

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Tongues Need to Be Translated**

*1 Corinthians 14:6-19*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

January 22, 2012

# Tongues Need to Be Translated

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of spiritual gifts. Let's learn more about that in a message I am calling, "Tongues Need to Be Translated."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 14:6-19:

<sup>6</sup>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? <sup>7</sup>If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? <sup>8</sup>And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. <sup>14</sup>For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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? <sup>17</sup>For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. <sup>18</sup>I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. <sup>19</sup>Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten

**thousand words in a tongue.** (1 Corinthians 14:6-19)

## **Introduction**

In the beginning of chapter 14 in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* the Apostle Paul wrote about the position of the gift of tongues. In the first five verses the apostle compared prophecy and tongues, and concluded that prophecy is superior to tongues.

We learned in our last lesson that Paul used the word “tongue” in both the singular form and the plural form throughout chapter 14.

Paul used the singular form for “tongue” in verses 2, 4, 13, 14, and 19 to indicate false tongues, the kind of tongues similar to pagan ecstatic speech.

Paul used the plural form for “tongue” in verses 5, 6, 18, 22, 23, and 39 to indicate true tongues, a language that is understandable to hearers.

The only exception is found in verse 27, where the singular form of “tongue” is used to refer to a single man speaking a single genuine tongue (or language).

## **Lesson**

In today’s lesson, we learn that only tongues that are understandable build up the church.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s learn about this as follows:

1. The Purpose of Tongues (14:6-12)
2. The Effects of Tongues (14:13-19)

### **I. The Purpose of Tongues (14:6-12)**

First, let’s notice the purpose of tongues.

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of today’s material is from John F. MacArthur, Jr., *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984).

Paul began by indicating that tongues, in themselves, are unintelligible. He then used himself as an illustration, saying in verse 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?”** I want you to notice that **“tongues”** in verse 6 is in the plural form. That means that it is a genuine spiritual gift, and it is therefore an understandable language. Paul’s point is that even if he came speaking foreign languages, it would not be helpful to the Corinthian congregation unless they could understand what he was saying. The congregation would only be built up if he were to bring them **some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching.**

It is amazing that the Corinthian Christians valued private or public utterances that no one could understand. But they did, and the Apostle Paul was trying to correct their wrong understanding regarding the supernatural sign gift of tongues.

There are Christians in our day, like the Corinthian Christians, who also value private or public utterances that no one can understand. In some instances, what is claimed to be an interpretation has been shown to be wrong.

My favorite illustration of this was given by Dr. Charles Stanley, the well-known pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta, GA. Dr. Stanley wanted to provide his large congregation with a vivid illustration of how some people misunderstand tongues.

He was teaching the biblical position about supernatural sign gifts and explained, as I am doing, that gibberish utterances is not a genuine spiritual gift. And further, when an interpretation was given of these gibberish utterances, what they claimed to be an interpretation was wrong.

Dr. Stanley arranged for a student who was unknown to the congregation to attend a particular service in which he was teaching on this very topic. At some pre-arranged point during the service, the student got up and said that he had a message from the Lord. He was given permission to speak. The student then spoke in a tongue that no-one understood. When he was finished, he sat

down.

Dr. Stanley asked if there was anyone who could interpret the tongue. After a very long pause someone finally got up and said that he (or she, I forget if it was a man or a woman) could interpret the tongue. The person “interpreted” what the student had said. When the interpretation was finished, the person sat down. Dr. Stanley said that the interpretation was completely wrong.

He then told the congregation that he had set them up. He had asked the student to recite Psalm 1 in Hebrew, which he did. Dr. Stanley guessed that no-one in the congregation knew Hebrew, and he was right. Of course, the interpretation that was given was nowhere close to Psalm 1; it was completely wrong.

Many of you may have heard people speaking in tongues. One of the major problems is that no-one knows what is said. So, how can anyone have any confidence whatsoever that the interpretation of such a tongue is correct?

