

THE GIFT OF TONGUES CONTRASTED WITH PROPHECY 1 CORINTHIANS 14:01–25

Introduction

Remember that chapters twelve through fourteen are dealing with the spiritual gifts which God gives to His followers for the work of the ministry. Believers are gifted to minister and to help people in their desperate need for life, both life abundant and life eternal. However, when men focus upon their gifts and abilities, the problems of pride, arrogance, superiority and super-spirituality always arise. There are always some people who feel that their gifts and abilities make them better and more favoured and privileged than others. This is exactly what happened to the Corinthian church, and it is what has happened to multitudes of believers since that day. The gift of tongues is especially subject to pride and super-spirituality because it involves a static and heavenly utterance as opposed to ordinary human language.

The point is this: the gift of tongues (and all other gifts) is just one of many gifts. Each gift has its place in fulfilling the mission of the Lord and each must be used effectively in reaching the world for Christ and in ministering to the needs of people. The present passage is a contrast of the gift of tongues with prophecy.

- I. Gifts are to be coveted — especially prophecy (v. 1).
- II. The difference between tongues and prophecy (vv. 2-5).
- III. The problem with tongues (vv. 6-14).
- IV. The gift of tongues and Paul's personal worship (vv. 15-20).
- V. The purpose of tongues and prophecy (vv. 21-25).

I. *1 Corinthians 14:01 Spiritual Gifts*

Gifts are to be coveted, especially prophecy. Note two points.

1. Love is to be pursued above all else in life. Gifts, abilities, and service are important; but they pale into insignificance in comparison with love. Love is the greatest need and the supreme answer to all the needs of men. It is when we love a person that we meet the needs of a person. In fact, if we truly love a person, then we will do all we can to meet all the needs of that person.
=> The word “follow” (*diokete*) means to pursue, to persist, to continue on and on, never giving up until love is possessed.
 2. Spiritual gifts are to be desired. We are to pursue love first, but this does not mean we are not to seek the spiritual gifts of God. On the contrary, the more we love God and men, the more we covet the gifts of God so that we can minister and help the world of men more effectively.
=> The word “desire” (*zeloute*) means to covet earnestly; to be zealous and ambitious for.
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II. *1 Corinthians 14:02–05 Gift of Tongues vs. Prophecy*

The difference between tongues and prophecy. Remember that the gift of tongues is the gift that is so subject to pride and super-spirituality because of its unearthly or heavenly nature. However, its true importance is shown by contrasting it with the gift of prophecy. The differences between tongues and prophecy are immediately said to be threefold.

1. Tongues are addressed to God, whereas prophecy is addressed to men (v. 2-3). Very simply stated, Scripture declares that tongues do not edify or benefit men as much as prophecy. There are reasons for this.
 - a. Tongues are directed toward God; they are for God, for communion with Him, for sharing the mysteries (secret things) of God with God.
 - b. Tongues are not understood by men. Scripture is clear; “no one understands him,” that is, hears, gets the sense, grasps the meaning of what is being said.
 - c. The believer who prophesies edifies, exhorts and comforts men (see *Prophecy*, 1 Cor. 14:3).

Thought 1. Note the importance being laid upon proclaiming the message of the gospel in understandable terms. Men can be reached and helped only as they can understand the message of believers. The point is clear: the primary message upon our lips must be the gospel, and it must be understandable to all men.

2. Tongues edify self, whereas prophecy edifies the church (v. 4). The point is clear: tongues are useful; they edify self. But prophecy is of much more benefit. The believer who prophesies edifies the *whole* church; he builds up far more people. Note something else as well: the gift of tongues is focused upon self-edification, but the gift of prophecy is focused upon the ministry, upon the edification of others. Self-edification is, of course, important; but the ministry of edifying others is far more important.
3. Tongues are commendable, but prophecy is more commendable. This is a verse that needs to be given close attention both by those who emphasize and by those who minimize and deny tongues.

=> Paul would like for all to speak with tongues.

=> But it is far more important for all to prophesy and proclaim the gospel.

=> The prophet is far more important than the man who speaks in tongues unless the tongues are interpreted.

Again, note that the stress is edification. The purpose for the believer speaking in worship must be to edify the church. (See *Prophecy*, 1 Cor. 14:3 for verses on edification.)

1 CORINTHIANS 14:03 PROPHECY

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 1 Corinthians 14:03

This is the gift of speaking under the inspiration of God's Spirit. In the Bible it includes both *prediction* and *proclamation*, and neither one should be minimized despite the abuse of the gift. There is no question...

