

# *Speaking in Tongues*

One of the topics we often think of on the Feast of Pentecost is that of speaking in tongues.

A few months ago, I received an e-mail message from a man – let's call him *Roger* – asking me some questions on this topic. Here is what he had to say:

**I have been studying the Bible for quite some time now and realize that it is quite different than what is commonly taught in today's "traditional religion." I have been seeking a church that is scripturally accurate and would like to know more about your congregation. What caught my attention was your beliefs in the Sabbath. I can't understand how anyone who has ever read the Bible denies its importance. This makes me think you accept the Word of God as final authority rather than the traditions of men. I have a few questions. Please answer them without fear of offending me. Knowing the truth about the Word of God is more important to me than finding out I have been misled. The gift of tongues... The charismatic movement is very large and my fiancée has this "gift." From what I have read in the Word, when the disciples prayed in tongues, each person heard in their own language. The only time a language was confounded was at the tower of Babel, and was a curse. However, she quotes the scripture in the book of I Corinthians 14:2-27. It seems to imply that we cannot understand (our mind is unfruitful ) sometimes when someone prays in tongues. Do you have an opinion on this?**

As Roger mentions in his letter we, in God's church, certainly do wish to live by the Word of God rather than by the traditions of men. We want our opinions to be those of God and His Word. So, when we examine the relevant scriptures on this subject, here is what we find:

## ***In Old Testament times***

In the beginning and after the flood, mankind enjoyed all the benefits of a single language:

**Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. (Genesis 11:1)**

But they misused this blessing and turned it against God in rebellion:

**Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." (Verses 3 and 4)**

God the Father and the One who became Jesus Christ were very displeased at what the people were doing so, at the tower of Babel, they split them up into linguistic groups:

**But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Verses 5-9)**

The linguistic groups resulting from this split are listed in the tenth chapter of Genesis:

**From these the coastland peoples of the Gentiles were separated into their lands, everyone according to his language, according to their families, into their nations. The sons of Ham were Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan, [etc.]... These were the sons of Ham, according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands and in their nations... These were the sons of Shem, according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands, according to their nations. (Genesis 10:5-6, 20, 31)**

We tend to think of the account in the second chapter of Acts as the first time that God miraculously affected the tongues, speech and language of His people since the tower of Babel. But here are a few scriptures that indicate otherwise:

**Then Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." So the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the LORD? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say." But he said, "O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send." So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and He said: "Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And look, he is also coming out to meet you. When he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. Now you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do. So he shall be your spokesman to the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God. (Exodus 4:10-16)**

The same thing has happened in more recent years in the church of God. God has taken men with speech impediments and others with no previous public speaking ability and, through the power of His Spirit, He has used them mightily in His Work. He did this with His faithful prophets, Samuel and Isaiah:

**The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue. (II Samuel 23:2)**

**The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens me morning by morning, He awakens my ear to hear as the learned. (Isaiah 50:4)**

There may even have been times when God empowered His servants to communicate in foreign languages with which they previously had no experience. When we read of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and others in their travels being able to communicate with those they came into contact with, there is no mention of them having any translation difficulties.

God, through David and Solomon, tells us that, to various extents, He affects the speech of all of His people:

**The mouth of the righteous speaks wisdom, and his tongue talks of justice.  
(Psalms 37:30)**

**A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)**

### ***In New Testament times***

Moving forward to the time of Jesus' ministry, He prophesied that speaking "with new tongues" would be a sign of His true believers:

**And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; (Mark 16:17)**

Was Jesus saying that His people would be inspired to speak some new languages, which non-believers would not be able to understand? Encouraged by Satan and his cohorts, some really do believe that this is what speaking in tongues is. But think about this logically. God is not the author of confusion (I Corinthians 14:33). What would be the use of His people preaching in some unintelligible babble? On the contrary, the recorded instances of speaking in tongues in the early church show that the church members who spoke in tongues were heard in *understandable* languages – languages that were in common use in the world at that time.

## ***Pentecost, 31AD***

The first *specifically recorded* instance of speaking in tongues, per se, occurred on the Feast of Pentecost, 31AD, on the same day that the New Testament church of God was founded. Let us examine this account:

**When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)**

It is interesting to note that Luke says that *all* of the disciples spoke with other tongues after they received God's Holy Spirit. If we compare the first four verses of this chapter with verses 15 and 21 of the previous chapter, we will see that the gift was probably given to one hundred and twenty of them, not just twelve:

**And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said... "Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us," (Acts 1:15, 21)**

Luke was inspired to write that the ability to speak in tongues was given through the power of God's Holy Spirit. Again, were these first church members speaking in some bizarre, incomprehensible, new language? No. The tongues that they spoke in were not gibberish, but were commonly used languages:

**And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." (Acts 2:5-11)**

This was an exceptional miracle. The apostles may have thought that they were speaking in their own language, but other languages were coming out of their mouths and, what is even more miraculous, each listener heard the words in his own native language. The miracle was upon the listeners just as much as it was on the speakers. For emphasis and to make sure that we get the point, God had Luke state it three times.

