

Tongues

1 Corinthians 14:1–40

It seems that if there was something that could be done wrong, the Corinthians did it. There were many believers in the congregation, but they had a very poor grasp on how to apply grace principles to their lives. Instead of embracing Paul's teaching, they were following personalities such as Peter, Jesus, Apollos, etc. Since they didn't take Paul's doctrine as seriously as they should, they didn't know what the Lord expected from them. This same concept applies to believers today. Many follow the sayings of the earthly Jesus instead of the doctrine that Jesus Christ gave to Paul following His resurrection and glorification. Once Israel turned away from God's appeal for them to come into the Kingdom, as marked by the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7), Israel was temporarily set aside and God began dealing directly with the Gentile nations through the Apostle Paul. It seems quite strange that people somehow think the things taught by the earthly Jesus were more important than the teaching given to Paul by the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. Those who ignore Paul's teachings are ignoring God's will for their lives and thus they will never be able to live a life pleasing to Him.

The Corinthians were so enamored by other teachers (the people, not the teaching) that they set aside the doctrine given to them by Paul in the past. They failed to deal with sin within their church, they failed to understand how we were to use this great freedom believers have in Christ, they failed to unite in their celebration of the Lord's Supper, and they failed in the proper use of the spiritual gifts. All of this division was a result of not embracing Pauline doctrine.

Paul spends three chapters explaining to the Corinthians how they were to use the spiritual gifts given to the church. These gifts were given to them by the Holy Spirit and were to be used in love for each other for the edification and building up of the entire church body. Instead, they were using the gifts for personal gain and bragging rights.

Purpose of the gift of tongues

There are two possible purposes for spiritual gifts. Some of the gifts were given for the edification of the church. The gifts were generally given for obtaining and preserving doctrine. One gift, tongues, is specifically called a sign gift. In this Dispensation of Grace it is not a sign of salvation, as some teach (Mark 16:17), nor is it a demonstration of the special filling of the Holy Spirit. Some even teach that we are to use the gift of tongues to edify ourselves, a perversion of Jude 20 which encourages Jewish believers going through the Tribulation to build themselves up in the faith, not in themselves. Tongues was given as a sign to the nation of Israel for unbelieving Jews (1 Corinthians 14:22; Exodus 10:2; Numbers 14:11).

Paul thanks God in his letter to the Corinthians that he had spoke more in tongues than all of them. His point was that speaking in tongues is worthless if the hearer is not able to understand the words. Five words of understanding is better than 10,000 unintelligible words. Other gifts such as prophecy and knowledge are so much more important than tongues that he chides the Corinthians for emphasizing the use of tongues. Charismatic churches today need to read past the early books of Acts to see what God thinks about speaking in tongues today. He compared them to children who needed to grow up. The reason Paul was thankful to be able to speak in tongues because it allowed him to disseminate the gospel in regions that spoke different languages (2 Corinthians 10:16; Romans 15:18). This same gift will allow the Jews in the Millennial Kingdom to witness to the Gentile world (Zechariah 8:23).

Anyone can speak convincing gibberish with a little practice, which is why people today need to practice speaking in tongues. A true gift of tongues was one that was enabled by the Holy Spirit so that a person could speak in a verifiable language without any training. If a person strings together a bunch of

nonsensical syllables, something that anyone can do with practice, that is not a gift from the Holy Spirit. If a person is able to speak in a language that he has never heard before, that would be a true supernatural gift of tongues which should impress even the most hard-hearted Pharisee. The fact that Charismatics fail to try speaking in another earthly language almost proves their “gift” is not from God. If the gibberish spoken by those claiming to speak in tongues today were an actual language, it would be possible for linguists to study the phonics and construct meaning to these syllable groupings, and come up with a vocabulary. Recording what was spoken and comparing that to the interpretation of what is said should make it fairly easy to codify the new language. Doing so would make it possible for anyone to understand and speak “heaven talk.” Of course, that will never happen.

Language of heaven

Charismatics almost always say they are speaking a heavenly language when they are speaking in tongues. The idea of a special heavenly language is taken from one verse in 1 Corinthians 13:1 in which Paul states that speaking in the tongues of men or angels without love is just noise. There is no indication that the tongues of angels is a heavenly language. In fact, as far as we know, almost any time angels did speak, it was in Hebrew. Even the voice that came out of heaven to Paul while traveling on the road to Damascus (Jesus Christ) was in Hebrew, even though Paul understood a number of languages (Acts 26:14).

