

T. Shane Martin
 Green Run Baptist Church
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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS
 #35

PROPHECY & TONGUES
1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-19

INTRODUCTION

A church's Lord's Day gathering is very important to God. He has provided instructions for us regarding what should and should not be a part of such gatherings. 1 Corinthians chapters 11-14 contain these kinds of instructions. Paul has already informed the Corinthians about spiritual gifts [chapter 12] and he has corrected their attitude toward one another [chapter 13]. Now he must deal with the specific problems plaguing their worship gatherings. Remember, their gatherings had departed from the will of God to the point that those gatherings did more harm than good [1 Corinthians 11:17].

The specific problems within the Corinthian church revolved around the use of prophecy and speaking in tongues, primarily speaking in tongues.

1. DEFINITIONS OF PROPHECY AND TONGUES

For help understanding prophecy, I like Wayne Grudem's definition: *The reception and subsequent transmission of spontaneous, divinely originating revelation.* The truth is spontaneously spoken for the purposes of *edification, exhortation, and consolation (v3).*

When we read the New Testament, we encounter the phenomena of speaking in tongues. I think this has been well defined by Larry Christensen as *a believer speaking forth a language he has never learned and which he does not understand.* This is not preaching as much as it is prayer (vv14-15), singing (v15) and giving thanks (v16).

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TONGUES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We primarily find speaking in tongues in Acts, when the church was baptized in the Holy Spirit [Acts 2] and began to expand to previously unreached peoples [Acts 8; 10-11 & 19]. In Acts 2, Luke records the fulfillment of prophecy at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the believers. As a sign that the gospel was now going beyond the Jews and to the world, the disciples supernaturally spoke in other recognizable languages which they had never learned. The content of their speaking was *the mighty deeds of God* [Acts 2:11]. The large crowd heard the disciples speaking and the people were amazed, *And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean (Acts 2:12)?"* Peter then told them what this meant as he stood to preach in his known language, probably Aramaic, and that sermon was used by God to convert 3000 people. The speaking in tongues drew their attention to the presence of God among them and the clearly spoken word convicted and converted them.

We only find speaking in tongues in three other places in Acts [Acts 8 (here it is implied); 10-11 & 19]. In each case, the gospel has reached a new group of people and tongues were given as a sign that they too had now received the Holy Spirit. In Acts 8, the Samaritans are converted and Peter

and John come from Jerusalem and lay hands on these new believers. In doing so, they receive the Holy Spirit and presumably speak in tongues. This unites the Jewish believers from Jerusalem with the new church of Samaritans and prevents some sort of schism. It becomes clear that they all partake of one Spirit.

In Acts 10-11, the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentile, Cornelius as well as his family and friends gathered to hear Peter preach. The new Gentile converts speak in tongues and the Jewish believers are amazed that the same Spirit has baptized both Jews and Gentiles. Again, the tongues served as a sign of God's expanding kingdom beyond Jewish people. *For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God (Acts 10:46)*. Notice that the tongues are used to exalt God in praise.

Finally, in Acts 19, we encounter some Ephesians who had heard of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus [Acts 19:4-5], but had not heard of Pentecost and the coming of God's Spirit [Acts 19:2]. So Paul lays his hands on them and Acts 19:6 says, *And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying*. Again this speaking in tongues serves a sign that the Spirit had now come to God's people, the people of all the nations.

D.A. Carson writes, *The way Luke tells the story, Acts provides not a paradigm for individual Christian experience, but the account of the gospel's outward movement, geographically, racially, and above all, theologically*.

The only other place we encounter tongues is Acts 14 and here, Paul must correct its abuse in Corinth. The church was divided concerning this particular gift because, apparently, one group strongly emphasized its use and another seriously doubted its validity. Their corporate worship gatherings were given heavily to tongue speaking and this created numerous problems in that local congregation.

One additional note on the tongue speaking in Corinth; I believe that the tongues spoken in Corinth were similar to the occasions mentioned from Acts in that those who spoke in tongues spoke some type of language that contained objective content else the idea of an interpreter is foolish (v13). There is a gift of speaking in tongues and a gift of interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:10 & 14:13). The mysterious content of what was spoken must contain objective meaning, all be it a mystery, if it was to be interpreted. The tongues in Acts 2 did not need to be interpreted because they were known human languages. The tongues in Corinth were possibly the *tongues of angels (1 Corinthians 13:1)*, or some heavenly language that required the additional gift of interpretation. My point is that these were not believers speaking meaningless gibberish. Gibberish cannot be interpreted objectively, the gift of tongues could be. D.A. Carson again writes, *Certainly tongues in Acts exercise some different functions from those in 1 Corinthians; but there is no substantial evidence that suggests Paul thought the two were essentially different*.

Now that we understand a little more about tongues, listen as Paul directs the Corinthian church regarding their corporate worship gatherings.