## ***Other recorded instances***

Some time later, when the first Gentiles were being called into God's church, a different, though still high profile, display of speaking in tongues occurred:

**While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God... (Acts 10:44-46)**

For God's own reasons and purposes, these people were given the gift of the Holy Spirit and the ability to speak in tongues. Even before they were baptized! The implication here is that some – if not all – of Cornelius' household were of a different native language. Verse 1 of this chapter indicates that Cornelius' native tongue may have been an Italian dialect:

**There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, (Acts 10:1)**

Later still, some new believers in Ephesus received the gift of speaking in tongues immediately after Paul had baptized and laid hands upon them:

**And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. (Acts 19:6)**

It is likely that the native language of these Ephesians was not Hebrew or Aramaic and that Paul recognized that they had been given this gift by a remarkable, immediate improvement in linguistic communication between them and himself... that he was able to hear whatever they said in his own language.

God gives miraculous gifts – not just for the sake of a magic show – but for good, logical, practical reasons. Many languages were prevalent in the various nations of the Mediterranean world of that time and good communications were necessary for the effective teaching of the members of the early church.

It is also interesting to note in both of these cases – that of Cornelius' household and that of the Ephesians – that these newly converted people spoke in tongues to the apostles who baptized them, and not vice-versa.

## ***Not given to every church member***

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth chapters, he makes much mention of the twin gifts of speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. First, he tells us that these gifts were not given to every church member:

**There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit... For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues... And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? (I Corinthians 12:4, 8-10, 28-30)**

The implied answer to these seven questions, of course, is "No." This tells us that we do not necessarily lack God's Holy Spirit because we have not been given the gift of speaking in tongues. God may have given us other gifts through His Spirit. The last-place positioning of these gifts in Paul's listing indicates that, even though he possessed them himself, he considered them relatively inferior; especially in comparison to the gift of true, inspired Christian love:

**Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. (I Corinthians 13:1)**

When we read this verse, we might ask ourselves, "What language do angels speak?" Perhaps they speak the same "pure language" that God promises to mankind in the World Tomorrow:

**For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one accord. (Zephaniah 3:9)**

Whatever tongue it may be, the angels' language is of no practical use to humans – even to God's children – unless we can understand it. Please note also that Paul did not claim the ability to speak in the tongues of angels any more than he claimed the ability to move mountains or the ability to understand every single mystery of life:

**And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (I Corinthians 13:2)**

He was merely saying that he would be like sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal *if* he had the ability to speak in the language of angels but did not have the more important gift of true Christian love. Paul's inspired viewpoint on the relative unimportance of the twin gifts of tongues was amplified further as he foresaw a time when the twin gifts of tongues would cease:

**Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. (Verse 8)**

Perhaps that time has come. Perhaps the requirement for speaking in tongues had diminished even by the time Paul wrote this epistle. As we shall see, the following chapter of I Corinthians indicates that this might have been so. Although God may restore the gift to His people at some time in the future, real speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues as described in God's Word does not seem to be a gift that is commonly given to the people of His church at the beginning of the 21st Century. We do, however, have church members who are remarkably effective in the translation of a few specific languages. The comparative ease in which they have learnt these languages is a great help to the church and may be considered miraculous to some degree, but certainly not to the same extent as that recorded in the New Testament accounts of the early church. More on this later.

## ***Tongues chapter***

The most comprehensive coverage of the subject of speaking in tongues is in the fourteenth chapter of the Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. Let us take the time to examine this chapter in some detail, beginning with the very first verse:

**Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. (I Corinthians 14:1)**

Remembering that Paul did not write his epistle in chapter and verse format, we see that he makes a transition here, at the beginning of chapter 14, from the subject of the priority of Christian love to a comparison of the gifts of prophecy and tongues, both of which he had mentioned in chapter 13 (verses 1-2, 8-9).

First, he continues his admonition for God's people to put a high priority on love. He then advises us that if we will desire and seek spiritual gifts, we should seek the spiritual gift of prophecy.

