

## **FIRST CORINTHIANS**

### **The Value Of Prophecy And Tongues I Corinthians 14:1-25**

Perhaps you are saying, "Oh no! not another message on tongues. I've had it with this whole tongues thing!" I can understand your frustration, but we only have this message and one more on the subject and then we are finished. You cannot learn too much about the so-called tongues movement today because there is no Christian who will not be affected in some way or another by our charismatic brothers and sisters in Christ.

These may not be important messages to you until you are confronted with the whole charismatic issue. A couple of years ago, I had a woman rush into my office half panicked. She wanted my notes on tongues and prophecy. When I was preaching on the subject, she was bored stiff and felt it was not relevant. But that week at work she had been discussing the issue with some charismatic co-workers and she suddenly realized she needed some answers. She told me, "Dr. Arnold, I don't remember much about what you taught on the spectacular gifts, but I'm going to read your notes. Where are they?" When this woman had a need, then this information was important to her.

The things I touch on spectacular gifts are my own opinion. Obviously, not all Christians hold my views, and we all need to keep studying to come to truth on these issues.

#### **VALUE OF PROPHECY TO THE CHURCH 14:1-6**

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. Christians are commanded to love one another, for love is more important than all spiritual gifts. Yet, Christians are commanded to desire earnestly all spiritual gifts, even the gift of tongues. This verse does not say a Christian should never seek the gift of tongues, but since it is the least of all the gifts, it should be sought last and not first. HBF has an official position on spectacular gifts which is: HBF neither encourages nor discourages spectacular gifts. We will take whatever gifts God sovereignly chooses to give our church.

The key gift is prophecy. Prophecy is the ability to speak the mind of God by preaching the Bible or telling something which God spontaneously brings to mind. This lesser form of prophecy is not infallible and is subject to error. Nevertheless this is one of the ways God guides His church. Apparently prophecy is a very important gift and it is to be sought after individually and collectively by a body of believers.

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. The gift of tongues is the ability to speak a language one has never learned and which is not understood by the speaker or the listener. This tongue may be a foreign language as in Acts 2 or a prayer language as in I Corinthians 14. While the speaker does not understand what he is

speaking, he intuitively understands that the words are a type of praise. We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own language (Acts 2:11). Apparently a person with the gift of tongues can quietly keep the language running through the mind without actually speaking the words. When this phenomena happens, God understands and the speaker knows he or she is having an experience even though no interpretation is known to the person.

"Mysteries" (musterion) does not always refer to special revelation as some claim. It may refer to "ultimate ungraspability (Col. 2:2; Eph. 5:32), "present incomprehensibility" (Rom, 11:25) and "eschatological truth that transcends our present experience" (I Cor. 15:51; II Thess. 2:7). Sometimes it refers to the "mystery of the gospel" which Paul was to proclaim, referring to intimate truths of the gospel. Some have translated "mysteries" In I Cor. 14:2 as "intimacies" (Eugene Peterson, The Message). Gordon Fee says, "More likely "mystery" carries the sense of that which lies outside the understanding" (First Corinthians).

While the content of I Corinthians 14 is about the public worship of a local church, this verse seems to allow for a private use of tongues as a prayer language. Those who understand tongues to be unintelligible utterances claim this experience gives them an emotional uplift and helps them to get into a spiritual prayer zone quicker than by just going through normal procedures in prayer.

But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. The gift of tongues brings praise to God and edifies, the speaker, but the one who uses prophecy edifies the whole church because they are understood in the common language of the people, causing growth and maturity. Prophecy is used by God to strengthen, encourage and comfort Christians in their victories, defeats, trials and sufferings. Prophecy builds up the whole church. This is why biblical prophecy is so important for every local church. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24). When does this happen? It is supposed to happen during the worship service of the church. Yet, for this to happen, there must be a time in the service set aside for this purpose. This is one of the reasons HBF has a share and prayer time. God may impress upon someone a message He wants communicated to our body of believers.

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. A tongue used in private or public can somehow build up a Christian but it does nothing for the whole church. There is benefit to the speaker, but tongues of any kind without interpretation becomes very self-centered and showy.

While God may allow a person to experience a prayer language, there is no place in public or private worship for extremes like fanatical emotionalism, laughing in the Spirit, rolling on the floor or being so-called slain in the Spirit.

