

Tongues And The Church

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1 Corinthians 14:1-19

The early church in Corinth had a preoccupation with speaking in tongues. It was a divisive issue in the church which included introducing aberrant doctrine, so the Apostle Paul dealt with it head-on in this letter. The same issue arose in evangelical churches in America and then around the world, mainly since the mid 1960's when the modern charismatic movement began in the Los Angeles area. That was when people other than members of Pentecostal and Assemblies of God denominations began manifesting **ecstatic speech** and believing it was the biblical gift of tongues.

It's not a minor issue. It even affects the doctrine of salvation. For example:

“The baptism of believers in the Holy Ghost is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the spirit of God gives them utterance.”

“We believe in speaking with other tongues as the spirit gives utterance, and that it is the initial evidence of the Holy Ghost.”¹

We already know that what is happening today in the modern tongues movement is **not** the biblical gift of tongues. It is non-linguistic ecstatic speech. It's a very real spiritual experience, but it is not the spiritual gift of tongues. Understanding the Corinthians tongues issue and putting it into Biblical perspective isn't difficult if you make some objective observations from the Bible.

1. The gift of tongues is mentioned 22X in 1 Corinthians. It is **never** mentioned to any other church in any of the New Testament epistles, nor is it mentioned in 2 Corinthians. Apparently, the problems were solved by 1 Corinthians.
2. There are four other references to tongues in the pages of your New Testament:
 - Mark 16:17
 - Acts 2
 - Acts 10
 - Acts 19
3. It's important to realize that speaking in tongues is **never** mentioned in the New Testament epistles as a normal occurrence when someone receives the Holy Spirit.

¹Constitution of the Assemblies of God, and Declaration of Faith of The Church of God.

False religions are known for tongues, in the sense of ecstatic speech during euphoric experiences. Here is one author's² conclusion about all that:

“These are only a few examples of tongues speaking that have gone on through the centuries and which continue today among pagans, heretics, and worshipers of the occult. While it is doubtful that many of those in the Charismatic movement would fall into this particular category, it is something for every Charismatic to think about.”

Now, to 1 Corinthians 14

I. **Tongues Are Insufficient For Edification (1-5)**

Paul uses a comparison between two gifts, **tongues and prophecy**, to show that prophecy is preferable in light of what is most loving of others. Prophecy is preferred over tongues because it always results in edification for the church. Love requires edifying everyone to take precedence over building up a single member when that member is the speaker, because **love does not seek its own** (13:5).

1 Corinthians 14:1: *Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.*

1 Corinthians 14:2: *For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.*

1 Corinthians 14:3: *But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.*

1 Corinthians 14:4: *One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.*

²John MacArthur, *The Charismatics*, p. 175.

1 Corinthians 14:5: *Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.*

II. **Tongues Is Inferior To Clear Speech (6-12)**

1 Corinthians 14:6: *But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?*

1 Corinthians 14:7: *Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?*

1 Corinthians 14:8: *For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?*

1 Corinthians 14:9-11: *So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.*

These verses strongly support the fact that the true gift of tongues is human language un-learned by the one speaking.

1 Corinthians 14:12: *So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.*

III. **Tongues Are Therefore Inappropriate In Church (13-19)**

The purpose of tongues is as a sign. Verses 20-25 will explain. It was not a gift ever intended for use in the church.

1 Corinthians 14:13: *Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.*

The only possible acceptable use of this gift when Christians were gathered together was if someone interpreted the foreign language.

1 Corinthians 14:14-15: *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.*

1 Corinthians 14:16-17: *Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified.*

1 Corinthians 14:18-19: *I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

The entire purpose of gathering together as a church is to glorify God and to seek the edification of the body of Christ. When we come seeking what we can personally receive, we are missing the point.