The Greek word *propheteuo*, used here, can also be translated as "speak under inspiration" as well as "prophecy" in the sense of foretelling future events. Although the context of this chapter favours the "inspired speaking" translation, we should not discard the fact that prophecy is not a totally discontinued gift. We may tend to think that true prophecy ended with the apostle John. But, in more recent years, other true ministers have been given the gift of explaining and clarifying God's prophecies with amazing accuracy. Some of these prophecies have already been fulfilled, but the fulfillments for most of them are still ahead of us. Paul continues by giving reasons why the gift of prophecy and inspired speaking is more practically useful than the gift of tongues:

**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. (Verse 2)**

Paul stresses that if a church member speaks in a foreign language to a local group of people, even if his words are very much inspired, they are useless to the locals who do not understand that language. Other than the speaker himself, the only One present who can understand him is God. For example, if a minister gave an inspired sermon in the Inuit language to any one of our North American, French, Dutch, Australian, Filipino, Trinidadian or African congregations, it is very doubtful that even one other member would be able to understand him. (We will come back to this point later.) On the other hand, if a man is inspired to preach or to prophesy in the congregation's native language, they will *all* be edified, exhorted and comforted by his words:

**But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. (Verses 3-4)**

When Paul says that the speaker edifies himself, he is not suggesting that the speaker of foreign languages is puffed up or vain. To edify is to enlighten, inform, educate, instruct, improve and teach. If a minister were to stand up in a congregation of English-speaking church members and speak in Inuit, it might be good practice for *him*, and *he* might learn some things that are better clarified in the Inuit-language Bible than in the English editions. He might impress us with his knowledge of the Inuit language or by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which, perhaps, has empowered him to speak so fluently in that language. But the congregation would not learn anything that is spiritually beneficial to them. That is, unless they were given the twin gift of interpretation of tongues – the ability to understand what he was saying. But what would be the logical point? The minister may just as well have spoken to the congregation in English and thus avoided all the extra effort! If he preaches or prophesies in our native language, Paul tells us, the whole congregation is then edified.

**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. (Verse 5)**

Paul says that he would be pleased if God had given every Corinthian church member the gift of tongues – perhaps because of the benefits that might ensue from improved international communication amongst God's people.

For example, the Church of the Great God has a lovely family of French brethren who we see at the Feast of Tabernacles each fall and with whom other members communicate via the Internet throughout the rest of the year. There is a meeting of the minds between us that comes through the mutual indwelling of God's Holy Spirit, and yet there is a constant language barrier between us. If we all possessed the gift of tongues, we would be able to freely communicate with all of our brethren around the world, no matter what native language they speak.

Paul continues in this verse by repeating that the gift of prophecy and inspired speaking is considered greater than that of tongues, but with the one exception of the associated gift of interpretation.

We have some very talented interpreters in God's church. They are able to simultaneously listen to the English language sermons and translate them into other languages for the benefit of the foreign members present. Members of the aforementioned family in Normandy, France translate church sermon transcripts and articles from English to French, for publication on our church web sites. Church members in Holland translate sermon transcripts into Dutch, repeat them verbally to their local brethren, and also send them for posting on the church web-sites.

Anyone who has struggled with foreign language classes will agree that fluent translation ability is a great gift. If, as in the above examples, this ability is used for service to God and His people, then it is very likely that the gift is not just acquired or inherited, but is given to them miraculously by God.

Paul repeats that the whole congregation – even the whole church – is edified by prophecy and inspired speaking. These words, when added to those in verse 4, imply that, except for rare circumstances (such as those recorded in Acts 2, for example), only a few members can be expected to be edified by a minister speaking in tongues. This makes good, logical sense when we realize that to receive edifying is to receive spiritual instruction and enlightenment.

Paul then asks the Corinthian members what use would it be if he were to speak to them in tongues:

**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? (Verse 6)**

If the truth of God could be explained more clearly in a foreign language, *and* if God enabled Paul to speak in tongues, *and* if God enabled the Corinthians to hear and understand his words, then there might be some benefit. All three of these requirements must be met for the gift of tongues to be of any practical use. But Paul stresses that, whatever language he speaks to them in, it would only be beneficial if his words come from God by revelation, knowledge, prophecy or doctrine.

## ***Musical voices***

Now Paul recalls a previously-used analogy:

**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? (Verse 7)**

The "things without life" that make noise are musical instruments. Here, Paul returns to the symbolism that he had introduced at the beginning of the previous chapter, where he wrote of sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Paul now gives two more examples of well-known musical instruments of his day: the flute (KJV: pipe) and the harp. Paul notes that different instruments give different, distinct sounds. A flute sounds like a flute and a harp sounds like a harp. Throughout this chapter, we find Paul making many logical, common sense, almost obvious statements such as this one. We, his readers, find ourselves nodding our heads and saying, "Yes. Of course." Paul's common sense approach to the topic of speaking in tongues is in total contradiction to the illogicality of the unbiblical teachings of many modern churches.

