

Understanding Tongues Part 1

1 Corinthians 14:1-19

BI: Paul considered the gift of tongues a secondary gift of the Spirit. Prophecy was primary, however, because it always edifies.

As we near the end of 1 Corinthians, we come to chapter 14 where Paul takes up the issue of the gift of tongues. I realize this is an incredibly controversial and often divisive issue in the modern church, and I suppose for that reason alone it behooves us to wrestle with this text until we understand what Paul is actually saying.

Now time is short, and we have a lot to cover so let's jump right in. First of all, when we speak about the gift of tongues we need to understand that tongues is the gift of languages. There is no ambiguity about this fact in the narrative of Acts 2 where the Holy Spirit first gave this gift to the church through the apostles. In verse 6 of that same chapter Luke tells us "And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own *language*." These were real languages that real people were able to hear and understand. The *true* gift of tongues is always the divinely bestowed ability to speak languages that a person has not learned for the purpose of authenticating the gospel message and its messengers.

The problem in Corinth, however, was that they had twisted the gift of tongues into something that more closely resembled the ecstatic gibberish of the mystery cults of the day. Ecstatic speech has always been an integral part of pagan religious practices since long before the birth of Christ. In fact, in 400 BC, the philosopher Plato wrote about people who practiced pagan religion and engaged in ecstatic speech.

More importantly, it should be noted that Corinth was situated right in the middle of a hot-bed of pagan mystery religions. They were called "mystery religions" because their internal practices were kept secret from everyone except those who had become initiates into the religion. The cult of Dionysius, for example, had a notable presence near Corinth, as did the cult of Apollo. Often the priests of these religions were stirred up into an emotional frenzy by the consumption of alcohol and the ingesting of hallucinogenic drugs combined with the "clashing of cymbals, loud drums, and screeching flutes" (Dr. Wayne House, *Tongues and Mystery Religions of Corinth*. http://www.seeking4truth.com/tongues_corinth.html).

Part of the common spiritual practice involved falling into a kind of spiritual ecstasy by which a person would break out in unintelligible speech. This is probably what Paul was appealing to when in 1 Cor. 13:1 "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging symbol." He was saying that "failure to evidence love in the expression of the gifts would be as meaningless as their former pagan" religious practices (House, p. 5).

Why were people in Paul's day drawn to the mystery cults? Because they had lost hope in the pantheon of the Greek and Roman gods. They had a great longing for salvation. They were eager for communion with the divine that would support them in times of great trial and guarantee them a friendly reception in the world beyond the grave. The practices of the mystery cults

offered what people desired.

Involvement in cultic rituals included such things as “gashing one’s flesh, [wild dancing], and speaking in ecstatic utterance” (ibid. p 4). The ecstatic speech was the means whereby the devotees sought to have communion with the god of their particular cult. One author writes, “Not every man can be a miracle worker or a seer, but all are susceptible to ecstasy... The rising tide of religious feeling seeks to surmount the barrier which separates man from god, it strives to encounter the divine, and it finds ultimate satisfaction only in that quenching of the consciousness in enthusiasm which is the goal of all mysticism” (ibid, p. 7).

In more recent history, the use of ecstatic speech is common among Shamanism, and other mediumistic religions. It is noted practice of Haitian Voodoo, Hindu Gurus and Fakirs of India. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossolalia>).

We should be surprised that Satan has his counterfeits. What should shock us (and perhaps what was so repulsive to Paul) was that this pagan practice was allowed to come into the church under the guise of superior spirituality.

There are many today who would have us believe that the gift of tongues is some kind of “prayer language.” Not a human language but either the language of heaven or the language of angels. But that can’t be, because in 1 Cor. 13: Paul clearly tells us that whatever the gift of tongues is, it will “cease” (8). I find it doubtful that when “that which is perfect comes, all the angels will be rendered mute.” Whatever language they speak is sure to continue forever, and there is no biblical text to suggest otherwise.

The salient point here is simply this, that the gift of tongues that was given by the Holy Spirit is the gift of languages. It was not some kind of ecstatic gibberish, but the supernatural ability to speak languages that one has not previously learned. What was happening in Corinth, however, was that some prominent members were failing to distinguish the difference between the ecstatic utterances of their past and the true gift of tongues given supernaturally by the Holy Spirit.” This, I believe, is exactly what Paul is addressing in 1 Cor. 14.

Now my hope this morning is to cover verses 1-19. And if, by some extraordinary grace of God, I am actually able to do that, I want to call our attention to the three main points Paul is seeking to establish with his readers.

I. Tongues is a Secondary Gift because it Does Not Edify: (1-5)

1. Read v. 1-4

2. Now a point that is often overlooked in the study of this chapter is that Paul is *NOT* speaking about individual Christians seeking individual gifts. He is speaking to the church as a whole about what they should be eagerly seeking and desiring when they assemble together. Chapters 11-14 address the issue of what should and should not happen when the assembly meets together.

