

Notes on TONGUES and PROPHECY in I CORINTHIANS 14

This outline is about the spiritual gifts of tongues, the interpretation of tongues, and the gift of prophecy, as experienced in the New Testament church. There are those of the cessationist view who hold that when the New Testament canon was complete these gifts ceased to exist. There are those who believe that these gifts are still in operation today. The purpose of this study is not to address that question, but rather to answer the question: “What was Paul trying to tell the Corinthians at the time of writing?” What was the gift of tongues and prophecy like, and what guidelines for their use did Paul give the church at that time?

TONGUES

SOME BASIC PRESUPPOSITIONS ABOUT TONGUES:

1. Tongues is speaking in a language one has never learned.

I Corinthians 13:1 “If I speak the languages of men and of angels...”

Acts 2:4 “Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability for speech.”

Act 2:7-8 “And they were astounded and amazed, saying, ‘Look, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’”

2. Speaking in tongues was not the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian has been baptized in the Spirit. Any person not baptized in the Spirit was not part of the Lord's church. Any person not indwelt by the Holy Spirit is a person without a relationship with Christ.

I Corinthians 12:13 “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

Romans 8:9 “You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God lives in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.”

3. Not every Christian was to be expected to have the gift of tongues.

I Corinthians 12:30 “All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?” (New American Standard) (The Greek expects a “no” answer to this question.)

4. **This gift is not an *eternal* part of God’s plan, but there is a date certain when it will cease to exist.**

I Corinthians 13:8-12, esp. vs. 12

“Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for languages, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things. For now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love.”

5. **There are spiritual beings in the universe beside the Holy Spirit. Correspondingly, not every supernatural event is produced the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is necessary to “test the spirits.”**

I John 4:1 “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

ACCORDING TO I CORINTHIANS 14, THE PERSON WHO HAS THE GIFT OF TONGUES:

1. The Person Who Has the Gift Of Tongues Speaks to God

As already mentioned, the gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak in languages one has never learned before (I Corinthians 13 :1). The question then becomes: who is the speaker *speaking to*? The answer is that the person speaking in tongues is speaking to God.

Verse 2 “For the person who speaks in another language is **not speaking to men but to God**, since no one understands him; however, he speaks mysteries in the Spirit.”

Verse 14 “For if I **pray in another language, my spirit prays**, but my understanding is unfruitful.”

Verse 16 “Otherwise, if you **bless with the spirit**, how will the uninformed person **say ‘Amen’** at your **giving of thanks**, since he does not know what you are saying?”

This is all the terminology of prayer. The person speaking in tongues is said to “bless” God – and blessing God is another way of saying, “giving of thanks.” The bystander who hears and desires to join in this praise is said to say “Amen” (if he understands what is said). This is why some refer to speaking in tongues as a “prayer language.”

There are some who have felt that that the tongues-speaking in Acts 2 is the key to understanding the tongues-speaking in I Corinthians 12-14 – and that all tongues-speaking is *evangelistic* in nature, rejecting the idea of any tongue-speaking as a “prayer language.” In Acts 2, there is speaking in other languages: “Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability for speech” (Acts 2: 4). Verse 11 says, “We hear them speaking in our own languages the magnificent acts of God.” My take is that the words in I Corinthians 12-14 do not refer to evangelistic activity. If we are to take both passages as referring to the same kind of speaking in tongues, it would be better to interpret the history book of Acts in light of the Epistle rather than the other way around. The Epistle is more explicit. In that case, the gathering crowds in Acts 2 heard the disciples praising God.

2. **The Person Who Has The Gift Of Tongues Speaks Words Which Have Meaning**

Verse 2 “For the person who **speaks in another language...**”

Verse 10 “There are doubtless many different kinds of languages in the world, and **all have meaning.**”

Verse 14 “For if I pray **in another language**, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.”

When tongues are not interpreted, the meaning remains a mystery, but it does have meaning. It is not “ecstatic utterances”— that is the shouting and babbling of a person emotionally caught up in euphoria.

It may be noted that the tongues-speaking in Acts 2 clearly concerned known languages (Acts 2:4, 8, 11).

3. **The Person Who Has the Gift Of Tongues Prays with his Human Spirit**

Verse 14 “For if I pray in another language, **my spirit** prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.”