How would a listener know, Paul asks, if it were a pipe or a harp making the noise if they both sounded the same? What would be the use, musically, if all instruments sounded the same? What would a band or orchestra sound like? A composer introduces a certain instrument into a concerto, symphony or other piece for a certain purpose – to achieve a certain musical effect. (It is interesting to note, by the way, that two hundred years ago, Mozart wrote a lovely concerto for flute, harp and orchestra.) Have you ever seen one of those Scottish bagpipe orchestra concerts on your local public television or arts station? After one – perhaps two – pieces, I find myself switching channels due to the sheer lack of variety in sound!

**For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? (Verse 8)**

Paul now adds a third musical example: that of a military trumpet. The purpose of a military trumpet – in modern times called a bugle – is not just for pleasant musical enjoyment. Its purpose is to transmit prearranged messages to soldiers both on and off the battlefield: to get them out of bed in the morning, to call them to the mess hall for meals, to tell them to go to sleep at night, to charge, to regroup, to retreat. The sound of a military trumpet is not soft and pleasant like that of a flute or a harp. It is loud and brash. It can be heard a long way off. What use would a military trumpet be if its sound could not be distinguished from that of a flute or a harp? The warriors would not be able to hear it and would not be able to receive the intended messages from their leaders. Paul's point here is this: What use are sounds – including words and languages – if their intended message cannot be understood?

**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. (Verse 9)**

Paul asks the Corinthians how they can expect their words to be easily understood if they speak in an unknown language. If God does not inspire the listening as well as the speaking, a speaker in tongues may as well speak to the air rather than to his fellow church members for all the good that his strange words would do. Speaking in tongues is only of use if the listener understands what the speaker is saying.

**There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. (Verse 10)**

Whereas the English word "tongues" is translated from the Greek word *glossa*, the word "languages" in this verse is translated from the Greek word *phone* and can also be rendered as *tone, noise, sound, saying* or, as it is in the King James version, *voice*. Paul seems still to be, at least in part, referring to his analogy of musical instruments. The hundreds of tones of a huge pipe organ are still called "voices" to this day.

So what is Paul telling us in this verse? He is telling us that all of the billions of different voices, tones, noises, sounds, sayings and languages in the world give their own individual meanings. If we don't understand the meaning of any one of them, it is useless to us. For example, if a man walking in the woods does not recognize the growl of a cougar for what it is, he will not benefit from its warning sound and he might not flee from its danger.

**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. (Verse 11)**

Here, Paul pulls the meaning of the word *phone* from musical sounds back to that of human language. The word "barbarian" (Greek *barbaros*) used in the King James version is a *foreigner* and is translated so in most newer Bible translations. Paul says that a speaker and a listener are like foreigners to each other if they cannot understand one another's language. Again, we nod our heads in agreement. This is just plain logic and common sense. Why should we think that there is anything spiritual about speaking in an unintelligible foreign language for no worthwhile purpose?

**Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel. (Verse 12)**

Paul returns to his related subject of edification, which he had introduced in verses 3, 4 and 5. He commends the Corinthian brethren for having zeal to have and to use spiritual gifts, but he exhorts them to seek growth in the gifts that will increase the spiritual education of their congregations. This is also a good admonishment for God's people today. As in other verses in this chapter, there is an implication here that the Corinthians had not, in fact, been seeking the better spiritual gifts, but had been placing too high a value on the higher profile gifts – especially that of speaking in tongues.

**Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. (Verse 13)**

For this reason – for the edification of the church – a member who has been blessed with a gift for foreign languages should pray that God would help him use his gift where it will be of the most use – for interpretation. What use would our language-gifted members be to the church if they stood up in an English speaking congregation and waxed eloquent in fluent French? The members' time would be wasted. Most would soon become bored. Some would probably doze off! Rather, they correctly use their gift to help our non-English-speaking brethren better understand the meanings of the English language sermons.

## ***Praying in a foreign language***

Continuing in verse 14:

**For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.**

If an English-speaking person were to pray in French – perhaps with the aid of an English-French dictionary – his original thoughts that lead to his words are in English. But his understanding of the French words that come out of his mouth is naturally hindered due to his lack of familiarity with the language.

