

Review of Tongues

Ecstatic, unintelligible speech has always been a part of paganism from way back. We have records as far back as 1100 B.C.

And in the centuries leading up to the time of Christ, it was a very, very common aspect of pagan worship.

About 400 BC Plato wrote about tongues in his time.

He described it in terms of ecstatic speech, praying, and utterings while possessed that brought physical healing to those who engaged in them. Plato believed (as did most of his contemporaries) that these occurrences were caused by divine inspiration.

He said God takes control of a person’s mind while he sleeps and inspires him with utterances and/or visions which he can neither understand nor interpret.

Virgil described the tongues of a priestess as the result of her being unified with the god Apollo.

The pagans believed there was actually sexual activity between people and the gods, which resulted in frenzied, ecstatic experiences including tongues.

The Osiris cult in Egypt, the Mithra cult in Persia, and the Eulusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic cults in Thrace, Macedonia, and Greece all were based on spirit possessions which resulted in tongues.

And all that continued during the time of Jesus, the writing of the NT, the period of the church fathers, etc.

So when Paul and Luke wrote about a genuine gift from God, and used the same term to describe it that the pagans used for their ecstatic utterances, you know there had to have been something connected to the genuine gift from the true God that clearly set it apart from the demonic pagan practice that had gone on for centuries.

In Acts it’s not too hard to figure out what that was – it was the same thing that validated all the activity of the Apostles and the inauguration of the Kingdom, and the writing of the NT: miracles.

There wasn’t any question that the tongues in Acts were from God, because the miraculous activity surrounding them proved it.

I know of no other way to make the distinction. Unless it is authenticated by miracles, there is no way we can know of unintelligible speech is by divine inspiration or just human babbling.

When people ask my position on tongues at Creekside, that’s my answer. For a miracle to serve its purpose it has to be apparent that it is a miracle.

You are welcome to speak in tongues in the service, but only if we know for sure it’s really the gift of tongues (interpreters who independently agreed, or other miracles)

No miraculous activity is easier to fake than tongues. If you want to counterfeit unintelligible divine speech, all you have to do is make some unintelligible noises. If no miracles are present, we have no way of telling if it's divine or demonic or simply human.

The true gift of tongues is an ability to speak in a language you have not learned – a language whose words have actual meaning that can be interpreted or translated into the language of the listeners.

The purpose of the gift, as we will see later in the chapter, was to illustrate God's judgment on unbelieving Israel.

In Acts it also served the purpose of proving that people actually received the Holy Spirit, so it was something that was clearly miraculous.

Is the modern phenomenon taking place in charismatic churches the biblical gift of tongues? We looked at that question in detail this summer, and if you want to review that pick up tape 139b.

God invites inspection of and meditation on his miraculous works (John 10:32, 37–38; 20:20, 27 ; Matt 28:6; Luke 24:39). Such inspection is wrong only when it occurs with a disrespectful or unbelieving attitude.

So researchers have looked into the modern tongues and have demonstrated they are not languages and are non-miraculous.

The present phenomenon is completely reproducible by unbelievers.

I think one safe assumption is that the real gift of languages is not something that would be indistinguishable from the pagan counterfeit.

Context:

The point of ch.12 was that all the gifts are from the same Holy Spirit who is working them all together toward the same goal – so none should be disparaged. There should be no division in the body over gifts.

Then right at the end of that chapter, he throws in a twist. All the gifts are spiritual, all are equally from God, and all vital, no one should disparage anyone else or himself...

However, there is one area of giftedness that they church should give highest priority to: prophesy.

28 And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

Primacy is given to apostles, prophets and teachers – those who are directly involved in the ministry of the word to the whole body in an authoritative, official capacity.

31 eagerly desire the greater gifts.

That's not telling you to be discontent with your gift and to seek some "greater" gift. There is no greater gift for you than the one you have been given.

It's not telling you, if you are a foot, to seek to be a hand. He just got done teaching against doing that.

The point is that we as a church should devote ourselves primarily to the ministry of the Word. And those gifts that directly bring that about are to be given our full attention as a church.

