



1 Cor. 14:20-25

When Tongues Are No Longer a Blessing

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

21 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.

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.

23 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?

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

25 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.

We have seen that the Corinthian church was just gaga over tongue-speaking. It was the sign gift they most avidly pursued, the thing everyone wanted. As far as individual tongue speaking, they felt that it indicated that a person was spiritually superior, and the absence of the ability to speak in tongues was a sign of spiritual inferiority. As far as the church was concerned, they strongly felt that the profusion of tongue speaking in their midst was a sign of God's blessing. No one may have been able to understand a word of it, and as we have seen, it didn't edify or build up the congregation, but they considered it to be very impressive, a sign of power, something that would draw people to them and hold them.

Paul however has something very serious to tell them in these verses, namely that far from being a sign of blessing, a profusion of unintelligible tongues in their worship services is sign not only of being spiritually infantile, or childish, but it is actually more likely to be a *curse* than a blessing. And far from being something that would draw in or persuade the unbeliever, it was likely to leave them simply confused or even repulsed.

When I was a child, I hated school. I didn't want to have to sit still and listen to what I was being taught. I wanted to run around, and play games, and make noise. I thought learning was boring, what I craved was excitement and action and so throughout my early school years, I did what I wanted to do, and as a result, I learned very little, especially in subjects like math where I had no natural gifts at all.

Now that kind of behavior is irritating and counterproductive, it is a dangerous excess of behavior common to children. *It is characteristic of children* says Godet *to prefer the amusing to the useful, the brilliant to the solid.* But Paul here isn't writing to children, he's writing to adults who were acting like children, they didn't want to learn or grow, they wanted to be amused, they craved excitement and action. So in verse 20 Paul says to them in essence, "**GROW UP!**"

Paul says don't act *childishly* when it comes to growing in grace and the knowledge of the faith, it is fine to be childlike in some respects particularly evil, here he means that Christians would benefit greatly by being more like children particularly in their innocence regarding sinful behaviors.

But the Corinthians, as we have seen from going through this letter had that equation entirely backwards, they were childish when it came to understanding, but all too adult when it came to sin and evil. As we saw in verse 5 there were all too few adult sins common to Corinth that weren't present within the congregation.

As far as their belief that the myriad of unintelligible tongue speaking being a blessing was concerned Paul uses an example from the Old Testament, specifically from Isaiah 28 to show them that that wasn't a blessing but a curse. God had sent his prophet Isaiah to preach to his own wayward people in their own tongue, and yet they had mocked him. *What babies are you trying to teach Isaiah, line-upon-line, line-upon-line, precept upon precept. Get to the nursery with you Isaiah and stop talking to us like children, we will not hear you.*

So God said, I will send them men who will teach them in a foreign tongue. What he meant was he would send the Assyrians whose language they did not understand as a sign of his judgment, and of course they were very nearly destroyed by them. And yet *they still* did not turn back to God or hear his instructions.

Therefore, what Paul means in verse 22 is that all of this babbling is a sign not of belief, but of unbelief, a failure to listen to and grow through prophecy, a sign of childishness. Tongues are a sign of their increasing tendency towards unbelief, whereas a desire to hear the prophetic revelation of God and thus to learn and grow is a sign of growth in belief.

As for Tongues being impressive to unbeliever and a means of conversion Paul says that isn't going to happen. Earlier he had made the point in verse 6 that if he had come to Corinth speaking in tongues he wouldn't have profited them at all. There wouldn't even have been a church in that town. What they needed was revelation, knowledge, prophesy, teaching.

Likewise if the unbeliever or the man or woman who knows nothing comes into their assembly, and hears the church all tongue speaking, then their conclusion is not going to be *O my what spiritual power there is here! But rather, what a bunch of loonies! I'm out of here!*

They are not going to see the natural growth of the church or solid conversions through their addiction to uninterpreted tongues, cause tongues don't convert people.

What does convert the unbelieving then? Baptisms? Music? Juggling? **No** Prophecy, the word of God. If the church is full of people all tongue speaking, nothing will happen, but if the church is full of people proclaiming the word of God in an intelligible tongue, and remember prophesy is more about *forthtelling* than *foretelling* preaching the word and witnessing is in a real sense part of prophesying, then unbelievers will be convicted and brought to faith.

We call this conversion and conviction that is produced by the proclamation of God's word – effectual calling, and while it normally accompanies the word rightly preached, it is ultimately the work of God's Holy Spirit.

We read in WLC Q. 67

Q67: What is effectual calling?

A67: Effectual calling is the work of God's almighty power and grace,[1] whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto [2]) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit;[3] savingly enlightening their minds,[4] renewing and powerfully determining their wills,[5] so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.[6]

The word is preached, the Holy Spirit changes their hearts and convicts them of their sins, and like the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Acts 2 who were convicted and converted not by tongue speaking but the preaching of Peter they cry out "'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'"

Paul knew exactly what this was like for when Jesus appeared to Him and proclaimed that the gospel message that he had been rejecting for so long was true, his heart was convinced, he saw the true state of his heart. For one of the great gifts of conversion is self awareness, the ability to finally see ourselves and our condition as we truly are.

I too know what that is like, and what it is to finally fall on ones face and worship Jesus as Lord, and admit that the church that I once despised is in fact that precious body of Christ, and that He is living and active in her midst. And was by tongues that I was converted, but by the simple and clear proclamation of the gospel.

Now the application of all this is almost too obvious, but I'll go ahead and do so anyway.

We live in a childish age, and it seems that the church becomes more childish and entertainment focused every moment. As one commentator on Corinthians, David Jackman observed: "*Many Christians today have a childish mentality, impressed by sensation and spectacle, swayed by manipulative music, susceptible to sentiment and suggestion. They would rather be made to feel than to think. They prefer their emotions to be stirred, rather than their thinking to be changed. Nursery rhymes are appropriate to the nursery, but God's church is the place for growing up, not for arrested development.*"

On the other hand while we evangelicals seem bent on becoming children in understanding, the evidence is that we are clearly very adult when it comes to evil. We have once again reversed God's formula.

Now, I've mentioned this before and I apologize for repeating myself, but I love to get phone calls asking about our church, but the kind of question that makes my heart sink, is when the first question is "*What kind of music ministry do you have?*" Why? Because it usually betrays the same attitude that these Corinthians suffered from, that church is about being entertained, amused, excited.

Now some would say, **o that's just because you prefer your boring style of music.** But brothers and sisters that is not it at all. It is because no one is converted or built up by a praise band, the church is not edified at all by an emphasis on excitement and entertainment, or on empty babbling. And brothers and Sisters I desperately want to see the lost not excited or entertained and the saints amused, I want to see the lost *converted* and the saints edified and built up in the faith.

The church has advanced and grown mightily in every age when the preaching of the word was paramount, and it has retreated and withered whenever symbolism and entertainment has prevailed. The church was never more unhealthy than during the signs, ecstatic visions, wonders, miracles, and passion plays period during the middle ages. It was recovered during the Reformation by a return to the strong preaching of Justification by Faith Alone.

We are seeing that recovery reversed however, don't let that happen in your life, and your church. Remember a profusion of empty and meaningless signs in the church is not a blessing, but a curse.