Yet, the person who prophesies builds the whole church because everyone can understand and enter into what the Holy Spirit is doing in, to and through the congregation as a whole. Both prophecy and tongues are so be done in a very orderly manner not in wild-eyed fanaticism.

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. This is not a command but a desire on the part of the Apostle Paul that all would speak in tongues. He was not opposed to the gift of tongues. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you (I Cor. 14:18). While it was Paul's human desire

that all would speak in tongues, it was obviously not God's sovereign purpose for all to do so.

It should be noted whatever tongues were they were words from Paul to God not from God to Paul. Words which were unintelligible to all, including the speaker. What kind of revelation is this? Surely this is less than something that is infallible and inspired.

Many charismatic claim that potentially all Christians can speak in tongues if they by faith claim the gift, basing their thinking on the words, "I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues." However, this was a mere wish or desire. Paul also said in I Corinthians 7:7: "I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift from God, another that." Here Paul is speaking about the single state, but he knew full well it was God's plan that most people would get married. Furthermore, Paul makes it very clear that everyone does not speak in tongues because all do not have this gift. Do all have gifts of healing? No! Do all speak in tongues? No! (Cor. 12:30).

He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified, Prophecy is of much great value to the church than tongues. Apparently sometimes In the public gathering of the church revelation came through tongues. However, the speaker in tongues would have to interpret himself or have the message interpreted by someone else. No public tongue speaking is to ever go un-interpreted.

It is easier to understand one giving his own interpretation if this refers to a literal foreign language given in a public setting. However, if it refers to an unintelligible utterance being self interpreted, it opens up a can of worms for great subjectivity. Obviously, elders would have to make a determination as to the spiritual accuracy of the private interpretation.

#### VALUE OF TONGUES TO BELIEVERS IN THE CHURCH 14:7-19

Now, brothers, If I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Paul argues from his own experience. The Corinthians would not get anything out of his preaching. If he came to them in tongues which no one could understand whether that be a foreign language or an unintelligible utterance. But if he came to them in the common, vernacular language of the people with a revelation, knowledge, prophecy or word of instruction, they would be tremendously blessed.

Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? If musical instruments cannot be appreciated when they give off indistinct and unclear sounds, how much more people speaking in a tongue which is not understood? Noise distracts and so do tongues when not understood.

Again if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak in intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. If the trumpeter does not hit the right note clearly, the army does not know whether to advance or retreat because the message was not communicated clearly. Tongues give off an uncertain

sound because they cannot be understood by the people. They communicate nothing. It is like blowing hot air.

Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. Whether a person speaks a foreign language or uses unintelligible utterances, the hearers cannot understand and it all sounds like babbling.

So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. Christians are to seek the spiritual gifts which will most build up the church. Obviously tongues does not build the church like prophecy, teaching or preaching.

For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. If a person speaks in a tongue publicly, there must be an interpreter. Apparently an individual who speaks in a tongue can pray for an interpretation. God may or may not give the interpretation. If there is no interpretation, the person must speak no more.

This verse may teach that spiritual gifts are not static because they were given at the moment of salvation. It may be possible for a person to receive a gift after salvation. At least this was the case with the gift of interpretation.

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. It is possible to pray in a tongue whether that be a foreign language or an unintelligible utterance. The human spirit knows the Holy Spirit is praying through him but the mind does not know or understand what is being said. He senses he is worshiping but does not know exactly how.

Those who hold to a prayer language believe this verse teaches that in worship and prayer, the Holy Spirit can somehow bypass the mind and free up the human spirit to praise God in unique ways.

So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but, I will also pray with my mind, I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. While it is possible to pray and sing in a tongue, the Apostle Paul was going to praise and sing in a language everybody assembled understood so that all could be built up.

Notice carefully that Paul would not fall into the trap of pure emotionalism in worship. His mind, as well as his human spirit, was to be active. There is a definite place for the mind as well as the spirit in Christian worship. Today we are experiencing a reaction to Christian intellectualism which is worship apart from the mind. The mind is set aside for feelings alone. However, mind, heart and spirit must all be deeply involved in worship.

If you are praising God with your spirit, how is one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to you thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying. You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. In New Testament times, in their meetings they separated the true believers from the inquirers and unbelievers who were observers. "Those who do not understand" probably refers to inquirers who were seriously looking into becoming followers of Christ as contrasted with rank unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind (I Cor. 14:23)? If inquirers are present, and some one gets up in the public meeting and speaks in a tongue whether it

be a foreign language or prayer language, they will not be able to say "Amen" (I believe; I confirm I agree).

