

Tongues In The Light of 1 Corinthians 14

Tongue and tongues

The Corinthian Church was a Church which had many problems. Outwardly, it appeared to be a Church which was alive with the Holy Spirit, but a close look at Scripture reveals that it was a spiritually immature Church (1 Cor. 3:1). It had even become tolerant of sexual immorality (5:1).

Prophecy

“... eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.” (14:1).

The apostle wants to direct the focus of the Corinthians away from meaningless speech to prophecy. It will be helpful at this stage to define what is meant by ‘prophecy’. The *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says of the Greek word, *propheteia* that it means the speaking forth of the mind and counsel of God *pro*, forth, *phemi*, to speak.¹

Prophecy can mean predicting the future, but please note that Paul does not use the word ‘predicting’ or ‘foretelling’ when describing the work of prophecy. He says, “... everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.” (14:3). The phrase, ‘so that they can know the future’ is deliberately missing.

His spirit

The classical Pentecostal belief is that the tongues spoken by the Corinthians are the same as those given under the power of God in Acts chapter two. Several things indicate that the two experiences are very different.

“For anyone who speaks in a tongue [Greek *lahwn glwssh*] does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.” (1 Cor. 14:2). “his spirit” (NIV, NASV), “the spirit” (KJV, NKJV) Literal Greek, “...but in spirit he speaks...”

Please note here that the speaking in tongues in this instance is something that the man does with *his* spirit. It is clear from the context that ‘his spirit’ is meant. See particularly v. 14.

Tongues are not something that the Corinthian Church is engaging in by the Spirit of God. That is why a whole chapter of the Bible is devoted to guiding the Church away from what they are doing to a correct practice.

“... he utters mysteries” this simply refers to something that cannot be understood. It is clear from the context that it does not refer to a revelation that God is trying to bring to man.

The apostle makes the point that no one understands what is being said when the Corinthians produce their ecstatic utterance. By way of contrast, when tongues were spoken by the Spirit of God in Acts chapter two, people understood what was said, because the tongues in that instance were languages which people understood. “When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.” (Acts 2:6). See also 2:11.

The apostle concedes that the Corinthian tongues must be directed to God. They can’t be directed to man, because no man understands the tongue, ‘... he utters mysteries with his spirit.’ Meaning things that cannot be understood.

Emotional edification

The apostle makes the point that “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself...” (14:4).

This can not possibly be an intellectual edification because no one understands what he is saying, and he does not even understand what he is saying himself. The apostle develops the thought further in verse nine by saying of those who speak in this manner, “...You will be just speaking into the air.” The edification that the apostle speaks of here is an emotional edification. The man does not understand what he is saying, he is simply edifying himself and himself only, and the edification is only emotional. This type of edification is clearly very selfish because it is of no benefit to others, that is why the apostle says, “since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.” (14:12).

Tongue - speaking into the air

The apostle would not use such disrespectful terms such as ‘speaking into the air’ of an activity which was a genuine work of the Holy Spirit (14:9). These are the words of someone who has a high regard for genuine works of the Spirit of God.

The apostle acknowledges that the Church is ‘eager to have spiritual gifts...’ but it is seeking after a gift which is of little benefit. The edification is only private and emotional, as noted before he tells them. “Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the Church.” (14:12). Notice that the apostle wants the people to focus their attention away from the self to the whole Church.

Speak in tongues

“I would like every one of you to speak in tongues...” (14:5).

When the apostle uses the word ‘tongues’ plural, he is referring to languages. This is clear from what the apostle says about the speech of foreigners. “... ‘Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord.” (14:21). See also, 13:8, 14:5, 6, 18, 21-23, 39. He is in effect telling the Church he would like them to speak in at least one other language.

When he uses the word ‘tongue’ singular, he is referring to the spirit of man producing a babel or incoherent sound as in 14:2, 4, 9, 13-14, 19, 27.

We will look at his wish that they speak in ‘tongues’ from three different angles.

