

## The Gift of Speaking in Tongues

### 1 Corinthians 14

Today we come to 1 Corinthians 14 and Paul's discussion of two spiritual gifts: speaking in tongues and prophecy. Today we'll consider what Paul says about tongues; next week we'll consider prophecy; the following week we'll try to gather up some loose ends.

It's an understatement to say that followers of Christ have very different opinions about the gift of speaking in tongues. When I began following Christ as a sophomore in college, I was surrounded by people who really didn't believe that speaking in tongues was a gift that God gives anymore. Their conviction was that it existed in the first century, but it has now become obsolete. Some even suggested that speaking in tongues was not a manifestation of the Holy Spirit but a manifestation of an evil spirit. The attitude toward tongues was extreme skepticism and ridicule.

But then I met some followers of Christ who believed just the opposite. They said that if you didn't speak in tongues you really weren't experiencing God in all His fullness; there was something defective about your relationship with God. I remember talking with a couple of guys in the Student Union at LSU one night. I can't quite remember all the details, but they were putting pressure on me to go out behind the Union and receive the gift of tongues. The whole idea sort of freaked me out, so I slipped away when I had the chance. Some people/groups have a very aggressive approach to speaking in tongues as a litmus test of whether or not you're filled with the Spirit.

Maybe you've encountered these two extremes when it comes to speaking in tongues: either you have the gift of tongues and you look down on everybody who doesn't *or* you don't have the gift and you disparage those who do have the gift of tongues. If those are the only two options when it comes to tongues, there's not much hope of unity on the issue – either in the local church or in the larger body of Christ. Sadly, that's the way tongues is often framed up: it's all or nothing.

But thankfully Paul takes a very different approach in 1 Corinthians 14. Paul gives a very *sane, wise, reasoned approach to speaking in tongues* – an approach that I believe eliminates the need to take a hard-line, all-or-nothing approach to tongues. Paul will say that tongues is a good gift of God and therefore should not be disparaged. But as with any spiritual gift, neither should tongues be elevated above all other gifts.

1 Corinthians 14 probably doesn't tell us everything we'd *like* to know about tongues; but it tell us everything we *need* to know about tongues. In Corinth, as best we can tell, there were some who had elevated tongues to a place of supremacy; those who spoke in tongues made those who didn't speak in tongues feel inferior. Given those dynamics in the church at Corinth, Paul's main point in this chapter is that *prophecy is preferable over tongues "in the church" (corporate worship) since intelligible speech benefits others*. The big idea of the chapter is that they should especially desire the gift of prophecy. In the context of this big idea, consider *the nature and value of speaking in tongues (12:1-19)*.

1 Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophecy.

We'll return to this verse in a couple of weeks and discuss the fact that Paul actually encourages the Corinthians to "desire earnestly" the gift of prophecy. We tend to have a rather passive view of receiving spiritual gifts. In Paul's mind/theology there is nothing incompatible between God sovereignly giving spiritual gifts (12:11, 28) and our desiring (and therefore asking for) certain spiritual gifts. We'll pick up this idea again in a couple of weeks.

For now notice again that Paul is trying to convince the Corinthians that they should "especially" desire "that [they] may prophecy." Paul isn't saying that they should desire prophecy over *all* spiritual gifts (such as giving, serving, teaching, leading, etc.). Rather, he is trying to convince them that prophecy is more valuable than tongues in the context of public worship.

Notice in the following verses how Paul describes speaking in tongues. We'll add up the data as we go through this passage until we have a well-rounded description/definition of tongues. We learn something foundational in verse 2: the person speaking in tongues is communicating with God, not other people.

2 For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.

The person who speaks in tongues is praying to God, not speaking to other people. This is why Paul will discourage the use of tongues in public worship; communicating truth to other people is not the primary function of tongues. Without someone to interpret, "no one understands" the content of what is being spoken. There is content; in that sense tongues is a language. The person speaking in tongues is speaking "in his spirit," not with his mind. Even though words are coming out of the person's mouth, s/he is having spirit to Spirit communication with God. The person's spirit is speaking to God who is Spirit (John 4:24).

Back in 12:10 and 12:28 Paul spoke about various "kinds of tongues" – suggesting that not all tongues are of the same kind. The tongues spoken in Acts 2 were human languages. People found themselves speaking in human languages which they did not know. Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost heard people from Galilee "speaking of the mighty deeds of God" in languages from all around the Roman Empire. The kind of tongues described here in 1 Corinthians 14 seems to be a different kind of tongues. Here tongues is not a human language which a person does not know. To understand these tongues, you don't need a translator; you need someone with the gift of "interpretation of tongues." Notice the contrast with prophecy:

3 But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.

4 One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.

Tongues is somewhat unique in that it edifies (builds up) the person who is speaking in tongues. In chapter 12 the emphasis was upon gifts being given for the common good – for the benefit of the larger body of Christ. The fact that tongues edifies the person speaking in tongues doesn't make it somehow selfish or wrong; Paul nowhere suggests that there's anything defective about the gift of tongues itself. We should point out that when a person is personally edified – whether

through tongues or through anything else – the whole body of Christ should benefit. God edifies or builds people up so that they can serve more effectively. When tongues edifies an individual person in private prayer, the rest of the body should benefit. Paul's point is that since tongues edifies the person speaking, its primary expression should be private prayer/worship. By contrast, the one who prophesies edifies the church (since a word of prophecy is a message from God); therefore, prophecy is better suited for public worship.

Lest we think that Paul has a negative view of tongues or that tongues is inherently divisive or unhealthy, Paul writes this in verse 5:

5 Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.