The early church practiced saying "Amen" in unison at the end of prayers. This was a carry over from the synagogue worship of the Jews. This tradition became so strong among the New Testament churches that the synagogues abandoned the use of the "Amen" because it made them sound like Christians. St. Jerome said that in his day the "Amen" sounded like a clap of thunder at the end of any prayer.

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. Paul spoke in tongues more than any of the Corinthians, so we know he was not against the practice. Where did he speak in tongues? According to this verse, he surely didn't do much of it in the local church, for this is what he was trying to discourage. He used this gift primarily outside the local church in evangelism if a foreign language, and in his closet if it was a prayer language.

What is Paul's point? Tongues, while permitted in New Testament public worship, were not desirable. In the church, Christians were to be built up in the faith in the common language of the people. The preached Word, teaching, prophesying, praying, reading scripture and singing in the common language is the best way to build up a body of believers. The policy of HBF is that the Session feels tongues are best used outside the official meeting of the church.

HBF believes it remains the prerogative of each local church Session to determine which gifts will be used publicly, or those which will be used in the large meeting of the church or the smaller group. All gifts are to be evaluated by the Session as to their validity ("Spectacular Gifts", Nov. 1, 1991).

#### VALID EXHORTATION TO THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH 14:20

Brothers, stop thinking like children. The Corinthians were acting like little children with a new toy in abusing the gift of tongues. Paul aborted them to grow up and get a biblical perspective on the whole issue of tongues. People who are spiritually immature are impressed with externals and the spectacular. Just as a child cannot know the difference between glittering glass and glittering diamonds, so these baby, carnal Corinthians did not know the difference between the proper use of true tongues and the improper use of false tongues.

In regard to evil, be infants; but in your thinking, be adults. In respect to evil, these Corinthians were to be babes, but in respect to tongues, they were to grow up. They needed to be able to discern true from false tongues and to stop thinking they were spiritually superior if they spoke in tongues over those who did not. They were to act like mature adults and investigate the whole matter of spectacular gifts, especially tongues, and so should we today.

#### VALUE OF TONGUES TO UNBELIEVERS 14:21-25

In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says

the Lord. This is a quote from Isaiah 28:11-12 and refers to the Assyrians who were about to go into the land of Israel and capture it. The prophet warned if they did not repent, they were going to hear Gentile tongues (languages) filling the streets of Jerusalem. This reign of foreigners speaking in their streets was to remind them of God's judgment on them because of disobedience.

Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; Tongues if a foreign language were a sign to unbelieving Jews and possibly Gentiles who required signs to believe, indicating that God was with the new movement of Christianity. Tongues, if unintelligible utterances, were also a sign to unbelievers of God's impending judgment on them.

Notice carefully that tongues is always a sign to unbelievers, not believers. Charismatics often claim that sometime after their conversion to Christ, God gave them a special sign by giving them the gift of tongues. Yet this verse clearly says that tongues are a sign for unbelievers and most likely a sign of judgment.

Prophecy, however, is for believers, not unbelievers. Prophecy is \_\_\_\_\_

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So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? If inquirers and rank unsaved come into the church and everybody is speaking in tongues to show off this spectacular gift, the visitors will think they are crazy. If there is just a bunch of babbling noise with no interpreter, then people will be driven away from the Lord Jesus Christ and be confused as to what Christianity really is.

But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" Speaking in tongues may not lead to the conversion of sinners but prophecy clearly given in the common language does result in men, women, boys and girls coming to Christ. Prophecy may come through the preached Word or through the Holy Spirit prompting Christians to speak the gospel to a specific person or situation. When the gospel comes through prophecy, non-Christians come under Holy Spirit conviction for their sins. Their lives come under the scrutiny of a holy God who judges their sinful lifestyles. Then they accept Christ as Savior and Lord, worshiping God and declaring He is truly among Christians.

This verse strongly implies that somewhere in every worship service there should be an explanation of how a person can become a Christian. They must hear and believe before they can worship.

## CONCLUSION

New Testament worship services must have been very powerful. So powerful that people fell to the floor in worship when they met the all-powerful, all-mighty, all-loving resurrected Jesus Christ.

You have heard that Jesus is the way to God and that He alone can forgive sins. Trust Christ as your Savior. Bow before Him as your Lord. When you meet the real Christ, you will never be the same. You will worship Him because He is your God.