

XXVII. A Requiem for Tongues

February 4/6, 2014

1 Corinthians 14:13-25

Aim: To understand that while the spiritual gift of tongues has passed away, the ministry of the word of God to edify believers and evangelize unbelievers continues.

A. Tongues Require Interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:13-19)

1. Tongues and Interpretation (14:13)

¹³*Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.*

Following Paul's main point that the edification of the congregation is the criterion by which the use of any gifts in the assembly is to be ordered, the logical deduction is that any tongues-speaker who uses the gift in public 'should pray for the power to interpret.' That is the only way in which the utterance can be of any use to his fellow worshipers.

The tongues-speaker must 'pray' for the capacity to 'interpret' what he says: only if his prayer is answered will his language(s) be intelligible and therefore beneficial to others. Should he be denied this further gift, he is to be silent.

2. Tongues and Oneself (14:14-15)

¹⁴*For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.* ¹⁵*What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.*

In these verses Paul uses the first person singular ('I') to assume the role of the tongues-speaker so as to teach the Corinthian tongues-speakers what to do. The problem for the speaker of an uninterpreted tongue is that his mind is detached from his spirit (emotions). As a result, his mind is 'unfruitful' and has no understanding of the sounds coming from his lips. But the mind is critical to human well-being, including spiritual well-being. The mind must not be separated from the spirit.

A distinction is drawn between the spirit and the mind. In the use of tongues, whether in prayer or song, Paul sees his human spirit as active under the influence of the Holy Spirit, but describes the mind as 'unfruitful.' That is probably exactly how the pagan religions would have regarded ecstatic utterance. With the basic dualism of spirit and body so entrenched in Greek thinking, their inclination was to believe that the more out of body and mind the devotee became – the more wholly given over to the spirit in religious ecstasy – the deeper and more to be admired was the experience. After all, the pure spirit was imprisoned throughout its existence in the body, of which the mind was a part, sealed up in an envelope of clay from which it longed to escape. Whenever therefore an ecstatic spiritual experience could overcome the down-drag of physicality, there was given a taste of immortality. Many of the Corinthians seem to have transported this sort of thinking, quite uncritically into their new Christian life-style, and this would explain why they were so taken up with *glossolalia*. The effect of Paul's teaching would be to move them in a totally opposite direction.

It certainly seems impossible that 'spirit' here refers to the Holy Spirit, as some charismatics believe-His Spirit being manifested through our spirits. The Holy Spirit could not be praying

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through a person while bypassing his mind. And he certainly was not saying that the mind of the Holy Spirit sometimes can be unfruitful. The apostle has to be speaking entirely of himself, and that hypothetically. ‘If I, though an apostle, were to speak the gibberish that man of you speak, my mind would have no part in it.’ What is the outcome then? The answer is that there is no place for mindless ecstatic prayer. Praying and singing with the spirit must be accompanied by praying and singing with the mind also. It is obvious that edification cannot exist apart from the mind. Spirituality involves more than the mind, but it never excludes the mind.

3. Tongues and the Outsider (14:16-17)

¹⁶*Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.*

Now Paul goes back to addressing other tongues-speakers, drawing to their attention the effects of uninterpreted tongues on an ‘outsider’ who happens to be present. ‘Outsider’ translates the Greek *idiotes*, which means ‘uninitiated’ or ‘unlearned.’ Our English word ‘idiot’ is derived from this word, which in Paul’s day was used of someone unskilled and untrained who was not a member of a trade guild, a ‘layman.’ ‘Outsider’ or ‘ungifted’ would better be translated in its usual sense of ignorant, unlearned, or unskilled. A person who is ignorant of a language being spoken cannot possibly understand what he hears.

Clearly it was not unusual for ‘outsiders’ to attend meetings of the Christians; the first believers were not exclusive brethren. But if the speaker offers a ‘thanksgiving’ (*eucharistia*) in a tongue, the ‘outsider’ will not be able to give his ‘Amen’ to the prayer. Again we hear Paul’s concern for the place of the mind, previously the speaker’s in verses 14-15 but not also the hearer’s.

