

The Truth About Tongues: Part 1

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Introduction

Dealing with the subject of I Corinthians 14 and the gift of tongues is a theological landmine. One false move and everything can blow up in your face! No biblical subject has caused more consternation, fueled more debates, ignited more arguments, or divided more churches perhaps, than the subject properly termed “glossolalia” in the 20th-21st centuries. The difficulty is immediately signaled when one realizes this is the only spiritual gift where an entire chapter of the New Testament is devoted to its discussion.

D.A. Carson notes when we consider this gift, there are three distinct issues in play: (1) Is ecstasy involved?; (2) Does the utterance have understandable content?; (3) Is the utterance a known human language? (Carson, *Showing*, 78).

Contention arises immediately in the very meaning of the word “tongues.” Again, Carson puts the matter succinctly, “Were the tongues at Corinth “real languages” or something else? Is the phenomenon in I Corinthians 14 an example of *xenoglossia* (that is, speaking in unlearned human languages) or glossolalia (that is, speaking in verbal patterns that cannot be identical with any human language?)” (Carson, *Showing*, 79).

One thing to keep in mind when attempting to interpret this chapter is Paul's concluding words in verses 39 and 40. "So then, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything is to be done decently and in order." So, here is our starting point. We do not believe that the gift of tongues has ceased, nor do we believe we should forbid someone to speak in tongues. We should not forbid the exercise of any spiritual gift as long as it is done biblically. Now, we realize there are many wonderful, godly Christians who will see this gift differently and exercise it differently. Too often, however, they are driven more by their experience than they are Scripture. Ultimately, as in all issues, the Bible must be our final authority.

I also agree with my friend James Merritt who says, "It should also be said that we should not be opposed to enthusiasm and excitement in worship. Certainly, it would be great for all of our churches if people were more participative in worship and not less. Sadly, some of what may be seen by others as excesses in worship is perhaps a reaction to the dead formalism, we have in many churches today." So, as we prepare to dive into 1 Cor. 14, keep this in mind. *The exercise of any spiritual gift should always be for the glorification of God, the edification of the church, and the evangelization of the lost.*

I. Prophecy (preaching) is superior to tongues for the edification of the body of Christ 14:1-5

Paul tells us to: “Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. For the person who speaks in a tongue is not speaking to people but to God, since no one understands him; he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the person who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement, and consolation. The person who speaks in a tongue builds himself up, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.”
(14:1-4)

The word “pursue” refers to a hunter chasing after prey. (Thiselton, *TNIGTC*, 1082). There is nothing wrong with spiritual gifts, the exercise of them, and desiring them. However, the ultimate prey we are after is love (ch. 13). To use a metaphor, “If spiritual gifts are not clothed in love they are in effect naked and should be ashamed.” (Merritt)

Now, the key question confronts us once again: What is the gift of tongues? Is it some form of esoteric, ecstatic, angelic babbling that is known only to God? Or, is it something else? Is it a known, human language (like in the book of Acts) that God supernaturally gives for the building up of the Church or something different?

The word used here for “tongue” (v.2) is the word *glossa*. The word is used fifty times in the New Testament. At times it refers to a literal human tongue (a physical organ in the mouth). In Acts 2:3, it is used figurately to refer to tongues

of fire. The other thirty-three times the word means “language.” We believe it is a foreign language, an earthly language, that is spoken by some group or nation on this earth. For example, in Revelation 5:9 we read,

“And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

The CSB properly translates this “language.” Every tribe and nation that spoke every language will be in heaven. Again, there are those who hold that the tongues spoken of in I Corinthians 14 is a heavenly language unlike any human language. It is some sort of an angelic heavenly language or an unknown language. However, there are several things to consider that makes this view unlikely.

Unfortunately, the King James Version places the word “unknown” before the word “tongue.” (see 14:2, KJV). However, it is italicized which means it is not in the original. People were not speaking in an unknown tongue, but simply “another tongue.” As we know, there are all kinds of foreign “tongues” or languages. It does not matter whether the language is Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish or English. They are all simply different kinds of languages. Furthermore, it is not accidental that Paul uses this very illustration in verses 10 and 11. “There are doubtless many different kinds of languages in

the world, none is without meaning. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker will be a foreigner to me.” (14:10-11) It is obvious there that Paul is referring to a foreign language.

Further in verse 21, Paul cites Isa. 28:11-12, “It is written in the law, I will speak to this people by people of other tongues and by the lips of foreigners, and even then, they will not listen to me says the Lord.” (14:21). Isaiah was prophesying the Assyrian takeover of the northern kingdom of Israel which occurred in 722 B.C. God had tried to speak in the Hebrew language to call the nation to repent, but when they refused, God brought in a people that would speak another language; a real language, but one they would not understand as a sign of his judgment.

Furthermore, it is extremely relevant that the first evidence of any type of “speaking in tongues” is found in the Book of Acts where, without question, what Luke describes are real known human languages. (Carson, *Showing*, 80).

