

- 2) It was from within this general framework that Paul addressed the specific matter of speaking in tongues. Like all the gifts of the Spirit, tongues-speaking is an endowment given to serve the common good by edifying the Body of Christ. Given that it is a *speaking* gift, there are three things that must characterize “tongues” and its use:

First, there must be *communication* between the speaker and the hearers; how can a spiritual gift that is communicative edify the Body when there is no communication? This issue is the heart of Paul’s treatment of speaking in tongues (ref. 14:5-19). Unless the content of the utterance is intelligibly communicated to those present (either by direct understanding or interpretation), the gift isn’t to be employed at all (14:26-28).

Second, that which is communicated must be *edifying*. Even if the content of such an utterance is clearly and correctly communicated to the hearers, if it doesn’t serve their genuine edification it is not a legitimate use or manifestation of the gift of tongues.

Finally, and following from the previous observation, if the content of tongues-speaking must be edifying, it must communicate and minister the *truths of the gospel*. It is the gospel that strengthens and nourishes the saints in their progress in Christ, and this is why Paul insisted upon the preeminence of the speaking gifts, and particularly the superiority of prophesying (that is, the direct verbal communication of the things of God to men) (14:1-6; cf. also 1:14-24, 2:1-5, 12-13).

Taken together, these three considerations disqualify virtually all of what occurs in the contemporary Church under the name of speaking in tongues. Incoherent babbling and vague, generic “interpretations” (if not the absence of interpretation altogether) violate every principle and parameter of the actual gift of tongues-speaking. The contemporary phenomenon may excite and incite great enthusiasm, but it doesn’t edify Christ’s Body as the Scripture understands edification.

- 3) It is also necessary to consider briefly Paul’s treatment of tongues-speaking as a *private* matter between the speaker and God (14:2-4, 18-19). This dynamic underlies the argument for private “prayer languages” (cf. vv. 2, 14-15) in which the Spirit causes the worshipper to pray in his mind – not with words in his own language, but “in his spirit” in “mysteries” he doesn’t consciously understand. Supporters of this notion believe they find additional scriptural justification in Paul’s words in Romans 8:26. Acknowledging this to be a misuse of the Romans verse, Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians still remains to be answered. *Most troubling about tongues-speaking as a private prayer language is that it seems to violate the definition and role of spiritual gifts as serving others’ edification, not to mention the need for this gift to operate in a communicative way.*

As a first consideration, those who argue that the gift of tongues-speaking always involves actual human languages commonly interpret Paul's assertion, "*no one understands,*" (14:2) in one of three ways:

- The phrase, "no one," is not to be taken in the absolute sense, but as referring to those *present at the time*. Thus Paul was saying that no one at Corinth was able to understand their tongues-speaking (that is, without the required interpretation – 14:5, 27-29).
- A similar view is that "no one" refers to all those *except the particular individual(s) whose language was being spoken* (as in the case of the Pentecost episode). Paul's point is then that the Corinthian tongues-speaking could not support the common good because of language barriers that existed in the Church there. The obvious difficulty with this interpretation is that it presupposes a linguistically non-homogeneous Christian community at Corinth – a group of individuals who perhaps shared the Greek language but otherwise had different native tongues (as at Pentecost).
- The third option is that Paul was here speaking of a *counterfeit phenomenon* rather than the biblical gift of speaking in tongues. In this instance, no one understood because what was being uttered was ecstatic gibberish effectively directed toward a false "god."

This view is held by some cessationists (Christians who maintain that all supernatural sign gifts have ceased), but it is clearly foreign to the overall context and confuses Paul's instruction: *When the entire context is concerned with the proper understanding and use of the authentic gift of speaking in tongues – a gift that Paul claims for himself as God's chosen apostle – why would he introduce his formal treatment of tongues-speaking by attaching an **entirely different** meaning to the practice? That is, why would he begin in chapter 14 by referring to the **counterfeit**, pagan practice of "tongues-speaking" supposedly occurring at Corinth, only to then address the **actual** spiritual gift of tongues under the same terminology and without any explanation or clarification? Such equivocation couldn't help but thoroughly confuse his readers.*

In the end, only the first view has any real merit. The second presumes too much and the third betrays a commitment to certain sensibilities respecting the gift of tongues more than to careful exegesis. Nevertheless, even the first view falls short in that it tends to distract from Paul's point. What Paul was emphasizing is the fundamental truth that tongues-speaking in the absence intelligible communication is of no value to the hearer(s). *The speaker always communicates with God (whose Spirit gave him utterance), and is perhaps edified himself, **but others must also be edified.***

This meaning is reinforced by Paul's description of this phenomenon as *speaking mysteries in (one's) spirit* – giving forth utterances which, in the Spirit, the speaker himself may discern, but which leave those around him entirely in the dark. Building on this foundation, Paul went on to contrast tongues with the gift of *prophesying*, repeatedly highlighting the superiority of the latter on the ground that it is communicative in every instance, whereas the gift of tongues usually requires interpretation.

- As a spiritual gift, tongues-speaking cannot operate autonomously (at least not in settings where the hearers don't understand what is being expressed); it requires the parallel gift of interpretation.
- And yet, where such utterances are interpreted – not by anyone, but by those having the gift of interpretation, *they effectively become equivalent to prophecy*: They equally impart divine truth by which the Church is edified.

Tongues is a *communicative* gift, and Paul acknowledged that it always involves communication between the speaker and God, for God's Spirit is the one who provokes the speaker's mind and utterance. But where there is no interpretation, this is the extent of the gift's communicative value (14:1-4); it functions only for the *speaker's* edification (14:12-19).