Then Paul wants to go on and explain why. Why is the direct ministry of the Word to be emphasized above other things? The answer to that is in ch.14 – the ministry of the Word is the most important, because it's the most loving thing you can do for the body.

But before saying that, Paul takes a whole chapter to remind us of the supremacy and importance of love.

1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. (Lit. **desires spiritual things, but more to prophesy**)

Again, as a church, you should seek eagerly after the things that come from the Holy Spirit – all the gifts, but most of all the ministry of the Word. (In this chapter he doesn't want to list out Apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, etc. every time he wants to refer to the ministry of the Word, so he just uses prophecy. I believe in this chapter prophecy represents the ministry of the Word in general.)

And it's set against tongues in this chapter, which stands as a representation of the clearly supernatural gifts (which seems to be the standard for how highly the Corinthians regarded a gift).

Given the wide range of things that are said about tongues in this chapter, and given the condition of the people in the Corinthian church, it is likely that some of what was going on was an actual, genuine gift from God, and some was just a human counterfeit generated not by the Holy Spirit, but by the flesh.

I don't see how we could deny that. It's true of every other gift. There are people who teach that we all know wouldn't know the gift of teaching if it bit them on the face.

Are there people who sing that are not gifted singers (but insist they are)? Are there people who claim to be gifted in leadership or administration, but who really are not, and their efforts are just human effort without any special giftedness in that area?

Of course. So why would it be any different in a church that highly valued gifts like tongues as a major status symbol, and that had people who were extremely immature spiritually (and others who were not even saved)?

But in this chapter it is not Paul's concern to sort out the true gifts from the false. He's concerned with a much bigger issue – the motivation of using your gift.

If you want the best summary of ch.14, just underline the first phrase: **Follow the way of love**

Anytime you are struggling with some issue regarding your gift, **Follow the way of love**

Follow ΔΙΩΚΩ

This is the normal NT word for "persecute." It means to track someone down – dog his steps, chase him.

It carries the idea of relentlessness. The one who is persecuted is constantly on the run, always trying to escape, being hunted.

Paul says, “Get on to the trail of the law of love, and be a determined hunter.”

and eagerly desire spiritual (things)

It may be that the spiritually mature, godly people in the church saw all the chaos that was coming from all the gifts, and were tempted to just downplay the use of gifts in the church.

Paul won't have any of that. The gifts are spiritual. They are from the Holy Spirit, and therefore should be eagerly desired.

The solution to unloving use of gifts is not to decrease anything, but to simply govern the use of the gifts with love.

The whole point of ch.13 was that since love is eternal and gifts are not, then gifts for gifts' sake are worthless. Only gifts for love's sake has any meaning.

Three contrasts

The point of these contrasts is to shift their thinking. For them, the measure of a gift was how supernatural it seemed to be.

So Paul picks out two gifts that on their scale were pretty much the same – prophecy and tongues. Then he goes through and draws huge distinctions between the two, but comparing them to the true standard.

You see, the measure of a gift is not how supernatural it appears to be. The measure of a gift is how lovingly it is used.

1. Tongues communicate nothing to men; prophecy does. (vv.2,3)

2 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. 3But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God

There is no end to the mountains of speculation about the nature of the gift of tongues that springs out of this verse.

- Is it a private prayer language?
- Is it supposed to be addressed to God?
- Are there two different gifts of tongues?
- Is this referring to the true gift of some pagan counterfeit?

The thing that will be the most help for us is to realize that Paul's purpose here is not to delineate details about the true gift of tongues. His concern is to critique what the Corinthians were doing.

Paul says, “The only one who knows what you are saying with your spiritual gift is God. That's no good.”

This is clearly a negative thing. Paul is not introducing some special kind of supernatural prayer.

Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

What would be the point of uttering unintelligible mysteries to God? A mystery is something that is unknowable to people without God revealing it.

That would be like writing a message, sealing it in an envelope, putting the sealed envelope in someone's hand, and then taking it back, opening it, and reading it.

God didn't give us spiritual gifts so that we could provide Him with information that only He knows.

