

Some comments on 1 Corinthians 14

(Updated 8 Mar 2010)

In Mark 16:15-18, Jesus said that tongues would be one of the signs to follow the evangelists as they went into the world and this was fulfilled, as Acts shows. About 20 years after Jesus spoke these words, in Mark 16, 1 Corinthians was written stating that tongues would cease and this occurred some 40 years later when the Bible was completed, or perhaps earlier in 70AD when the Temple was destroyed. 1 Cor. 14 makes many statements governing the use of tongues and these rules applied to the church *before* the gift was withdrawn. The rules were put in place because of the abuse of the gift and had no bearing on the fact that tongues, being just a sign, was to cease at a later stage when the sign had served its purpose and the completed Bible made it clear to the Jews that the Gentiles were part of God's salvation plan.

Tongues was simply a sign

If tongues was not just a sign but for prayer, revelation and prophecy also, then, in relation to people speaking in tongues, why did Paul tell the people to stop thinking like children (1 Cor. 14:20)? It would be wrong for him to call their use of tongues childish if it was meant for these things. To clarify why he said this, he immediately continued on in vs.21-22 to say that God would speak to "*this people*" with strange tongues and that it was a sign for unbelievers (The term 'this people' always refers to the Jews). Together these verses tell us that tongues was simply a sign to the Jewish unbelievers, nothing more. The very nature of the sign (God being praised in foreign languages) tells us the nature of the Jewish unbelief. They refused to believe that the Gentiles were part of God's salvation plan and this is quite apparent from the violent opposition Paul endured all throughout Acts. To the Jews, the idea of being one with the Gentiles was more that they could swallow as they alone had been 'God's people' for many centuries. To hear people praising 'their' God in foreign languages was a powerful sign to them and the beginning of the fulfilment of Acts 2:17 which says, "*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people*", meaning Gentiles and Jews.

Tongues was just a sign to the Jews when the evangelists went out into the world, as stated in Mark 16:15-18. The sign was for evangelism, not for prayer nor prophecy nor for general church use. In vs.18-19 Paul said "*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 ...*" The words "*But in the church*" tells us that tongues are not the norm for the church, but intelligent words are. Paul would rather speak intelligently in the church than speak in tongues. 'But' is used four times in vs. 2-5 showing that tongues was not for prophecy.

In Acts 2:11, the men who spoke in tongues were declaring the wonders of God and 1 Cor. 14:16 says that praying in the spirit is praising God and giving thanks. These examples show that tongues was for speaking to God, as 1 Cor. 14:2 says, and not for receiving messages from God. 1 Cor. 14:2 says, "*anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God*", so tongues was not for giving messages to man (In Acts 19:6, men "*spoke in tongues and prophesied*" but this is not saying that they prophesied in tongues). Given that tongues was always speaking to God it is certain that the gospel was never presented in tongues. Further to this, those who had the gift of tongues did not necessarily know what they were saying and to effectively convey the gospel, a common language is needed for questions and debate. A gospel presenter would be dumbfounded if someone questioned him in a language he didn't understand. However, if an evangelist simply praised God or declared His wonders in a tongue, unknown to himself, then the sign would have been given to the Jews present and the gospel could then be presented in a common language. Also, as tongues was a sign to the Jews, the gift would not have been used to spread the gospel to the Gentiles - the sign was specifically for the Jews. Note that in two of the three cases where tongues is mentioned, in Acts, tongues were spoken by those who received the gospel (Cornelius and company in Ch.10 & the twelve Jews who had received John's baptism in Ch.19). This further emphasises the fact that tongues was simply a sign.

The novelty and pride of being able to speak in tongues was causing upset in the church and for this reason rules governing the use of tongues were laid down and were to be followed in the interim period up until the time of the cessation of the gift (about 40 years after 1 Corinthians was written). The gift of tongues would certainly have no longer been needed as a sign by the time the Bible was completed as:

- a) It was well known by then that the Gentiles were part of God's salvation plan and
- b) Jerusalem had been destroyed (God's severe judgment on the Jews for rejecting His Son).

That tongues was a sign to the Jews is clear as, in Acts, whenever tongues was mentioned, Jews were present. In Acts 2, Jews from many nations were present and in Acts 19, the twelve were more than likely all Jews as they had received John's baptism of repentance. Acts 10-11 shows where tongues was used as a sign to convince the Jews of Jerusalem, including Peter, that the Gentiles were part of God's salvation plan. The following PDF outlines where God has used tongues as a sign of judgment against the Jews: <http://www.christianissues.biz/pdf-bin/tongues/tonguesasasign.pdf>

Tongues was not for personal edification

1 Cor. 14:4 says that tongues would edify the individual, however this was not the intended purpose of any of the gifts. The very next verse (1 Cor. 14:5) says that it would be better if believers prophesied as it edified the church. Paul said that he desired people to seek to prophecy especially (1 Cor. 14:1) as it edified the church as well as bringing sinners to repentance as shown in 1 Cor. 14:24-25.