**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. (Verse 15)**

Paul says that he is determined to pray and to sing (the singing of hymns to God is implied) with both a correct spirit and with understanding of the words coming out of his mouth.

**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? (Verse 16)**

In using the phrase "bless with the spirit" here, Paul may or may not have been writing about the giving of thanks for a meal. Nevertheless, such a prayer makes a good case in point. If a person who could not speak French (and is thus *uninformed* or *unlearned* (KJV) in that language) were sharing a meal in the home of a French-speaking person and his French host were to ask the blessing on their meal in the French language, it would be untruthful – and therefore wrong – for his English guest to say "Amen" to the prayer. Why untruthful? Because the word "Amen" means "So be it," and so demands understanding of the words of the prayer.

**For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. (Verse 17)**

The French host has given a proper blessing on the meal, but his English guest is not edified – he is uninformed, unlearned or ignorant – as to what was said.

## ***Spiritually mature approach***

Paul makes an intriguing statement in verse 18:

**I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;**

Here we see that Paul was in no way belittling the gift, even though, throughout this part of his letter, he was recommending that the gift of tongues be given a more realistic priority. He had been given the gift of tongues in great measure.

But why did Paul thank God that his gift of tongues was more extensive than that of any of the Corinthian brethren? It is unlikely that he was boasting in a wrong way. It is more likely that he was implying that he needed a greater measure of the gift in order to be able to fulfil the work that God had given him in the various foreign areas where he was sent to preach. But also that his greater level of this gift gave him the understanding and authority to correct them on this topic. The context of this whole chapter indicates that the Corinthian church members had somewhat immature and inaccurate attitudes toward the gift of tongues and that Paul, with his experience with the gift, found it necessary to correct them.

**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. (Verse 19)**

If God has not given us a miraculous gift for language translation, a few, brief, inspired words of understanding in our recognizable, native languages are worth more than multiple thousands in an unrecognizable, foreign one.

**Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. (Verse 20)**

While God's people are to be as "un-malicious" as little children, He wants us to be growing in maturity of understanding. It seems that it is those who are spiritually immature who would tend to seek the "magic show" of a display of speaking in tongues. Paul gives the impression that the Corinthian church members were, to some degree, to be counted among the immature.

**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. (Verse 21)**

Paul was paraphrasing this writing from Isaiah 28:11-12:

**For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people, to whom He said, "This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest," and, "This is the refreshing"; yet they would not hear.**

Isaiah was inspired to prophesy of a time when God would use other languages (and also, perhaps, the gift of speaking in tongues) as tools to speak to the internationally-scattered Israelites, to give them yet another opportunity to repent and to accept His requirements. Through His hand-picked servants, God would speak to the English-speaking Israelites, not in Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew, but in English. He would speak to the French-speaking Israelites in French, to the Dutch-speaking Israelites in Dutch, and so on. Isaiah also prophesied that, despite these miraculous gifts, and no matter what language in which they were heard, the majority of Israelites would refuse to listen to God's words that would be spoken to them. These prophecies have been partially fulfilled. Israel has had a long history of ignoring God's warnings, even when accompanied by wonderful encouragement, blessings and miracles.

A second fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy might be for the New Testament era "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). In this interpretation, God would use different groups of His true, but scattered, church – that is, different tribes, or sub-tribes of spiritual Israel – each group perhaps preaching the truth using a different approach to transmit His end-time message to the people to whom He wants to give it. It is to be hoped that the people of this end-time "Israel of God" will not close their ears to His words as did their physical Israelite forebears.

### ***Practical purpose and benefits***

But what is the practical benefit of the gift of tongues? As we return to I Corinthians 14, we see that Paul gives the answer in verse 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.**

Here we see that the purpose of the gift of tongues is as a miraculous sign, which benefits some of those God is calling rather than those who are already converted. Note that it is *a* sign and not *the* sign. God has *sometimes* used this gift to call *some* people. When employed by God, it benefits a group of unconverted people He is calling through this means, and it may be a starting point to bring them to conversion and to begettal as spiritual babies. However, most church members in recent times were called in other ways. At the time of writing, I am not aware of even one church member who was called through the gift of tongues.

Paul points out that true prophecy and inspired preaching, on the other hand, are beneficial to the converted – *every one* of the converted – and help them grow from spiritual babies into spiritually mature adults.

**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? (Verse 23)**

Paul uses some word-play here, using an analogy of poor mental health. If, during a church meeting, all of the members were speaking in foreign languages when some new attendees (the Greek word translated "uninformed" is *idiotes* and connotes spiritual ignoramuses) arrived who were not given a gift of translation, the newcomers would probably think that the members were the ones who were mentally infirm. This would be confusion and a terribly negative example – the very opposite of God's way (I Corinthians 14:33, 40; James 3:16).