He gave us spiritual gifts so that we would strengthen (lit. "edify"), encourage and comfort our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And the number one way people are built up, encouraged and comforted is through the ministry of the Word.

3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

The first term is **edification**, and in the context of ministry, it is the measure of love.

In 8:1 Paul pointed out how they were using their knowledge of Christian freedom to elevate themselves over one another: **Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**

The term **builds up** is the same word that is translated **strengthening** here, and it's the controlling idea of the first half of this chapter.

Paul's whole point is about loving the body through the use of your gift, and love builds others up and strengthens them spiritually.

That's always the question with spiritual gifts. Are you using your gift to build up the body and strengthen the rest of us? Or are you prostituting your gift and using it only to build yourself up?

encouragement παράκλησις

This is the idea of encouraging someone by coming along side him and supporting him.

and comfort

This is a very tender word. It's what you do for the timid (1 Thes.5:14 **warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.**) and the grieving (it's used in Jn.11 of the consolation Mary and Martha's friends offered them when Lazarus died).

The thread that runs through all three words is the idea of strengthening.

I love the English word "encourage." Break that word down: en-courage (to infuse a person with courage, to inject strength into him).

Every Christian is a little construction project. God is building something wonderful. And He's doing it through the spiritual gifts of the rest of the church.

Ever seen the bumper sticker, "Be patient. God's not finished with me."?

Not finished doing what? The answer is He's not finished doing what He's doing in you through the spiritual gifts of the rest of the church.

2. Tongues only build up self; prophecy builds up the church

4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

Is self-edification a good thing or bad thing?

The Charismatics will argue, "Throughout the chapter it's a good thing – it's the goal of gifts in general! So it's a good thing to edify yourself."

I don't think we can say that for sure. The word just means "to build up," and it's something that should be done *to* you by someone else.

The whole model of spiritual gifts is that the body is built up by the contributions of the parts. No part has the function of just serving itself.

Remember ch.12?

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Ro.12:5 is also talking about the various gifts, and it says the same thing: **each member belongs to all the others.**

1 Peter 4:10 **Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.**

How hard is that to understand? Your gift isn't for you. It's for us. I don't know how to put that in any simpler language than Peter did.

To use your gift for building up yourself alone is a prostitution of your gift.

We know from the context that the Corinthians were proud and puffed up and out to show each other up. So when Paul says, "You are only building yourself up rather than building each other up" that's not a compliment.

1 Cor.10:23-26 **"Everything is permissible"-but not everything edifies. 24 Nobody should seek his own, but the of others.**

This is such an important message for our individualistic culture. So many Christians think, "My walk with the Lord is a private issue. It's between me and God alone."

People like that look at church the same way they look at personal devotions or personal prayer —just another tool to use in their private devotional life.

That's how you can have people who will walk in just in time for the service and leave immediately, and that's their only connection with the church.

People like that are in to self-edification alone. All they care about is how they are doing spiritually. How someone else in the church is doing spiritually isn't even on their radar screen on Sunday morning.

You can always tell those people, because as soon as a sermon series isn't interesting to them, they immediately drop out of church.

That's because they are not here to edify you or build you up.

That is wrong. The primary reason you come here on Sunday morning is to build others up spiritually.

And that should be obvious from the fact that every spiritual gift is designed to edify others.

3. Tongues are good; but prophecy is better because it edifies.

5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy.

Paul doesn't want to disparage the true gift of tongues. Anything that is from God is good.

Num.11:27-34

A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

28 Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!"

29 But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

Paul is saying, "I have no monopoly on gifts from God. Anything that is from God is a good thing."

We should not conclude from this verse that every person is supposed to have the gift of tongues. In ch.12 he stated clearly that there is no gift that is intended for everyone to have (vv.29,30).

Paul uses this same kind of language in ch.7.

1 Co. 7:7 I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God

We know that Paul didn't really wish that marriage would be abolished, everyone would be single, and the whole race would die out in one generation. A few verses later he counsels some people to marry.

We could translate the idea this way: "There's one sense in which I would like it if everyone were single."

And that's the same thing he's doing here.

