

Tongues: Knowing their Purpose Helps...

I Corinthians 14:1-25

We have finally arrived at I Corinthians 14. In this chapter Paul gives his most detailed instruction on speaking in tongues. As we walk through this passage, I want you to be pondering and meditating on primarily one basic question: In his wonderful wisdom, why did God give the gift of tongues? What purpose do they serve in his grand scheme of redemption. Because knowing their purpose goes a long way in understanding them rightly.

I have already said this in previous sermons, but it is important to repeat: I respect and love my charismatic brothers and sisters in Christ. My purpose is not to criticize them or even their spiritual experiences.

But, I believe that far too often they have interpreted the Bible according to their personal experience, rather than evaluating their personal experience according to the Bible. I believe that the charismatic movement misunderstands the biblical purpose for the gift of tongues.

Rather than seeking new prophecy and/or the speaking in tongues, I encourage all Christians to rejoice in the completed prophecy already given to us and preserved in the canon of Scripture. The work of the Holy Spirit continues today, not in the giving of new revelations, but in the writing of revelation already given on our hearts.

In Jesus Christ, and in the Bible, we have God's final word. But, there is no doubt that every Christian falls short when it comes to having that word written on our hearts. We are to daily strive to be transformed in our character by the renewing of our minds according to the truth of the Word of God.

I Corinthians 14:1-25:

Pursue love,
and
earnestly desire the spiritual gifts,
especially that you may prophesy.

The command to pursue love is ongoing. This is the goal of the Christian life. The spiritual gifts are in many ways only means to an end: the loving of God and one another. In the end, it is our progress in love that truly matters. If you did not hear last week's message on Love I strongly encourage you to go back and listen to it.

But, even if we accept the priority of love, Paul also gives us a very clear command: earnestly desire the spiritual gifts – especially that you may prophesy.

Should we seek the spiritual gifts today?

That depends on whether or not the spiritual gifts, and we will focus on the word gifts of prophesy and tongues continue to be given by the Holy Spirit. If these gifts are being given, and we are not seeking them, then we are in rebellion to the Word of God. But if these gifts are no longer being given, but prophesy has truly ended with the completion of God's Word, then the best way that we can obey this command is to give our utmost and ongoing attention to studying God's Word and seeking to know Him through it.

I Corinthians 14 is surely a challenging passage. As always, we begin with the general principle that truth matters. We firmly believe that you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Jesus is the Himself the Truth. And thankfully, even when we disagree on the issue of tongues and prophecy, we hold a common faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior of our souls.

But embracing Jesus with our charismatic brothers and sisters does not mean that today's passage is irrelevant. Truth always matters – even in the details. But it is also true that Christians are to continue loving one another even in the face of strong disagreements.

I Corinthians 14:2.

2 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.

From verse 2 we can conclude that tongues is speech. But what sort of speech?

Paul says that it is speech that no one understands. Since other people cannot understand what is being said, Paul concludes that the conversation must be with God. God understands every language.

One immediate question is whether or not a person who speaks in tongues is simply expressing his or her own thoughts to God or whether or not they are receiving truth from God. Does the person who speaks in tongues speak to God? Or does the person receive truth from God and then communicate it to others?

On the surface, it may seem that Paul think of tongues as nothing more than human speech in a foreign tongue. Paul writes that he “utters mysteries in the Spirit.”

It is possible to read the Greek “utters mysteries in his spirit.” The mysteries would be taken as the deep inner thoughts and feelings of the soul. But you would only think this way if you were not paying attention to the way that Paul uses the word, mystery, throughout his writings.

He uses it as a way to describe the redemption that we have in Jesus Christ, a redemption that may have been hidden in the past, but now has been revealed in the gospel.

ESV **1 Corinthians 4:1** This is how one should regard us (apostles), as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

ESV **1 Corinthians 13:2** And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

ESV **1 Corinthians 15:51** Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

ESV **Ephesians 3:3** how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

So, a mystery is that which was hidden, but has been revealed by God through some form of revelation.

