

# STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF 1st CORINTHIANS

## POSITIVE LIVING IN A PAGAN WORLD

### LESSON 9

## THE GIFT OF TONGUES

### 1 Corinthians 14:1-40

### INTRODUCTION

In 1 Cor. 14:1, the connection with the previous chapter is apparent. Christians should pursue love, and this will mean that they will always be trying to serve others. They should also earnestly desire spiritual gifts for their assembly. While it is true that gifts are distributed by the Spirit as He wishes, it is also true that we can ask for gifts that will be of greatest value in the local fellowship. That is why Paul suggests that the gift of prophecy is eminently desirable. He goes on to explain why prophecy, for instance, is of greater benefit than tongues.

### I. SPEAKING IN TONGUES

#### A. The Meaning of Tongues

Paul now deals with one spiritual gift that is probably more controversial, more problematical, than all the rest of them put together. That is the gift of tongues. The phenomenon is technically called glossalalia. That word comes from the Greek word for the languages or for tongues and has become a technical word for that phenomenon of ecstatic speech that occurs in our generation (but is not the same as the New Testament gift).

The problem has always been with the church in one way or another, either by the presence or by the absence of tongues. In the early church, it obviously was a problem in Corinth and that is why Paul deals with it here. His whole point in I Corinthians 12 to 14 is the correction of abuse. He never denies that there is the legitimate gift in Corinth. He does not deny that it is of God. What he does do is deny that it is for the entire church and for every believer, and he attempts to regulate its abuses.

In about 1900, in this country, there began a movement that revived the phenomenon and the question of ecstatic speech. It is not hard to show that it was not part of the church's life except in heretical groups throughout the ages from about 150 A.D. to 1900. What about it? We want to look first at some things that the gift was and is not. Then we want to look at the purposes of tongues in the New Testament church.

#### 1. Tongues was not ecstatic speech.

The New Testament gift of tongues was not mere ecstatic speech. It was speaking in a foreign language which the speaker had not learned.

*In fact the seedbed for most of Paul's theological concepts and the usual source of his terms was the Old Testament. This is evident by Paul's use of "glossa" outside of these three Corinthian chapters. He used the word 21 times in I Corinthians 12-14 but only 3 other times in his other letters. Each of Paul's other uses was either in a quotation from the Old Testament (Ps.5:9 in Rom.3:13; Isa.45:23 in Rom.14:11) or in an allusion to it (Isa.45:23 in Phil.2:11). In all three instances he used the word "tongue" as a figure of speech for the statement or confession made. Whether good (Rom.14:11; Phil.2:11) or bad (Rom.3:13) the statement was clearly intelligible.*

*The same may be said of the meaning of the word "glossa" elsewhere in the New Testament. Whether it was used literally of the physical organ (e.g., Mark 7:33; James 3:5; Rev.16:10) or figuratively of human languages (e.g., Acts 2:11; Rev.5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15), it nowhere referred to ecstatic speech. If it is reasonable to interpret the unknown with the help of the known, the obscure by the clear, then the burden of proof rests with those who find in this term a meaning other than human language.*

Walvoord and Zuck, The Bible Knowledge Commentary pp. 537,538

**2. Tongues was/is not an evidence of our salvation.**

The gift was not to be an evidence that those who had the gift were saved. This is obvious from I Corinthians 12:1-3 where Paul shows them that the ecstatic utterances and the being carried away with ecstasy was part of their old pagan religions. And the fact that tongues occurs in every religion, in every cult, and in mental illness, shows that it cannot be a sure evidence that the person who speaks in tongues has salvation.

**3. Tongues is not an evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.**

In I Corinthians 12, Paul tells us the definitive statement of what is the baptism of the Holy Spirit: that all believers, at the moment of salvation are placed into the body of Christ. So tongues, which was a gift only for some, could not be an evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

**4. Tongues is not an evidence of spirituality.**

The fact that a person speaks in an unknown tongue or ecstatic speech either today or in Paul's day, was never any evidence of his spirituality. It cannot mean a superior dedication. It should never be used as a sign that a person is more spiritually mature than somebody else. The very idea that all the gifts are grace gifts, first of all, rules against that. The most carnal church is the one church Paul talks to about the gift of tongues. It also cannot be an evidence of spirituality because Paul very clearly shows us that not all Christians are to have the gift. In verses 29 and 30, he points this out in his series of questions.