All gifts were given for the edification of the church, and not for personal uplifting, as the following list clearly shows:

1 Cor. 12:7 - "... now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given *for the common good*..."

1 Cor. 12:25 - "... but that each part should have equal concern *for each other*"

1 Cor. 14:3 - "... but everyone who prophesies *speaks to men* for *their* strengthening, encouragement and comfort."

1 Cor. 14:4 - "... he edifies *the church*."

1 Cor. 14:5 - "... so that *the church* may be edified."

1 Cor. 14:6 - "... *what good* will I be *to you*?"

1 Cor. 14:7 - "... how will *anyone* know...?"

1 Cor. 14:8 - "... *who* will get ready...?"

1 Cor. 14:9 - "... how will *anyone* know...?"

1 Cor. 14:16 - "... how can *one who does not understand* say 'amen'?"

1 Cor. 14:16 - "... since *he does not know* what you are saying."

1 Cor. 14:17 - "... *the other man* is not edified."

1 Cor. 14:19 - "... to instruct *others*..."

1 Cor. 14:26 - "... must be done *for the strengthening of the church*."

1 Cor. 14:31 - "... so that *everyone* may be instructed..."

1 Cor. 14:31 - "... so that *everyone* may be encouraged."

All of chapter 13 deals with love which is a fruit for others - a tree does not bear fruit for itself.

Tongues were known languages

In 1 Cor. 14, the word 'unknown' appears in KJV. It was inserted by the translators and that is why it is in italics. 1 Cor. 14:10 tells us that all tongues were known languages. The belief that tongues can be an angelic language is a misinterpretation of 1 Cor. 13:1-3. Exaggerated language (hyperbole) is used in these verses to emphasise that love is more important than any gift. Paul says that *even if* he could speak in an angelic tongue, fathom all mysteries, had all knowledge or had faith to move mountains but didn't have love, then he had nothing. He didn't say that he could do these things (in 1 Cor. 13:9 he said that knowledge and prophecy were only in part) but that *if* he could, yet didn't have love, then he had nothing. An angelic language, if there is such a thing, is not a known language on earth so there can be no interpretation nor any edification. In 1 Cor. 14:19, Paul said that five intelligible words were preferable to

ten thousand words in a tongue. All tongues were to be interpreted otherwise the speaker was to keep quiet ... 1 Cor. 14:27-28. Also, 1 Cor. 14:12-13 stresses the need for interpretation so that the church may be built up.

Nowhere does the Bible speak of an uninterpretable tongue. On the contrary, right in the middle of his talk on tongues and interpretation, Paul said that *“there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning”* (1 Cor. 14:10). From this we can see that tongues were interpretable languages. The fact that people claim to speak in tongues today is not proof that it is from the Holy Spirit. Many religions and sects speak in tongues. Witches go into churches and are welcomed as 'sisters in Christ' because they speak in tongues. The witches say that the difference between them and the congregation is that they know exactly what they are saying as they curse the Pastor and congregation. The witches receive a genuine language from the devil, to serve his purposes.

I have an Indian friend who attended a Pentecostal Bible college. She told me that when the leader of the college spoke in tongues he repeated the names of two Hindu gods. The man was unknowingly calling up the spirits behind those gods.

There is a simple method of testing a tongue. Make a recording of the person speaking in tongues then take it to, say, three interpreters and ask them to tell you what has been said. If they all come up with the same thing then you will know that your tongue is genuine. But also record some of your own, fake speaking in tongues and see how they interpret it. I think that will tell a story. If the gift of tongues is still available then the gift of interpretation would be also and they must agree with each other as they go together. People are generally not willing to do this test and give all sorts of reasons but they need to bear in mind that the Lord tells us to test all spirits (1 John 4) and that the devil can appear as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11). If a tongues speaker does not know what he or she is saying then they are on very dangerous ground indeed. 1 Thess. 5:21-22 says, *“Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil”*.

I have never had anyone say that they were willing to do the taping of tongues test but I know that, if I spoke in tongues, then I would submit to it to see if my tongue was real. I'd like to know and would seek out men and women that I respected to see how they interpreted my tongue and if I got different interpretations then alarm bells would ring. Testing the spirits is not putting God to the test but rather it is a command of God - all tongues speakers will be without excuse on The Day.

