit. And may our lives reflect the beauty of Christ, our risen King.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.