- the gift to predict events has been abused to the point of the ridiculous. However, the abuse of the gift does not eliminate the fact that the Spirit of God does sometimes give believers a glimpse into coming events in order to prepare and strengthen them to face the events.
- the gift to proclaim the gospel has been abused to the point that most people's understanding of the gospel is tragically warped. However, the abuse of the gospel by both the false and immature prophets (ministers) does not eliminate the fact that God does call some men to proclaim His Word.

The New Testament clearly states the purpose of prophecy in this verse: "everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort" (1 Cor. 14:3).

1. *Strengthening, edification (oikodomen)* means to build up. It is a construction word referring to constructing some building. The first purpose of prophecy is to build up people.

Rom 14:19 *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.*

Rom 15:2 *Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up.*

1 Cor 8:1 *...Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

1 Cor 14:26 *...All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.*

2 Cor 12:19 *Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.*

Eph 4:11-12 *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*

Eph 4:29 *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

2. *Encouragement, exhortation* (parakiesin) means to strengthen, to encourage, to call to the side of. The second purpose of prophecy is to strengthen and encourage people by calling them to the side of God.

Luke 3:18 *And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.*

Acts 2:40 *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."*

Acts 11:23 *When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*

Acts 14:22 *Strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.*

Acts 15:32 *Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.*

1 Th 5:14 *And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*

2 Th 3:12 *Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.*

1 Tim 2:1 *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.*

1 Tim 4:13 *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.*

2 Tim 4:2 *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction.*

Titus 1:9 *He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*

Titus 2:15 *These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.*

Heb 3:13 *But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

Heb 10:25 *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Heb 13:22 *Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.*

1 Pet 5:1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:

3. *Comfort (paramuthian)* means to give strength and hope to, to ease the grief or trouble of someone. It has the idea of comforting through the most severe experiences of life, for example, through death (cp. Jn. 11:19, 31). The third purpose of prophecy is to comfort people as they walk through life.

2 Cor 2:7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

1 Th 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

1 Th 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with every one.

Isa 40:1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. □

III. 1 Corinthians 14:06–14 Problems with the Gift of Tongues

The problem with tongues. There are two specific problems with tongues that are discussed in these nine verses.

1. The first problem: tongues do not communicate in the church, not apart from some other gift (interpretation, v. 13). Paul illustrated the fact with several illustrations.
 - a. Paul himself, if he were to visit the church, would not speak with tongues. Why? Because his speaking in a tongue would not profit us. We would not be able to understand what he was saying. His visit and proclamation would do us no good. The only way his visit and words would help us would be if he shared...
 - some revelation
 - some knowledge
 - some prophesying
 - some teaching
 - b. Musical instruments also illustrate the fact. The flute (Greek, *aulos*, wind instruments) and the harps (Greek, *kithara*, string instruments) must have a distinctive sound or else their sound is meaningless, confused and nonsense — just not understood. Musical instruments must communicate or else the music is unknown and fails to inspire the listeners.
 - c. A military trumpet illustrates the point. When the soldier blows the trumpet, he must communicate or else the army is unprepared for the battle.
 - d. A person's own speech is a fourth illustration. A person must speak words that are understood or else the listeners do not know what he is saying. He is doing nothing more than speaking into the air.

e. Different foreign languages are a fifth illustration. Very simply, there are many different voices (languages) in the world, and each language has its own distinct speech. If a foreigner speaks to me and I do not understand what he is saying...

- I am as a foreigner, that is, as a dumb and senseless man to him.
- he is as a foreigner, that is, as a dumb and senseless man to me.

He is of no use to me, not in sharing and communicating the gospel. What he has to say is meaningless, unintelligible, unprofitable and of no value. It does not reach or edify, strengthen or comfort me.

f. The point is striking: the believer who is zealous of spiritual gifts is to seek for the gifts that edify the church. Note: a believer's zeal is not to be dampened even if he has been misinformed and emphasizes the wrong gift. He is to straighten out his emphasis, keep his zeal and direct his energy to edifying the church. The important gifts are those that build up people for Christ.

1 Cor 12:31 But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

1 Cor 14:1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

1 Cor 14:12 So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

Phil 3:13-14 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

2 Tim 1:6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

2. The second problem: tongues do not communicate even in prayer, not apart from some other gift (interpretation). Paul definitely says one can pray in a tongue. The idea seems to be a tongue of "ecstasy" (v. 2, Williams) or of some "strange language" (v. 2, Beck).

The speaking in tongues in Acts seems to be the speaking of foreign languages.

But the speaking in tongues in 1 Cor. 14 is an ecstatic utterance. An objective and thorough study of 1 Cor. 12-14 shows this. Some of the passages have to be really strained to make them apply to foreign languages (or to a learned and conditioned reflex as claimed by some interpreters). Several examples are as follows.

