

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul addresses misuse of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church. The Corinthians were afflicted with the pride of wanting to outdo each other in use of what I might call the spectacular or “sign gifts”; tongues, prophecy, words of wisdom, words of knowledge, etc. It’s interesting that those are gifts that are super visible to others, and they all involved speaking. It appears the Corinthians were really into the visible or “showy” gifts. Paul seems to address several different expressions of the gifts of tongues in Chapter 12, 13, and 14. I caution you that in my opinion, it is not super easy to decipher just exactly what Paul is saying. We’ll move through the text and try to figure out what Paul is talking about. Again, much of the problem in deciphering what Paul is saying is because we can’t see the letter or the questions that the church had written to Paul about. We’re looking at half of a conversation.

There is a high probability that the Corinthian converts had brought in elements of their Apollo worship into the church. In that tradition, a medium of sorts would sit and speak in a cryptic way, giving a word of knowledge or a word of wisdom. She was called a “Pythia” and an offering would be made and she would be asked to give a word of prophecy or the foretelling of the future. An interpreter stood near by to give an interpretation of what she had said. (See my article at the end of this sermon). This shouldn’t diminish the importance of the Spiritual Gifts introduced in Chapter 12-14, but it is fair to say that perhaps some syncretism was going on. That’s when Christians bring elements of their paganism into our own worship. You see such things like this in the “Day of the Dead” celebrations that go on throughout Latin America. Whenever God has given gifting to the Church, you can rest assured that Satan is not far off from offering his imitations of the real thing.

There are several interpretations for the passages we are reading in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Christian traditions differ in their position concerning what are called tongues, or languages in these chapters. The positions differ in whether these are always known human languages, ecstatic speech of some kind, both, or something else; and whether the gift continues today. For full context, in a few minutes we will read our way from 1 Corinthians 12 from where we left off a few weeks ago, through Chapter 13, and Chapter 14. Let’s read them all the way through. If you’re reading this sermon, get your Bible out and follow along with what is being said in this sermon.

The Gift of Tongues mentioned in the Bible is one of the most interesting of all of the super natural gifts. Maybe because some of you have tried to study a second language and no matter how hard you try you can’t seem to grasp speaking in another language. I am comfortable speaking in 3 languages, and I can tell you that it takes a lot of study and determination to be able to speak in a language that’s not your mother tongue. The exception of course is that you don’t remember how hard you worked at speaking your own mother tongue. Your mother just spoke to you, corrected your speech, and you learned it. Realize that speaking a tongue and a language are the same thing. Tongue is the Anglo-Saxon word for language which derives from a French word coming directly out of Latin. A tongue is a language and a language is a tongue. We are introduced to the idea of “tongues”, meaning foreign languages in the account of the Holy Spirit coming on the Day of Pentecost. There is no disagreement as to what this means.

TONGUES - SPEAKING IN LANGUAGES NEVER STUDIED – A SIGN TO UNBELIEVERS

Tongues at Pentecost Acts 2

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance 5 And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. 7 Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?"

Jews had come from all over the known world at the time, and God provided a way for them to hear the gospel in their own languages. The Jews had several feasts that they came to celebrate, and along with the celebration of Shavuot (which falls exactly 49 days after the second day of Passover), they celebrated receiving the Torah at Sinai on this same day. This is because they had left Egypt and arrived at Sinai on the 49th day after the first Passover. They received the Torah from God on Sinai the next day, or the 50th day from leaving Egypt.

The Pentecost celebration that we're reading about here was 50 days after Jesus had been crucified and risen from the dead. According to Rabbi Hartman, in Judaism, the number 50 (Hebrew: *chamishim*) symbolizes transcendence, freedom, renewal, and the transition from the natural to the supernatural or divine realm. It often represents going beyond the limitations of the physical world (associated with $7 \times 7 = 49$) into a higher, redemptive state.¹ Wow! What two historical events could be more about freedom, renewal, and transition than leaving Egypt or Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection? The Israelites received the Law fifty days after Egypt. Some argue that this is when they became the Nation of Israel. And then, fifty days after Jesus went to the cross, God gave believers the Holy Spirit igniting and starting the Church.