This passage in 1 Corinthians 13:1 shows Paul setting up a supposition that if he were to speak all known languages in heaven and on earth, it would mean nothing unless he spoke them out of love. The Greek word translated as tongue (G1100 glossa) means language. This is a reference to a known language, but perhaps unknown to the hearer, as opposed to one that is completely unknown to anyone on the planet. Some translations add the word *unknown* in front of the word *tongue* (1 Corinthians 14:2, 4, 13, 14, 19, 27). The word *unknown* is not found in any of the original Greek manuscripts, and instead of clarifying it muddles the intended meaning. The language being spoken by a person with the gift of tongues is a known language, but is one that is unknown to the speaker. The so-called angelic language would be one that is unknown, but Paul never talks about being able to speak a language that is completely unknown to any human. Any reference to tongues in the Bible is consistently a reference to a known language.

Paul acknowledges that tongues are spoken, earthly languages in 1 Corinthians 14:10–11. He says that when he hears someone speaking in a voice (language) that he cannot understand then he will seem to be a barbarian to the speaker, and the speaker will be a barbarian to Paul. A barbarian is anyone who does not speak Hebrew or Greek (Romans 1:14; Colossians 3:11). The people on the island of Malta are an example of barbarians (Acts 28:1–2). These instructions on the use of tongues makes the most sense when taken in the context of the whole book of 1 Corinthians. This is a book of rebuke for how the Corinthians were handling themselves. When Paul spoke to them about the Lord’s Supper, he was not instructing them (or us), rather, he was rebuking them for their behavior. The same can be said about the use of tongues. Paul is not training us on how to use the gift of tongues, rather he is admonishing them for misusing the gift. Those who were given the gift did not need to practice using it, they did need training on how to use tongues in the proper way.

Rules for using the gift of tongues

It seems obvious that the Corinthians were misusing the gift of tongues. They were used to puff up the speaker, and in a manner that created much chaos and confusion in the church (1 Corinthians 14:40). The notion that the person speaking in tongues does so in an almost uncontrolled and chaotic manner is contrary to scripture. Those who had the gift could control when they used the gift. Just as we are able to

control what we say in our own language, those with the gift of tongues were commanded to control what and when they spoke, and to do so only under certain conditions. Proper use of tongues:

1. Tongues were to be used as a sign for unbelieving Israel so they would know that God was working through the church (1 Corinthians 14:20–22). The proper use of tongues could lead Jews to Christ, if their hearts were not so hardened. The improper use would very likely turn them away. God was still reaching out to Jews with the Gospel of Grace during the Acts period (Acts 13:46; Romans 1:16). Tongues would also edify the church if an interpreter was present (1 Corinthians 14:12–14). The use of tongues is not to be used to edify the person using it. 1 Corinthians 14:4 is a rebuke against the Corinthians who were doing just that.
2. They were not to seek (or elevate) the lesser gift of tongues over other gifts (1 Corinthians 12:28–31). The greater gifts were ones that proclaimed, disseminated, and preserved doctrine. These were the greater gifts that the Corinthian church were told to think more highly of.
3. Only two or three were to speak during the church service (1 Corinthians 14:27). This was a controlled use of the gifts. Those who had the gift were able to speak or be silent. They were not uncontrollably made to speak by the power of the Holy Spirit.
4. Those with the gift of tongues were to make sure that there was an interpreter in the congregation before speaking. They were to remain silent if there were no interpreter. This is because the one speaking a foreign language would not be understood by anyone. It would be a waste of time.
5. Women were not to speak in tongues (or prophecy) in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34). This passage has been twisted to say that Paul commanded that women should never speak while in church. The context is in the use of the spiritual gifts. Women can have great insight into spiritual matters and much would be lost if they were never allowed to speak. Paul often made use of women in his ministry (Romans 16:1, 6, 12, 13, 15). However, women are never to have a leadership role over men (1 Timothy 2:12–13), which includes becoming a pastor of a church (an overseer must be the husband of one wife—1 Timothy 3:2).
6. Tongues, and all other things, must be done decently and in an orderly manner (1 Corinthians 14:39).

Paul's use of tongues

Tongues were used by Paul to overcome language barriers so that he could bring the gospel to all Gentiles. They were to be used carefully and judiciously so as to benefit the whole body of believers. Paul made it clear to the Corinthians that these spiritual gifts were soon to pass away so that when that happened (perhaps within the next 5 years or so), they would not become distressed over these changes. There was no need for spiritual gifts once Scripture was all written and assembled. The Bible was brought together most likely by the apostles who were alive along with Paul. As Scripture was written, the apostles knew instantly that it was Scripture (2 Peter 3:15–16). These apostles would be most capable of assembling the whole canon of Scripture as soon as it was written. Most people assume that this task required a special council of early church fathers to decree what books were and were not Scripture more than 300 years after the last book of the Bible was penned. I believe the work of the apostles in bringing together the word of God was lost because of religion and the tradition of men. Many who were called church fathers were not even saved, and many became mystical in their beliefs. Even though the canon of Scripture had become the victim of church tradition, God still preserved His word, as He promised He would do.

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