Paul never badmouths tongues. The true gift is something that is from God, and is therefore good (when it's used properly).

So assuming it's the true gift, and assuming it's used the right way, it would be great if everyone had it.

But anything that edifies is superior to something that doesn't edify.

He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Here a new idea is interjected: interpretation. Everything thus far has been about uninterpreted tongues.

But where there is an understandable interpretation, there is the possibility of the church being edified.

In this case it would be the same person who speaks the tongue and then interprets his own speech.

But without intelligible speech, tongues are worthless.

Illustrations

6 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?

Can you imagine this? Imagine our church getting a visit from the Apostle Paul himself! Maybe he's planning on staying with us for 6 months.

So we get all excited about it, and when he arrives, from the moment he gets here until the moment he leaves he does nothing but speak unintelligible, uninterpreted tongues.

Even the tongues enthusiasts Paul was writing against wouldn't like that.

"But Paul, you don't understand. There is more to ministry than the cerebral cortex. There's more than just information. Tongues are like music. They touch the emotions. They reach down to your very soul."

Paul: "Even music has meaning."

7 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?

The sounds have to have some relationship to the other sounds. One note has to be a third or a fifth from the last note, and they need to begin at a certain point and end at a certain point.

Without any meaning in what is being played, the noise is only noise (if you doubt that, go upstairs and get one of the toddlers and put him on the piano bench, and see if the sound that is produced reaches down into your very soul.

I don't doubt it will do something to your soul, but edification is really the word that comes to mind.

Next Paul uses an illustration of a noise that isn't even musical:

8 Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?

The call of the bugler to battle is not a very complex sound. It's not a symphony or anything, but still it conveys information, and that information is only conveyed by a certain kind of sound.

If there are not certain tonal distinctive to the sound you hear outside, you don't know if one of your cows is sick, or if something's howling at the moon, or if you are being called to battle.

This whole section is dominated by terms that Paul never uses anywhere else, but that are very common in the literature from the time from pagan, mystical worship. (Collins)

I don't think there is any question the Corinthians were heavily influenced by that. They had a very healthy dose of paganism mixed in with their worship. That's one reason why ch.14 sounds a little strange to us.

9 So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.

That's the strongest statement yet.

This would be a very strange way to refer to prayer – especially prayer that is more profound and “deep” than normal prayer.

The most profound kind of prayer is intelligible prayer. All the instruction we receive about prayer is about praying in your own language with words you understand.

Look at all the prayers recorded in the Bible, all the prayers the prophets prayed, all the prayers the Apostles prayed, all the prayers Jesus prayed, everything Jesus said about prayer...

And see if there is any example anywhere of prayers being unintelligible.

Just look at Jesus' example. He prayed in the same language He normally spoke.

Even His times of deepest, most heartfelt, emotional prayer. In the garden, the night before He died, when He sweat drops of blood and prayed all night – hour after hour in an intensity of prayer I'm sure no other person has ever experienced, He prayed in normal language.

When deity communed with deity, it's not in some heavenly language. It's intelligible.

Our prayers should not be pure emotion. I don't know how the gift of tongues worked, exactly, but I do know that God wants our prayers to be rational and cognitive.

Mt.6:7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans

The KJV says “vain repetitions.” The word is βατταλογεω (bata speech)

It's an onomatopoeia (a word that imitates the sound of its action – like “buzz” or “zip”).

So “bata speech” is when your speech is meaningless babble. “batabatabatabata...”

If someone is praying in tongues, and there is no interpreter, how do you know you are not violating Mt.6:7?

10 Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world,

The first word is very difficult to translate. The most natural translation would be “Perhaps there are many languages.”

Since it would seem that there should be any uncertainty about that, Fee translates it this way: “There are who-knows-how-many languages in the world...”

yet none of them is without meaning.

Since Paul is using the normal word for “language” in this chapter to refer to tongues, he has to pick another word here to refer to normal foreign languages, so he uses the word “voice” (which can also mean “language”).

Then he uses a play on words. Literally: “There are all kinds of different voices, but none of them is voiceless.”

Every language has some meaning.