

Paul's Directives in 1 Corinthians 14

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1 Corinthians 14 addresses a particular church—the church in Corinth—about their exercise of spiritual gifts. Paul's instructions to his audience pertain specifically to the problems present in Corinth, and thus do not constitute a systematic body of teaching about spiritual gifts in general, or speaking in tongues in particular.

So what can a modern Christian, who may be far removed from the Corinthian situation, take away from Paul's instructions? One way to get at the core of what Paul was teaching is to focus on the imperative verb forms that Paul used in the chapter. According to the NET Bible, "The imperative mood corresponds to the English imperative, and expresses a command to the hearer to perform a certain action by the order and authority of the one commanding. Thus, Jesus' phrase, 'Repent ye, and believe the gospel' (Mk.1:15) is not at all an 'invitation,' but an absolute command requiring full obedience on the part of all hearers."

Imperative verb forms appear 21 times in 1 Corinthians 14; those occurrences are displayed in bold type in the table below. Phrases that express what Paul was commanding are underlined. Analysis of these commands appears after the table.

1 Corinthians 14 (King James Version)	1 Corinthians 14 (New American Standard Bible)
¹ <u>Follow after</u> charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy.	¹ <u>Pursue</u> love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.
¹² Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.	¹² So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.
¹³ Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret.	¹³ Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.
²⁰ Brethren, be not children in understanding : howbeit in malice be ye children , but in understanding be men .	²⁰ Brethren, do not be children in your thinking ; yet in evil be infants , but in your thinking be mature .
²⁶ How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. <u>Let all things</u> be done unto edifying.	²⁶ What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation <u>Let all things</u> be done for edification.
²⁷ If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and <u>let one</u> interpret .	²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and <u>one must</u> interpret ;
²⁸ But if there be no interpreter, <u>let him</u> keep silence in the church; and <u>let him</u> speak to himself, and to God.	²⁸ but if there is no interpreter, <u>he must</u> keep silent in the church; and <u>let him</u> speak to himself and to God.
²⁹ <u>Let the prophets</u> speak two or three, and <u>let the other</u> judge .	²⁹ <u>Let two or three prophets</u> speak , and <u>let the others</u> pass judgment .
³⁰ If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, <u>let the first</u> hold his peace .	³⁰ But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, <u>the first one must</u> keep silent .
³⁴ <u>Let your women</u> keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.	³⁴ The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.
³⁵ And if they will learn any thing, <u>let them</u> ask their husbands at home : for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.	³⁵ If they desire to learn anything, <u>let them</u> ask their own husbands at home ; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

³⁷ If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, <u>let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.</u>	³⁷ If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, <u>let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.</u>
³⁸ But if any man be ignorant, <u>let him be ignorant.</u>	³⁸ But if anyone does not recognize this, <u>he is not recognized.</u>
³⁹ Wherefore, brethren, <u>covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.</u>	³⁹ Therefore, my brethren, <u>desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.</u>
⁴⁰ <u>Let all things be done decently and in order.</u>	⁴⁰ But all things must <u>be done properly and in an orderly manner.</u>

We do not understand fully the situation that led Paul to write to the Corinthian believers about the use of spiritual gifts. Nevertheless, as we examine the imperatives in 1 Corinthians 14, we see clearly that we should observe the following principles as we use spiritual gifts in public worship:

1. **Always exercise the gifts in love.** Love is the theme of chapter 13, and it recurs at the beginning of this chapter (1).
2. **Seek (the best) spiritual gifts.** While speaking in tongues was not to be barred from public worship (39), it was not the most valuable gift. Rather, prophecy seems to have held that place (39). Furthermore, the gift of tongues was not sufficient by itself, but needed to be accompanied by interpretation (13).
3. **Use the spiritual gifts for the welfare of others.** At least in the context of public worship, the gifts were to be used for the edification of the church rather than for personal gain (12, 26).
4. **Strive for order and clear communication.** The gift of tongues was to be accompanied by interpretation. If an interpreter was not available, there could be no communication or edification, and thus the gift of tongues was to be suppressed (13, 27, 28). Silence was as necessary to fruitful worship as was intelligible speech. Members with speaking gifts such as tongues and prophecy were to listen to one another in turn, not speak at the same time (27-30). A limited number of members were to address the congregation at any given meeting (27, 29). Women were enjoined to refrain from speaking and to ask questions at home (34). In summary, all things were to "be done decently and in order" (40).