It is best to think of the one speaking in tongues as speaking truths of salvation that have been revealed by the Holy Spirit. Maybe the idea of prayers offered to God are not entirely absent. Certainly God communicated his truth through the prayers of the psalms in the OT. But mysteries should not be taken as ideas originating in the thoughts and feelings of men.

Speaking in tongues is a form of prophecy. The prophet received from God truth, and then spoke it to the people. Tongues functions in a similar way, except the person speaking does so in a language he or she did not understand.

So, why does Paul say that the person who speaks in tongues, talks to God?

Well, it must be assumed at this point that Paul is referring to those who speak in tongues but who do not interpret what they have spoken. Paul will talk about those who speak in tongues with an interpreter in a moment. So, it is uninterpreted tongues to which Paul refers. And since God is the only one who understands what is being spoken, God is the only audience. But I do not think that Paul is describing the very nature of tongues as human expression of one’s inner feelings in prayer.

What is the purpose/s of prophesy and tongues?

3 On the other hand,
 the one who prophesies
 speaks to people
 for their upbuilding
 and encouragement
 and consolation.

Paul does give us here the nature of prophecy. Some prophecy is for edification, building a person up in their relationship with Christ. Some prophecy is for encouragement/exhortation, the coming alongside another to keep them from quitting the race. And some prophecy is to console people in the hardships and trials they are enduring. In all of this, the prophet speaks truth from God to the people. As the people understand the prophet's message they are edified in some way.

Uninterpreted tongues cannot have this effect because the audience is unable to understand the message.

4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself,
 but
 the one who prophesies builds up the church.

Uninterpreted tongues has the capacity to build up the speaker himself, but no one else.

Prophecy, on the other hand, has the capacity to build up the entire church.

It is easy to move too quickly to the next verse. I want you to begin chewing on a question: If it is true that in order to build up the church, the members must understand the message, how is it possible for the person who is speaking to be built up?

The charismatic answers that the speaker does not have to even understand what he is saying to be built up. He is speaking mysteries in his spirit. The spirit of the one speaking, and the Spirit of God, engage in fellowship, even as they bypass the mind altogether. But my question is that if this is true in the individual speaking, why can it not also be true among the congregation as a whole?

To think that the speaker can be edified without understanding the message but the hearers can only be edified if they understand the message is a contradiction. And this contradiction leads me to a very emphatic conclusion: The speaker of tongues knows the truth of what he or she is saying. They are simply speaking that truth in a language they do not understand.

Basic principle: In order to be edified, you must understand and embrace truth.

5 Now I want you all to speak in tongues,
 but
 even more to prophesy.
 The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues,
 unless someone interprets,
 so that the church may be built up.

In verse 5, Paul makes a very simple comparison between tongues and prophecy.

Why is prophecy superior to tongues? Because prophecy has the capacity to communicate truth to the entire church. Tongues, on the other hand, only has the capacity to communicate truth to the speaker. Unless, someone interprets.

And then, tongues with interpretation rises to the level of prophecy.

This is so important to understand: Tongues is nothing more than a subset of prophecy. If you combine tongues with interpretation it has the same ability to build up the congregation as prophecy.

This should make it clear that tongues is not simply a prayer tongue. It is the communication of truth from God to man.

This is the exact point that Paul makes in verse 6.

6 Now, brothers,
 if I come to you speaking in tongues,
 how will I benefit you
 unless I bring you some
 revelation
 or knowledge
 or prophecy
 or teaching?

The way that individuals receive benefit is by receiving and embracing truth from God.

Paul is now going to illustrate his point in several ways:

7 If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp,
 do not give distinct notes,
 how will anyone know what is played?

Even in something so simple as determining whether you are listening to a harp or to a flute, you must be able to distinguish differences in the sounds, the notes, that each one makes.