1. Paul’s wish is not that they be able to speak in an

unknown tongue (singular, actually a babel), but that they be able to speak in tongues (plural), meaning languages. The supernatural gift of languages - as in Acts chapter two - was lacking in this Church. If the whole congregation had the gift of tongues, then the gospel could go out more quickly to the nations.

2. Paul wishes that they could all speak in an unknown tongue. It is possible that Paul is simply wanting everyone to have their wish - everyone speaking in the babel tongue (ecstatic speech). However, they would still be bound by the requirement to not speak in an incomprehensible way in Church without interpretation (14:27-28).
3. Paul is wishing that they could all have the baptism of the Holy Spirit of which tongues is the sign. Tongues is in effect - according to this interpretation - code for baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Problems

The problem with point number two is Paul is not referring to an angelic tongue (singular) as some like to believe. He uses the plural 'tongues' referring to several languages.

Point number three is quite absurd. It would mean that Scripture is condemning what God is doing in the Church. This interpretation has God causing people to speak in tongues in the Church without interpretation, and Scripture is condemning the practice because of the lack of edification it brings to the Church.

Paul speaks in tongues

"I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all" (v. 18)

The old Pentecostal view took this verse to mean Paul speaks in *unintelligible* tongues more than all of the people in the Corinthian Church put together. But that interpretation does not make sense. If the Corinthian Church were to read that view into his statement, they would consider the apostle to be quite mad. The apostle knows that it is important not to destroy his credibility in the Church which he cares for and which he is trying to lead into a sound practice through sound reasoning.

If the apostle was speaking of an unknown tongue (babel), how could he be certain without a detailed statement from every member in the Church listing how long they spent speaking in tongues, both in public and in private. With his schedule - which at times was very busy - he could not possibly compete with the widow who had the luxury of plenty of time to speak in her unknown tongue. Paul worked hard with his own hands to support himself (1 Cor. 4:12, 9:6, 2 Cor. 6:5).

The apostle encouraged others to work hard, he said, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." (Col. 3:23-24).

Given the high value which the apostle placed in hard work, it would be wrong to picture the apostle as someone who sat down like a guru from one of the eastern religions

who spent many hours speaking in an unintelligible tongue. A tongue which could not edify others, nor intellectually edify himself, since he could not understand that type of tongue. It is the very thing that he condemns.

When the apostle speaks of tongues in this verse, he is referring to languages. The apostle travelled widely and was often engaged in speaking to various groups of people. The Corinthians knew that the apostle spoke in several languages to get the message out. He was able to confidently assert that he spoke in tongues (languages) more than all of them. He would have known Latin (the tongue of the conquering Romans), Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic and possibly some other tongues as well. It was a statement that they would quite happily accept as being true.

"For if..."

"For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful." (v 14)

The apostle puts forward a hypothetical situation in which he shows the Corinthians what would happen if he were to adopt their practice. Please note that the apostle says, "...if I pray in a tongue", not *when* I pray in a tongue. He is using himself as an example. The Corinthians are to imagine Paul praying in a tongue (singular) without the use of his mind. That is what they were doing. Paul continues the example by saying, "What shall I do?" The apostle explains that his spirit and mind must work together (v 15). He would not, for example, sing with his spirit (emotions) without the use of his mind. That would produce a senseless babble.

"... my spirit prays..."

"For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful." (v 14)

"For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind." (14:13-15).

In this passage, the apostle makes the point that 'if I pray in a tongue, **my** spirit prays'. Please note that he uses the singular tongue, and that he refers to his spirit praying, not the Spirit of God. Literal Greek translation is "...the spirit of me (Gk. *pneuma mou*) prays..."

Hymn singing

We have already seen that there is an emotional edification that is not permitted in the Church when there is no intellectual edification through interpretation. However, there is an emotional edification which is permitted in Church, and that is hymn singing (v 15). There are two reasons why hymn singing is allowed in the Church.

- Hymn singing does not simply edify the worshipper emotionally, it also edifies the mind as the words are contemplated.
- Hymn singing is not a selfish activity. When a person sings, others in the Church are edified emotionally and intellectually.