Verse 15 (NIV): “So what shall I do? I will pray with **my spirit**, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.”

The person prays with his spirit, but he doesn't understand with his mind; unless, of course, there is an interpretation.

Some Christians believe that people have a body and a spirit, others a spirit, soul, and body. All Christians believe that people have a human spirit (I Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12). That was even part of Jesus' humanity; the Bible refers to His human spirit, for example when He commended it to God at His death.

4. The Person Who Has The Gift Of Tongues May Be Able To Sing In Tongues

Verse 15 “What then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with my understanding. **I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with my understanding.**”

5. The Person Who Has The Gift Of Tongues Edifies Himself. That Is, He Is Built Up In The Lord.

It is a good thing to be built up in the Lord. In fact, Colossians 2:6-7 commands it: “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him.” Personal edification is why we have our quiet times. However, Paul was saying speaking in tongues in public is like having your quiet time in public. Unless you told people what you were getting out of your Bible reading, it wouldn’t mean anything to them to see you reading your Bible. Paul is saying the same was true when someone spoke in tongues without an interpretation. That person was edifying himself to the neglect of others.

Verse 4 “The person who speaks in another language builds himself up, but he who prophesies builds up the church.”

Verses 6-9 “But now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in other languages, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you with a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? Even inanimate things producing sounds—whether flute or harp—if they don’t make a distinction in the notes, how will what is played on the flute or harp be recognized? In fact, if the trumpet makes an unclear sound, who will prepare for battle? In the same way, unless you use your tongue for intelligible speech, how will what is spoken be known? For you will be speaking into the air.”

Verse 19 “Yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, in order to teach others also, than 10,000 words in another language.”

6. The Person Who Has the Gift Of Tongues Should Pray to be Empowered to Interpret

Verse 13 “Therefore the person who speaks in another language should pray that he can interpret.”

7. The Person Who Has the Gift Of Tongues should Pray in Tongues and in his Normal Language

Verse 15 “What then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also **pray with my understanding.** I will sing with the spirit, and I will also **sing with my understanding.**”

8. The Person Who Has The Gift Of Tongues Must Follow Five Rules for Using His Gift in the Fellowship Of Other Christians:

- A. No more than two or three may speak in tongues on anyone occasion

Verse 27 “If any person speaks in another language, there should be **only two, or at the most three**, each in turn, and someone must interpret.”

- B. Those who speak in tongues must take turns and speak one at a time. Therefore, group tongue speaking and congregational singing in tongues is forbidden

Verse 27 “If any person speaks in another language, there should be only two, or at the most three, **each in turn**, and someone must interpret.”

- C. There must be a *known* interpreter present *before* anyone speaks in tongues and all tongues-speaking must be interpreted in the church. Only in this way can the use of this gift edify the rest of the church.

Verse 27-28 “If any person speaks in another language, there should be only two, or at the most three, each in turn, and **someone must interpret**. But if there is **no interpreter**, that person should **keep silent** in the church and speak to himself and to God.”

- D. Since tongues plus interpretation is similar to prophecy, it should, like prophecy, be judged (evaluated and weighed).

Verse 29 “Two or three prophets should speak, **and the others should evaluate**.”

- E. The person who has the gift of tongues must remember that his is not the only gift and that the rest of the body should have the opportunity to exercise their gifts in an orderly manner.

Verse 26 “How is it then, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, another language, or an interpretation. All things must be done for edification.”

Verse 40 “But everything must be done decently and in order.”

It should be pointed out that the New Testament churches generally met in homes and that would have been the context of their use of spiritual gifts. Therefore, small groups like the ones we use today are the format most like that of the New Testament period – rather than the modern large worship service.

Tongue-speaking, when done according to these guidelines, was not to be forbidden.

Verse 39 “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and **do not forbid** speaking in other languages.”

PROPHECY

SOME BASIC PRESUPPOSITIONS ABOUT PROPHECY:

1. Prophecy is the gift of being able to spontaneously receive a revelation from God and then expressing what God has brought to mind in human words.
2. The inspiration is not on the same level as the Old Testament prophets or inspiration of the Bible— the very words of God and inerrant. Rather, it is the words of man expressing something God has brought to mind. This is why these prophecies were to be evaluated. If such prophecies were as authoritative as Scripture, that would not only be unnecessary, it would be to sit in judgment on God’s Word. This would also be the reason we should not record prophecies or interpretations of tongues, treating them as authoritative books. The Bible is the place to go to hear a word from God and the Bible is the final word on all Truth.