Those who do not understand, because they do not know what is being said, cannot add their ‘Amen,’ even though the thanksgiving is of the finest spiritual quality. ‘Amen’ is a Hebrew word of agreement and encouragement, meaning ‘So let it be,’ and was commonly used by worshipers in the synagogue. The practice carried over into some early Christian churches, and, in fact, is common in many churches today. A person cannot know when to ‘Amen,’ however, if he does not know what is being said.

The Corinthian who gives thanks ‘splendidly’ (*kalōs*) in a non-translated tongue – Paul is being ironic – senses that he is heard by God. Yet excellent though the prayer may be, the apostle is disconsolate in that ‘the other person’ does not understand and therefore cannot be ‘edified.’ The unknown tongue should have been held in check.

4. Tongues and Paul (14:18-19)

¹⁸*I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

Paul’s statement in verse 18 ensures that the Corinthians realize that he is not undervaluing or dismissing one of God’s gracious gifts. In the last verse of the chapter he will reiterate that his purpose is not to forbid speaking in tongues, but to regulate it. He wants to keep it in its proper context and not to give to it an exaggerated role or importance.

Paul is grateful because he can thank God in other tongues – and thanks God that he can thank God in this fashion ‘more than you all.’ The latter assertion is amazing. The disclosure in verse

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18 is that, in addition to the languages that he had learnt from childhood onwards. Paul himself spoke in very many endowed tongues. If, then, the Corinthians enumerate the many languages granted them by the Spirit for their edification, their total will be far less than those granted by the Lord to Paul. Alternatively, he may mean that he speaks in tongues much more frequently than his readers, exercising his gift both privately, and – with translation – in the presence of others. Either way, the Spirit has blessed him to an exceptional degree.

Paul made it clear that he was not condemning true tongues or enviously criticizing a gift he did not himself possess. Paul was no longer speaking hypothetically. He had more experience than any of the Corinthians in speaking in tongues, though we have no record of a specific instance. He knew what the proper use of the true gift involved and did not involve. We can be sure that he did not use the gift in any perverted way for personal gratification. He may have used it as it was used at Pentecost, to bring a supernatural message to those God wanted to reach, and as a miraculous sign verifying the gospel and his apostolic authority. Yet he considered that gift so low in value as compared to his other gifts and ministries that in none of his writings does he mention a specific use of it by him or any other believer.

Ten thousand, a ‘myriad’ (*myrios*), was the largest arithmetical unit of the period. Paul was not speaking of an exact mathematical ratio; *myrios* was commonly used to indicate an inestimable number (cp. Rev. 5:11 – ‘myriads of myriads’ of angels; i.e., ‘infinity times infinity’). The apostle states that although he can at will speak countless words in any of the very many languages at his disposal, he does not choose to do so. ‘Yet’ (*alla*) is emphatic: although he has been given so much, he will not parade even one of these tongues when in the company of others, the reason being that there can be no advantage for the ‘church’; no one will learn anything from him.

Clarity is all-important, which is why he introduces ‘instruct’ (*katēcheō*, whence ‘catechism’), suggesting a teacher-pupil link: because the church must be taught, non-translated languages have to be suppressed.

By identifying with them as a tongues-speaker Paul is able to drive home the need for tongues to be made intelligible in church. Otherwise tongues begin and end with the speaker. In short, uninterpreted tongues-speaking has no place in the church.

B. Tongues Are A Sign for Unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:20-25)

1. The Rebuke of Paul (14:20)

²⁰*Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.*

Within their family relationship of brotherhood, Paul begins by delivering quite a stunning rebuke. From the evidence of this letter it is clear that many of the Corinthians did not consider themselves to be spiritually mature. Their spectacular gifts tempted them to think that they were spectacular people, to the extent that some of them were quite happy to criticize Paul’s ministry as unimpressive and below par for a trendy, sharp-edged place like Corinth. But throughout the letter Paul has been presenting evidence of their childishness, not in order to score points over them, but to change their lives.

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Paul now urges grown up (or ‘mature’ – *teleioi*) attitudes, except in matters of evil. Is he now saying that tongues, because they have no ministry to the mind, are childish and contribute nothing to our maturity? Is he saying that prophesying, because it is intelligible, builds up our minds to spiritual adulthood? In this allusive language Paul seems to be criticizing uninterpreted tongues-speaking. In short, he appears to give preference to adult prophesying over childish tongues-speaking.