For this reason, Paul clearly regarded this to be a secondary (if not non-normative) use of the gift, *but one that still follows the same general pattern that marks every authentic manifestation of the Spirit*. Consistent with all the spiritual gifts, it has its goal in the spiritual progress of Christ's Church. And being a communicative gift, tongues-speaking must *communicate*, first and foremost in the context of the assembled body.

Being a communicative gift, tongues-speaking must communicate with its hearers. But more than that, it communicates for the sake of *edification*. In accordance with the principles that govern every other spiritual gift, if a manifestation of speaking in tongues in a given context doesn't serve the "common good" – namely, the true edification of those present, it must be reordered (by the use of an interpreter) or rejected altogether (14:27-28). Though Paul apparently affirmed a private function of tongues-speaking, he was careful to disallow it within the assembly (14:18-19).

- 4) A final consideration concerns a *negative function* of the gift of tongues. In 14:22-25, and by way of summing up, Paul observed that tongues are a sign to unbelievers. This is in direct contrast to prophecy which is a sign to those who believe. Paul explained his meaning by illustration in vv. 23-25: In the first instance, prophecy is a "sign to the believing" in that it communicates and ministers the gospel – to those who already believe as well as those who come to believe through the words proclaimed.

Viewed against that backdrop, it follows that tongues are a “sign to the unbelieving” in the opposite sense: When it is an unintelligible utterance, tongues-speaking deprives the unbelieving hearer of the gospel through which he can be saved. Worse than that, it provokes him to actively reject the things of God; he doesn’t merely *miss* the gospel; he is moved to *despise* it because it becomes associated in his mind with a Christianity defined by chaos and even madness.

An unintelligible “gospel” is in one sense worse than no gospel; it ultimately speaks of divine judgment upon the hearer in the sense that it leaves him in his unbelief without giving him the word of life. If “faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ,” where there is no hearing of Christ’s gospel there can be no faith. And where there is no faith, there is judgment and final condemnation.

Thus Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand the gravity of their non-communicative tongues-speaking: They were effectively withholding the gospel not only from one another, but from any unbelievers who came among them. Didn’t they realize the tragedy of God’s word being hidden from men? *Indeed, it was historically a sign of His judgment upon them.*

So it had been with Israel: Fed up with their unbelief, Yahweh informed the two sub-kingdoms that their refusal to listen to His prophets was going to result in their subjugation and final captivity. As Moses had predicted centuries earlier (Deuteronomy 28:49-50), the sons of Israel increasingly stopped their ears when God attempted to speak to them in a language they could understand; soon they would endure a famine of His word, being bound over to foreign captors who would speak to them with words they couldn’t understand (cf. 14:20-21 with Isaiah 28:11ff).

With respect to believers and unbelievers alike, the issue in the communicative gifts is intelligibility – that is, *communication*. Without communication there is no edification, and without edification there is no “common good.”

- For the *community of believers* – who are the primary referent and recipients of the ministry of the Spirit’s gifts, this means that tongues-speaking must be accompanied by the Spirit’s own interpretation provided by a person who possesses this spiritual gift (ref. 12:7ff, esp. v. 10). For this reason, prophecy – being an intelligible proclamation of divine truth – is inherently superior to the gift of speaking in tongues and therefore preferable to it (cf. again 14:1-5, 18-20, 39-40).
- So also prophecy is a superior gift with respect to the *unbelieving*. While the spiritual gifts don’t directly pertain to unbelievers, the communicative gifts are used by God to bring them to repentance and faith. *How shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard?*

In summary, answering the question of the ongoing existence/role of the gift of tongues in the Church demands a more careful and prudent consideration than many Christians are willing to give. Many on the cessationist side of the argument are inclined to reduce the matter to the lexical and grammatical treatment of a handful of Greek words. On the other side, a traditional interpretation of certain biblical texts along with the actual practice of a “tongues” phenomenon are sufficient to substantiate the continuance of this spiritual gift.

The first consideration in resolving the question obviously needs to be the *witness of the New Testament* itself. From that vantage point, one cannot legitimately argue that the text *explicitly* indicates the cessation of the gift of tongues-speaking (in context, the coming of the “perfect” in 13:8-10 isn’t referring to the completion of the canon as so many are quick to argue). At the same time, the New Testament’s treatment of tongues argues against it being an ongoing (or at least normative) gift in the life of the Church.

- Pentecost was a salvation-historical point of singularity. Like the cross, Jesus’ enthronement, and the outpouring of the Spirit, it is associated with the inauguration of the new age of the new creation. In its nature, function and relationship with the Christ event, it is clearly non-repeatable.
- Scripture further indicates the uncommon (if not transitory) nature of the gift of tongues by its scarce presence and minimal treatment in the New Testament text. Outside of the gift’s function in relation to the Pentecost singularity noted above (Acts 2, 10, 19), tongues-speaking is only mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

A second consideration is the *witness of Church history*. Though historical practice must bow to scriptural revelation and instruction, the question of the perpetuity of tongues-speaking demands that history be considered. The presence of some sort of tongues phenomenon across the centuries doesn’t itself prove the perpetuity of the authentic gift, but the absence of tongues-speaking does indicate its cessation. And what one discovers is that speaking in tongues disappeared early in church history and only reemerged sporadically and in expressions that deviated from the biblical nature and operation of the true gift.

So also what exists in the Church today doesn’t coincide with the biblical gift: First of all, this writer is aware of no instances in which tongues-speaking involves the use of a human language unknown to the speaker but known to his hearers. This is precisely the reason so many advocates of the practice argue for its being a non-human “prayer language.” (Even if this were true, it is disallowed by the fact that most tongues-speaking is done in the corporate assembly.) Moreover, the contemporary phenomenon is often *taught* to practitioners and typically involves no interpretation. When it does, the so-called “interpretation” is usually generic and obscure – resembling a horoscope reading more than the ministry of the gospel by which the hearers are edified and built up in Christ.