So, on that day, the account tells us that people were speaking in known languages of the world, but they were doing so supernaturally. They were speaking languages that they did not know. This means for example if we were to see that kind of tongues today, we might hear someone speaking perfect Castillian Spanish without ever studying a word of it. I think parenthetically, just as importantly as receiving the Holy Spirit was seeing the effect that it had on those who received it. What do I mean by that? Look at how the power of the Holy Spirit transformed Peter.

If you continue reading the account in Acts 2, the same Peter who had denied Jesus three times was now a new man. He was bold. He was powerful. What made the difference? The indwelling of the Holy Spirit made the difference. He stood up and recited the passage from the Book of Joel that foretold of this day, "*And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I*

¹ <https://aish.com/who-knows-50/>; Jewish Wisdom in Numbers, Rabbi Yehoshua Hartman

will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ And on My menservants and on My maidservants, I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy.” (Acts 2:17-18)

So, the tongues mentioned at Pentecost were indisputably the phenomenon of people either speaking in their own language and being heard in another language, or speaking in a language that they had never studied or known. I believe this is the same kind of gift of tongues experienced by Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 (a sign to the Gentiles) and at the Church in Ephesus in Acts Chapter 19 (a sign to the known world). We won't take time to read those texts here. We don't hear anything again about any sort of gift of tongues until Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and particularly in chapters 12, 13, and 14. This is where the confusion and division about tongues begins.

TONGUES – CHAPTER 12 – SPOKEN AND TRANSLATED IN A CHURCH SERVICE

In Chapter 12 Paul begins a discourse of unity in verses 12-26. Apparently, members of the Corinthian church were attributing too much status to persons who were gifted with the gifts described in what we read last week. They were falling victim to the dangers that I spoke about in my last teaching on this, in which some felt more powerful or more holy because of receiving one of the listed gifts. Others felt envious that someone had received a gift and they had not. It was a mess. They had been guilty of creating cliques and factions at their Love Feasts, and now they were letting the flesh get totally involved in their exercise of spiritual gifts. Paul asks them to consider a church body like our own physical bodies, where a heart is no more important than let's say one's lungs. All of these pieces are to work together, and Paul reminds them that these gifts are not the most important gifts. He says, “

³⁰ Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

At this point, the text seems to me to be pointing to tongues that were no different than those heard at Pentecost. That might be a wrong interpretation, but I don't see anything in the text that differentiates this from the phenomenon at Pentecost. There might be, but I don't see that. However, there appears to be some distinction in how it was practiced. In the Corinthian services, people were getting up and speaking in a language that they had never studied and someone else was getting up and translating what had been said. Paul is trying to minimize the importance of doing these kinds of things by his last statement, “And yet I show you a more excellent way.”

TONGUES – THE LOVE CHAPTER – Not the Spiritual Gifts Chapter

***13** Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. ⁴ Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ⁵ does not*

behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. ¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

This is referred to as the “Love Chapter”. It is an interlude of persuasion between the two Chapters dealing with the Gift of Tongues. Notice that the focus of the chapter is not the gifts themselves, but the overriding spiritual principle that Love is more important than any and all spiritual gifts. Love is supreme when we’re involved in exercising spiritual gifts. Obviously, the Corinthians were doing these things, and love got left behind. And then Paul unmistakably says that these kinds of gifts will vanish away. This is where different groups have different interpretations. Cessationists believe that when the Bible came, the “perfect had come.” Those sign gifts ceased as there was no more need for them. Continuationists believe that the sign gifts will continue until Jesus comes again. They say that Jesus’ coming constitutes “that which is perfect coming”. A Cessationist would take the position that a completed canon of Scripture constituted “when that which is perfect comes.”