In fact, word studies have shown that never does the term *glossa* denote noncognitive utterance. (Carson, *Showing*, 83), (Gundry, *JTS*, 299-307)

Therefore, we define the gift of speaking in tongues as a gift of speaking in a foreign language that is totally unknown to the one who is speaking and to

some who may be hearing. This is consistent with Acts 2, (possibly 8), 10, and 19.

Paul, in a sense, is putting prophecy and tongues on a scale to see which one bears the most weight. He immediately makes the point that *prophecy is to be desired above tongues*. Again, note 14:1-5:

“Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. For the person who speaks in a tongue is not speaking to people but to God, since no one understands him; he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the person who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement, and consolation. The person who speaks in a tongue builds himself up, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. I wish all of you spoke in tongues, but even more that you prophesied. The person who prophesies is greater than the person who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up.” (14:1-5)

When we weigh the two gifts clearly the greater gift and the better gift is the gift of prophecy. Why? When the gift of tongues stands alone without interpretation, they are unintelligible and only benefit the speaker (which is not the purpose of spiritual gifts), but prophecy builds up the church. (Hayes, *Interpretation*, 235). It should be noted immediately that there is something unique about tongues. *It is the only gift that needs a corollary spiritual gift to*

complete its function as a gift. Tongues can neither edify the church, glorify God in the greatest sense, and evangelize the lost unless there is interpretation. (Bruce, *TNCBC*, 130). Without an interpretation, the church is not edified and built up. This leads to our 2nd point in the text.

II. Tongues serve no value to the body of Christ without understanding 14:6-12

“So now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you with a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? Even lifeless instruments that produce sounds—whether flute or harp—if they don’t make a distinction in the notes, how will what is played on the flute or harp be recognized? In fact, if the bugle makes an unclear sound, who will prepare for battle? In the same way, unless you use your tongue for intelligible speech, how will what is spoken be known? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different kinds of languages in the world, none is without meaning. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker will be a foreigner to me. So also you—since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, seek to excel in building up the church.” (14:6-12)

For Paul two things are of utmost importance: (a) communication in the church must be intelligible and delivered in such a way that people understand what is being said; (b) the ultimate purpose of spiritual gifts, including tongues, is the

building up of the church and its edification. Spiritual gifts are for the body of Christ not an individual. In verses 6-12, Paul uses various analogies to make the point. The first is musical instruments (v.6-7). Musical instruments are not just to make sounds; they are to actually play music that has melody and meaning. Music that is unintelligible to the mind will never move the heart or edify the mind.

An even more poignant illustration is that of the military bugler (v.8). A soldier must always know whether the bugler is sounding retreat or attack. The difference of course can be between a disastrous defeat and a great victory.

Carson helpfully points out that the fact that Paul has to emphasize this point with examples from musical instruments and military bugle calls shows just how deeply committed at least some of the Corinthians were to trying to argue for the superiority of tongues. (Carson, *Showing*, 103)

The third analogy (vs. 9-12) Paul uses concerns the variety of *known* languages in the world, and the fact that every language has meaning that can be understood when properly heard or interpreted. In fact, languages are given to do just that – communicate intelligibly with other people. (Schreiner, 288).

And, his repetition is instructive. Tongues must “excel in building up the church” (v. 13) or they serve no real purpose.

III. An interpretation of tongues is essential for others to be built up 14:13-19

“Therefore the person who speaks in a tongue should pray that he can interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with my understanding. I will sing praise with the spirit, and I will also sing praise with my understanding. Otherwise, if you praise with the spirit, how will the outsider say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? For you may very well be giving thanks, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, in order to teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” (14:13-19)

Two ideas stand out in this passage: *understanding* and *building up*.

Edification of the body can only come through understanding. That is why interpretation must accompany tongues (v. 13). Paul places a premium on understanding, because edification comes through the mind and through understanding. (Schreiner, 289)

Simply but strongly, put when believers come together for both personal and corporate worship, understanding and intelligibility should rule the day. The ultimate goal is the edification of the church (v. 12, 17, 19). Carson rightly says, “edification in the church depends utterly on intelligibility, understanding, coherence. Both charismatic and non-charismatic churches

need to be reminded of that truth again and again.” (Carson, *Showing*, 106).

Paul is so adamant on this, he says in v. 19, “I would rather speak 5 words to instruct than 10,000 that don’t!”

IV. Rightly handling prophecy and tongues requires spiritual maturity 14:20-25

“Brothers and sisters, don’t be childish in your thinking, but be infants in regard to evil and adult (*ESV*, “mature”) in your thinking. It is written in the law, **I will speak to this people by people of other tongues and by the lips of foreigners, and even then, they will not listen to me**, says the Lord.

