

Tongues Are For A Sign

1 Corinthians, Vol. 29

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1 Corinthians 14:20-25

The key to this passage is what comes immediately before it:

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.*

In the church tells you that the location or the kind of audience is crucial to what is appropriate for tongues. We already learned that the gift of tongues is not appropriate when the church is assembled together. This passage shows us the support for that position. Six verses make three points:

I. **The Rebuke** of immaturity (20)

1 Corinthians 14:20: *Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.*

Do not be children in your thinking is in a grammatical form that means “stop being children in your thinking.”

yet in evil be infants: We should seek **infancy in evil** and **maturity in thinking** about the deep things of God.

but in your thinking be mature: God commands us to stay in the state of infancy with regard to evil things, but to grow up as quickly as possible in matters of the mind. Do you see the connection in the context?

Preoccupation with tongues = immaturity

II. **The Reason** for the rebuke (21-22)

1 Corinthians 14:21-22: *In the Law it is written, “BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,” says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.*

Six Observations on The Meaning of the Gift of Tongues

1. **Tongues fulfil** _____. The quotation is from:

Isaiah 28:9–13: *“To whom would He teach knowledge,*

And to whom would He interpret the message?

Those just weaned from milk?

Those just taken from the breast?

10 *“For He says,*

‘Order on order, order on order,

Line on line, line on line,

A little here, a little there.’ ”

11 *Indeed, He will speak to this people*

Through stammering lips and a foreign tongue,

12 *He who said to them, “Here is rest, give rest to the weary,”*

And, “Here is repose,” but they would not listen.

13 *So the word of the LORD to them will be,*

“Order on order, order on order,

Line on line, line on line,

A little here, a little there,”

That they may go and stumble backward, be broken, snared and taken captive.

Because Israel had rejected God's grace and His provisions for them, they were going to be taken captive. They were mocking and disregarding Isaiah as they had other prophets. Thus, in the 8th century B.C., Isaiah was given these words from God to predict that they would be **taken captive by a foreign nation**. This passage mocks the attitudes of some of the people toward Isaiah's prophecies about their spiritual condition. If you have the NASB, look at the marginal notes in verses 10 and 13:

Verse 10: Heb *Sav lasav, sav lasav, Kav lakav, kav lakav, Ze' er sham, ze' er sham*
These Hebrew monosyllables, imitating the babbling of a child, mock the prophet's preaching.

Verse 13: The LORD responds to their scoffing by imitating their mockery, to represent the unintelligible language of a conqueror

2. **This concept is not** _____.

Deuteronomy 18:49-50: *The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, a nation of fierce countenance who will have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young.*

Isaiah was announcing the fulfilment of God's promised judgment upon Isaiah. It happened just as Isaiah predicted it would happen in fulfilment of Moses' prediction in Deuteronomy. Jeremiah announced it:

Jeremiah 5:15–17: “Behold, I am bringing a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel,” declares the LORD.

*“It is an enduring nation,
It is an ancient nation,
A nation whose language you do not know,
Nor can you understand what they say.
Their quiver is like an open grave,
All of them are mighty men.
They will devour your harvest and your food;
They will devour your sons and your daughters;
They will devour your flocks and your herds;
They will devour your vines and your fig trees;
They will demolish with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust.*

That's the word from God through Jeremiah, a little later than Isaiah, that the captivity was the fulfilment of God's promised curse upon Israel.

3. There is _____ in the contexts of Isaiah 28 and 1 Corinthians 14.

Isaiah's problem was the childish nation of Israel. Paul's problem was the childish church at Corinth (as he said in verse 20). In both settings, people were ignoring the instructions they had from God in order to do their own thing. Paul directly connects the situation in Corinth with the situation in Israel centuries earlier.

4. Paul _____ by quoting from Isaiah 28.

The triple prophecies of the 15th, 8th, and 7th centuries B.C. found its initial fulfilment when the **Babbling Babylonians** overran Israel. For rejecting the Messiah, Jesus told the leaders of Israel in His day that there were going to be serious consequences for the nation.

Luke 13:34–35: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you will not see Me until the time comes when you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’”

5. **Therefore, the meaning of _____ in the New Testament era is clear.**

The speaking in foreign languages in Acts 2 at the day of Pentecost, and whenever it was repeated in other settings, was a **sign** indicating the realization of God's promise through His Son Jesus, to set aside the nation of Israel for refusing to embrace Jesus as the Messiah. At the same time, it was a sign of the New Covenant blessing on anyone, **Jew OR Gentile**, who would receive the free gift of eternal life in Christ. So at the same time as the original giving of the gift of tongues came the outpouring of the Spirit of God upon all who accepted Christ by faith.

All the recorded occurrences of the gift of tongues in the book of Acts, though they occur in different circumstances, fit clearly with this frame of understanding the purpose of tongues. All three (there are **only three!**) involved Jewish people present to whom the sign of tongues symbolized both cursing (Israel being set aside) and blessing (the arrival of New Covenant salvation).

6. **Prophecy is _____ .**

1 Corinthians 14:22: *So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is ~~for a sign~~, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.*

The Greek construction would allow for repeating **for a sign** as implied after the word **prophecy**, but in this case the more obvious contrast isn't between **prophecy** and **tongues**, it's between **to unbelievers** and **those who believe**. I therefore prefer the NKJV:

1 Corinthians 14:22: (NKJV) *Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.*

Tongues served as a sign to indicate that God's redemptive program shifted to a new phase, from being centered on the nation of Israel, to involving all nations. **Prophecy** (preaching the revealed word of God) is the activity that builds believers to maturity in the Church.

III. **The Result** of proper actions (23-25)

1 Corinthians 14:23: *Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?*

Church is for believers, but what takes place in the church should be intelligible to unbelievers as well. We are not a secret organization. We are not a clandestine brotherhood initiating one another into mysterious rituals and secret relationships where some are superior to others. Even if someone disagrees with and rejects whatever we preach, they should always be able to **understand** what goes on in a church service.

Acts 2:4–13: And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others were mocking and saying, “They are full of sweet wine.”

1 Corinthians 14:24-25: But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

Immediately after the tongues, Peter preached about what was going on. He preached in the language they all shared in common, either Greek or Aramaic. And **look at the results:**

Acts 2:36–41: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all

who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

Repent means to acknowledge your sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and turn from your sin by turning to Him in faith.

Be baptized is how to express and demonstrate symbolically your commitment to Christ. Baptism is a physical symbol of the spiritual transaction that has taken place in the heart.

Be saved is the result of that commitment to Christ. Jesus took on Himself all the penalty for all your sins, so you never have to. And He gives to you the perfect righteousness of His sinless life.

Acts 2:42: *They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

Is that a good description of you?

Acts 2:46–47: *Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.*