The Greek word translated ‘adults’ is *teleioi*, ‘complete’ or ‘perfect,’ and ‘understanding’ (*phrēn*) is the ability to see a situation in its true light. Childishly, they grossly overvalue the temporary gift of tongues, not choosing to see beyond their immediate situation, a superficial estimation that reflects a malicious sense of superiority.

It was their loveless immaturity and carnality that caused their theological, spiritual, and moral problems, including their misuse and counterfeiting of spiritual gifts. Before they could comprehend what the apostle was trying to say, they would have to stop being children in their thinking. In evil the Corinthians were anything but babes. They were highly advanced in every sort of sin.

There may be an acceptable naiveté, or infancy, with regard to evil. Christians do not need to delve into every kind of evil in order to repudiate it. For example, they did not have to attend a pagan orgy in a Corinthian temple in order to understand why they should not attend a pagan orgy! There are plenty of contemporary parallels in today’s culture, where a little more Christian innocence might not come amiss.

Paul’s demand is that they must grow up, and so verse 20 stresses that the area in which change must come is in their minds, or thinking. The battle is always for the mind. Children are not profound thinkers; they do not yet possess the mental abilities. They love movement, noise, anything exciting and unusual. But what is appropriate for childhood is not so in adult life. ‘Grow up!’ is Paul’s message to them and to us.

Many Christians today have a childish mentality, impressed by sensation and spectacle, swayed by manipulative music, susceptible to sentiment and suggestion. They would rather be made to feel than to think. They prefer their emotions to be stirred, rather than their thinking to be changed.

2. The Sign of Tongues (14:21-23)

a) *The Record in the Law (14:21)*

²¹*In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.”*

[DSB note: compare the original judgment of foreign languages at Babel in Genesis 11].

Paul explains to them the true purpose of tongues, by stretching his reader’s thinking. He begins with a freely rendered passage from Isaiah 28:11-12 that he describes as written ‘in the Law,’ his shorthand term for the Old Testament. Hundreds of years before Christ, the Lord told Israel that one day He would ‘speak to this people by strange tongues’ from ‘the lips of strangers.’ Despite this miraculous sign, however, she would ‘not listen to Me.’ It is a strange quotation at first reading because it seems as if God is sending unintelligible messages and then rebuking Israel for not listening to Him, even though it was impossible for them to understand the words declared.

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When we put the quotation in its original context however, we discover that it was a prophesy of judgment. When Isaiah was called, he was warned by God that his message would be rejected by his contemporaries (Is. 6:10). That is exactly what happened and by chapter 28, in the two verses preceding the ones quoted by Paul, we find the people mocking Isaiah and accusing him of bring a message suitable only for a nursery. ‘Who is he trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?’ Then they parody his message and reduce it to the level of a nursery rhyme – ‘line upon line, line upon line’ (see Is. 28:9-10). It is in response to this determined unbelief and flagrant rejection of His word by unbelieving Israel, that God declared His word of judgment, quoted here. They had not listened to His word through Isaiah in their own language that they *could* understand, so He would send the invading armies of Babylon, speaking a language they did not comprehend, to bring His judgment upon their unbelief and sweep them away. In its context, therefore, the unknown tongues were not God’s blessing to a faithful congregation, but His sharp, corrective judgment on their unbelief.

The northern kingdom of Israel was conquered and overrun by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The prophet Isaiah warned the southern kingdom of Judah that the same judgment as had befallen their northern sister also awaited here at the hands of the Babylonians. The proud religious leaders of Judah would not listen to Isaiah. His teaching was too simple. He talked to them, they claimed, as if they were babies, ‘Those just weaned from milk’ and ‘just taken from the breast.’ He taught them as if they were kindergarteners: ‘Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there’ (Is. 28:9-10). God had indeed spoken to them simply, in order that the least mature among them could understand and so that no Israelite would have an excuse for not knowing the Lord’s will and promise. Yet Israel did not listen. About 800 years before Isaiah, God had given Israel the same warning through Moses (Dt. 28:49). The strange language of their conquerors would be a sign of God’s judgment. About 100 years after Isaiah, the Lord gave the same warning through Jeremiah (Jer. 5:15). The sign of judgment would be a language they could not understand.