We'll see down in verse 18 that Paul himself spoke in tongues. It was a good gift for which he thanked God. Because it was a good gift from God he could say, "Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues." I don't take this as Paul saying that they all *should* speak in tongues. Back in 12:30 when arguing that God has designed the body of Christ with diversity, he asks rhetorically, "All do not speak in tongues, do they?" By God's design *not* everyone speaks in tongues. But tongues was such a good gift for Paul that he wished it upon everyone. (Interestingly, back in 7:7 Paul said, "I wish that all men were even as I myself am" – unmarried and celibate in order to be more single-minded.)

When Paul says, "greater is the one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues," I don't think he's speaking in absolute terms. I think Paul is speaking in relative terms here: when it comes to corporate worship, prophecy is more valuable than tongues (unless there is an interpretation). Again, intelligible communication is valuable in corporate worship.

In verses 6 through 11 Paul illustrates why intelligible language is so important in the church:

6 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?  
7 Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?

Unless there is interpretation, tongues is just like random notes played on a flute or harp: nothing meaningful is communicated. Something similar is true of a bugle used to summons an army for battle:

8 For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? 9 So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. 10 There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. 11 If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.

All languages (including various kinds of tongues) have meaning. But if you don't understand that language, no true communication – and therefore edification – takes place. Verse 12 gives the application for the Corinthians:

12 So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.

Their zeal for spiritual gifts should be directed toward building up the church. What builds up the church is understandable language.

13 Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

If someone speaks in a tongue and then interprets, s/he can now communicate some truth or some message that might be valuable to others. In verse 14 we have another clue as to what happens when a person speaks in tongues:

14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

Here we see again that speaking in tongues is primarily praying in one's spirit. The spirit is communicating with God but the "mind is unfruitful." By contrast, when Paul taught and explained the Scriptures, his mind was fruitful; it bore the fruit of understanding in the lives of his hearers. But when he spoke in tongues, Paul's mind was unfruitful. Notice how Paul continues to describe his own experience of tongues in verse 15:

15 What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.

There are a lot of different views on exactly what Paul is describing here. I think he is saying that sometimes he prayed in tongues (with the spirit) and other times he prayed with his mind (consciously expressing his thoughts/desires to God). Sometimes tongues took the form of song (singing with the spirit) and other times he sang songs like we've done here today – with the mind fully engaged. When it comes to corporate worship, Paul encourages them to pray and sing with their minds instead of praying/singing in tongues:

16 Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen " at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? 17 For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. 18 I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; 19 however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul's statement in verse 19 is very instructive. Basically Paul says that he would almost *never* speak in tongues "in the church": five intelligible words are more valuable than 10,000 words in a tongue. Based on this conviction, we feel like it is fully appropriate for a church to not include

tongues in its normal public worship. That was Paul's preference. Paul does make provision for speaking in tongues "in the church" down in verses 27 and 28:

27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; 28 but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

Paul says that if you must have tongues in your public worship, it should be done in a very orderly manner and only with interpretation. Notice that verse 28 presupposes that the gift of tongues is under the control of the speaker. It's not like a person has the uncontrollable urge to speak in tongues and should therefore be accommodated regardless of whether there is an interpreter. No, Paul's statement suggests that this gift is under a person's control. If there is no interpreter, the person should "speak to himself and to God" instead of speaking out loud in the church.

We'll say a bit more about tongues next week when we look at prophecy. But we're now ready to formulate a description of tongues from what we've seen in 1 Corinthians 14: ***Speaking in tongues is spirit to spirit communication with God, bypassing the mind yet edifying the speaker.*** Sorry that's so wonky, but that's the best way I can describe it. Even though I've got a nice, tight description of tongues here, there is tons of mystery that surrounds this gift, and I'm perfect fine with that. But if this is indeed what the gift of tongues is all about, I hope you can see that everyone – both those who have this gift and those who don't – can appreciate tongues as a good gift of God. There is no reason to take an all-or-nothing, hard-line approach to tongues.

Let me be explicit about a couple of implications about tongues:

First, if you have the gift of tongues, ***receive the edification God gives with gratitude and humility.*** This is what I understand Paul's main point to be in 1 Corinthians 14. He makes clear that tongues doesn't need to be the focal point of public worship; rather, tongues is best experienced in private communion with God. If God has given you this gift, allow tongues to fulfill its God-given function in your life.

Some have found that tongues allows them to intercede for others in a unique way. There are times when they don't know what to pray for another person, and so they are led to pray in tongues. Even though they don't understand exactly what they are expressing through tongues, they have the sense that they are praying according to the will of God for the person/issue on their heart. Others have found that tongues allows them to praise God with great freedom and expression. Others have found that during times of great stress, tongues allows them to unburden their hearts in a way that they cannot fully explain. My encouragement is to receive everything God has for you through this gift.

I've added "with humility" as a reminder that no spiritual gift should be a source of pride. Part of the reaction against tongues is due to the arrogance that sometimes accompanies this gift. Such pride violates everything Paul says about tongues in 1 Corinthians 14. If you have the gift

of tongues, be humbled that God would give you the capacity to enjoy spirit-to-Spirit communion with Him.

Second, if you do not have the gift of tongues, ***appreciate the gift of tongues as an expression of the goodness of God.*** God only gives good gifts. If God wants to give some the gift of tongues, who am I to object? A believer should no more disparage the gift of tongues than the gift of mercy or leadership or teaching or giving.

I'd encourage you to not let the abuses of this gift nullify everything good about this gift. There is plenty of abuse; just this past week I heard of a church that is incredibly manipulative and controlling in their practice of tongues. There is plenty of horrible theology and practice out there. But as you might have heard in Alpha, "The solution to ***misuse*** is not ***disuse*** but ***proper use***." That's what we're striving for here at Faith: a proper use of tongues that honors God and His revelation in Scripture.