



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 14:20-25

Topic

Paul stunned the believers at Corinth by telling them that speaking in tongues in public without it being interpreted was a sign to others of God's displeasure and disapproval

Title

"Tongues Stunned"

Introduction

You're dead if you don't; you're the devil if you do.

Those are the extremes when it comes to whether or not your church exercises the gift of speaking in tongues in its meetings.

"You're dead if you don't" speak in tongues is a prevalent view among Pentecostals. You hear it all the time. It's hard to find it in print but it is certainly implied. One respected author, R. L. Brandt, said,

The concept that the gift of tongues is... the greatest of the gifts is well-founded... no Christian needs feel the gift is not for him... we conclude, with much assurance, that when men are baptized in the Holy Spirit they speak with other tongues... tongues is the... physical evidence of the baptism of the Spirit.¹

¹ compiled from *Charismatics: Are We Missing Something?*
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“You’re the devil if you do” speak in tongues is something conservative authors *are* willing to say! Answering a question about tongues, Pastor John MacArthur said,

I believe what we have today could basically be explained as demonic, counterfeit. And, by the way, I don’t know if you know this, Tibetan Monks speak in tongues, Eskimos speak in tongues, many of their tribes, so do Mormons, who don’t even believe the Gospel. So, it could be Satanic.²

Dead or the devil - which is it? Well, it’s neither. We don’t need to go to extremes. Tongues is a gift still available to some, but not every, believer in the church. It’s use in your private devotions is unrestricted but its exercise in public must follow the principle that God wants you to build others up by only always speaking in ways that everyone can understand.

The verses we will cover this morning were written to a church that was misusing, even abusing, the gift of speaking in tongues. They were definitely in the extreme Pentecostal camp.

But Paul didn’t condemn what they were doing as demonic. He simply corrected them so they would hopefully begin to exercise the gift properly.

We’re going to further our understanding of tongues by seeing two things:
#1 If You Speak Unintelligibly No One Will Know God Is Among You, and
#2 If You Speak Intelligibly Everyone Will Know God Is Among You.

#1 If You Speak Unintelligibly
No One Will Know God Is Among You
(v20-23)

One of the reasons that Pentecostals suggest a church service without everyone speaking in tongues is ‘dead’ is that there is no visible evidence that God has been among His people.

² <http://www.biblebb.com/files/macqa/1301-X-7.htm>

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In the meetings of the church in Corinth the believers spoke and sang in tongues simultaneously, with no interpretation. No one could understand what they were saying or singing.

We need to listen carefully to what the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Instead of saying, "God is among you," people were saying, "You people are crazy!"

1 Corinthians 14:20 Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.

Speaking in tongues is often promoted as a sign of spiritual maturity. The Corinthians certainly thought themselves mature in their exercise of the gift.

Paul said that their understanding of the gift was childish. He encouraged them to heed his instruction so they would "in understanding be mature."

While he was giving this illustration he hit them with the phrase "in malice be babes." Here is what I think he was saying. It was childish for them to think that speaking in tongues was evidence of mature Christian behavior while at the same time they were acting maliciously towards one another by suing one another, divorcing one another, causing division, and practicing idolatry and immorality.

Some outward manifestation of the Spirit, like speaking in tongues, is *not* a sign you are mature or even spiritual. Fruit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, produced in your life on a habitual basis is the sign of Christian maturity.

Paul is going to analyze and criticize their speaking in uninterpreted tongues by appealing to a passage from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah.

1 Corinthians 14:21 In the law it is written: "With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me," says the Lord.

It's a paraphrase of Isaiah 28:12. Apparently this mostly Gentile congregation had a good handle on the Old Testament because Paul referred to it often.

By the way, Paul's use of God's Word with regard to the gifts of the Holy Spirit is a good reminder for us to do the same. God will not contradict Himself. We need not fear that we are going to somehow quench the work of the Holy Spirit among us if we appeal to God's written Word to be certain that what we are doing, and the way we are doing it, is profitable.

Even on the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples in the upper room were baptized with then filled with the Holy Spirit accompanied by physical signs, Peter was able to say to the crowd, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel."

The lack of biblical analysis of phenomena is why some Pentecostals get so weird in their behavior. And I believe it is why so many conservatives conclude that what is happening among the Pentecostals is demonic.

Let me give you the background and context of the quote from Isaiah. The Jews had been mocking the word of God Isaiah was speaking to them. They spoke to Isaiah in a deriding, derogatory tone. They refused to heed God's clear, intelligible words of warning and repent from their sinful behavior.

As a result God would allow the northern kingdom of the Jews, called Israel, to be conquered by the fierce and cruel Assyrian Empire.

The Assyrians did not speak Hebrew! They were the "men of other tongues and other lips" who would "speak" to the Jews instead of God's prophet.

In other words, they would be conquered by a foreign people who would speak to them in a language they did not understand. It was God's judgment upon them for refusing to understand His Word and repent while there was still time.

Here comes the application:

1 Corinthians 14:22 Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.

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By “tongues” Paul was referring to the uninterpreted speaking in a language unknown to the hearers. **In Isaiah’s day, the uninterpreted speaking of the Assyrians to the Jews was a “sign” of God’s disapproval and displeasure with His disobedient people!**

In other words, when God seems to be speaking but it is in a way that cannot be understood, it is a sign alright - but a bad one. If an observer were to see God’s people in a context of uninterpreted language they would be justified in concluding that God was **not** among His people but had (at least temporarily) brought them into a place of discipline and judgment.