Although Paul modifies Isaiah’s text, prophet and apostle both claim that unknown languages cannot generate faith in their hearers (cp. 14:23-25). Moses warned that if Israel remained unfaithful to the Sinai covenant, Yahweh would in time evict them from Canaan, doing so through foreign invasion; barbarous soldiers mouthing strange languages would overrun them (Dt. 28:49). This actually happened. Isaiah 28:7-10 presents the spectacle of drunken priests ridiculing what was for them the infantile prophetic word. Very well, retorts Isaiah, God will speak to Israel through a foreign army and by the destruction they bring. The unknown language of alien soldiers heard in the heartland of Judah will advertise God’s curse upon Israel (Is. 28:15).

To illustrate the principle that tongues are a sign for unbelievers (see v. 22), Paul quotes a couple of verses from Isaiah in which God said he would speak to the people of Israel with ‘other tongues.’ The people of Isaiah’s day had consistently rejected God’s demand for repentance. God decided, therefore, to bring the Babylonians in to carry His people away captive. When the Jews heard the Babylonian tongue, a language they did not understand, they would know the prophets were right and God’s judgment was coming upon them for their unbelief! The tramp of the invading enemy and their harsh guttural sounds speak only of doom.

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b) *The Reason for Tongues (14:22)*

²²*Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.*

Those ‘strange tongues,’ Paul says, are what you now know and experience as the gift of languages. God has given that gift as ‘a sign, not to those who believer, but to unbelievers.’ Here is the heart of chapter 14 and the most important truth about this phenomenon: it was given as a sign, and as a sign to unbelievers, specifically unbelieving Jews, the unbelievers among this people. *The gift of tongues was given solely as a sign to unbelieving Israel.*

Paul now applies the principle of judgment quoted from Isaiah to unbelievers who find themselves in a Christian meeting, at Corinth, or anywhere else. The believers who wanted to major on tongues would have argued, almost certainly, that this sign of the supernatural would be the overwhelming evidence to their unbelieving friends, of the reality of God and of His presence among His people. Paul’s view is different. He agrees that they are a sign, but in a negative, not a positive way, because, as in Isaiah 28, they are a sign of judgment. Verse 23 traces the thought through for an unbeliever encountering tongues.

In the second half of this verse, Paul turns the coin over and examines the alternative. The gift of prophecy is designed to benefit the church, to build up the believers (14:3-4). In that intelligible prophecy is an evidence of God’s favor to His people, it follows that the church needs to be more zealous for prophecy than has been the case. If they desire to learn more of Christ, let their prophets be granted room.

‘Is for a sign’ applied to prophecy is not in the original Greek text and is supplied by the translators. According to Greek grammar such a meaning is possible, but it is not required. Because prophesying is nowhere else spoken of as a sign, it is likely not Paul’s meaning here. He was not saying that prophecy is a sign to believers as tongues was a sign to unbelievers. Prophecy is given’ to those who believe, and is not given as a sign pointing to something else but for edification in itself (vv. 4, 31).

(1) The Response at Pentecost

Even though God used the gift of tongues for evangelism on the Day of Pentecost, that was not their only purpose. The thing that so often escapes our notice is the fact that there was no inherent need for the gifts of tongues even on Pentecost. Yes, there were people there from various nations, but keep in mind that these people were Jews and could in all probability still understand the Jewish language (Acts 2:5). The Jews who came to Jerusalem from other nations were, in other words, people of two languages. They could speak the language of the nation in which they were born. These scattered Jews could still understand the Jewish language. Their national pride demanded that they keep their native tongue alive even though they were living far from their homeland.

Here then is the great question. Why did God enable the disciples to speak to these Jews in foreign languages? Why didn’t He have the disciples preach in the one language everybody there could understand – the Jewish tongue? The answer is given in this passage by Paul – tongues are a sign for unbelievers.

Isaiah’s day was not the last time the people of Israel rejected God’s message. God spoke even more clearly and decisively to the people of Israel when He sent His Son, Jesus Christ. And

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what did they do? Like their forefathers, they refused to believe God's clear and distinct message and then they crucified the Savior.