3. PRINCIPLES FOR CORPORATE WORSHIP GATHERINGS (14:1-19)

(3.1) Christians must worship Jesus in a way that lovingly edifies one another (14:1-5)

The Corinthians were to love one another (v1), but that did not mean spiritual gifts should not be practiced, especially the gift of prophecy. Prophecy involves clear, comprehensible *edification, exhortation, and consolation* (v3). This wasn't the case with tongues (v2); the one who speaks in tongues, speaks mysteries and even though he may be sincerely thanking God, praying to God or singing to God, *no one understands*. But when one prophesies, everyone can grasp the message and be helped. This does not mean that Paul forbids speaking in tongues; in fact, it is quite the opposite; *Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues* (v5). Paul acknowledges that the ability to speak to God in a heavenly language is a gift. His concern is that the Corinthians have placed a greater value on tongues than prophecy. And when he compares the two, prophecy wins because the message benefits all who hear. In other words, the message is intelligible. Therefore, if the gift of tongues is to benefit the congregation, an interpreter is essential (v5).

Paul's reasoning is simple; both tongues and prophecy are from the Holy Spirit, but one gift is more beneficial to the congregation and that is prophecy because the message is clear. The primary purpose of spiritual gifts is *the common good* (1 Corinthians 12:7). Though individuals will benefit from using their gifts, their personal benefit is never primarily in view.

(3.2) For those with "speaking gifts", clarity is essential (14:6-12)

Those who are gifted to speak will always play a large role in the corporate gatherings of a church and this is the way God designed it. Paul said to Timothy, *11Prescribe and teach these things. 12Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. 13Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. 14Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. 15Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. 16Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you* (1 Timothy 4:11-16). Obviously, Timothy's role as a teacher was an essential role for that local congregation.

Paul's concern in Corinth is that their use of spiritual gifts has become unprofitable (v6) because it was unintelligible. He illustrates his point by referring to musical instruments which must play with proper distinction in tone and rhythm or their music is unintelligible. The sound of the instrument must vary at precise times in order to offer a beautiful, recognizable sound. A beautiful instrument that plays only one sound with no variation is not producing beautiful music. Of if it's time to go to battle and the soldier plays *an indistinct sound* (v8) on the bugle, the other soldiers will not respond. In the same way, if the Corinthians' messages were not clear, no one is helped, but they are only *speaking into the air* (v9). Therefore, they were commanded to *seek to abound for the edification of the church* (v12).

(3.3) An essential part of normal worship gatherings is clear proclamation of truth (14:13-19)

In order for tongues to clearly present the truth in an intelligible manner, one could pray for the additional gift of interpretation (v13). If he only prayed in the unknown language, his mind was not engaged in that act of worship (v14). Therefore, Paul encourages prayer with the spirit and the mind; or intelligible prayer in the worship gathering. The same encouragement is given for singing (v15) and thanksgiving (v16) because Paul wants the congregation to add the "Amen". Amen is the proper response to truthful and sincere praying, singing and preaching. If the church

is to Amen the message of the prayer, singing, thanksgiving or preaching, then the message must be comprehended by our minds and with the Amen, all are edified (v17).

Paul continues to support the gift of tongues by his own practice (v18), but that seems to be a private practice. His statement regarding public worship *is 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 (v19)*. Paul indicates that he would almost never speak in tongues in a public gathering.

Paul knew the importance of the Holy Spirit and he also know the importance of our minds. He believed the normal means God chooses to use in a local congregation to convert sinners and sanctify believers was to apply the truth of God to the hearer's mind.

I think Paul wants us to be a church that appeals first to the mind, then the affections and finally, the will. Romans 6:17, *But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed*. Notice the order: their obedience came from their heart's affections and those affections came from a form of teaching to which they were committed. Repentance and faith begin with a deliberate commitment to a definite kind of teaching. The Holy Spirit takes that teaching and changes the affections so that we love Jesus and His words and the result is a knowledgeable and heart-felt obedience.

Think of this another way; obedience does not best result from pressuring the will or the emotions. Certainly, a temporary obedience can come from guilt, enthusiasm, or fear. But if the mind is not convinced, that obedience will falter. To appeal primarily to the will and emotions is to produce many false converts. This is why I am content to preach week after week without ever demanding any immediate response to the message. Don't misunderstand; there is a response which God demands; obedience that is always characterized by repentance and faith. But I know the Spirit works in His own time and in His determined ways. I must be content to present the truth to your minds and speak to you about the urgency of addressing spiritual matters, but in the end, it is the Holy Spirit who will enlighten your mind and melt your heart so that obedience results.

CONCLUSION

My personal understanding of speaking in tongues from this limited text is this: the emphasis must always be placed on clear proclamation of God's truth. Tongues may remain a valid gift for today's Christian, but Paul seems to encourage its private use rather than its expected presence in public worship gatherings.

I recognize that many may disagree with my understanding of these verses and I will still call them my brothers and sisters in Christ. But they must recognize that they run into the same temptation as the Corinthians; the sensational and mysterious can easily overwhelm the clear proclamation of God's Word.

Both groups encounter temptations. There is no path we walk that is free from excesses and sin and this is true for even the churches that seek to be the most biblical. We want to value the presence of the Spirit and we want to proclaim the gospel with clear precision. We have all witnessed the sad realities of churches that neglected either reality. May God's Spirit keep us from that path.