3. For example, chap. 11 talks about how women are to behave in the assembly, and how the church as a whole should take the Lord’s Supper. Chapter 12 talks about how to minister the gifts in the assembly and how the church is one body made up of many parts. Chapter 13 discusses the need to love one another when they met together. And now, chapter 14 talks about how they were

to use of the gift of tongues when the body is assembled. He is not talking so much about what individuals do in their personal relationship with God, but rather about what the church as a whole should be most concerned about and desirous of when they meet together.

4. So what should be the attitude and expectation of believers when they meet? Verse 1 says, we should pursue love. The word for “pursue” here means to hunt down or to strive for. It means (as Chap 13 expounds upon) that we should come to the assembly of believers determined to love other people. Only after we have set our minds and hearts to love others should we then desire to use and see others use their spiritual gift.

5. But notice what Paul does here. He elevates prophesy above all the other gifts that the church should be eager for when we assemble. In other words, we should come to worship with such a frame of mind that our chief desire is to hear the word of God proclaimed, explained, and applied. That’s what prophesy is. We don’t come to church hoping to hear someone break out in ecstatic speech. We don’t come hoping that there will be a healing, or that some spectacular miracle will take place. No, we come to hear the word of God.

6. Why is prophesy the priority over tongues? Paul explains beginning in verse 2. (Read v. 2).

7. Now, before we dive in to this flow of thought it’s imperative that we understand a few important details. First of all, throughout this passage Paul will address both the false gift of tongues (ecstatic speech) and the true gift of tongues. I believe the difference can be identified through Paul’s use of the singular and plural forms of the word for tongues. That is, when he uses the singular form, I think he is speaking of the kind of gibberish that was a carry-over from the mystery religions. There aren’t many kinds of gibberish, there is only one. As MacArthur point out, “No one ever asks, ‘What gibberish do you speak?’ There’s only one kind - gibberish!” On the other hand, there are many languages. Hence the plural use of the word “tongues” when he is speaking of the true gift of languages.

8. Second, we need to understand that throughout the book of 1 Cor., Paul uses a rhetorical device known as irony or even sarcasm. Look back at 4:8-10. Paul says...(Read 4:8-10). Beloved, this is inspired, biting sarcasm. And Paul will use it here in chapter 14. In fact, I believe he is employing irony when he says in verse 2 “For one who speaks in [ecstatic gibberish] does not speak to men, but to God.”

9. One hint that he is being sarcastic here is that the normal definite article in front of the word “God” is missing. In other words, Paul may well be saying that such a person is not speaking to men, “but to a god.” And this would be consistent with the fact that their false practice of tongues came not from the H.S., but from the worship of the false gods of the mystery cults.

10. Another confirmation of this is found in the last phrase, “”for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.” Now, what are the mysteries. If you read the evangelical commentaries on this phrase you will witness all kinds of theological gymnastics as various men

try to explain the mysteries revealed by the gift of tongues. But I don't that that's Paul's point at all.

11. Sometimes the N.T. speaks of true spiritual mysteries, but I believe Alexander Hay is right when he says:

In the N.T. [the word mystery] refers to the things of God that could not be known by man except through revelation from God. The revelation of these things by the H.S. is not obscure but clear and is given to be communication to God's people (1 Cor. 2:1-16). It is not given privately in unknown words. In heathen religions [the word mysteries] referred to the hidden secrets of the gods which only the initiated could know. Those initiated into such mysteries claimed to have contact with the spirit world through emotional excitement, revelations, the working or miracles and the speaking of unknown words revealed by the spirits" (Ibid, p. 6).

12. Beloved, Paul is not commending the private use of ecstatic speech in the church. He is condemning it! And this is plain to see when you realize Paul is contrasting true and false tongues; that he is engaging in the rhetorical use of irony or sarcasm; and third, that he makes edification of the body the litmus test of the proper use of spiritual gifts.

13. Paul's emphasis on edification of the body is paramount in 1 Cor. The question is, Who does the H.S. intend to benefit from the used of the gifts. Paul says they are for whose good? Look back at 12:7. Paul says... (Read 12:7 "common good").

14. The same word is used back in 6:12 where Paul says, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are *profitable*." This is the same GK word as "common good." The use of the gifts were to be profitable for the body of Christ, not the individual.

15. Paul understood that the Spiritual gifts were *NOT* for self-gratification but for mutual edification. They are *NOT* to be focused inward but outward toward others. Your spiritual gifts were specifically designed to build up other members of the body so that they can fulfill their purpose even as you fulfill yours.

16. This is why Paul so often reminded the Corinthians that they should each be concerned about edifying (building up) one another.

