

What are the Tongues in 1 Corinthians?

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“For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:2, RSV).

What was the nature of the tongues Paul mentioned in his first letter to the Corinthians? Was he referring to an ecstatic or angelic unintelligible speech, comparable to that in Pentecostal and charismatic circles, or were the tongues in Corinth foreign languages?

The Church in Corinth

The Corinthian church, founded by Paul some three years prior to the letter, faced many problems: rivalries among various factions (1 Cor. 3:3), gross immorality (5:1), court cases among believers (6:1), marital problems (7:1), eating of foods sacrificed to idols (8:1), improper conduct of women in public worship (11:2–16), abuse of the Lord’s Supper (vs. 21), and also misunderstanding regarding the proper function of spiritual gifts, particularly the use of the gift of tongues (14:1–5).

The Proper Use of Spiritual Gifts

Tongues are mentioned only in chapters 12 to 14. These chapters deal with spiritual gifts, one of which is called “[various] kinds of tongues” (12:10, 28) or just “tongues” (vs. 30). In addition, there is the gift of translating tongues (vss. 10, 30). Paul ends chapter 12 by pointing to something even better than spiritual gifts, namely love. In this connection, he states that speaking with human tongues or even angelic tongues is worthless without love (13:1).

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul continues the discussion of spiritual gifts by focusing on speaking in tongues versus prophecy. However, the real issues are: (1) who is to benefit in a worship context; and (2) disorder creates problems in the worship service. The discussion of tongues must be understood against this background. Who is going to benefit from the exercise of this spiritual gift—the gifted person only or others also (14:2–6, 9)? Paul is clear: The goal must be to edify the church (vss. 4, 5, 12, 17, 26). Furthermore, for outsiders the impression must be avoided that church members are out of their mind (vs. 23). Verses 27 to 40 discuss the problem of disorder in the worship service in Corinth. Paul points out that since spiritual gifts can be controlled by the recipients, only two or three persons should speak in turn and that an interpretation should be provided. If these rules are not maintained, speaking in tongues has no place in the worship service of the Corinthian church. The same is also true for prophecy (vss. 29–32). Thus, the context makes it clear that the issue is the abuse of spiritual gifts.

Important Words

To appreciate what 1 Corinthians 14 teaches, we need to understand the meaning of some of the key terms.

Tongue—The Greek term translated as “tongue(s)” stands predominantly for:

- the human organ of the mouth called the tongue (Ps. 22:15, James 3:5);
- languages (Gen. 10:5; Acts 2:4), including nations that speak other languages (Zech. 8:23; Rev. 5:9); and
- the tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:3).

Speak—The Greek term translated as “to speak” occurs 34 times in 1 Corinthians. In chapter 14, it is used 10 times with “tongues” and 14 times without it. Each time it is used without *tongues* the act of speaking involves a real language that contains content that can be communicated. Because the very same verb “to speak” is used in the phrase “speak in a tongue” (14:2, 4–6, etc.), it is expected to have the same meaning in every text; otherwise language loses its meaning. In the same context, a word

should have the same meaning unless it is clearly redefined. In chapter 14, in which the author goes back and forth between prophecy and speaking in tongues, the word translated as “tongue(s)” should always have the same meaning.¹

Speaking in Tongues—How are the words *speaking* and *tongue* in the same context and the phrase “speaking in tongues” used in Scripture? (1) In Wisdom Literature: “My tongue speaks” (Job 33:2, NKJV). The tongue of the righteous speaks justice (Ps. 37:30; LXX² 36:30). “They have spoken against me with a lying tongue” (Ps. 109:2, KJV; LXX). (2) In the Prophets: “Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue” (Isa. 28:11, NASB).³ “They have taught their tongue to speak lies” (Jer. 9:5, NASB). (3) In the Gospels: “They will speak with new tongues” (Mark 16:17, NASB). (4) In Acts: The early Christians “Began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (Acts 2:4, NASB). What they spoke were foreign languages: People from different countries said, “we hear them in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God” (vs. 11, NASB). Foreign languages are also meant in Acts 10:46 in which Peter, referring to Cornelius and his household says, “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (RSV). The same applies to Acts 19:6 in which speaking in tongues and prophesying are attributed to those who received the Holy Spirit. (5) In 1 Corinthians: The phrase “speak with tongues” (RSV) occurs in 12:30 as a description of the spiritual gift. In 1 Corinthians 13:1, it is used to describe human language. The disputed texts are primarily found in 1 Corinthians 14. There the phrase is used with *tongue* in the singular (“speaking in a tongue”) in 1 Corinthians 14:2, 4, 13, and 27 and with *tongues* in the plural (“speaking in tongues”) in 1 Corinthians 14:5 (twice), 6, 18, 23, 39. Because “speaking in tongues” refers to foreign languages throughout Scripture, it is hardly conceivable that the phrase in 1 Corinthians 14 should be understood differently from the rest of Scripture, unless there were clear indicators in the text.

Mysteries—The term *mystery* occurs 28 times in the New Testament, and in 21 of those times, it refers to the mystery of the kingdom of heaven and related concepts. Other mysteries are the “the mystery of iniquity” (2 Thess. 2:7, KJV), “the mystery of the seven stars” (Rev. 1:20, NKJV), or “the mystery of the harlot” in Revelation 17.

Paul uses the Greek word translated as “mystery” in the singular in 1 Corinthians 2:1 (translated as “testimony,” KJV), 2:7, and 15:51. In chapter 2, the mystery is “Jesus Christ crucified” (vs. 2), i.e., God’s saving activity in and through Christ. In chapter 15, the mystery is that not all will die and sleep but that they will be transformed at the Second Coming. The plural *mysteries* is used in 4:1 [KJV]; 13:2; and 14:2. In Paul’s writings, mysteries are truths revealed by God that are related to Christ and the plan of salvation.

