

Iglesia de Carne

Studies in First Corinthians

Text

First Corinthians 14:1-25

Topic

Because the Corinthians were speaking in uninterpreted tongues, visitors to their services went away thinking they were crazy

Title

“Crazy Little Thing Called Tongues”

It was an outrage.

The event was the memorial in 2013 in Johannesburg, South Africa, for Nelson Mandela. Then President Obama was giving a eulogy. Next to him was a sign language interpreter. **Except that the man was only *pretending* to sign.** Among those who noticed what was happening was Wilma Newhoudt, the first deaf person elected to South Africa's parliament and a vice president of the World Federation of the Deaf.

"Shame on this so called interpreter on the stage," she tweeted during the memorial service. "What is he signing? Shame on him!"

Shame on the Christians in Corinth. At their gatherings, they were speaking in a way that no one could understand: "For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him...*" (14:2).

Unlike the sign language interpreter, however, the speaking in tongues was a genuine, not fake, gift of the Holy Spirit. The problem was that it required



interpretation; and the believers were neglecting the corresponding gift of interpretation.

The gift of speaking in tongues is one of the most controversial subjects believers argue and divide over. Whether you believe that the gift has ceased, or that it continues, or *who cares?*, what the apostle wrote here is the truth about tongues.

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 Your Uninterpreted Speaking In Tongues In Public Is Selfish**, and **#2 Your Uninterpreted Speaking In Tongues In Public Is A Sign**.

#1 - Your Uninterpreted Speaking In Tongues In Public Is Selfish (1-14)

I want to use the apostle Paul's own brief descriptions of the gifts we are going to discuss. They are prophecy, speaking in tongues (let's just refer to it as tongues), and interpretation.

Prophecy in verses three and four:

1Co 14:3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.

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

Prophecy can be a *foretelling* of the future, but that is rare now that we have the complete Word of God. Most often it is a *forth-telling* of God's Word. It is you hearing exactly what you need in order to be edified, exhorted, and comforted. Just last week a brother told me he'd been praying for another saint, and felt the Lord give him a verse to share. When he did - *it was exactly the same verse the recipient had sensed God using to edify, exhort, and comfort him*.

(Coincidence? I don't think so. There are 31,102 verses in the Bible).

Tongues in verse two:

1Co 14:2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him*; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.



The biblical gift of tongues is *not a known or learnable human language*. Everyone who is given this gift gets their own peculiar expression of it. That's why it can sound like gibberish but be genuine. If that sounds ridiculous, consider this: We are told that the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us through **wordless groans**" (Romans 8:26). *He* groans, not us. Our speaking in tongues is no more ridiculous than the Holy Spirit using groans to communicate.

We are further told that a person speaking or singing in tongues is directly addressing God. It is *never* a message *from* God; it is speaking *to* God.

The interpretation of tongues:

1Co 14:13 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

The interpretation of tongues is the Holy Spirit giving you the understanding of what was spoken by someone else or by yourself. You can't otherwise know what was said.

Since tongues is not a known human language, and since everyone's tongues is therefore unique, interpretation is *not* a translation. Think of it like interpreting a work of art. You put into words what the artist was trying to convey.

And since tongues is always speaking to God, the interpretation must be phrased as a prayer to Him.

One more really, really important point often overlooked. **Tongues were only a problem in Corinth because they were left uninterpreted.** Look at verse five: "For he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, **unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.**" Tongues that **are** interpreted are just as edifying as prophecy, or any other speaking gift.

1Co 14:1 Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy.

The Corinthians claimed to "desire" the best gifts - and they thought it was tongues. Had they been pursuing love, they'd have recognized without needing to be told that uninterpreted tongues was selfish.



1Co 14:2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him*; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.

Tongues has rightfully been called a prayer language. This is why some argue it is for every believer. No matter how logical or spiritually that sounds, Paul said “No” back in chapter twelve.

Something I want to sneak in about tongues. Some commentators use the Day of Pentecost to insist tongues must be a known language. It is not.

On the Day of Pentecost, when God the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples gathered in the Upper Room... *Did the hearers recognize their own human languages being spoken?* They did; and that means the gift of tongues is something different than the miracle of languages on the Day of Pentecost.

1Co 14:3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.

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

Regardless that you or I may think hearing tongues is beautiful, or worshipful - by definition it cannot build us up because it is unintelligible to us without interpretation. It should not be exercised in public unless there is the possibility of interpretation.

1Co 14:5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Nowhere does Paul indicate any of these gifts will cease in the church age. Quite to the contrary, he spent three chapters discussing their proper exercise in the church age.

1Co 14:6 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?



This is a partial list of manifestations of the Spirit that can be understood. Only what is understood can “profit you.” You may think some unintelligible phenomena is spiritual, but Paul says it isn’t.

1Co 14:7 Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?

1Co 14:8 For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?

1Co 14:9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

The gathering of believers... the assembly of God... Is a place to get understanding. Over-and-over Paul emphasizes how important this is. We should think that way as well, and examine our behavior accordingly.

1Co 14:10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them *is* without significance.

1Co 14:11 Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks *will be* a foreigner to me.

