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The Purpose Of Tongues

Turn in your Bible to 1 Corinthians 14. Paul is correcting the Corinthian's infatuation with tongues. Of course tongues is a fascinating gift. Everybody agrees that to speak in a foreign language that you've never studied before is something quite interesting. But the Corinthians were speaking in tongues in order to draw attention to themselves or to feel a euphoria and that is fleshly, not spiritual, and yet they thought merely speaking in tongues made one spiritual. Baloney! 13:1-3 showed that it's nothing more than a big noise to everybody. Now the gift of tongues could be used in a spiritual way and that would be in love, where the object or goal is the edification of others and in terms of the purpose of tongues, which was a sign to unbelieving Jews and we'll learn what it was a sign of later today.

Now, in verse 1 Paul said, "Pursue love, yet earnestly desire to speak in tongues, and especially that you may prophesy." This was written in a time when these verbal revelation gifts were active. And both tongues and prophecy are verbal revelation gifts. But the gift of prophecy had a higher rank of importance than tongues. As you see in 1 Cor 12:28 Paul ranked first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then helps and so forth on down to tongues and interpretation of tongues. So prophecy was greater in importance than tongues and that's why Paul says in verse 1 to especially desire that you may prophesy. But we don't live in a time when verbal revelation gifts are active because Paul predicted in 13:8-10 that prophecy and tongues would be done away with when the perfect comes, the perfect being the completion of the NT canon which occurred in AD96 with the writing of the Revelation. So in AD96 all the verbal revelation gifts were done away with. Since then no one has genuinely prophesied, no one has genuinely spoken in tongues, no one has genuinely received a word of knowledge.

Therefore the greatest gift still being given today, according to Paul's ranking in 12:28, is teacher.

Now what this means, fundamentally, for us today is that every Christian ought to desire the Bible to be taught with excellence. And it's very sad that very few Christians have that desire. That's why you are so rare, you aren't looking for some kind of confirmatory experience, you're not looking to feel good about yourself, you want to know what God says. And when the Bible is taught you hear God's voice and by that you come to know yourself even as God knows who you are because He has revealed who you are in the NT. And yet today we still have Christians running around wanting to speak in tongues. That I will tell you now before we get to verse 20 is a very immature, childish desire.

But in their day prophecy and tongues was still active and Paul is going to continue to emphasize prophecy over tongues. And Paul is going to tell us exactly why it is so much better to prophesy than speak in tongues in the assembly. But to transition to that verse 13 **let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.** That's the only way you could understand what was being spoken in a tongue, it had to be **interpreted.** And so Paul commanded those who spoke in a tongue to pray that they might interpret the tongue. That's a repeat of basically what Paul said in verse 5, unless you interpret there's no use speaking in a tongue because no one can be edified, but if you interpret then everyone in the church is edified.

Now verse 14 explains, **For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.** Several points have to be made here. First of all, the human spirit and the human mind are not identical. Clearly Paul says the spirit could pray in a foreign tongue without involving the mind. Second, the activity of tongues speaking occurs through the human spirit independent of the mind. This means that the Holy Spirit used the human spirit as a conduit or instrument to produce a language that the person had not learned. Third, the ability to pray in a tongue in one's spirit does not necessarily mean you should pray in a tongue. See, many Christians claim to be able to speak in a private prayer language with God and they say because I have this ability I should do it and besides, I get something out of it, I feel spiritual when I do it. And they quote 1 Cor 14:4 as proof that it's biblical to have a private prayer language with God. Now, there's nothing in this passage which says you

should do that. Paul is actually telling them not to do it unless there is an interpreter and that they should pray that they may interpret. So there is no support for a private prayer language in this passage. Fourth, if you pray in a tongue then your mind is **unfruitful**. This is the number one reason you should not speak in a private prayer language with God. You are speaking mysteries between you and God but you have no idea what you are saying and that means your **mind is unfruitful**. And since every thought and deed a Christian has or does should be fruitful then to merely pray in a tongue is a waste of time. Now let's be honest. All Christians should desire to be fruitful, shouldn't they? Why would we waste our time practicing something unfruitful? Something not rewardable at the judgment seat of Christ. That's not good. That's selfish and done simply to fulfill the lusts of the flesh. Now what I have said was true in Paul's day when speaking in tongues was an active gift. But now that this gift is no longer active, to claim to speak in a private prayer language with God is nonsense. It's not even of the Holy Spirit according to 1 Cor 13:8-10. The Holy Spirit will not do something contrary to His own word! Therefore what passes for private prayer language today must be a learned exercise or a demonically influenced activity. Tom Constable actually tells the story of a pastor friend of his who used to speak in tongues who said he could teach anyone to speak in tongues. "According to him it just requires learning a few phrases, getting oneself into the proper emotional state, and releasing one's inhibitions."ⁱ I've read stories of people who explain how they were taught to speak in tongues or why they started opening their mouth and babbling. Is that really a Christian practice? Where in the NT are we told to get in the proper emotional state, learn a few phrases and release our inhibitions? The answer is nowhere. So what is passing today for private prayer language as well as tongues in general is an unbiblical and unwarranted practice, has nothing to do with Christianity at all. Bible teaching is Christianity. And verse 14 shows that Paul in his day didn't want anyone to speak in a tongue, merely in his spirit, without an interpretation so that it could be understood in the mind and be fruitful.