**But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. (Verse 24)**

Paul now presents an alternative scenario. If, in this same church meeting, a newcomer were to hear truly inspired messages and to meet a truly converted, welcoming and loving congregation who, in the fellowship periods before and after the service, are conversing under God's inspiration through the power of His Holy Spirit, their behaviour and their inspired words would give him, if God is calling him, a good start to becoming convinced of the truth and to being called to account.

**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. (Verse 25)**

On first reading, this verse looks as though this new attendee opens up the secrets of his heart and prostrates himself before God in worship immediately and publicly, at the first church service he attends. But such behaviour does not fit in with the decency and order which Paul stresses the importance of in other parts of this same chapter. Nor does it conform to Jesus' clear instructions for privacy in prayer (Matthew 6:6).

Rather, Paul is telling the Corinthians that these actions will come to pass sooner or later as a gradual or eventual result of the inspired preaching and conversation of the congregation. Through their good example, our newcomer will begin to open up to the church members and – more importantly, to God – without fear of being harshly judged by them for his former sinful and unconverted life. He will begin to kneel privately or even to prostrate himself in prayers of worship, and he will declare that he recognizes that God is in this congregation to which he has been led (John 17:21, 23).

**How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (Verse 26)**

When Paul writes, "How is it then?" the commentators tell us that what he means is, "Considering what I have written so far on this subject, what should you be doing about it?" Then he goes on to *tell* them what they should be doing about it. When they meet together – whether it be on a Sabbath Day, a Holy Day, or even on a regular week day for any reason – one church member may have a favourite, inspiring hymn that he has been thinking about the words to. He is excited about it, perhaps because its words did not strike him before. Another may be similarly inspired and excited about a scripture or doctrine for which, to him, God has just "turned on the light."

But such excitement and inspiration can come through foreign languages and translations too. Although not at all fluent in German, I have read certain phrases and enjoyed many pieces of choral and vocal music in the German language, and have found their meaning to be so very much more colourful and enlightening than they would be in the equivalent English. One of our local church members, originally from the Frisian Islands in the northwest corner of Germany, tells me that certain passages in his German language Bible bring out the meaning so much clearer than in the English translations. The same may be true for other languages too.

## ***Strict rules for order***

However, despite our excitement due to His inspiration, God commands us to maintain strict control:

**If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. (Verse 27)**

Another of our church members recently described to me a local, so-called "speaking in tongues" meeting that had been related to her by a leading participant in that session. One of the activities was a period when all of those in attendance prayed – different prayers, not the same vain repetition (Matthew 6:7) – out loud at the same time. Imagine the confusion!

When any speaking in tongues was done in the early true church of God, like all aspects of church services, it was to be done in a very orderly and respectful manner. Two or three men were permitted to speak, and it was to be consecutively, not simultaneously. This limitation may have been useful for two or three sermons, sermonettes or split sermons (as we sometimes have at the Feast of Tabernacles and other holy days) or for the benefit of two or three groups of different native languages who may have been present at the same service. An interpreter was also required to make sure that the rest of the congregation knew what the speaker was saying. When Herbert W. Armstrong spoke in China some years ago, he had a translator standing next to him. Mr. Armstrong would speak a few phrases in English, then he would stop and his translator would convert what he said into Chinese. In some multiple-language congregations of God's church today, translators sit outside the main meeting hall, listening to the spoken messages on headphones, and simultaneously translating the original speaker's words into the other language. The translator's words are communicated to the second-language members, also via radio headphones. As mentioned earlier, such translation ability is a great gift. To be able to speak and listen at the same time is impossible for most of us.

**But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. (Verse 28)**

Paul was very strict on the requirement that a translator be present whenever a member spoke in tongues. If no translator were available, the speakers in tongues were not to exercise their gift. I doubt that many translators are employed in the counterfeit "speaking-in-tongues" sessions today.

Referring to the last phrase in this verse, "let him speak to himself, and to God," God does not, of course, want His preachers, or any of His people to be walking around talking to themselves; nor does He want them to disrupt church services by praying to Him out loud. In his commentary on this verse, Albert Barnes aptly paraphrases this clause as: "Let him meditate on the truths which are revealed to him, and let him in secret express his desires to God."