Spirit—In 1 Corinthians, the word translated as “spirit” usually refers to the Holy Spirit, but it can also describe the human spirit or person (1 Cor. 2:11; 5:5; 16:18, KJV), the spirit of the world (2:12), or various spirits (12:10), probably true and false prophets or teachers, etc. The highest concentration of the word translated as “spirit” is found in chapter 12. In this chapter, *spirit* is used once in the plural and 11 times in the singular. Always *spirit* in the singular refers to the Holy Spirit. He is the author of the spiritual gifts. Therefore, it is very natural that 1 Corinthians 14:2, which continues the discussion of spiritual gifts, would refer to the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, when Paul speaks of the human spirit, he makes it quite clear. Either he uses qualifiers, such as personal pronouns or appositions, “of the man” (1 Cor. 2:11, NKJV), or the context of his letter points clearly to the nature of the spirit. Because there is no qualifier in 1 Corinthians 14:2, it can be assumed that Paul refers to the Holy Spirit. This also makes sense with *mystery* being revealed truth.

Paul and the Misuse of the Gift in Corinth

On the one hand, Paul wants to encourage the church members to use their spiritual gifts; on the other hand, he tries to correct the abuse of the gift of tongues. Instead of using this gift for what it was

intended—to evangelize people who speak foreign languages—the Corinthians were using it in church to edify themselves or to gain status. Therefore, Paul says, “ For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one” (14:2, RSV). God, of course, understands all languages, but the other church members do not.

Arguments in Favor of Foreign Languages

While many sincere Christians believe that Paul in 1 Corinthians is speaking about ecstatic speech, the weight of scriptural evidence favors the view that tongues in 1 Corinthians refers to real languages:

1. *The context refers to languages.* 1 Corinthians 13:1 uses the unique phrase “tongues of men” (NKJV). This phrase clearly refers to human languages. Paul states a hypothetical case. Even if I spoke foreign languages and were able to communicate the way angels do, without love it would be worthless.

2. *Throughout the New Testament, the same word is used for the gift of tongues.* Because in Acts tongues are foreign languages, the tongues in 1 Corinthians should also be understood as foreign languages. Difficult texts should be explained by clear texts. 1 Corinthians 14 should be interpreted by Acts 2, in which *tongues* clearly mean foreign languages.

3. *God works through human intelligence.* The Lord, who warned against babbling on like the heathen (Matt. 6:7), would surely not inspire ecstatic speech that no one could understand. “The New Testament use does not support the idea that *glossa* ever refers to ecstatic speech. The only specific example or description of tongues in the entire Bible is Acts 2:4 to 11 where they are definitely described as normal human languages. . . . Abundant evidence demonstrates that the gift of tongues is the miraculous ability to speak languages previously unknown to the speaker.”⁴

4. *1 Corinthians 14:21 provides something like a definition of the gift of tongues.* In this verse, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11, which says that God will speak to His people in a foreign language, literally “another tongue.” The context of Isaiah 28 reveals that the persons speaking the foreign language are the Assyrians. The Septuagint renders the term translated as “foreign tongue.” Paul contracts the two words. “This comparison is revealing, because it seems to imply that what is happening in Corinth is the same. ‘Foreign languages’ are brought in by means of the tongues-speakers, but they do not bring about the desired results since they cannot be understood by the hearers.”⁵ Because foreign languages clearly are in view in 1 Corinthians 14:21, verse 2 must also refer to a real human language. Furthermore, in verse 22, tongues are for a sign to unbelievers as at Pentecost in which real languages were a positive sign for unbelievers, calling them to repentance (Acts 2:38).

5. *The gifts were given for the common good* (1 Cor. 12:7), which rules out using a gift purely for personal gratification.

6. *The divine gift of tongues appeared for the first time at Pentecost* as described in Acts 2, where it is clearly presented as foreign languages and was a fulfillment of the prediction made in Mark 16:17. Although the events depicted in Acts 2 occurred earlier than the events presented in 1 Corinthians, the letter to the Corinthians was most likely written earlier than Acts. There are a number of connections between 1 Corinthians 14 and Acts 2, as well as other texts in Acts, dealing with the gift of tongues:

- There is a similar reaction to the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:22 and 23; and Acts 2:13. People think Christians are mad or drunk.

- Speaking in tongues is to serve the mission of the church (1 Cor. 14:22; Acts 2:14–41). Tongues are a sign to unbelievers, calling them to repentance. Many are saved; others refuse to follow Jesus. Ecstatic speech would hardly be a sign and could hardly achieve the reported results.

- The phrase translated as “speak in other tongues” in Acts 2:4 sounds like the language used to describe those with a foreign language in 1 Corinthians 14:21.

- In Acts 2, Luke uses the same terminology employed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 to describe the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, referring to foreign languages. In Acts 19:6, Luke associates Paul with a situation in which some disciples received this gift. When Paul laid hands on these believers, they

received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. It is hardly conceivable that Luke would understand or use the same phrase differently than Paul did and vice versa.

Clearly the gift of tongues may best be understood as the gift of speaking foreign languages without having studied them.

Conclusion

First Corinthians 14:2 refers to a situation in which someone who speaks a foreign language in a context in which the language is not understood speaks to God only because God can understand all languages. The gift of tongues in Corinth was a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit, but it was misused. Consequently, the church was instructed by Paul to return to the right use of spiritual gifts so that they could become a blessing and not a hindrance for believers and unbelievers.

REFERENCES

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2. The Septuagint.
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4. Thomas R. Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit: Affirming the Fullness of God's Provisions for Spiritual Living* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1996), p. 153.
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