**5. Tongues is not a greater gift than others.**

Being able to speak in tongues was not an evidence of having a greater gift. This was one of the problems in Corinth. The more showy gifts, the more, seemingly, supernatural gifts, were those they exalted. And Paul is trying to tell them that just the opposite is true 1 Cor 12:24. He says the most important gifts are not the most showy. The church has always had a problem with this. We have always magnified the preacher, the eloquent one, the musician, the person who could stand in front of others, who could command the great crowds. And we have always exalted some of the more showy gifts, more than those which are the more necessary in the church. In fact, Paul implies in the same passage in I Corinthians 12:28-30, that the gift of tongues is the least of the gifts. He does the same thing in chapter 14 when he compares it to prophecy. Giving revelation to the church is 10,000 to 5 in ratio to words spoken in tongues.

**6. Tongues is not evidence of the supernatural.**

For one thing, the phenomenon of tongues may be primarily psychological not supernatural. Even if it were supernatural, you would have two choices to make. Anything truly supernatural has one of two origins, either from God or from Satan. But the existence of tongues does not even prove the supernatural. There may be a natural explanation for the current phenomenon.

**B. The Purpose of Tongues**

**1. To proclaim the mighty works of God to Jews out of every nation under heaven in their own language at Pentecost (Acts 2).**

**2. To confirm to Jewish Christians that God had granted repentance to the Gentiles (Acts 10-11).**

**3. To convey New Testament truth to the church before the New Testament Scriptures had been written.**

Matthew and Thessalonians were the only New Testament books written thus far. This was a way of God giving them revelation. Now there is no need for tongues for this purpose since we have all the

## POSITIVE LIVING IN A PAGAN WORLD, LESSON 9

scriptures. Because all revelation has been given, it is wrong to think that tongues are on an equal plane with His Word.

### **4. To edify the individual believer (I Cor.14:4).**

It seems that Paul is saying that if the gift edifies only you, then what good is it for the church? Perhaps some need some similar phenomenon from God for spiritual assurance. The danger is to seek growth through an experience rather than the Word of God.

### **5. To validate the apostolic message.**

The major purpose of the gift of tongues in the New Testament was to certify the apostles and authenticate their message. It was to be used along with the other special gifts of healing, miracles, supernatural knowledge, and of prophecy -- those gifts that had to do with the authentication of the Gospel and of their apostleship.

The supernatural gifts are signs -- authenticating phenomena -- of the apostleship. It is often translated "miracle" when it really means signs; especially in John's Gospel where miracles were the authenticating signs of the Messiah and the Messianic Age. The apostles were the very ambassadors of Jesus in a very special sense. They carried His authority so that Paul could say to both the Thessalonians and the Corinthians that when he spoke as an apostle he spoke the very words of God. No one can say that today unless they are reading from the Bible. In 2 Cor.12:11-12, Paul notices this. "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you by signs and wonders and miracles." If signs, etc., were universal gifts that everybody, or even many, besides the apostles had, then they could not have acted as authenticating signs for Paul's apostleship. Either only the apostles had these gifts and only those closely associated with the apostles so that it still authenticates them as apostles, or Paul's argument totally falls useless in 2 Cor.12.

Tongues were a sign to confirm the spoken message of the apostles. Mark 16 is a disputed passage in the sense that many of the best texts of the Greek New Testament do not contain the traditional ending. But look at a verse that people often claim to prove that tongues-speaking is a universal gift and that all of us ought to experience it. If that is the case, the verse proves too much. Starting in verse 16, it says, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved. He who has disbelieved shall be condemned and these signs will accompany those who have believed. In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues, they will pick up serpents, and if they pick up any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them. They will lay hands on the sick and they will recover." When Mark is writing this, he is looking back at the promise actually having been fulfilled, as recorded in the book of Acts. Luke records that the actions and the activities that took place during the time that the book of Acts refers to had already happened, so that Mark goes on to say, "So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up to heaven and sat down at the right hand of God, and they went out and preached everywhere while the Lord worked with them and confirmed [past tense] the word by the signs that followed." What Mark is saying is that Jesus' prophecy came true. The apostles (not every believer), from Jesus to the time when he wrote, had all of those signs, confirming the fact that they believed. You either take the position that it is restricted to the apostles and was an apostolic authentication or it proves too much, and all of us have to do all of these things in order to show that we have believed. But they actually cast out demons, spoke with the new languages, picked up serpents -- Paul, remember, was bitten and it did not kill him -- and laid hands on the sick and they recovered. It was an authentication.

Notice Hebrews 2:3-4. The writer pictures the confirming miracles, etc., as having been done by those who heard the Lord. God was bearing the apostles witness by these miracles.