Speaking in tongues, then, is intended as a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church assembles together and all are speaking in tongues and people who are outsiders or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all are prophesying and some unbeliever or outsider comes in, he is convicted by all and is called to account by all. The secrets of his heart will be revealed, and as a result he will fall facedown and worship God, proclaiming, “God is really among you.” (14:20-25)

Whether for believers or unbelievers, prophecy should always take precedent over tongues. Any spiritual gift that puts a barrier between unbelievers and God rather than a bridge is simply out of place. F.F. Bruce points out that –

“Over concentration on glossolalia is a mark of immaturity.” (Bruce, *TNCBC*, 132) Spiritual maturity would never under any circumstance stress something that is noncognitive over what is cognitive. It would never emphasize what is unintelligible over that which is intelligible. (Blomberg, *TNAC*, 270)

Paul gives his attention to outsiders as opposed to insiders to “people on the periphery of the church community.” (Vs 22 ff; Hayes, *Interpretation*, 238). It cannot be overstated strongly enough that the most important aspect of any spiritual gift is not the personal experience of the gift, but the spiritual effect of the gift on others. Any gift falls short of its God intended function if it does not edify the believer and evangelize the unbeliever. One cannot deny the plain teaching in this passage that prophecy – speaking plain truth from God, is a powerful tool for evangelism, but tongues, particularly uninterpreted, is a hindrance to making the Gospel clear. (Hayes, *Interpretation*, 239)

Though Schreiner is certainly correct that verses 20-25 are some of the most difficult in the letter (Schreiner, *TNTC*, 290), the basic thrust of the passage is clear. Prophecy not only edifies believers, because it is understandable and fosters maturity, it also evangelizes unbelievers producing belief when unbelievers are convicted of their sins and brought to faith through hearing the Gospel plainly presented. (Schreiner, *TNTC*, 292)

Now, when tongues are properly interpreted, what is the purpose and function of the gift? The gift of speaking in tongues is speaking in a foreign language by the supernatural power of God. It has 3 specific purposes.

The Ministry of Communications

Every verbal spiritual gift whether it is prophecy, teaching, exhortation, or speaking in tongues should communicate truth that is in harmony with the Word of God. Whether it is a real language or a heavenly language, anything that is not interpreted doesn't communicate anything. Just as a flute communicates music, just as a bugle communicates military orders, it is true for speaking in an otherwise unknown language. Paul said, "In the same way, unless you use your tongue for intelligible speech, how will what is spoken be known? For you will be speaking into the air." (14:9). It is better to never to say a word than to say a thousand words that cannot be understood, because the result then would be confusion rather than communication (v. 19). The gift of speaking in tongues is not so much to communicate to God, but to communicate for God.

A teaching caveat: Private prayer language

Don Carson believes that 14:19 (note also 14:2-4) provides a strong defense of the private use of tongues. He dogmatically states, "The only possible conclusion is that Paul exercises his remarkable tongues gift *in private*"

(Carson, *Showing*, 105). However, we find it difficult to find evidence of tongues of any sort being used this way in scripture. Further, a gift used privately in a closet cannot possibly edify the church. I like Merritt's take at this point, "One thing that chapter 14 should tell us all is that we need to get a lot of spiritual gifts out of the closet and into the pews so the church can be truly edified." Gifts are never for self-edification. They are always for the edification of the body.

The Ministry of Confirmation

What did Paul mean when he said that tongues were assigned to unbelievers?

"Speaking in tongues, then, is intended as a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers." (14:22)

We have already stated it could refer, as it did in referring to Isaiah's day, as the judgment of God. But, there may be more.

Tongues when interpreted can also show an unbeliever the power of God.

They hear the Gospel in their own language knowing full well there would be no way the speaker could have possibly known the language beforehand.

Certainly in the Book of Acts tongues was a sign of confirmation. It made unbelievers sit up and take notice. "*Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the magnificent acts of God in our own tongues.*" (Acts 2:11) It confirmed the gospel.

The Ministry of Conversion

Paul was primarily a missionary and a church planter. In the church he will prophesy. Five word of prophecy is better than ten-thousand words in a tongue. On the mission field, it would be different.

We believe speaking in tongues is primarily a missionary gift. It was a gift that God gave and that God can still give so that people around the world can hear the Gospel. To be sure, it is rare and exceptional. It is not normative.

With modern day technology, a gift like this would be less necessary and needed, but it can still be useful in certain parts of the world. Don't ever put God in a man-made box!

Perhaps this is what Paul meant back in verse 5, "I wish all of you spoke in tongues..." (14:5). People in that day weren't bilingual, much less multilingual. One would meet all kinds of foreigners in those days. It would make sense that Paul was saying in effect, "I wish every time you met someone that you didn't speak their language or they didn't speak yours, that you would exercise this gift along with the gift of interpretation that they might hear the Gospel, understand it, and come to know Jesus."

Conclusion

It cannot be overemphasized that spiritual gifts are not an in, in and of themselves. They are not gifts primarily for our enjoyment, but for God's employment and the

church's edification. They are a means to an end - teaching biblical truth to believers and reaching unbelievers with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the Bible truth about tongues.

- This study draws heavily from James Merritt, *God's Prescription for a Healthy Christian*, ch. 11, 123-135.