Christianity is a religion of the mind whose goal is to bear fruit. And you cannot bear fruit if you bypass the mind. Isn't it funny since so many Christians criticize Bible teaching groups for being too intellectual? And yet Paul says that fruit-bearing requires the mind. There is no fruit bearing when you bypass the mind in emotional escapades. And yet that is the pursuit of most Christians today. They want to experience God, by which

they mean to feel God. You don't feel God; you know Him. John says, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." So how do you know if you've come to know God? If you keep His commandments. It has nothing to do with your feelings. It has to do with knowledge of His word and obedience to His word. There's nothing about feeling God or feeling spiritual. And if you've got to have these feelings then feelings are either being substituted for knowing the word or a necessary adjunct to knowing the word and now the word is not sufficient. You've denied the sufficiency of Scripture. Paul says in verse 14 the mind must be activated in order to be fruitful, the Christian mind is front and center, and therefore any activity that bypasses the mind, whether praying in a tongue or having a euphoric experience should not be practiced.

Verse 15, what is proper then? **What is the outcome?** Or what then? What am I to do? Answer: **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.** The two must go hand in hand; if tongues then also an interpreter, that's the only way to engage both the spirit and the mind so you can be fruitful. And again, I don't see anything valid with having your own private prayer language with God. I see everything valid with praying in a known language because when you pray in a known language both your spirit and mind are active. And when you sing in a known language both your spirit and mind are active.

Verse 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.** Now here he is clearly referring to a prayer in the corporate meeting and whoever is praying is praying in a foreign tongue so that only his spirit is active and not his mind. In this case nobody else will have a clue what you are praying and therefore how can they say "**Amen?**" How can they agree with what you prayed? They don't have a clue what you prayed. It's not fruitful. And everything we do ought to be fruitful because we're going to be judged at the judgment seat of Christ. And only the fruitful things will be rewarded.

If I get up here and pray in Greek you can't say amen to that, you don't know what I'm saying. And further, verse 17, you're **not edified**. It's interesting

that Paul understood that a prayer given in a corporate meeting could edify others, if it was understood. And that's true. How often have you been edified by another person's prayer because they were reciting truth and you were built up by the truth? But you can't be edified by prayers in Latin. You don't know what's being said, you don't even know if it's true. Same thing with tongues.

Verse 18, **I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all;**
19however, **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.** Now again, Paul is not endorsing a private prayer language by saying **I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all.** He is thanking God for being able to speak in tongues outside the church because he contrasts that with what he desires to do inside the church which is to speak intelligibly. So the gift of tongues had especial application outside the church. What did Paul do outside the church? He evangelized. Evangelism occurs outside the church, not inside. Discipleship, the training of believers, occurs inside the church.

This is where most Baptist churches have it wrong. Week after week they try to get the saved saved rather than get the saved trained. According to Paul the church is not the place for evangelism but for training. Bible training is what should be happening in the churches. Evangelism should be occurring outside the churches. You don't bring someone to church to evangelize them. You know the gospel, you evangelize them. Then you bring them to church to get trained. And once you get trained then the evangelizing is easy.

But inside the church is where you get trained. And therefore verse 19, **in the church** Paul says, **I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.** According to the math Paul had 2,000 times greater desire to speak five intelligible words in church than he did to speak in a tongue. Put in time, the amount of time it takes to speak about 10,000 words is over an hour and a half whereas the time it takes to speak five words is about four seconds. It is therefore 2,000 times more valuable to speak intelligibly in the church for four seconds than it is to speak unintelligibly for over an hour and a half! And with these kinds of statistics I'll never grasp why Charismatics want to go to

church to speak in tongues. Why waste an hour and a half when you can get more out of what I can say in four seconds?

Now I've intimated that tongues was related to evangelism out on the streets but don't confuse that with giving the gospel in a foreign language. That was not what speaking in tongues was doing and I'm going to prove it to you from Isaiah 28 and Acts 2 but let's wait till we get to vv 21-22 for that.