Paul then gave another illustration in verse 7, **“If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?”** As you know, music has a language of its own. The musical notes are arranged in a particular order and played in a certain way in order to convey joy, sadness, calm, peace, or whatever the musician intends to convey. However, if a person plays notes in a random order, listeners will not be able to understand what is being conveyed.

Similarly, in verse 8 Paul said, **“And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?”** Wikipedia says that “a bugle call is a short tune . . . announcing scheduled and certain non-scheduled events on a military installation, battlefield, or ship. Historically, bugles . . . were used for clear communication in the noise and confusion of a battlefield.”<sup>2</sup> Bugles must not only be heard, but they must give clear communication in the noise and confusion of a battlefield. And if the bugle cannot be understood, no one will know what to do.

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bugle\\_call](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bugle_call).

So, Paul concluded in verse 9, **“So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said?”** They won’t, of course. **“For you will be speaking into the air.”**

The Corinthians were so self-centered and interested in personal fulfillment that they did not care what other people thought. They did not understand that the purpose of spiritual gifts was to build up the church. I have been stressing the importance that spiritual gifts are never meant to serve ourselves; they are always intended to serve others in the church.

The apostle Paul continued to hammer away at this same point. So, he said in verse 10, **“There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning.”** Paul was stating the obvious. Every language has meaning. A language without meaning is not really a language. It is meaning that makes language language. Sometimes people have even made up languages that only a select number of individuals can understand. The point is that even though many do not understand the made-up language, some do. And that is the point of language: it must be understood by those who hear it.

And so Paul continued in verse 11, **“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.”** That is obvious, isn’t it? When I have travelled to Ciudad Victoria, my greatest frustration was that I do not know Spanish. I heard people speaking, I could see their facial expressions, and so on, but I did not know the meaning of their language, and so, like Paul, I was a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker was a foreigner to me.

So, Paul concluded in verse 12, **“So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.”** In other words, Paul was saying, “If you are so eager to exercise spiritual gifts, use them in the way God intended: for the benefit of the church. Use your spiritual gifts to serve others and to build up the church.”

The purpose of the spiritual gift of tongues, just as the pur-

pose of all languages, was to communicate. Although it was a miraculous sign gift, it was a gift of communication. From its first occurrence on the Day of Pentecost God intended it to be a means of communication. The very miracle of tongues at Pentecost was in the fact that everyone present, though from many different countries, heard the apostles “speak in his own language” (Acts 2:6; cf. vv. 8, 11).

That was always the characteristic of genuine tongues. The tongues on the Day of Pentecost, and every true manifestation of tongues after that time until their cessation (with the apostles), were understandable—either directly (Acts 2:6) or through an interpreter (1 Corinthians 14:27). God did not give two kinds of tongues, one intelligible and the other unintelligible. The Bible speaks of only one gift, whose characteristics and purpose did not change.

So, the purpose of tongues is that they communicated truth to people in a language that the hearer understood.

## II. The Effects of Tongues (14:13-19)

And second, let's observe the effects of tongues.

Paul, for the most part in the next seven verses, was speaking of the false gift of tongues. The one exception is in verse 18, which I shall explain when I get to that verse. Furthermore, as Paul continued to teach about false tongues, he continued to speak with some sarcasm, as I shall show you.

Paul said in verse 13: **“Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.”** Paul used the singular form for **“tongue”** here, indicating that he was referring to the false gift of tongues. He was saying that the Corinthian Christian who was speaking gibberish should also pray for the gift of interpretation.

Paul sarcastically reproached the wayward Christians in Corinth for their misunderstanding of spiritual gifts, saying in effect, “While you are jabbering away in your unintelligible pseudo-

tongues, you could at least pray and ask God to give you some means of making them beneficial to the church. As you now exercise your tongue, it is pagan, pointless, and self-serving.”