We ought not act like “foreigners” by speaking uninterpreted tongues when, in fact, we are one in Jesus - members of His earthly body. Don’t you feel weird when folks who speak English suddenly start speaking in another language - just so you can’t understand?

1Co 14:12 Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual *gifts*, *let it be* for the edification of the church *that* you seek to excel.

Their zeal to exercise gifts was commendable, but needed correction. That isn’t a bad thing. They definitely were zealous to serve. It’s better than apathy.

And “seek to excel.” I hate most sports expressions, but here we might say regarding our gatherings, “Bring your ‘A’ game, give 110%, and leave it all out in the pews.” That is, expect God to use you.

1Co 14:13 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.



1Co 14:14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.

If you speak in tongues publicly, it's gonna need interpreting by you or someone else. If you don't have the gift of interpretation, you might want to ask if someone in the assembly does.

Wait a minute... It sounds like we think we can control our exercise of the gifts? That's because we not only can; we must. Part two of this chapter is all about order, with Paul insisting that, "the spirits of the prophets **are** subject to the prophets" (v32).

#2 - Your Uninterpreted Speaking In Tongues In Public Is A Sign (v15-25)

As much as we might be learning about the gifts, the real issue is the selfless building up of others when we gather. Gordon Fee, himself a Pentecostal, put it this way:

The point of everything in corporate worship is not personal experience in the Spirit, but building up the church itself. Much that comes under the banner of Charismatic or Pentecostal worship seems very often to fail right at this point. The building up of the community is the basic reason for corporate settings of worship; they should probably not be turned into a corporate gathering for a thousand individual experiences of worship.

1Co 14:15 What is *the conclusion* then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.

- Praying and singing "with the spirit" means praying and singing in tongues.
- Praying and singing "with the understanding" means praying and singing in ways that can be understood by everyone.

1Co 14:16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?

1Co 14:17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.



You cannot agree to something you don't hear with understanding. It's like Jerry Seinfeld and the low-talker. He didn't hear with understanding that he was agreeing to wear the ridiculous puffy shirt. (That shirt, BTW, is in the Smithsonian).

1Co 14:18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;
1Co 14:19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Yes, Paul spoke in tongues. But not "in the church," because there he had a different focus. This gives us the freedom to encourage or to discourage certain gifts from being exercised in certain meetings for the good of the body. We don't see Sunday morning as an appropriate meeting for encouraging tongues. It's a time to sing with understanding, and to speak with understanding, in order to build up the saints and reach sinners. It's not a quenching.

Just for fun, I tried to think of five-word sentences that would be better than ten thousand words in tongues. How about, "You must be born again?" Or, "God so loved the world?" Try it on your own.

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

Speaking in tongues is often still promoted as a sign of spiritual maturity, or even of salvation itself. The Corinthians certainly thought themselves mature in their exercise of the gift. Paul said that their understanding of the gift was childish. They should rather hear with understanding and thereby mature.

The comment about "malice" was a reminder that, while they thought themselves mature, they were simultaneously suing one another, committing all manner of sexual sin, and defiling the Lord's Supper.

1Co 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.

Let me give you the background and context of the quote from Isaiah. The backslidden Jews of the northern kingdom of Israel had been ignoring the



warnings that Isaiah was speaking to them to solicit their repentance. They refused to heed God's clear, intelligible words.

As a result God would allow 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 prophets. 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.

1Co 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.

The unintelligible speaking of the Assyrians to Israel was a "sign" of God's disapproval and displeasure with His disobedient people.

Hearing the uninterpreted tongues in Corinth, a visitor 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. It's reminiscent of the Tower of Babel where the lack of understanding each other was obviously a judgment.

Prophecy, here representing all intelligible speech, has the opposite effect on unbelievers. It reveals God communicating in order to build up His people.

1Co 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?

- The "uninformed" is likely a reference to young believers, recently saved and with little information about the Christian life. They were, and are, hungry to hear about God in ways they can understand. Imagine them attending church in Corinth for the first time.
- "Unbelievers" need to hear the Gospel - not your prayer language - in order to be saved.

I'm guessing the uninformed and unbelieving were, in fact, spreading the word that the Corinthian Christians were crazy.



1Co 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.

As we will see in Part Two, Paul didn't intend that everyone prophesy. Only that those who speak do so in ways that can be easily understood, like forth-telling God's Word, so that everyone can be touched by the Holy Spirit.

- 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.

1Co 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.

No, that's not it. 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 on their face, or to their knees; or come forward weeping; or experience a wave of joy.

Note one thing: This person fell on his face; he fell forward. If you've ever seen someone who was supposedly slain by the Spirit's power coming upon them, they always fall back - not forward. If you're going to teach that folks get slain, *make sure that they do it biblically*.

Turns out, tongues *can* be a form of sign language. If left uninterpreted in public, it can be a sign you are crazy.

- Too many assemblies of saints act as though the more out of control they get, the more spiritual they are. They are Corinthian and need to heed Paul's correction.
- Too many assemblies of saints disparage the gifts in this chapter. Paul didn't, and those who do must submit to his inspired teaching.



- If you are in the “*Who cares?*” group - this is the Word of the Lord every bit as much as the rest.

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“*Crazy Little Thing Called Tongues*”