TONGUES – CHAPTER 14 - Prophecy and Tongues – Praying in the Spirit – Praying in Tongues

This chapter is where the struggle begins to understand exactly what Paul is talking about. It requires inference to get to either position. I will remind you that it is one chapter of the Bible and we should be careful to not build an entire systematic theology or our religious devotion around this. I am not saying it isn’t important, but in the scheme of all else it is in reality very unimportant and not salvific.

***14** Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. ² For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. (Chapter 14:1-2)*

So, the question presents itself, “What is Paul talking about?” To me, although I might be mistaken, this sounds like something quite different from the tongues at Pentecost, as Paul says that someone who is exercising this “speaks to God”. He adds, that “in the Spirit he speaks mysteries”. The words spoken at Pentecost were neither directed to God, nor were they mysteries. They were the clear gospel message spoken to a group of unbelievers, so it seems Paul is speaking about something very different.

Verses 3-5

Then in verse 3 he elevates “prophecy” (proclamation of the gospel) over self-edification through private speaking of “tongues”. Paul adds, “I wish you all spoke in tongues but even more that you prophesied”. I don’t know if Paul is speaking permissively or as an imperative. Somehow the Corinthians were speaking these tongues publicly but giving no interpretation, and that was a problem.

Verses 6-12

In these verses Paul makes a statement and adds a question that if they’re speaking to God in a language that no one can understand, then where is the benefit? He’s basically saying that if you speak in a way that no one understands, then what is the use of even opening your mouth. Instead, a person should focus their attention on what will help the whole congregation.

***Verses 13-14** - Paul continues to make the point that speaking in these other languages doesn’t really benefit anyone, yet it is interesting that he says that he participates in this practice. It causes me to wonder why Paul practiced this if it really didn’t benefit anyone. If we’re still interested, we can ask that question when we get to heaven.

¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. ¹⁵ What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.

Frankly, it is hard to understand exactly what Paul is trying to say here and what he is describing. I want to digress for a minute and say that at various times, people in this congregation have come to me and told me that they’ve spoken words in their prayer life that they do not understand. Some tell me they hear these words in their minds as they pray. Others tell me they’ve broken out singing in a language they do not understand. One woman said she was driving down FM 362 and just broke into praise in a language unknown to her. In each case, they’ve told me that when they did this, they felt closer to God. Perhaps they are experiencing what Paul is talking about in these few verses. I do not know for sure. I think this may be what I’ve come to call an “echo” of the Spiritual Gifts given in the early days of the church.

As a lawyer, I do not discount or summarily dismiss the testimony of anyone. In every case, those that gave me these accounts are credible people who walk in holiness in their private lives. I have never experienced what they have experienced, and I’m okay with that. As many of you know, I experienced seeing an angel the day my father died in a tractor accident. I had two corroborating witnesses with me at that time: my daughter and my wife. It’s not really that important to me if anyone believes me or not, because I know what I saw and I am certain of what I saw. What happened to me wasn’t outside of what we see possible in scripture, and there was no ill purpose in my sighting of a heavenly being. I look at this reported phenomenon of a “prayer language” which these people describe to me in much the same way. If this happens to you and you are brought closer to the Lord through this, then who am I to argue with what God

might be doing in your life. Parole evidence is powerful in law especially in instances of ambiguity, but not conclusive. I'm not suggesting anyone should seek such an experience, any more than seeing an angel, but if it happens don't be too bothered by it. And, I think that the words Paul uses here might well give scriptural authority and an explanation for what you've experienced.

Verse 18 – Is this a private communication between a believer and God?

18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; 19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

This shows that Paul considered his speaking in tongues to be a good thing, but he is clear that it doesn't belong in the church. The inference however, is that this is done privately.

Verses 20-25 - Paul seems to contradict himself. He has just said that tongues are to be used privately, and here he is saying that they are a means to convince unbelievers to come to faith. He does however say that this must only be done in public only if there is an interpreter. Maybe Paul is arguing with himself. I do not know.

Verses 26-40 - In these last verses Paul is addressing the very things we talked about in avoiding syncretism. Paul is addressing practices that went on in pagan worship and he was concerned that these practices were seeping into orthodox Christian worship in the church in Corinth. In the various cults women priestesses conducted the services. Paul is urging the Corinthian church to get control of itself and do things in order. In closing, I'd like to make some observations about the gift of tongues and interpretation.