You may remember that in the pagan rites with which the Corinthians were so familiar, speaking in ecstatic utterances was considered to be communing with the gods spirit-to-spirit. The experience was intended to bypass the mind and normal understanding. So, Paul said in verse 14, **“For if I pray in a [self-manufactured, false] tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.”** The word that is translated as **“spirit”** also means **“breath.”** It seems that Paul was saying, “If I, though an apostle, were to speak the gibberish that many of you speak, my mind would have no part of it. I would only be making wind, blowing air. What I would say would be as empty and mindless as the ecstasies you used to witness in your pagan temples.”

So, Paul asked in verse 15a, **“What am I to do?”** The answer is that there is no place for mindless ecstatic utterances in prayer. Praying and singing with the spirit must be accompanied by praying and singing with the mind also, as he said in the rest of verse 15b, **“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.”**

It is extremely important to remember that edification never takes place apart from the mind. Spiritual growth involves more than our minds, but it never excludes our minds. The Scripture never places a premium on ignorance. Rather, the Scripture exhorts us in ways such as in 2 Peter 3:18a, **“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”**

Jesus himself said in Matthew 22:37, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your *mind*.”**

Some of you may wonder periodically why you are not growing much as a Christian. Let me be frank with you and say that your spiritual growth will be stunted until you get actively involved in some form of Bible study, Growth Group, Sunday



school, Adult Christian Education & Fellowship class, and so on. You need to grow your mind! And until you do, you will never grow much as a Christian!

Praying or singing in tongues could serve no purpose, and Paul would not do it. **“Otherwise,”** as Paul said in verse 16, **“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?”** Paul was thinking of the worship service, and he imagined **an outsider**, that is, a non-Christian, in the worship service. Paul said that if the **outsider** did not know what was being said, how could he say **“Amen”** to it? That is, how could he agree with what was being said? The answer, of course, is that he couldn’t because he could not understand what was being said.

The person speaking in tongues **may be giving thanks well enough**, but no one will understand what is being said. Worse yet, **the other person is not being built up** (14:17).

Lest the Corinthian Christians think that Paul did not believe that there was a genuine gift of tongues, Paul said in verse 18, **“I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.”** Notice that Paul used the plural form of **“tongues,”** which indicates that it is the genuine spiritual gift of languages to which he was referring.

Paul apparently was able to communicate to foreigners in their own language. However, we do not have any specific recorded instance of this. Paul knew though what the genuine gift was, and he asserted that he was enabled by the Holy Spirit to speak to foreigners in a language that they understood. Paul knew that the gift of languages had a proper place for a prescribed period of time as a miraculous sign confirming to unbelievers the work of God. Sometimes, if not all understood the language, it was accompanied by the supernatural gift of interpretation as well.

**“Nevertheless,”** said Paul in verse 19, **“in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”** Using the singular

form of “**tongue**” again to refer to gibberish, Paul emphasized that an uncountable number of such words had no place in the church, and was in fact useless. **Five** understandable **words** were far more desirable.

### Conclusion

When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians he knew that the gift of tongues would cease in a few years. Therefore, he was not giving instructions for the use of tongues in the church today. He was not even giving instructions to the Corinthians, because he was speaking of counterfeit tongues, which was based on self-centered emotionalism and was not given by the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul was giving the Corinthians, as well as Christians throughout all ages, warnings against using self-serving, ineffective, worldly, and God-dishonoring substitutes for the true spiritual gifts that God has ordained to be used in the church.

We will all be helped if we remember that the purpose of spiritual gifts is always to build others up in the body of Christ. May God help us to remember that. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributor\\_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181)
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz)

Please give your input and leave your feedback at websites 2 and 3 when requested to do so. This helps with evaluation and planning of sermons.

## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAYER:**

O Lord our God, you have given us your Word for our instruction and edification. Help us to understand and rightly divide your truth so that we conform our lives to your truth. Help us to understand your teaching on tongues, especially that it is no longer operative today.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and use the spiritual gifts that God has given you for the common good!