ACCORDING TO I CORINTHIANS 14:

1. **Prophecy is superior to the other gifts because it speaks to the specific needs of the moment.** Some needs may be known only to God. Therefore, while spiritual gifts are to be desired, the gift of prophecy is to be especially desired. Of course, the Holy Spirit sovereignly assigns the gifts.

Verse 1 “Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and above all that you may prophesy.”

12:11 “But one and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each one as He wills.”

2. **Prophecy is superior to un-interpreted tongues because it edifies others and not just the one with the gift.**

vs. 2-5 “For the person who speaks in another language is not speaking to men but to God, since no one understands him; however, he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. But the person who prophesies speaks to people for edification, encouragement, and consolation. The person who speaks in another language builds himself up, but he who prophesies builds up the church.”

Verses 9-12 “In the same way, unless you use your tongue for intelligible speech, how will what is spoken be known? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different kinds of languages in the world, and all have meaning. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker will be a foreigner to me. So also you--since you are zealous in matters of the spirit, seek to excel in building up the church.”

3. Prophecy speaks to other people

Prophecy speaks words which:

- (1) edify, build up
- (2) exhort, encourage
- (3) comfort, console

Verses 3 “But the person who prophesies speaks to people for edification, encouragement, and consolation.”

3. Prophecy is a sign of God's presence in the fellowship, but un-interpreted tongues is a sign of God's judgment on unbelievers

Verses 21-22 “It is written in the law: *By people of other languages and by the lips of foreigners, I will speak to this people; and even then, they will not listen to Me, says the Lord.* It follows that speaking in other languages is intended as a sign, not to believers but to unbelievers. But prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.”

Because of this, prophecy may result in the conversion of unbelievers when they have their sins exposed and see proof of God's presence

Verses 24-25 “But if all are prophesying, and some unbeliever or uninformed person comes in, he is convicted by all and is judged by all. The secrets of his heart will be revealed, and as a result he will fall down on his face and worship God, proclaiming, ‘God is really among you.’”

And therefore, there should be no un-interpreted tongues in church since it will only drive people away; giving them the impression that everyone is crazy.

Verse 23 “Therefore if the whole church assembles together, and all are speaking in other languages, and people who are uninformed or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your minds?”

5. Principles for the use of prophecy in the church:

- A. No more than two or three may prophesy on a single occasion.

Verse 29 “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should evaluate.”

- B. Prophets must take turns. When another prophet receives a revelation, he must let the next prophet speak in turn.

Verse 30 “But if something has been revealed to another person sitting there, the first prophet should be silent.”

- C. Real God-given prophecy will not cause the prophet to lose self-control; he has control of the gift's use.

Verses 32-33 “And the prophets' spirits are under the control of the prophets, since God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints.”

- D. The men were to evaluate and judge all prophecies

vs. 29 “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should evaluate.”

"Evaluate" = to judge, to weigh

Naturally, the standard by which this was to be done was in light of Scripture.

I Thessalonians 5:20-21 “Don't despise prophecies, but test all things. Hold on to what is good.”

- E. Women were allowed to pray and prophesy in church.

I Corinthians 11:5, 10 “But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since that is one and the same as having her head shaved... This is why a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head: because of the angels.”

While women could prophesy, they were not allowed to exercise authority over men by teaching or holding a position of authority over men in the church.

I Timothy 2:12 “I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; instead, she is to be silent.”

Therefore, women were not to exercise authority by judging prophecies in the church; that was a role reserved for men.

Verses 34-35 “The women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church meeting.”

These are God's principles

Verses 36-38 “Did the word of God originate from you, or did it come to you only? If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, he should recognize that what I write to you is the Lord's command. But if anyone ignores this, he will be ignored.”

5. Two conclusions:

Verses 39-40 “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in other languages. But everything must be done decently and in order.”

- A. Desire to prophesy
- B. Do everything decently and in order