A second illustration:

8 And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound,
 who will get ready for battle?

If you know anything about bugles, or trumpets, they have the capacity to sound various patterns and notes to communicate specific messages. But if you could not distinguish the differences in the notes, then you would not know when the message is being given to get ready for battle.

In order for a specific message to be communicated, there needs to be distinct notes being formed that are recognizable to the hearers.

9 So with yourselves,
 if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible,
 how will anyone know what is said?
 For you will be speaking into the air.

Notice that Paul does not say that the person's inner thoughts are unintelligible, but only that the speech is unintelligible.

Notice also that Paul says that the speaker is "speaking into the air." This helps us to confirm that when Paul earlier said that the speaker was speaking to God that he was not actually giving us the purpose and nature of tongues, but only making the point that other humans were not getting the message.

10 There are doubtless many different languages in the world,
 and

11 none is without meaning,
but
if I do not know the meaning of the language,
I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.

In these verses we can see that speaking in tongues is a gift of speaking another human language existing in the world. And Paul makes a very simple and obvious point: that if two people do not speak the same language, they are foreigners to one another.

In order for there to be true fellowship, there must be true communication. No communication, no relationship. And no mutual building up of one another.

12 So with yourselves,
since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit,
strive to excel in building up the church.

In verse 12, Paul connects with the Corinthians. He gives them a bit of exhortation. It seems from his exhortation that the Corinthians were enamored with speaking in tongues. They were zealous to experience this particular manifestation of the Holy Spirit in their lives. I cannot blame them. It really would be cool speak in a language that you do not know.

Breathing Helium changes your voice – involuntarily: cool – not recommending it.

But Paul exhorts the Corinthians that it would be good if they directed their zeal to wanting gifts of the Spirit that would actually build up the body.

13 Therefore,
one who speaks in a tongue
should pray for the power to interpret.

Paul brings up this power to interpret again. Now is a good time to explain what exactly is this “gift of interpretation.” And if you remember from chapter 12, Paul made explicit that Interpretation was indeed a Spiritual gift.

ESV **1 Corinthians 12:10** to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

When God first gave the gift of tongues there was not a need to give an additional gift of interpretation. It was only later that God gave the gift of interpretation. Why was the gift of tongues NOT necessary originally, but then later necessary?

When tongues was given originally, at Pentecost, people from many nations and languages had gathered in Jerusalem. (Think of a gathering at the United Nations) So, when the Apostles and disciples started preaching the mysteries of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the crowd, the individuals in the crowd simply heard the message in their own language.

If that same situation continued everywhere the gospel went, you would never need the gift of interpretation. There would always be people hearing the Word in their own language.

But it is doubtless that this situation ever existed anywhere else in precisely the same way. For instance, it is possible that a few languages could have been represented in the church at Corinth. But nothing like what occurred at Pentecost.

This brings us to the purpose for the gift of tongues in the first place. I am going to give you the positive reason now, and then I am going to give you the negative reason in a few moments.

The gift of tongues positively signifies the Gospel going to the nations. It is a sort of reversal of the curse of the Tower of Babel. When God confused the languages at Babel, he restrained evil, but he also made the spread of the truth more difficult as well. Before Pentecost, most of the world remained in darkness. But with Pentecost, God indicates that the Church of Jesus Christ would be international in nature. The disciples would be witnesses in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So, for a foreigner to hear the Gospel in their own language was a sign that God was coming to save them. Good news. What is going on is more than a practical convenience. It wasn't just to make the proclamation of the Gospel easier. It was God's sign that the Gospel truly was for the nations. A Gentile did not have to come to Jerusalem and become a Jew to be saved. Jesus truly was the Savior of the world.

But, if a person has the gift of tongues and was living in Corinth where most everyone spoke the same language, what is he or she to do with their gift. In this context, it was not very helpful. God couldn't take away the gift, because that would be like God taking away his Spirit, or the gospel.