Verse 20, and here we have the key verse that sets you up for what's coming, the purpose of tongues. **Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.** The Corinthians' infatuation with tongues was but another evidence of their immaturity. They wanted to get other people's attention to show just how spiritual they were. They did this in church. This was childish. It was all the worse since Paul says in 1 Cor 3 that they had had plenty of time to advance to maturity. They were way overdue for growing up. They were eighth graders in diapers. So they need to put off the diapers, except when it comes to evil, Paul says, **in evil be infants, but in your thinking become mature.**

Now just as an aside, isn't it interesting that Paul admits that Christians can be evil? In evil they could be mature, meaning complex evil. And it's just another evidence that you can't judge from a person's actions whether they are a real Christian or not. Christians can do evil things. And notice he is talking to believers because he says at the beginning of the verse, **brethren.** And I take it that the Corinthians were quite evil. As an example, in 1 Cor 5 Paul mentions one believer at Corinth who was fornicating with his mother-in-law, in 1 Cor 4 Paul mentions arrogant believers, in 1 Cor 1-2 Paul mentions believers who exalted human reason over divine revelation. These are all wicked things believers at Corinth were doing and believers today do the same things. So it may surprise you that believers can commit all these horrible sins and yet it didn't surprise Paul a bit. Paul knew that all Christians still have a flesh and can live according to their flesh. He said if you set your mind on the things of the flesh you'll fulfill the desires of the flesh. There's a skill to living the Christian life and at the very root of it is your thinking, you've got to set your mind on the things of the Spirit, the word of God, then Paul says you'll fulfill the desires of the Spirit. But if you don't have the word of God in your thinking you can't set your mind on it and

you'll just be an immature baby. And Paul recognized that all this infatuation with tongues was evidence of spiritual baby hood, immaturity.

Now he sets out in verse 21 to give the purpose of tongues in light of immaturity. Someone, a group of people, was immature and needed to hear baby talk. What group are we talking about? The Jews, unbelieving Jews in the 1st century. They were immature babies when it came to the word of God and so God sent them sound bytes of information, like baby talk, in foreign tongues and this was a sign.

So let's move into this purpose of tongues and why Paul was so thankful God gave him this gift. Back in the Gospels Jesus Christ came to His own, to the Jewish people and He offered the long-awaited kingdom. His message was repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. And He did signs, miracles and wonders that manifested the powers of the kingdom held in Him, authenticating that He was the king. But the leadership of Israel rejected Him, explaining His miracles away by claiming they were done by the power of Satan. So Jesus began to teach in parables so that hearing they would not hear and seeing they would not see and so that they would be set for judgment. He warned them by parable that He would give them two offers of the kingdom, the first offer would be rejected, the second offer would be rejected, then Jerusalem would be destroyed. But they didn't understand and they crucified Him.

Now an important question to ask is why did they reject Him? And I already gave you a hint. They did not understand. Jesus says this in Matthew 13, they did not understand. What do we call someone who does not understand the Scriptures? We call them immature. And the nation Israel was immature in the Scriptures when Jesus came and offered the kingdom.

They didn't understand the word of God. Over and over He asks them questions and they don't have an answer. They don't know; they didn't know the Scriptures. Immature spiritual brats. Now how do you have to speak to immature spiritual brats? Like they're babies, with baby talk, goo-goo, ga-ga.

Now that's what I'm saying happened in Acts 2, baby talk, the tongues were not even complete sentences. Turn to Acts 2, people come rushing into Acts 2 at 90mph and they see tongues, all of a sudden tongues whip out and

everyone gets excited, boy, look at this great blessing, the gospel is really going out now through tongues. Wrong. That is not what was being said through tongues. People say, well, there were Jews from all over the Mediterranean world there and they needed to hear the gospel in their own languages and so God gave the twelve tongues to speak the gospel in their languages. Wrong. Everybody spoke Koine Greek in addition to their native tongue and Peter gives them the gospel in Koine Greek starting in Acts 2:22. So if Peter is giving them the gospel in Koine Greek why in the world is he repeating what he already gave them in their native languages? Why give it to them in their native language and then turn around and give it in Greek? Answer: he didn't give the gospel in their native language. Well, if he didn't give the gospel what did he say? Verse 11, "the mighty works of God." And the Greek word for "mighty works" is a word used in the LXX of recent miraculous works of God, great and mighty miracles of God. Now think. What were the recent miraculous works God had done in front of the whole nation of Israel? Is it not Christ's miracles? Is it not Jesus turning water into wine? Is it not Jesus healing the leper and healing the blind? Is it not Jesus walking on water? Is it not Jesus casting out demons? Is it not Jesus feeding the five thousand? Is it not Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead? Are these not the mighty works of God? So, here's what they were saying with tongues. They were just giving little snippets of Christ's miracles in foreign languages. And it's pretty clear that they were hearing just snippets. You can tell that from v 12 because they were asking. "What does this mean?" It was baby talk, it wasn't even complete sentences, and it was barely intelligible. If we had been there we might have heard things like, "Jesus healed the leper" "He turned water into wine" "He cast out the demoniac," just short little sound bytes of the great and mighty works of God done by Jesus Christ. Now wait a minute, they would say, slow down, what do you mean by all this? It's like they were reeling off headlines of the daily news or something. So they're asking "What does this mean?" And others said, "They must be drunk." No, you idiots. This was prophesied to occur. Isaiah predicted what is happening in Acts 2. God said to Isaiah, when the nation gets so immature in the word of God I'm going to send them baby talk in foreign language. Immature people can't understand full sentences anyway so just send them baby talk. And here it is happening but these Jews are such spiritual morons they don't even know Isaiah's prophecy is being fulfilled right in front of their eyeballs. And Paul says this was a sign, a warning sign, a billboard if you will in flashing lights,