As verses 29 to 32, although certainly worthy of detailed study, deal more with the subjects of prophecy and inspired speaking in the native language than with speaking in tongues, we will move on to verse 33:

**For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.**

This well-known and oft-quoted verse, when teamed up with verse 40, is a very important key in our understanding about how church services and other church meetings should be conducted. It is also very important in this context of inspired speaking – both in native and in foreign languages. God is telling us, through the apostle Paul, that all of the above rules have been set in place because God demands peace, not confusion, in His congregations.

On the other extreme, the fruits of Satan's spirit prove that he is the author of confusion (Acts 19:21-34; James 3:14-16). He is a liar and a counterfeiter (John 8:44; II Corinthians 11:13-15). His counterfeit of speaking in tongues is the twisted performance that one might witness at today's bizarre, uncontrolled "speaking in tongues" sessions or "tarry meetings."

One leading member of a local Victoria area religious organization, otherwise a very respected businessman in the local community, when visiting and "witnessing" to the downtown street-people, is often motivated (evidently by the chief liar and counterfeiter or by one of his agents) to loudly babble in some harsh-sounding, incomprehensible "language" to such an extent that even his audiences of street people are embarrassed and ashamed by his carryings-on.

God, through Paul, now introduces a rule, which has become in our day one of the most controversial of His commands in the whole Bible:

**Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. (Verse 34)**

Here is a rule that, apparently, was being violated by the church of God in Corinth, and is being flagrantly violated over and over again by many of today's churches, even by some that claim to accept and live by the words of the New Testament. Not only do they ignore God's Word on this command through the apostle Paul; they disregard the repeated support of all of the major Bible scholars and commentators.

God forbids women to speak at church services. This restriction in no way implies that God looks upon women as inferior or second-class Christians. On the contrary, many examples of godly women are highlighted throughout the scriptures. God-fearing, female prophets – i.e. prophetesses – are mentioned in Exodus 15:20, Judges 4:4, II Kings 22:14, II Chronicles 34:22, Isaiah 8:3, Luke 2:36 and Acts 21:9. God specially chose these women to transmit His messages to His people. Through Paul, God teaches us in I Corinthians 11:5 that, even in New Testament times, God might still choose to prophesy through a woman, or He might communicate directly to her mind in order to instruct her to speak inspired words privately to her fellow members or to others God is calling. However, her prophesying or inspired speaking must not be done publicly or "from the pulpit." See also I Timothy 2:11-12.

What does this have to do with the subject of speaking in tongues? Perhaps God inspired Paul to add these sentences to his epistle at this point because He knew that women would be the majority who would be deceived into vainly participating in Satan's counterfeit "speaking in tongues."

**And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church. (Verse 35)**

Here, Paul expands upon what he had written in verse 34. The implication is that that a woman should not even ask a question out loud to the minister during a church meeting. Today, a limited number of such questions might be allowed from the men of the congregation during a church Bible study. If a woman does not understand something that was said in a church service or Bible study, she is first to ask her husband. If he cannot provide an adequate answer, he should contact the speaker, then relay the response and explanation back to his wife.

## ***Rebuke for Corinth***

In verse 36, Paul rebukes the Corinth congregation:

**Or did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached?**

But this reprimand can also serve as a strong and motivating admonition for God's people throughout the world, today.

A comparison of various Bible translations and commentaries shows that Paul was asking them: "Do you members of the Corinth congregation think that somehow God's Word originated with you? Or do you think that God gave His Word only to you?"

Based on contextual verses and chapters, the following two implications may be added. First, that the Corinth church was a comparatively new and inexperienced one. Second, its members, immaturely and somewhat vainly, looked upon themselves as progressive in their approach to Christianity and thus maintained wrong practices, including their incorrect approach to prophecy, inspired speaking, speaking in tongues, women preaching, and general decorum at church meetings.

**If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. (Verse 37)**

Today's churches that condone women preachers and wild, uncontrolled "speaking in tongues" sessions look upon Paul's writings on these subjects, not as part of the clear, inspired Word of God, but merely as the personal opinions of an old-school, out-of-date, male chauvinist. Paul here warns against this attitude. If a person is one of God's true prophets or is being truly inspired by God through His Holy Spirit, he will know, without the shadow of a doubt, that Paul's instructions and corrections are not just his own, but are given through the direct inspiration of God.

**But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant. (Verse 38)**

Back in verses 22, 23 and 24, Paul had compared "the uninformed" (KJV: *unlearned*; Greek *idiotes*) – those who were comparatively ignorant of the truth, of foreign languages, and of the concepts of true speaking in tongues, prophecy and inspired speaking – with believers who were spiritually enlightened and, therefore, familiar with these things.

