

## Four Points About Tongues from 1 Corinthians 14

Scripture: Isaiah 28:11; 1 Corinthians 14:9–40

Code: B131111

A goodly portion of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians is focused on correcting that congregation's abuse of spiritual gifts—tongues in particular. The whole theme of the apostle's admonition about how the gifts were to function is neatly summarized in 1 Corinthians 14:40: "All things should be done decently and in order." Along the way, it's hard to miss the stress the apostle places on that which *edifies*. The point Paul makes repeatedly is that the gifts should always be used in a way that enlightens and instructs the mind. "I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:19).

That principle has been largely ignored—and often diametrically opposed—in the doctrine and practice of the modern charismatic movement. The real point of 1 Corinthians 14 is often buried under endless arguments about the exegetical nuances of that passage. I want to take a more big-picture perspective of the text and point out a few of that chapter's most important ideas.

### 1. "Tongues" were real languages.

Paul is clearly no proponent of any kind of "speech that is not intelligible" (1 Corinthians 14:9). Sounds and syllables without meaning are of no use whatsoever. "There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning" (1 Corinthians 14:10). Throughout the chapter, he is talking about real languages with *real meaning*. The ecstatic gibberish of the modern charismatic movement does not even fit the apostle's definition of a language.

Furthermore, he says in verse 11, "If . . . I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me" (NASB). All true language has a meaning, and if the meaning cannot be understood, it sounds like the noises of a troglodyte. If the tongue is merely gibberish and has no translatable message, it is actually worse than a savage tongue.

So Paul insists that whenever tongues are spoken, *they should be translated*. Verse 13: "One who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret." And verses 27-28: "If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God."

In other words, if someone is authentically speaking in tongues, the utterance contains a message, and the message must be translated for those who hear. Even if the tongues-speaker is praying alone and no one else is around to hear, he is to pray that he may interpret.

Paul was *not* authorizing the use of tongues as a private prayer language, as some charismatics claim. But let's lay that issue aside for the moment and simply point out that whenever tongues is spoken, whether in public or in private, whether in prophecy or in prayer, an interpretation is always to be sought.

## 2. Speaking in tongues is not supposed to be a mystical exercise that bypasses the mind.

Paul's overriding message throughout this whole chapter is that everything done in the public worship service is supposed to be edifying to the hearers. That is his key point. He is calling for intelligibility. He is appealing for clarity. When we say something in public worship, the people in the congregation need to *understand* the message.

Go through this passage and notice how many times the apostle uses terms like *understanding*, *edification*, and *the mind*. A lot of Christians in the post-charismatic era have the utterly false notion that true spirituality is something that bypasses the intellect and operates mysteriously in the soul. That opinion has more in common with Hinduism than with true Christianity. Genuine Christianity is not anti-intellectual. We do not believe that the mind is a detriment to spirituality. In fact, we believe true spirituality involves being transformed by the renewing of our *minds*. We are sanctified by the *truth*, and truth is something we apprehend primarily with our minds.

The notion that the intellect is to be switched off while we seek some form of mentally disengaged spiritual ecstasy is an utterly false notion. If that is your idea of spirituality, then you might as well join the swaying mobs at the Kali temple in Calcutta who have done just that: they have switched off their minds in pursuit of spiritual euphoria.

Here Paul is telling us that the primary purpose of spiritual gifts is for *edification*. And by "edification," he means the building up of the *mind* through a better understanding of the truth. If you do a study on the Greek word *oikodomeo* (which is translated *edify* in verses 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, and 26), you will find that almost everywhere this word appears in the New Testament, it speaks of building up the understanding. A person is "edified" in the biblical sense when the *mind* is enriched with truth and understanding.

That is why Paul insists that utterances in other tongues must be translated. What good is a message that bypasses the minds of the hearers? We don't grow spiritually through subliminal means. We are sanctified when the truth is applied to our minds and our minds are transformed.

Matthew Henry writes, "Even an apostle could not edify, unless he spoke so as to be understood by his hearers. To speak words that have no meaning to those who hear them, is but speaking into the air. . . . There can be no assent to prayers that are not understood. A truly Christian minister will seek much more to do spiritual good to men's souls, than to get the greatest applause to himself."

