

Some comments on 1 Corinthians 14

(Updated 4 Apr. 08)

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. This was fulfilled as Acts shows. About 20 years after Jesus said this, 1 Corinthians was written stating that tongues would cease and this occurred some 40 years later when the Bible was completed. 1 Cor. 14 makes many statements governing the use of tongues and these rules applied to the church before the gift was withdrawn.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 completed Bible made it clear to the Jews that the Gentiles were part of God's salvation plan.

Tongues was a sign

If tongues was for prayer, revelation, prophecy etc, 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 continued in vs.21-22 to say that God would speak to *"this people"* with strange tongues and that it was a sign for unbelievers. Together these verses tell us that tongues was a sign to the Jewish unbelievers. The very nature of the sign, God being praised in foreign languages, tells us the nature of their unbelief. The Jew were vehemently opposed to the idea of Gentiles being part of God's salvation plan and that 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.

Tongues was simply 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 church settings. 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 and have someone interpret. In v. 6 he said that he would be of no good if he came to them speaking in tongues and not bring some revelation or knowledge etc. 'But' is used four times in vs. 2-5 showing that tongues was not for prophecy.

In Acts 2:11 and 10:46, tongues was said to be declaring the wonders of God and praising Him and 1 Cor. 14:16 says that praying in the spirit is praising God and giving thanks. In Acts 19:6 the men *"spoke in tongues and prophesied"* which is not the same as prophesying in tongues. None of these examples show that tongues was for any other use than for speaking to God. When we consider that someone speaking in tongues did not necessarily understand what he was saying, it is not likely that the gospel was presented in tongues. To effectively present the gospel, a common language is needed for questions and debate. The gospel presenter would be dumbfounded if someone questioned him in a language he didn't understand. However, if a person simply praised God or declared His wonders in a tongue, unknown to himself, then the sign would have been given and the gospel could be then presented in a common language.

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 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. 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 the gift of 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 verses clearly show:

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, *par excellence*, a fruit for others, since 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, would not be a known language on earth so there would 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.

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, as it says in this verse and is repeated in 1 Cor. 14:28. He is uttering mysteries because, without interpretation, everything he says really is a mystery. Also, because it is *to God*, it cannot be considered to be revelatory mysteries *from God* to man. 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. In 1 Cor. 14, all that is said regarding praying in tongues is in the context of a church meeting or public situation, requiring interpretation for public edification. Tongues is compared to prophecy, which is always in a church or 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 prayer language.

Praying in the Spirit

Often people 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'. Praying in the Spirit 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, fleshly 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? We are also 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.

Clear proof that praying in the Spirit is not praying in tongues is found in the following:

- 1) 1 Cor. 12:29-30 asks, "*are all apostles? ... do all work miracles? ... do all speak in tongues?*". We know that the answer to each question is no, so we know that not everyone spoke in tongues.
- 2) In Eph. 6:18, ALL believers are given the command to "*pray in the Spirit on ALL occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests*". If praying in the Spirit is praying in tongues, then how can a person fulfil this command if he does not speak in tongues?
- 3) From these verses it is clear that not everyone spoke in tongues and praying in the Spirit is not praying in tongues.

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 some 40 more years. 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 the Jews and 2) it was edifying to be used of God in such a manner and he wished this edification on others.

Some other comments:
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 some 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 the groans cannot be expressed or uttered in words, it is clear that tongues is not being referred to as tongues was expression in foreign words.
- 3) Paul was well versed in Greek and would say tongues if that is what he meant.

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>

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