Lets look briefly at three activities which take place in the Church, and look at the judgment which Scriptures place on the three activities:

- **Preaching** (i.e. prophesying v 3) is supported by this passage because the intellect is edified through the proclamation of God's Word.
- **Hymn singing** is supported because the emotions and the intellect are edified.
- **Uninterpreted tongue-speaking** in Church is condemned. It edifies emotionally, but it fails to edify intellectually. It is a selfish activity, others are not edified by the activity (v 4).

Selfish activity

Let's imagine for a moment a situation in which I am invited to a Church to sing. The congregation expects me to sing a well-known hymn. However, when I stand up, I announce to the congregation that I have decided to sing in a tongue - the result is a senseless babble. After I have sung with my spirit in a tongue without the use of the mind, I announce to the congregation that I was emotionally edified through my singing and I thank them for listening.

The elders of the congregation then gently point out to me afterwards that they are pleased that I was emotionally edified through the experience, but they then explain that the congregation was not edified, either emotionally or intellectually. My experience in this instance would be an entirely selfish experience, and the elders of the congregation would be acting within their duty to point me in the direction of 1 Corinthians 14 to correct my practice.

The general thrust of 1 Corinthians 14 is to discourage the Corinthians from acting in a selfish manner. They are to use gifts in a way which engages the activity of the mind as well as the activity of their spirit. "...I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind."

Tongues are a sign

The apostle corrects any thinking in the minds of the Corinthians that those who speak with their ecstatic speech have a special measure of the Holy Spirit. It is not a sign of special spirituality.

Because of the rebellion of Judah toward God in the 6th century B.C., they were taken captive by the Babylonians who spoke to them in a language they could not understand. This was a judgment on the unbelievers because they would not listen to God. Paul quotes the Isaiah passage (Is. 28:11-12) to prove that tongues are a sign to unbelievers. He says, "Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers..." (14:22).

The Unlearned

"If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?" (v 16). NB. "*your* spirit", not Spirit of God. "...the spirit" KJV.

One Bible scholar makes the point that the Greek word translated "the unlearned [KJV] is idiotou which in its primary sense means, a layman, a person who occupies a private position in contradistinction to an official of some kind." ² The apostle is urging the Church to give some thought for the person who does not understand what is going on. The reference is not to a person who is lacking in a supernatural gift.

Someone must interpret

"If anyone speaks in a tongue, two - or at the most three - should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret." (14:26).

Please note the use of the word 'if' instead of the word 'when'. The apostle does not insist that they speak in a tongue, but he does insist that they interpret the tongue if they do. By establishing this rule of practice, the apostle is able to remove ecstatic speech (speech produced by the spirit of man) from the Church. The aim of the apostle is to have prophecy (proclaiming the word of God) replace ecstatic speech (14:1).

This verse is an embarrassment to the classical Pentecostal position that the tongues at Corinth were from God, and that all of the gifts in the New Testament are in operation today. If tongues and interpretation are in the Church today, then why don't we see verse twenty-six put into practice? The clear answer to that question is that Pentecostals who hold to the above view would love to put the verse into practice, but they know that they can not, because in the past, time and time again, those claiming to have the gift of interpretation have proven to be false when they go into the specifics with their interpretation.

You will be hard-pressed today to find a Pentecostal church which actively promotes the view that their Church has people who have the gift of interpretation. Although there were a considerable number who made claim to the gift in the heyday of Pentecostalism before the disgrace of Jimmy Swaggart in 1988, but that is another story. It is strange that some of these Churches will insist they have people who have the genuine gift of tongues. Are we to believe that God only gives the type of gifts today which can be easily manufactured?

Both the Corinthian situation and our own are clearly understood when we realise that the tongues spoken at Corinth were not from God, but were something which was produced by their own spirits as stated in verse two. Regarding their practice, the apostle says, '... he utters mysteries with **his** spirit.' (14:2). Today, some people speak in a tongue through the activity of their own spirits. It is not something which comes from God. That is why it can not be interpreted. When people spoke in tongues by the power of God as in Acts chapter two and ten, they were recognisable languages. It is not possible to praise (speak

well of) God without using recognisable speech.