This explains the intervention of the apostles in Acts 8. Why cannot Philip be the one to start the church at Samaria? It is not just because there would be a divisive church, a Samaritan church and a Jewish church. It is that the authentication of the Gospel and the message was to be given through the apostles and so the apostles must go to Samaria, and they are the ones who impart to them the gifts. Miraculous signs are always done in the presence of, or with the direct help of, an apostle. You should not read the book of Acts with the idea that everyone was running around healing everybody, speaking in

## POSITIVE LIVING IN A PAGAN WORLD, LESSON 9

tongues, walking on water, parting oceans or lakes or doing all these things. They simply were not. They were living lives that were **extraordinary in their character** under ordinary circumstances and through ordinary means. The import of the book of Acts is not that great miracles happened, it is that ordinary people lived extraordinary lives and turned a world upside down for Jesus in the process. That is the timeless message of the book. They went everywhere gossiping the Gospel which itself is the power of God to salvation.

Remember that at Pentecost only the apostles spoke in tongues. Tongues is often mentioned along with prophecy as an authentication of the apostolic message (Acts 10:46; 19:6).

### **6. It was a sign to Jewish unbelievers and doubters (14:21).**

Paul is saying that those Jews who knew Isaiah's prophecy in Isa.28:11-12 would understand. When Paul finally turned to the Gentiles, there is no evidence that tongues were used again. (See II.A.)

## **C. Tongues and Prophecy 14:1-12**

### **1. Comparisons 14:1-5**

The man who speaks in tongues helps no one except himself. But since the purpose of the gifts is the good of the entire body, Paul prefers that they prophesy. Prophecy was the giving of truth by revelation of God. Paul's point is more that all understand and are therefore edified than that of giving a definition of prophecy.

*14:2 He who speaks in a tongue without interpretation is not speaking for the benefit of the congregation. God understands what he is saying but the people don't because it is a foreign language to them. He might be setting forth marvelous truths, hitherto unknown, but it does no good because it is all unintelligible.*

*14:3 The man who prophesies, on the other hand, builds people up, encourages them, and comforts them. The reason for this is that he is speaking in the language of the people; that is what makes the difference. When Paul says that the prophet builds up, stirs up, and binds up, he is not giving a definition. He is simply saying that these results follow when the message is given in a language the people know.*

*14:4 Verse 4 is commonly used to justify the private use of tongues for self-edification. But the fact that the word "church" is found nine times in this chapter (vv.4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 33, 34, 35) offers rather convincing evidence that Paul is not dealing with a believer's devotional life in the privacy of his room, but with the use of tongues in the local assembly. The context shows that, far from advocating the use of tongues for self-edification, the apostle is condemning any use of the gift in the church that does not result in helping others. Love thinks of others and not of self. If the gift of tongues is used in love, it will benefit others and not only one-self. He who prophesies edifies the church. He is not parading his gift for personal advantage, but speaking constructively in a language the congregation can understand.*

-- William MacDonald, Believers Bible Commentary New Testament, pp. 613, 614

In verse 5 Paul says he wishes that all of them spoke in tongues, but he also said that he wished they were all single and celibate like himself!

### **2. Illustrations 14:6-11**

Enjoying music necessitates the distinction of tones, and a trumpet calling to battle must be clear and distinct. Even so, what is said in church can not be enjoyed or acted upon unless we understand it.

## **D. Tongues and Worship 14:13-25**

### **1. Prayer 14:13-15**

Paul is wanting them to pray so all can understand. The NIV "mind" would better read "understanding." His concern is not for himself but for the whole church.

**2. Thanksgiving 14:16-19**

**3. Instruction 14:20-25**

If no interpreter is present, tongues-speaking is forbidden. Following that rule would eliminate most of what passes for tongues today. The prophets were to speak in order and one should discern if he was truly giving a revelation from God.

**E. Tongues for Today**

It has ceased as a major tool today, although God can give any phenomenon He wishes without that phenomenon being the gift mentioned in Corinth. There are some dangers.

**1. It is dangerous to seek a gift rather than the Giver.**

**2. There is a danger of ignoring clear scriptural revelation (See III.A.1).**

**3. There is a danger of failing to test the spirits (Cf. I John 4:1-3).**

Some demons have been known to adopt the name "Jesus" but deny the Christ. If God wants to give a gift, He will decide what to give you. God will give His best to those who leave the choice to Him.