When we have a message for the assembly of God's people, the sound must be distinct. The *message*, not the *language*, is the key to the gift of tongues. The Holy Spirit does not gift people with languages just to make interesting noises. There's a message to be conveyed, just like on Pentecost, when the wonderful works of God were proclaimed in the hearer's native tongues. And notice this carefully: Regardless of your position on the charismatic movement, you must ultimately confess that Scripture demands that tongues-speakers remain silent, unless the message they have to convey is going to be understood by the people who are present to hear. Verse 28: "If there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent."

I know of few charismatic churches where people are taught to be submissive to that command.

There's a charismatic church not far from where I live that is one of the largest in America. Every Sunday morning in their worship service, they have a time at the end of the pastoral prayer when everyone in the church is invited to "worship the Lord" aloud. Most do so by speaking in tongues simultaneously. It produces exactly the kind of chaotic environment Paul warns against in verse 23: "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?"

### **3. It is wrong to allow the church service to become chaotic.**

Some charismatics delight in precisely the sort of chaos Paul condemns here. The so-called "Toronto Blessing" virtually conferred liturgical significance on chaos and noise in many charismatic churches. I visited a world-famous charismatic church at the height of the Toronto hysteria, and much of the service consisted of unbelievable chaos.

The preacher that night contradicted virtually every one of the principles laid out in 1 Corinthians 14. He cautioned people against using their minds and their doctrinal convictions to evaluate what they were about to see. He said, "God wants to reach your heart, not your mind. It is not necessary for you to have a rational understanding of what is going on here." He encouraged people to speak in tongues simultaneously, even though no one interpreted any of those utterances. And he finally turned the meeting over to absolute chaos, unleashing a frenzy of noise and activity in the name of the Holy Spirit.

Can God possibly be behind such phenomena? The Bible answers that question with a definitive *no*. Verse 33 says, "God is *not* a God of confusion." Such chaotic displays in the churches must not be attributed to Him. The Word of God speaks with the utmost clarity on this. In more familiar King James terminology, "God is not the *author* of confusion." He is neither glorified nor pleased where chaos and confusion reign.

### **4. Tongues are a sign to unbelievers.**

In verse 22, Paul writes, "Tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers." Here he contrasts tongues with prophecy, which he says is meant for believers.

What is his point? Simple: *Prophecy* involved a message from God in a language everyone understood. The message conveyed in *tongues* was intelligible only to those who understood the language.

Remember, *all* the languages a tongues-speaker used were Gentile languages. Hebrew was the Jewish language, and Aramaic was a first-century variation of Hebrew. All other tongues were Gentile languages.

The fact that God would give inspired truth in a Gentile tongue was itself significant. At Pentecost it was remarkable enough to hear the disciples speaking in languages that were not their own. But to the first-century Hebrew ear it would have been equally amazing to hear them proclaiming truth about Jehovah in Gentile tongues. That is something no true Israelite would ever do.

Jews in first-century Israel often spoke Greek, of course, because that was the common language of

commerce. Some of them also spoke Latin, and many other dialects. But when they came to the Temple, when they rehearsed the wonderful works of God, or (above all) when they prayed, they prayed in Hebrew, because that was deemed the language of God and His people.

The gift of tongues changed all that. For the first time ever, inspired truth was revealed by God in languages other than Hebrew. This in and of itself was a remarkable sign, not only to the unbelieving Gentile hearers, but also to the unbelieving Jews.

And for the unbelieving Jews, it was a sign of judgment to come. Isaiah 28:11 contains this promise about the Messiah: "By people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the Lord will speak to this people." The apostle Paul paraphrases that verse in 1 Corinthians 14:21, just before saying that tongues are a sign to unbelievers. His primary meaning, then, is that tongues are a sign of *judgment* against the unbelieving Israelites and a token of divine grace to the Gentile unbelievers who hear the message in their own tongues.

So again we see that the gift of tongues was God's declaration that the wall of partition had been broken down. Although the oracles of God had once been committed to the Jewish race alone, now the message about God's wonderful works would extend to every nation, people, and tribe. That was the primary significance of the gift of tongues. It was never intended to be a Babel of noise that no one, including the speaker, understood.

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