Azusa Street

Pentecostals who want to insist that God is involved in all tongue-speaking, must ignore what Scripture says. This is exactly what happened at Azusa Street. The Pentecostalism of the 20th century owes much to a lively (to put it mildly) Church at Azusa Street Los Angeles under the leadership of William Seymour. Many of the Negroes at that time were known for their emotional extremes in worship services. Seymour, himself a Negro, led a small band of Negroes into the ecstatic tongues experience. The tongues were not languages as in Acts 2, 8, 10 and 19.

Even when the meetings - under the leadership of Seymour - got quite wild, with members of the occult contributing to some of the excesses, and the father of modern pentecostalism - Charles Fox Parham - denouncing what he saw at Azusa Street, the people still insisted that God was involved in the activity. It did not matter to the Azusa Street congregation that tongues in Church without interpretation are condemned in Scripture.

Parham was invited by Seymour to come to Azusa Street to help settle the chaos which reigned supreme at the time. However, Parham failed in that objective.

I believe Parham handled the situation at Azusa Street badly. He should have gently pointed the congregation in the direction of 1 Corinthians 14. By doing so, he could have shown from Scripture that the use of tongues in Church without interpretation is condemned, and why.

To be fair to Parham though, it must be stated that he was shocked by what he saw. The situation at Azusa Street was worse than he had been led to believe. He did not have the time for a carefully planned response. The outcome of his badly handled rebuttal of what was happening was his expulsion from the Azusa Street congregation. The opposition of Parham to the chaos at Azusa Street has the backing of Scripture which says, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (14:33).

Gentiles speak in tongues (Acts 10)

Regarding that great event recorded in chapter ten of Acts where Gentiles received the baptism of the Holy Spirit for the first time, and spoke in tongues, Scripture says.

"For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.'" (10:46-47).

The NIV footnote to 'speaking in tongues' (v 46) says 'or other languages'. Other languages is the logical understanding of this phrase because Peter has recognised that the Gentiles have received the same experience as the apostles received in Acts two where they spoke in languages, hence his comment, 'just as we have'.

Also, the Scripture says they praised God (v 46). Praising God, which means speaking well of God requires speech which is understood. Quite clearly, they were not uttering an incomprehensible emotionally edifying babel.

It is important that the Gentiles receive the same experience as the apostles when they were baptised in the Holy Spirit for the first time. If they had merely spoken in a babel, then there would have been some suspicion among

the doubting Jews that their experience was from God. We should not think for a moment that causing people to speak in another language is such a difficult thing for God that he could only do it once in Acts chapter two.

Do not forbid speaking in tongues

The apostle says, "... do not forbid speaking in tongues (14:39). Please note that he does not use the phrase 'a tongue' referring to ecstatic speech as in verse two. He uses the word 'tongues' plural, referring to languages. Languages are helpful in Church for clearly presenting the message to all language groups.

Tongues of angels

Before closing, I will step out of the chapter fourteen boundary and deal with the first verse in chapter thirteen which has been used by Pentecostals to claim they have the tongues of angels. The verse says, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels..."

Please note that Paul is putting forward a hypothetical situation in this verse and the next couple of verses. He is not saying that speaking in the tongues of angels is something that he actually does. Note the word 'if'. We do not find a single incident in Scripture of an angel speaking to people in a language that is not known to them.

Conversely, there is no evidence from Scripture of a person speaking in the language of an angel. Linguists point out that the tongue (ecstatic speech) which has been spoken by Pentecostals, does not have the structure of a language.

Summary

The plain teaching of Scripture is that those who seek a spiritual gift should seek and cultivate a gift which is of benefit to the Church. Little emphasis should be placed on gifts which are of a small personal benefit only.

End Notes

1. W. E. Vine, "*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*", Oliphants, London, 1973, p. 221.
2. Spiros Zodhiates, "*Speaking In Tongues and Public Worship*", AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, USA, 1997, p. 60.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version ©. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

David Holden

Copyright
December 2000

Aletheia Publishing
Box 641
Albany Creek 4035
AUSTRALIA
www.defenceofthefaitth.org