Paul applied this to the situation at Corinth. They were speaking in uninterpreted tongues during their worship services. Since no one could understand what was being said, it was a “sign” - but not that God was among them. It was a “sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers” who visited the service ***that they were out of their minds!***

Look at verse twenty-three:

1 Corinthians 14:23 Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

Somehow in Corinth they had services in which “the whole church [came] together in one place.” There were no church campuses; the believers mostly met in private homes. So either the church in Corinth was fairly small, or there was at least one very large home, or they had some large meeting place for weekly gatherings.

At that weekly gathering “uninformed” people and “unbelievers” were invited and welcomed. There is some debate among scholars as to exactly who the “uninformed” were. It could be a reference to young believers, recently saved and with little information about the Christian life. Or it could be a description of the “unbeliever” as a person who needs information about Jesus that he or she can understand in order to get saved.

In either case, speaking out loud during the services in uninterpreted tongues was counter-productive. Not only did it withhold vital information about the Gospel, it left them thinking that being a believer meant you were out of your mind and being influenced by a 'force' you could not control.

You can argue all day that speaking in uninterpreted tongues is a sign among "believers" that God has shown-up in your church service. Paul would strongly disagree. When the Pentecostal thinks a service was dead because it lacked certain physical manifestations, well, that's just wrong.

The issue we face is being overly conservative. We don't want to be charismatic in our teaching about the gifts but conservative in their practice. We need to strive to give opportunities for the gifts to be properly exercised.

Paul also said that "prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe." He explained what he meant in verses twenty-four and twenty-five.

#1 If You Speak Intelligibly
Everyone Will Know God Is Among You
(v24-25)

We've discussed the gift of prophesy two or three times now as we've been going through this unit of First Corinthians on the gifts of the Holy Spirit that began in chapter twelve. Prophesy is an immediate word from the Lord, either a Scripture or something in perfect agreement and harmony with Scripture, that is intended by God to bring edification, exhortation, and comfort to His people.

Paul's point in comparing it to the gift of speaking in tongues is that it can be understood by all.

What did the apostle mean when he said "prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe?" Remember the context of the illustration from Isaiah. When God speaks to His people in ways that

cannot be understood it is a sign of His disapproval and displeasure with their disobedience.

The opposite is true. When God speaks to His people - to “believers” - in ways that are supernatural but can be understood (like “prophecy”) it is a sign to them of His approval and pleasure.

It is a “sign to believers,” but one that can also affect unbelievers in a positive and powerful way.

1 Corinthians 14:24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all.

The unbeliever is “convinced” and “convicted” in order that he or she might be converted to Jesus Christ.

When Christians meet God wants to impart information to those who have gathered. He certainly wants to do it supernaturally, by His Holy Spirit. But it must be intelligible; it must be able to be understood. That way if there is an “unbeliever” or an “uninformed” young believer in the service they will be “convinced by all” that is said and done.

What is this convincing? It is nothing less than giving God’s Word the opportunity to affect the heart of the hearer. It is presenting God’s Word in ways that can be understood so it can penetrate between the soul and the spirit of a heart and reveal Jesus to the hearer.

That is why earlier the apostle Paul said he would rather speak five words someone could understand than ten thousand in a tongue they could not understand. One is a mere outward showing of the Holy Spirit’s gifting. The other gives the Holy Spirit opportunity to do a miracle in a persons life.

Once “convinced,” the person can be “convicted.”

- If the hearer is an “unbeliever” he or she can be “convicted” of sin and of righteousness and of the judgment to come.
- If the hearer is an “uninformed” believer he or she can understand that God’s Word is His enabling for them to live the Christian life. If that

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person is in an apathetic or a backslidden state they are exhorted to repent and rededicate themselves to their Lord.

Now we're talking manifestations of God's power!

1 Corinthians 14:25 And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.

Ah, finally something Pentecostal! This person was slain by the Holy Spirit and fell down!!

First of all, it's debatable whether or not this was actually what Paul meant. The phrase "falling down on his face" could simply be a figure of speech for the fact the person got saved or rededicated their life. We use expressions like this all the time. Have you ever said, "It floored me?" Did you actually fall down on the floor? Probably not.

I think Paul was simply describing the strong emotional reaction a person might have to the convincing, convicting, work of the Holy Spirit as they are converted. I guess they could fall to their knees; or come forward weeping; or experience a wave of joy.

But every service? On command? Whenever the minister touches them? Those are more likely to be replications of real experiences people have had. They are repeated because of the teaching that unless something 'happens,' God has not shown-up.

Note this. The person Paul described who falls to his face does so after hearing a clear presentation of God's Word - *not* after a frenzied worship service in which all manner of uninterpreted speaking has occurred.

If we sound overly critical of Pentecostalism, we're not. The context of our verses demand we speak plainly about Pentecostal excesses. The church at Corinth needed correcting. Any church that is misusing the gift of speaking in tongues in a similar manner needs this same correction.

We're *not* saying that speaking in tongues is demonic. We believe it is a gift available to some, but not all, believers and that it can be exercised properly in services of the church. We'll see next week, in fact (Lord willing), how tongues, when interpreted, can be edifying to everyone.

We cannot conclude God is among us on the basis of outward, physical phenomena. *God is already among us whenever we gather together!*

What He wants to do is penetrate our hearts with words spoken that can be understood then powerfully applied by His Holy Spirit.