Fifty days passed and Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Suddenly, the religious leaders of Jerusalem began to hear a strange sound – men speaking in foreign languages! Yes, the Jews from the various nations understood their own languages, but the Jerusalem leaders heard nothing but gibberish! What was it all about? Just like in Isaiah's day, the foreign languages they heard were the sign that God's judgment for their rejection of His Son was near! The fact that they were hearing Gentile languages right there in Jerusalem on that day was God's way of telling them He had set the nation of Israel aside and He was going to call out of the Gentiles a people for Himself. A few short years after they heard these foreign languages on the Day of Pentecost, God's devastating judgment fell. In AD 70, the Romans attacked Jerusalem and completely demolished the city and the temple.

When the apostles spoke at Pentecost and were heard in their own language by Jews from many countries (Acts 2:7-11), those Jews should have known that God's judgment was imminent. His judgment had fallen on rebellious Israel and then on rebellious Judah. How much more would it fall on those of His people who now had crucified the Son of God? In AD 70 that great judgment fell, when Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the Roman general Titus (later emperor). Over one million Jews were slaughtered; thousands more were taken captive; the Temple was plundered, desecrated, and then utterly destroyed; and the rest of the city was burned to the ground.

(2) The Rejection of the Jews

The gift of tongues, then, was a sign of God's judgment upon the Jewish nation. Since Israel has been set aside and the Gentiles brought in, there is no continuing purpose for the gift. The Corinthians undoubtedly knew about the foreign languages spoken on the Day of Pentecost, but like so many in our own day, they misunderstood the nature of the gift. Instead of understanding it as God's sign of judgment upon unbelieving Israel, they saw it as a token of superior spirituality. So everyone who already knew a tongue began using it in the worship services, and those who didn't know a tongue quickly picked one up. Little did they realize they had chosen to exalt a gift that had been given as a temporary sign of judgment upon Israel, and that by using tongues, they were bringing confusion, not spirituality, into their worship services.

After the destruction of Jerusalem, and especially of the Temple, the reason for tongues ceased to exist. The judgment of which it was a sign had come. In addition to being a sign of judgment against the unbelieving Jewish nation, the gift of tongues was also a sign that God would no longer work through one nation, and favor one people. The church of Jesus Christ was for all peoples of all nations, a church in which there are many languages but no barriers. The sign of tongues was repeated when the Gentiles were included in the church, as recorded in Acts 10:44-46.

Tongues sustain a secondary role in addition to showing that Christ is the Savior of many from every part of a multi-lingual world rather than from Abraham's family alone. The latter truth comes to the fore in Acts 2:1-13; 10:46; 19:6, which tell of Jews and Gentiles speaking in tongues. But glossolalia served also to show that the blessing of God was being withdrawn from ethnic Israel, a 'perverse generation' (Acts 2:40), to be transferred to the Gentiles. Strangers unwelcome to the Jews, were, so to speak, entering into occupation (cp. Mt. 21:41). In short, Paul indicates that a revived sign of judgment upon a disbelieving people should not be seen

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through charismatic rose-tinted spectacles solely as a sign of the grace poured out on the churches, and certainly not as an evidence of superior spirituality.

A third function of the sign of tongues was to demonstrate the authority of the apostles and prophets. Those who preached the judgment and promised the blessing were the apostles and prophets, whose authority was validated by ‘signs and wonders and miracles’ (2 Cor. 12:12; cp. Rom. 15:9). Among the authenticating signs was the gift of tongues, in which Paul spoke ‘more than you all’ (14:18). As a sign, the purpose of tongues ended when that to which it pointed ended. The gift of tongues was attached irretrievably to one point in history, and that point has long been past.

It is interesting and highly significant that no record is given of a single word spoke in tongues or even interpreted. Every reference to tongues is general. They are always mentioned in relation to their purpose and significance, never in relation to their specific content. The messages given in tongues were not new revelations or new insights, but, as at Pentecost, simply unique expressions of old truths, ‘the mighty deeds of God’ (Acts 2:11). Though tongues could edify when interpreted, their purpose was not to teach, but to point, not to reveal God’s truth but to validate the truth of His appointed spokesman. Since the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 there has been no purpose for the sign gift of tongues, because that to which it pointed has been reached and passed.

c) The Response of the Outsider (14:23)

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?*

Paul hypothesizes: let it be supposed that the whole church gathers in one place, that all speak in tongues, and that ‘plain people’ (*idiōtai* = intelligent people but with no experience of tongues-speaking; cp. 14:16) and non-Christians join the congregation. What effect will the phenomenon have upon them? We are told. In Israel, foreign languages achieved nothing useful – and the Corinthian situation is not dissimilar. The visitors discern neither the origin of tongues, nor that they are true languages, nor their significance. Rather, they attribute what they hear to mental imbalance, an appreciation reflecting adversely upon the hearers rather than upon the tongues-speakers. But for Paul the needs of the former come first: let each person present hear something which can be understood.