So, God gives a new gift altogether. The person can continue to speak in tongues in the congregation as long as he or someone else is there to interpret.

Question: if the person actually knows what he or she is saying, why can they not themselves simply translate what they have just said?

Because human translation has the capacity of distorting the message.

But if you have a supernatural gift of interpretation, then there is no meaning lost in the process.

And if tongues is going to remain on the level of prophecy, then the interpretation must be precise.

Let me add one more argument. When the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, Peter was clear that what was happening was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. But the interesting thing was that Joel's prophecy does not even mention tongues.

Joel 2:28-29 ²⁸ "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹ Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

Acts 2:17-18 ¹⁷ "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants¹ and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

So, if Peter can declare Joel fulfilled as the disciples spoke in tongues, it seems clear that tongues must be a form of prophecy.

Let's continue: we have come in verse 15 to a challenge to my whole argument thus far.

¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue,
my spirit prays
but
my mind is unfruitful.

I have made the statement that the mind of the speaker understands what he or she is saying. But this verse appears to separate and contrast the activity of our spirit from our mind. How do I explain this? Well, I admit, that this is a most challenging verse for me to deal with. But, even if I had no explanation, I don't think that the uncertainty of this verse would sway me to overthrow everything that has already been said.

Here is my answer: I do not think that we should draw too strong of a distinction between the spirit and the mind.

And I think that Paul is here contrasting prophecy and tongues in the church. He is not contrasting private tongues interpreted with private tongues uninterpreted.

In other words, I am not convinced that when Paul says that his spirit prays that there are no coherent thoughts going on inside of him.

I think he is more so distinguishing his inner thoughts, which have meaning, but are difficult to put into actual words, from the activity of the mind to formulate words and sentences.

We can see the same use of spirit in the Gospel of Mark.

Mark 2:6-8 ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts?"

The perception that occurs in the spirit of Jesus is certainly not "thoughtless". It is just that which remained "in the heart" of Jesus and was not put into actual spoken words.

Paul is not expressing the idea that he can experience blessing by bypassing the use of meaningful thoughts altogether.

15 What am I to do?
 I will pray with my spirit,
 but
 I will pray with my mind also;
 I will sing praise with my spirit,
 but
 I will sing with my mind also.
16 Otherwise,
 if you give thanks with your spirit,
 how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen"
 to your thanksgiving
 when he does not know what you are saying?
17 For you may be giving thanks well enough,
 but
 the other person is not being built up.

These verses make clear, to my thinking, that Praying or Praising in his spirit refers to actual meaningful praise.

You can pray without forming words.

You can praise God without forming words.

But you cannot bless others with your prayers and praise unless you actually put your thoughts into words.

Again, the principle is clear: If another person is to be built up, they must be able to understand what is being said.

18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.
19 Nevertheless,
 in church I would rather speak five words with my mind
 in order to instruct others,
 than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Without question, it is better to speak five intelligible words than to speak 1,000 words in a tongue that no one understands.

20 Brothers,

do not be children in your thinking.
Be infants in evil,
but
in your thinking be mature.

What is it that Paul calls childish?
It is thinking that unintelligible words are better than intelligible words.

And this brings us to the second reason for God's giving the gift of tongues. The negative reason.

21 In the Law it is written,
"By people of strange tongues
and
by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people,
and
even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord."
22 Thus tongues are a sign not for believers
but
for unbelievers,
while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers
but
for believers.

Paul quotes Isaiah 28. If you know anything about Isaiah, he is the prophet that preached to God's people just before the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered. But he also prophesied that the Southern Kingdom of Judah would also be conquered. The destruction of Jerusalem came in 586 BC with the invasion of the Babylonians.

When God says through Isaiah, "by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people and even then they will not listen to me" he is pronouncing a terrible curse upon "his unbelieving covenant people".

God's people refused to listen to the prophets that God had sent them over many years.
It was God's own people that possessed an unbelieving and hardened heart, refusing to listen to the word of the prophets.