**II. SIGNIFICANCE OF TONGUES**

**A. In Scripture 14:20-22**

The Jews as a nation could accept revelation when accompanied by signs so apostolic authentication was important for them. 1 Cor.14:20-25 is the only mention of the purpose of the New Testament gift of tongues. It is a very difficult passage to understand, having least an apparent contradiction in it. It seems to indicate, as he says in verse 22, "So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is a sign, not to unbelievers but to those that believe. If therefore the whole church is assembled together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will not they say that you are mad?" Now, it seems to be a contradiction. "But if all prophesy, and an ungifted man or an unbeliever enters, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you." Paul has quoted Isaiah, so that it seems again that one authenticating sign to the Jews would be men of strange tongues (in verse 21, and "by the lips of strangers, I will speak to this people and even so they will not listen to me, says the Lord.") Even though this was accomplished by the Gentiles in the captivity, he seems to indicate here that the phenomenon is again going to be an authenticating message. The only thing you can draw for sure from this passage is that Paul is saying that the tongues by themselves will not convince anybody; you need the gift of prophecy. His argument is that if tongues-speaking is a sign to warn Jewish unbelievers, then the Corinthians should not be so eager to use them in their assembly of believers.

**B. In the Church 14:23-25**

**III. SUBJECTION OF TONGUES 14:26-40**

**A. In Relation to Order 14:26-33a**

It seems the Corinthians were no more orderly in their other church services than they were in the Lord's table. Paul did not try to stop their participation, but tried to bring some order to it. Kenneth Chafin says:

*If Paul were writing the average congregation today, his advice would have to work the other side of the street. Rather than an unstructured spontaneity that creates bedlam he would be confronted with a well-regulated order of worship that often creates boredom. The smallest of churches often prints or mimeographs for its members a program of everything that is going to happen during the hour and the sequence in which it will take place, and once it has been printed it becomes a sacred thing to those who planned it. And the likelihood of the Spirit's leading*

## POSITIVE LIVING IN A PAGAN WORLD, LESSON 9

*anyone to say or do something that was not anticipated on Tuesday when the stencil was cut is very remote.*

*While the church does not need the disorder that comes from not planning, it does need to recognize the importance of using both human intellect and emotion in our expressions of gratitude to God for His love. It is a shame to waste all our tears on the plots of soap operas, all our shouting for a basketball game, and all our enthusiasm for the latest toy and then come into the presence of the Creator and sustainer of life without expressing our deep feelings of awe, of reverence, of unworthiness, and of thankfulness.*

-- Kenneth L. Chafin, 1 Corinthians, The Communicator's Commentary, p. 173.

### 1. Tongues 14:27-28

- a. Used by only two or three
  - b. Must do it one at a time  
God does not call one to preach and another to speak in tongues at the same time.
  - c. Cannot be done without an interpreter
  - d. Women cannot use it - 14:34
  - e. It must be done in a fitting and orderly way - 14:40
  - f. Do not forbid it - 14:39
- Any gathering of believers must have these regulations.

### 2. Prophecy 14:29-33

These verses are another evidence that tongues were not supernatural utterances. Paul is trying to regulate its abuse. They evidently were disorderly and speaking in tongues without regulation. He said "the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet" (14:32). Paul is speaking of the emotions, not the Holy Spirit. The logic behind this is very simple. If the Holy Spirit were causing them to speak as they were in the assembly, then the Holy Spirit would be doing something wrong (which is impossible) because Paul tells them they were doing it wrong. Therefore, it could not have been the Holy Spirit creating a miracle. It had to be a psychological phenomenon, initially caused by the Holy Spirit. The use of the gift then had to be regulated by the individual and the church. So, it is no proof of the supernatural.

### B. In Relation to Women 14:33b-35

The uniform teaching of the New Testament is that although women have many valuable ministries, it is not given to them to have a public ministry to the whole church. The law Paul refers to is probably the Genesis creation account and the concept of the woman's submission to the loving authority of the man.

Some have taken this to mean women chattering and causing confusion in a building where men and women were separated. Although the purpose may be to retard confusion, his word laleo - "to speak" -- does not mean gossiping or chattering in Koine Greek (The common language of Paul's time). It means to speak authoritatively and is used of God in verse 14:21 and in Hebrews 1:1.

## IV. CONCLUSION 37-40

Paul warns against forbidding the use of the gift of tongues but again calls for order. Prophecy was to be more valued because it could be understood, and therefore could win the unbeliever and edify the saint. These are abiding controls and principles which apply to the church today.

Note: There are not study questions for this lesson.