Tongues was not a prayer language

1 Cor. 14:2 isn't saying that tongues is a prayer language. The reason the person is only speaking to God is because no one else understands him just as it says in this verse and is repeated in 1 Cor. 14:28. He is uttering mysteries because, without interpretation, everything he says is foreign to the listeners. When Paul prayed in tongues, 1 Cor. 14:13-17, he said it should be interpreted for the edification of others, otherwise the speaker should keep quiet (also 1 Cor. 14:28). He also said it was unfruitful to the mind unless there was interpretation – what use is an unfruitful prayer language?. In 1 Cor. 14, *all* that is said regarding praying in tongues is in the context of *public* situations requiring interpretation for *public* edification. Tongues is compared to prophecy, which is also always in a public setting. There is no indication that tongues was for private prayer. All tongues usage in Acts was in *public* settings, so it is an argument from silence to say it is a private prayer language. The Bible simply says it is a sign to unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:22) and not a sign of receiving the Holy Spirit nor a private prayer language.

Praying in the Spirit

Some say that where the Bible speaks of praying in the Spirit it means praying in tongues. It is far from good Bible interpretation to take the word 'Spirit' and replace it with the word 'tongues'. We are told to walk in the Spirit (Rom. 8:12-13), love in the Spirit (Col. 1:8) and John was in the Spirit in Rev. 1:10. It would be ridiculous to replace the word Spirit with the word tongues in these verses.

Praying in the Spirit, as in Eph. 6:18, is not praying in tongues, it is just what it says it is ... praying in the Spirit. This is praying after God's will with the aid and guidance of the Spirit as opposed to self generated, fleshy prayers, seeking one's own ends. How can anyone pray with "*all kinds of prayers and requests*" (Eph. 6:18) if they are praying in tongues and don't know what they are saying?

The following verses provide clear proof that praying in the Spirit is not praying in tongues:

- In Eph. 6:18, believers (**all** Christians) are given the command to "*pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests*".
- 1 Cor. 12:29-30 ask us, "*are all apostles? ... do all work miracles? ... do all speak in tongues?*". Because the answer to these rhetorical questions is "No", we know that not everyone spoke in tongues.
- So, if praying in the Spirit is praying in tongues and not everyone speaks in tongues then the Lord has given an impossible command to those who don't speak in tongues. From this it is plain to see that praying in the Spirit is not praying in tongues.

1 Cor. 14:14 Paul equates praying in tongues with praying with *his* spirit and says that it was *unfruitful* to his mind. Praying 'in the Holy Spirit' is done with the mind and is never said to be unfruitful because it is intelligible prayer and God wants us to love Him with all our mind.

Do not forbid tongues

In 1 Cor. 14:39 Paul said "do not forbid speaking in tongues" because at that point in time speaking in tongues was still a gift and was to remain so for many more years until the sign had served its purpose. He also said in 1 Cor. 14:18 that he spoke in tongues more than anyone. This is because he was on the front line of evangelism. He travelled widely doing the pioneering work for the Gospel and always went to the Jews first, the very people the sign was for. With this in mind it is easy to see why he spoke in tongues more than anyone else. In 1 Cor. 14:5 he said that he wished all spoke in tongues. Two possible reasons for his saying this are 1) more individuals would be evangelising and encountering the Jews he loved and 2) it was edifying to be used by God in such a manner and he wished this edification on others.

The groanings of Romans 8:26

The groanings of Rom. 8:26 is often quoted as being tongues. This falls short of good interpretation for a couple of simple reasons.

- 1) The only other place the Greek word (G4726) for groaning is used is in Acts 7:34 where Stephen is talking about the sorrowful groans of the Israelites in Egypt. Obviously he was not speaking about tongues. In Rom. 8:26 the groanings refer to heartfelt sorrow and an inability to express oneself, as often felt in prayer. When this happens to an individual in prayer the Spirit intercedes for them.
- 2) The Spirit is said to intercede with "*groans that words cannot express*" (KJV says "*cannot be uttered*"). Considering that these groans cannot be expressed or uttered in words, it is clear that tongues is not being referred to as tongues was expression in known words.

These groanings are just what they are said to be ... groanings..

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Some of the quotes in this article were taken from the book All About Speaking In Tongues, by Fernand Legrand, which covers the subject in much greater depth.

It is free to download from <http://www.christianissues.biz/tongues.html>

Mick Alexander
www.ChristianIssues.biz/tongues.html
leeandmick@gmail.com