FULLY UNDERSTOOD TONGUES

- 1 With certainty a gift was given to some at Pentecost to speak in languages that they had never learned. In addition, it is possible that sometimes a person will speak in their own language and it will be understood by others in their language (I'll call that a reverse tongues). That too can be inferred in the Acts 2 account.

DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND TONGUES

- 2 Paul seems to differentiate a public exercise of the gift of tongues from a private exercise of the gift of tongues. He minimizes the efficacy of the public use of this, seeming to give more credence to the private exercise thereof. Paul speaks of praying in tongues but says his spirit doesn't really understand it, so he concludes that he will pray in the spirit but also pray with understanding.

IMPORTANCE OF TONGUES IS ABSOLUTELY MINIMIZED

- 3 Paul puts tongues (whatever kind it might be) as less important than any other gift that is being discussed in these chapters.

CONCLUSION: If you are a Continuationist, and feel, think, or know you've been given the gift of tongues, exercise it privately and also pray in your own mother tongue with understanding. Paul says it's better for you to know what you're praying. Don't overextend your understanding to feel that you are spiritually superior to others or that tongues are required as a badge of holiness or a confirmation of being saved. The text is clear that even if tongues haven't ceased, they are not for everyone. Don't ever suggest that speaking in tongues is a necessary sign of salvation. It is not.

If you are a Cessationist, then pray to God in your own language, your mother tongue, with passion. Don't get too focused on those who say they have an experience speaking in tongues (or for that matter have seen an angel). You don't need to approve or disapprove of that. You have an understanding and biblical reasons that you believe this was a sign gift that has ceased, but realize others interpret the verses in 1 Corinthians 13-14 differently. Don't assume it is demonic forces at work. The lives of most who claim this exhibit lives of dedication and holiness. Above all, express love in how you handle this.

In summary, whatever your position and whatever your practice, let it be done in love.

Let us pray.

MY OWN THOUGHTS AS TO THE POSSIBLE BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE



I do not know, but I suspect that a certain amount of syncretism might have been working its way into the Corinthian church and into the valid use of the gift of tongues. Paul doesn't mention this, but the Greeks had an ancient tradition of having someone speak as a channel of a god (usually Apollo) and then it was interpreted for meaning. Most have heard of the Oracle of Delphi. If you don't, let me digress a bit and explain this to you. From about 800 BC as part of the worship of Apollo, there was a place where people would come for prophecy, advice, direction, knowledge, wisdom, etc. An "oracle" or let's call it a word of wisdom was channeled through a priestess called Pythia (that's the same as the word Python).

She was chosen from the noble families of Delphi and was usually over the age of 50. She was dressed in a pure way like a young maiden. Inquirers who came, paid a fee and brought a goat to be sacrificed. The animal had to tremble when cold water was poured on it to signify Apollo's approval. The Pythia would bathe in pure waters and then enter a chamber where she sat on a three-legged stool over a fissure in the rock. She would breathe the vapors coming up through the fissure in the rock and she would go into a euphoric state as ethylene produces euphoria and a trance-like state. Scientists have now determined that these vapors were present. A word of wisdom would be given and a person off to the side would interpret that word. There might have been some of this practice seeping into the Corinthian Church and into its services. I am not saying that their exercise of the use of tongues was wrong in any way, but it may have been drifting over into this same kind of ritual. It is easy to see parallels.

Paul was intent on maintaining church unity and we too should be so focused as well. We don't need to have big debates about spiritual gifts and whether they are in operation today in the same way that they were exercised at the time of the nascent church. Focus on the greater gifts of proclaiming the gospel to others in the world around you. Learn to be comfortable with knowing that some things are just a mystery; and, we won't understand them completely until Jesus comes again. Above all else, have a heart of love for your brothers in the church and to all others outside of the church. ¹³*And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*" (1 Corinthians 13 NKJV)