What was God's response?

To bring in the Babylonians to conquer them. God was speaking to his unbelieving people through allowing a foreign nation to conquer them. So, as God's people watched their Babylonian conquerors speaking to one another in the streets of Jerusalem, in a language that was foreign to them, they were to understand that God was truly angry with them, and that they needed desperately to repent.

Having prophets speaking in Jerusalem in foreign tongues is a sign of God's judgment upon his unbelieving covenant people.

Think back to Pentecost. What did the unbelieving Jews think of the message of the disciples?
It was not that they simply rejected it. They did not even understand it. They thought the disciples were drunk.

Now Peter afterwards did preach to them in a language that they understood, but the sign of God's curse still stands.

To have preachers preaching the truth in a language that you cannot understand is not a good sign. It is a terrible sign.

It is the fulfillment of Jesus' words:

Matthew 21:43 ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

And Paul is telling the Corinthians, "Don't be like foolish children. Only immature people would put unintelligible speech as more important than intelligible speech.

Once you get why Paul quotes Isaiah 28, the rest of his comments make better sense.

²³ If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues,
and outsiders or unbelievers enter,
will they not say that you are out of your minds?

Paul makes clear that by unbelievers he is speaking of those in the covenant community who are unbelieving, because he distinguishes them from "outsiders". Whether they are outside of the church altogether, or if they are covenant breakers, the effect is the same: Tongues uninterpreted will not change their heart.

They will only think you are crazy – or drunk, like was said of the disciples at the day of Pentecost. And more of the same will not help. What the unbelievers need is an intelligible word spoken directly to their heart.

²⁴ But if all prophesy,
and an unbeliever or outsider enters,
he is convicted by all,
he is called to account by all,
²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed,
and so, falling on his face,
he will worship God
and
declare that God is really among you.

In some cases the prophet was given supernatural insight into the secrets of people's hearts. Like Peter with Ananias and Saphira. But even if they did not have supernatural insight, as the prophet spoke God's Word the Spirit applied to the hearts of the hearers.

By the way, this same thing still occurs as the Spirit of God applies the truth of the written Word and the preached Word, to the hearts of hearers today. The Spirit of God is applying the Word of God to the hearts of men and women to bring them to repentance and faith, with the goal of true biblical love.

The positive purpose of the gift of tongues was that it served as a sign that the Gospel was for the nations.

And the negative purpose of the gift of tongues was that it served as a sign to God's unbelieving people that they were being cursed. Once a sign has served its purpose, you no longer are in need of the sign. If you are driving down one of the many curvy roads in Burke County, before you enter into a curve there will often be a sign. It will have an arrow on it pointing in the direction of the upcoming curve. They purposely put these signs before you enter the curve, or in the curve itself. They would not do much good if they were placed after you had already gone through the curve.

Once you are through the curve, you no longer need the sign.

Does anyone here question whether or not the gospel is for every nation and people in the world?

- No, why not?
- Because the sign has served its purpose. The Church has accepted God's revelation.

When it comes to the modern phenomenon of speaking in tongues, the question we should be asking is this: Has God given a new gift to his modern people for other purposes?

Maybe, but if he has, then we must recognize it as something new, something different than his original gift of tongues. And we also must recognize that in this gift, we are not returning to some NT form of Christian experience.

Application:

1. Be thankful that with the NT we have God's "Final Word". We have all that we need to know and love Jesus Christ.
2. Continue to use the means of Grace: Word, Sacraments, and Prayer.
 - a. Fellowship with Christ
3. Live by faith in God's Word rather than looking for new words from God.
 - a. Yearn for the Spirit to produce "love" in you.

"I have covenanted with my Lord, that he should not send me visions, or dreams, or even angels. I am content with this one gift of the Scriptures, which abundantly teaches and supplies all that is necessary both for this life and that which is to come." Luther