hello nation, where are you spiritually? When they saw this they were to know!

Now to see Isaiah's prophecy turn to Isa 28. Am I really right what I'm saying here? This is a very important passage on the issue of tongues yet it's never brought up by the Charismatics. I've never seen them deal with this verse probably because it's easier just to start flapping at the mouth instead of studying it, but this is a key because Paul quoted it as the purpose of tongues in 1 Cor 14:21.

Isa 28:11, "Indeed, He" God, "will speak to this people" what people? Israel, "Through stammering lips and a foreign tongue," So what does this prophecy tell you? That tongues is primarily directed at Israel not the Gentiles. It's not a sign to everyone who breathes; it's a sign to Israel. It's a sign to her that something is happening. What's happening? Verse 12, "He who said to them, "Here is rest, give rest to the weary," And, "Here is repose," but they would not listen." Now, up to the word "but" that's a prophecy of the millennial kingdom. The kingdom was a time of rest, repose for Israel. That's what Isaiah is talking about. But look at their response at the end of v 12; "but they would not listen." They heard the words, sure they'd heard it. Who'd they hear it from? They heard it from John the Baptist, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand". They heard it from Jesus, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand". Oh, they heard it - they just didn't get it. So he says, "Through stammering lips and a foreign tongue" they will hear it. They are going to get it and this is how they're going to get it, in stammering baby talk and Gentile languages. They will have to hear little snippets of mighty works of God in Gentile tongues.


Now you understand why Paul says to the Corinthians, you're such babies wanting to talk in tongues, that's a Jewish issue, that's to be a sign to unbelieving Jews that they are so out of it spiritually that God is having to bend down and talk in their ear with baby talk and in Gentile languages!

Now this just shows you that the whole issue of tongues is not a blessing, it's a sign of cursing, the whole thing is signifying a judgment coming on the nation Israel because they rejected, rejected, rejected and become so spiritually dull that God had to talk to them like little babies. So verse 13, "The word of God will be to them" like baby talk, they'll just despise it, won't

want to have anything to do with it and they'll stumble around and be broken and taken captive." And what happened in AD70? The Romans came in and they stumbled around and were defeated and taken captive. It's very easy.

And so why in the world would the Corinthians want to do this in Church? Sure, out on the streets where unbelieving Jews congregated, great, have at it, warn them, give them the sign, maybe a few will catch on to what's going on. But in the church? Paul says I'd rather speak five intelligible words to believers because there is no point of speaking in tongues to believers. NONE, NONE, NONE. It is completely irrelevant to believers, it is completely irrelevant to Gentiles, it was an issue exclusively for that generation of unbelieving Jews who were about to come under judgment.

So then, 1 Cor 14:22. **So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.** Prophecy was for instruction, that's what you do inside the church, you instruct believers. Verse 23, **Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?** Of course they will. They're Gentiles, they have no clue about Isaiah. Isaiah isn't for them. Isaiah is for the Jews. So you'll just be making a fool of yourself. ²⁴**But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;** see, teaching the word of God can convict people of sin, you don't have to simply preach the gospel, the Holy Spirit uses all of Scripture to convict people, He doesn't just use the simple gospel message, He uses all of Scripture. Why? Because verse 25, **the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.** He's being confronted with the whole system of Christianity. And the whole of Christianity crushes unbelief, it devastates it, the whole network of Christian truths completely annihilates unbelief. And then the unbeliever realizes he's believing a sham, a Satanicly inspired system that exalts itself against God but is nothing more than hot air and he's convicted by the truth of God's word and he realizes his heart condition of being dead in sin and so he's converted, he falls down and worships the God with whom we have to do! So why speak in tongues? That is a strictly Jewish issue. You don't do that in church. You did it then in the streets



among Jewish communities but not in the church. And you certainly don't do it today. Baloney!

ⁱ Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*. Galaxie Software.

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