Here, Paul seems to be comparing the ignorant man with the man in the previous verse who is – or "thinks himself to be" – a prophet or a spiritual person. Paul uses the verb *agnoeo*: to be ignorant. The RSV translates this word as "not recognize," which suggests not only that such an ignorant man is not a prophet or a spiritual man, but also that he does not recognize Paul's God-given authority, nor that the instructions Paul gives come from God through direct inspiration.

**Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. (Verse 39)**

As Paul begins his conclusion on these subjects, he reminds the readers of his epistle that they should have a greater desire to prophesy and to speak under God's inspiration than to speak with tongues. However, as he had already detailed, speaking in tongues was acceptable in the appropriate circumstances. Even in the church today, speaking in tongues should not be forbidden if, of course, it is truly inspired of God and not empowered by the counterfeiter. God will make it manifest to His people whether or not it comes from Him.

The gift of tongues has not been evident in the church of God in recent years, but that is not to say that God will not use it again in the future. Although it is proper for us to be wary of any apparent manifestations of speaking in tongues, we should accept the fact that it once was a powerful gift that God used through some members of His church and that He may, for His own good purposes, reintroduce it (Verse 21; Isaiah 28:11-12).

## ***Final call for order***

Here is a very fitting conclusion to this part of Paul's letter:

### **Let all things be done decently and in order. (Verse 40)**

Let us examine the phrase "decently and in order" and let us apply our findings to our church meetings, and to our Christian lives in general. The English word "decently" is translated from the Greek adverb *euschemonos*, which can also be translated as "decorously" (i.e. marked by decorum), or "honestly." This Greek adverb *euschemonos* comes from the adjective *euschemon*, which means "well-formed," "decorous," "noble (in rank)," "comely," or "honourable." *Euschemon*, is derived from the two Greek words, *eu* and *schema*, which together mean a scheme, fashion, figure or pattern of well-doing or, more simply, a visibly good example.

The English phrase "in order" is translated from two Greek words, *kata* and *taxis*. The preposition *kata* frequently denotes intensity. It can be translated in quite a number of ways but, according to the context of this chapter, the most significant translations are: *beyond, charitably, exceeding, more excellent, godly, beyond measure, mightily, more, particularly, and uttermost.*

The Greek word *taxis* may be alternately translated as "fixed succession of rank or character," "official dignity," or "regular arrangement in time" (which might partly relate back to Paul's preaching and timing limitations in verses 26 through 33).

*Taxis* comes from the Greek verb *tasso*, which can mean "arrange in an orderly manner," "assign or dispose to a certain position or lot," "determine," "ordain," or "set."

When we read the Greek word *taxis*, a vision of a rank of modern taxicabs might come to mind. Perhaps this mental picture can help us understand what Paul is saying here in his conclusion. Among taxi drivers there appears to be a strict first-come-first-serve rule. When you come out of an airport and you see a long line of taxis, you are to some extent compelled to ride in the first car in the line. You might not like the look of the car or the driver, but if you were to choose the fifth cab in the line, its driver would be considered by the others as jumping the queue and might be castigated by his fellows. This is the kind of strict adherence to accepted rule and order that Paul is writing about here.

## ***In summary***

Let us review what God has taught us on these subjects:

God caused the division of human languages at the time of the construction of the tower of Babel but, since then, has maintained authority and control over the miraculous gifts of speaking, understanding and translating foreign languages for His own purposes.

In the early years of His New Testament church, God spoke to His people and to prospective church members using the miraculous gifts of prophecy, inspired speaking in the native language of the speaker and, whenever necessary, in languages foreign to the speaker but native to the majority of the listeners. If the congregation was made up of people from more than one linguistic group, then the inspired message from God would likely be given in the language of the majority, and the minorities would hear the message through inspired translators.

**The gift of speaking in tongues was to be considered relatively inferior to those of love, of translation, and of prophecy and inspired speaking in the native language.**

**The gifts of tongues were given for the benefit of certain prospective members whom God was calling, whereas those already converted were benefited by the gifts of prophecy and inspired speaking.**

**The wild, uncontrolled, unintelligible gibberish of those who commonly claim to have the gift of speaking in tongues today is certainly not inspired by God, is most likely empowered by Satan and his demons, and is in direct opposition and disobedience to God's teaching in His Word.**

**It appears that the inspired speaking of the early church was somewhat different than that of today. As God spoke directly to the minds of the prophets of old, so He did with the inspired speakers of His fledgling church. However, it is likely that God may at some time in the future deem it necessary and beneficial that He restore this same level of direct inspiration to His people, both in native and foreign languages.**

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