The unbelievers come in and discover that the whole church is gathered together and everyone is speaking in tongues which they cannot comprehend. How are they going to react? They will not understand anything of the gospel through what they hear, since it is totally unintelligible to them. To them the God of these Christians is totally incomprehensible and so they reject him; they remain in their unbelief and ultimately incur His judgment. The ‘sign’ for them is not one of life or truth, but one of judgment.

Moreover, they will be seriously deterred from ever coming back, because, Paul says, ‘will they not say that you are out of your minds?’ *Mainomai* (‘mad’) means to be in a frenzied rage, to be beside oneself in anger. An unbeliever, Gentile or Jew, would go away from such a service thinking it was just another wild and meaningless ritual, much like those of paganism. So instead of them finding Christ and new life, they find madness and incomprehensibility, and the God of the gospel is maligned. The sign of tongues has simply confirmed them in their unbelief. Though they were not given for edification, tongues were nevertheless to be understood, not cause bewilderment.

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If all the visitor hears is a babble of tongues he will conclude that the assembly of Christians is little different from cults like Dionysus or Cybele whose people raved in unintelligible language. Thus tongues will be a sign not point to and urging belief but unbelief. For the visiting ‘outsider,’ this babble will be an omen of judgment just as the foreign language of the invading Assyrians was an omen of judgment to the people of Israel.

3. The Testimony of Prophecy (14:24-25)

²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

The situation alters if ‘all prophesy’ and ‘an unbeliever’ or ‘plain person’ (as in 14:23, *idiōtēs*, meaning ‘unlearned’ or ‘ignorant’), someone not previously acquainted with prophetic utterances, enters. What he hears are words from God which concern his personal situation, and, most important of all, words that he understands. If the Corinthians exercise the gift of prophecy wisely, the visitor learns about God and about himself. It is as if he realizes that he has been condemned by a court of law.

These judicial verbs indicate that preaching the Word brings men to the conviction that the argument is true, and that they will be judged on the basis of their response. Paul continues to contrast tongues with prophecy, again showing prophecy’s superiority. ‘Prophecy’ is used here in its most general sense of speaking forth God’s Word. When the Word is proclaimed it speaks to men’s hearts and brings conviction of sin, the first step in coming to faith. The church’s most powerful testimony is not in its ecstasies, but in its clear proclamation of the powerful Word of God (Heb. 4:12).

Prophecy is not specifically addressed to unbelievers, but if they come into a meeting where prophecy is central, their reaction is likely to be very different. For now the non-Christian can understand the message, because the language is recognizable and familiar. The meaning is clear. Although the gift is intended primarily for the church, yet as the unbeliever ‘overhears’ the content of God’s self-revelation in the prophecy, it may have a profound effect on him. The gift that is nourishing believers then impacts the unbeliever’s mind through the truth.

Paul’s words, ‘God is among’ them, fulfill Zechariah’s prophecy that in the last days God will gather His people to His Holy City where He will dwell with them. By way of climax He declared that the nations will come to Jerusalem seeking the Lord where they will say to the Jews, ‘God is with you’ (Zech. 8:23). Paul is saying that the words of Zechariah are fulfilled in these, the end times, when the ‘outsider’ visits the Christian assembly, hears the word of God, and falls down before God. For Paul, ancient predictions are being fulfilled, the church at Corinth being seen as part of the Messianic Israel.

In this chapter, Paul has engaged in a lengthy contrast between tongues-speaking and prophesying. His words stand as a strong, theologically based and pastorally realistic affirmation of the centrality of the ministry of the prophetic word of God in the church. Despite all efforts to devise programs for evangelism and outreach, the gathered congregation, in its life and ministry, remains a potent force for gathering in the ‘outsider.’ Churches and their ministers, however, must ensure that the word of the Lord is intelligibly and powerfully taught so that the visitor will indeed say, ‘God is with you.’

