

For most of chapter 14 Paul is evaluating the gift of tongues and its use, basically contrasting it with the gift of prophecy. As mentioned and supported in earlier sermons, the gift of tongues most likely referred to speech in unknown but intelligible languages. Here Paul makes use of two related standards by which he evaluates tongues. These standards contain principles for a broader application.

I. **The first standard: edification** (14:2-6). “Edify” translates a word which means literally “build”. Figuratively, it can also mean “strengthen”.

1. *Speaking in tongues fails to edify.* They cannot be understood and hence cannot build up.
 - a. Tongues cannot edify because only God understands. It is possible that tongues speech is directed primarily to God, if we consider the little which we now about the content. (It is praise and thanksgiving in 1 Cor 14:16-17 and “the mighty deeds of God” in Acts 2:11.)
 - b. The content of tongues speech is by nature generally hidden, hence excluding edification. The tongues speaker utters “mysteries” (14:2), which frequently in the NT refers to truth hidden in God, which He must reveal. Unless God reveals what is said in tongues speech, the content remains unknown.
 - c. How does the tongues speaker edify himself (v 4)? It cannot be through the speaker’s understanding of the tongues speech, since he does not (*cf.* vv 13, 14). A simple explanation fits both the context and the meaning of the word. The one who speaks in tongues publically without interpretation is building himself up in front of others. It is not meant positively, since gifts are given for the benefit of others.
2. *Prophecy does edify.*
 - a. Unlike tongues, prophecy was directed to people to hear and understand for strengthening (= edifying), encouragement and comfort.
 - b. According to verse 6 prophecy belongs to a greater group of ministries having the Word of God in common and which edify or build up the church spiritually.
 - c. Prophecy, as representative of word-related ministries, points to the Bible as our source for edification. *Cf.* Ephesians 4:7-16 – false teaching tosses believers about but speaking the truth in love brings about spiritual growth or maturity.

It is important for every church and for every believer to regularly receive correct and thorough Biblical teaching. Nothing can replace the Word for edification.

II. **The second standard: intelligibility** (14:7-19) When something is not intelligible, it cannot edify. It is then less important than that which can edify.

1. Two examples that illustrate the importance of sounds being intelligible (7-11).
 - a. Musical instruments: the notes must be clearly played, so that the tune will not be recognized. The battle horn must give clear signals so that the soldiers will know what to do. It needs to be intelligible to have meaning. Just like a musical instrument, unless the words of our mouth have meaning, we are just blowing air.
 - b. The sounds of human speech (vv 10-11): “Languages” (v 10) is the same word as “sounds” (v 7), “call” (v 8), and “what someone is saying” (v 11) and is probably better translated the “human sounds which make up language.” There are all types of human sounds that make of languages. But none of these sounds are without meaning. If I, however, do not understand the meaning, if it is not intelligible to me, then I am no different than one who doesn’t speak the common language. Therefore, the sounds which one uses must have meaning and the meaning must be known, in order for communication to be possible. At Corinth what might have been expressed by the tongues speech meant nothing to those who heard. It could not edify.
2. The Corinthians were to seek and to try to excel in those gifts that edify.
 - a. Interpretation (v 13): “Let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.” (NASB) Prayer in tongues operates in a realm that does not communicate with the mind and hence cannot edify. Paul preferred to always sing or pray so that he understood, which might mean that he would rather only pray or sing in tongues when God gives him the gift of interpretation (v 13). The tongues speech of the Corinthians might truly have been praise to God, but if others do not understand, it did not edify.
 - b. Teaching (vv 18-19): Paul could speak in tongues but compared to teaching, he rated tongues at 5 to 10,000. Even five words in teaching is better than 10,000 words in tongues because the latter cannot build up.

Paul will later conclude (v 28), that if there is not interpretation, there should be no public use of tongues. This would naturally have application to anyone who believes that tongues are still for today. Whether it be praying or singing or whatever activity is involved with tongues, it had no place outside in public, if there was no interpretation.

There is a greater principle beyond the question concerning tongues. Paul sets a priority on edification and requires intelligibility to accomplish that. Paul himself strove for “intelligibility” and avoid eloquence and philosophical reasoning. He spoke Biblical truth in simple fashion so that people could be built up spiritually.

We, too, must speak God’s Word. It is profitable and is that which equips for every good work. If we are not communicating God’s Word, we really do not have very much profitable to say. We must also do it in an intelligible fashion. Our language should be understandable and our actions verbally explained. We can trust God to use His Word to communicate to the hearts of people. We need to know the truth and communicate it clearly.