A. (8:1) "Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies."

B. (10:23) "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify."

17. So here in v. 2, when Paul says, “For the one who speaks in [ecstatic gibberish] does not speak to men...”, he is not commending that, he is rebuking it. The true gift of tongues was precisely about speaking to men.

18. Paul will argue later that even the true gift of tongues is useless for edification in the church, because unless there is someone to interpret no one can understand what is being said so no one is edified.

19. And this is precisely why the gift of prophesy is so much better. Read v. 3.

20. Edification is “building up others.” Exhortation is “encouraging others”; and Consolation is ministering “comfort to others.”

21. Notice the explicit contrast in verse 4. “One who speaks in [ecstatic gibberish] edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.”

22. Then verse 5 comes as a summary. (read v. 5). In other words, “I wish you all had the ability to employ the real gift of languages. But even then it would not be as important as the gift of prophesy. Because the gift of languages edifies no one in the church without an interpreter, but the gift of prophesy edifies the whole church.

23. You see, beloved, the church in Corinth, like so many charismatic churches in America today, are all revved up about the wrong gifts. And some of what they call real gifts are nothing more than self-centered outbursts of emotional, ecstatic gibberish that benefits no one... not even themselves.

24. Paul’s principle is nowhere laid out more clearly than in 14:26. “Let all things be done for edification.”

25. So the first reason tongues is a secondary gift is because it is incapable of edifying. Second.

II. Tongues are secondary because they are unintelligible: (7-10)

1. Now, we need to move fast here, so hold on. In the next three verse Paul is going to give us two illustration and a conclusion. But first (v. 6) he lays out his premise that the gifts of tongues is useless if it does not offer something of substance to the assembled body of Christ. (Read v. 6)

2. In v.7, then, he offers his first illustration. (Read v. 7)

3. This is the illustration of lifeless things. If I could change the illustration a little, let me ask “Who would you rather hear playing the piano when you come into the chapel on Sunday - Marcia Whiting, or Pastor Dan? Let me tell you, all I have to offer is “indistinct sounds.” Believe

me, my playing the piano will be detrimental to the edification of the body. It may free up some much needed seats on Sunday morning, but it will not edify.

4. The second illustration is found in v. 8 (read v. 8). Once again, indistinct sounds are of no use to anyone.

5. Now Paul's conclusion in v. 9-11. (Read 9-11).

6. These are harsh words from the apostle. He's saying, musical instruments that are so out of tune that they can't produce a cohesive melody, and an army bugler who is so incompetent that the soldiers don't have a clue what the signal is; this is what it's like when you come together for worship. Pure confusion and chaos (see MacArthur, *1 Cor.*)

7. The illustration of language in v. 10 may strike a cord with some of our older brothers and sisters who were saved out of the Catholic Church. My mom grew up Catholic before Vatican 2 when they began allowing priests to preach in English. She would go to church week after week and listen to all kinds of religious talk and preaching that she couldn't even understand because every word was Latin, a language she did not understand! That's what it's like when someone comes into the assembly and begins speaking in tongues.

8. Paul is saying, when you come to the assembly of believers, don't come to show off with your spiritual gift. Don't come eager to rev yourself up into an emotional frenzy until your mind spills forth ecstatic gibberish for purposes of self-edification. And don't come eager to use the true gift of tongues. That may have a place, but not without an interpreter. Rather come eager to edify one another. And come eager to hear the word of God preached.

9. So the gift of tongues is secondary because it cannot edify, because it is unintelligible; and third...

III. Tongues are Secondary Because They are Emotional rather than Mental: (13-19)

1. Read 13-14

2. Paul, I believe, is saying, "Let the one who speak gibberish in the church pray for a new gift." Pray that God would give you a gift that actually edifies the body. Again, I think Paul is intentionally being hard on the Corinthians. His sarcasm has given way to bluntness. He's saying find a gift that will engage *NOT* only your spirit (your emotions) but also your mind.

3. No where in the Bible are we ever told to disengage our minds. Christianity is designed to engage the heart (i.e. is the spirit, affections, emotions) *AND* the mind. (Read 15).

4. What happens if we come to church for the purpose of seeking a personal, emotional experience? We might edify ourselves, but God's purpose of mutual edification is lost. (Read 16-19)

5. You see, beloved, Paul believed there was a place for the true gift of tongues (and he will speak more about that later). But when the church assembles together for fellowship and worship, the gift of tongues was to have (at best) a secondary role. Moreover, Paul made no allowance for a kind of tongues speaking that only edifies self. Such a practice is self-oriented, edifies no one else, completely misses God's purpose for the gifts of the Spirit, and more closely resembles the practices of ancient Mystery Religions than the true church of Jesus Christ.

6. Can I just make this perfectly plain? The H.S. has never given anyone any gift designed to edify himself. The gifts of the Spirit are designed to mutually "build up" (edify) the body of Christ until we all collectively resemble the Lord Jesus Christ in all godliness and maturity.

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