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When tongues were misused, there was only confusion, frustration, and bewilderment. Unbelievers were repelled and believers were unedified. But prophecy edifies believers and evangelizes unbelievers. God is honored and men are blessed when His Word is clearly declared. Our desire should be that every service, every activity, everything we say or do in the Lord's name will cause people to say 'God is certainly among you.'

The point is clear. It is prophecy, not tongues, which can move the unbeliever from unbelief to faith, from ignorance to the true knowledge of the living God. The evidences of the reality of God and of His indisputable presence among His people is not in the gift of tongues, but in the powerful proclamation of prophecy; not in ecstatic confusion, but in meaningful communication. To think otherwise is naïve and childish.

There was nothing wrong *per se* with speaking in a foreign language in a worship service as long as the language was interpreted. And there was still the possibility that someone from another land would walk into a service and need to hear the gospel in his own tongue. So Paul doesn't tell the Corinthians to abandon the gift. He does, however, give them certain guidelines to follow in exercising the gifts, and we shall look at these guidelines in the next lesson.

C. Tongues Have Ceased

The gift of tongues ceased by the end of the apostolic age. In the first place, tongues was a sign gift and, as with the gifts of healing and miracles, it ceased to operate when the New Testament was completed. The New Testament miracle age was for the purpose of confirming the Word as given by Jesus and the apostles.

The second evidence that the gift of tongues ended with the apostles is that its purpose as a judicial sign of Israel's judgment ceased to apply at that time. Tongues were not given as a sign to believers 'but to unbelievers' (1 Cor. 14:22), specifically unbelieving Jews. With the destruction of the Temple by the Roman general Titus in AD 70, Judaism ended except as a shadow religion. When that destruction occurred, some 15 years after Paul wrote this epistle, the need for tongues as a judicial sign to Israel had no further value.

Third, tongues ceased because they were an inferior means of edification. When properly interpreted, tongues had the ability to edify in a limited way (1 Cor. 14:5, 12-13; 27-28). But the primary purpose of 1 Corinthians 14 is to show that tongues were an inferior means of communication (vv. 1-12), an inferior means of praise (vv. 13-19), and an inferior means of evangelism (vv. 19-25). Tongues provided limited and inferior edification, whereas prophecy is far superior in every way (vv. 1, 3-6, 24, 29, 31, 39).

Fourth, the gift of tongues has ceased because its purpose as a confirming sign of apostolic authority and doctrine ended when the New Testament was completed.

Fifth, it is reasonable to believe that tongues have ceased because their use is mentioned only in the earlier New Testament books. Most of the books, in fact, do not mention it. Paul mentions it only in this one letter, and James, Peter, John, and Jude make no mention of it at all. Nor does reference to it appear in the book of Acts after 19:6. It seems clear from the New Testament record itself that tongues not only ceased to be an issued but ceased to be practiced well before the end of the apostolic age.

Finally, the gift of tongues has evidently ceased because, since the apostolic age, it has reappeared only spasmodically and questionably throughout nineteen centuries of church history.

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The gift of tongues is nowhere alluded to or found in any of the writings of the church Fathers (e.g., Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Origen). Chrysostom, perhaps the greatest of the post-New Testament writers, lived from 347 until 407. Writing on 1 Corinthians 12 he states that tongues and the other miraculous gifts not only had ceased but could not even be accurately defined. Augustine in his comments on Acts 2:4, wrote, ‘In the earliest times the Holy Spirit fell on them that believed, and they spoke with tongues. These were signs adapted to that time, for there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit. That thing was done for betokening and it passed away.’

Apparently no other tongues speaking was practiced in Christianity beyond the movement of Montanus, a second-century heretic, until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it appeared in several Roman Catholic groups in Europe (Cevenols and Jansenists) and among the Shakers in New England. The nineteenth century Irvingites of London were marked by unbiblical claims of revelations and by ‘tongues-speak.’ For over 1800 years the gift of tongues, along with the other miracle gifts, was unknown in the life and doctrine of orthodox Christianity. Then, around the turn of the twentieth century, tongues became a major emphasis within the holiness movement, a large section of which developed into modern Pentecostalism. The charismatic movement, which began in 1960, carried the practice of tongues beyond traditional Pentecostalism into many other denominations, churches, and groups, both Catholic and Protestant, filling the void in true spiritual living with false experience.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-40.