1 Cor 14:2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God...he utters mysteries with his spirit.

1 Cor 14:4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

1 Cor 14:14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays...

1 Cor 14:18-19 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

The point is an eye-opener: even if a believer prays in an unknown tongue, it is unfruitful unless he has the gift of interpretation. He has no idea what he is praying unless there is the gift of interpretation. His prayer is unfruitful and meaningless.

IV. 1 Corinthians 14:015–20 Paul’s Gift of Tongues

Paul’s own personal worship and use of tongues is covered in these six verses. He says three distinct things.

1. Paul worships by praying and singing both with the spirit and with the mind (v. 15-17). Note a crucial point throughout this passage: Paul is not denying or forbidding the exercise of the gift of tongues. He is insisting on the proper use of the gifts. He says that he himself will “also pray and sing with my mind.”

The stress is that he does not pray or sing without understanding what he is praying and singing. He gives two reasons for this.

- a. He wishes others to understand and to confirm what he prays and sings (v. 16). The illustration is pointed. If you bless God with the spirit (that is, with a tongue), how shall the unlearned (those who do not understand tongues) say “Amen,” that is, confirm what you say? Agreeing and sharing in your prayer and praise is impossible, for no one understands what you are saying.
- b. He wishes others to be edified (v. 17). The giving of thanks and prayer are not wrong; in fact, they are good. But if they are done in a tongue, others are not edified.

2. Paul speaks in tongues often, but in the church he always uses another gift (v. 18-19). Nothing could be any clearer about Paul’s practice of tongues than this verse:

⇒ Paul had the gift of tongues and used the gift more than “all of you.”

⇒ However, in church, he would rather speak five clearly understood words than ten thousand words in a tongue. To the honest and open reader, Paul’s point is clear: in the church, he used other gifts to worship and proclaim the gospel. He used his gift of tongues in private worship.

3. Paul urges one thing: maturity and edification. This is a strong imperative, a forceful statement: “Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” It seems as though “tongues” had so divided the Corinthian church that bitterness and malice had become quite a problem between some. Some of the believers just did not understand the gifts, their importance and purpose. Therefore, they were acting like children, stricken with the different, emotional and

spectacular experience. They desperately needed to understand the gifts and their proper place in the believer's life. One thing was certain: there was to be no place for divisiveness over the gifts. There was to be only love and mature understanding. Believers are to be as mature men and women, not as children.

1 Cor 3:1-2 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.

1 Cor 13:11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

1 Cor 14:20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

Eph 4:13-14 Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Heb 5:12, 14 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!...But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

1 Pet 2:2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.

1 John 2:14 I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

V. 1 Corinthians 14:21–25 Gift of Tongues and Prophecy

The purpose of tongues and prophecy. Three points are discussed.

1. Tongues are a sign to warn unbelievers; prophecy is a gift to edify believers. The Old Testament passage quoted is Isa. 28:11-12. The meaning seems to be a promise that God will bear witness to unbelieving Israel through many tongues (languages), yet they will still not hear Him.

Paul seems to be saying several things here.

- a. Tongues are foreign languages, although they are often experienced in an ecstatic moment and may not be understood by the speaker himself.
- b. Tongues are a sign to warn unbelievers. How can this verse be reconciled with the fact that tongues are said to be primarily for personal edification (v. 2, 4, 17) and

prophecy is said to be primarily for public edification and witness (v. 24-25)? The answer is probably twofold.

- => Unbelievers clearly see the hand of God when a foreign believer is suddenly and miraculously given the ability to witness to them in their own native language. Such was definitely the case at Pentecost (cp. Acts 2:6-13).
- => The believer who speaks in tongues has an exciting and exhilarating experience while in his prayer closet. This exciting experience enables him to become the kind of witness he ought to be for the Lord Jesus Christ. His gift of tongues edifies him personally, and he is quickened with a new fervour to warn the unbeliever of pending judgment. Verses 21, 23 and the whole context point toward this meaning. One thing is certain: God knows what every child of His needs to make that child the witness he ought to be. He knows what experience and what gifts are needed — and He always provides these experiences and gifts. Prophecy is primarily for believers, for their strengthening, edification, encouragement and comfort (see *Prophecy*, 1 Cor. 14:3).
2. Tongues within the church confuse and harden unbelievers. The point is clearly seen: tongues without interpretation cause a person to appear insane. The tongue speaker seems to be babbling just like an insane person does. Tongues (the ecstatic gift) are not to be used to reach people within the church.
 3. Prophecy within the church convicts unbelievers. This is a great passage on the effect of preaching upon unbelievers. Note that although prophecy is primarily for believers and their edification, it is used by God to reach the lost as well. (See *Prophecy*, 1 Cor. 14:3.)

Acts 2:37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Acts 24:25 As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, “That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.”

Isa 66:2 Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?” declares the Lord. “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”

Luke 12:2 “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.”

Eccl 12:14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. ■