

The Gift of Tongues

1 Corinthians 14:1-19

Introduction:

Chapters 12-14 of 1 Corinthians are devoted to the subject of spiritual gifts. The Corinthians valued the use of spiritual gifts but with a wrong motive which led them to misusing and misunderstanding them. Here are some major highlights from Paul's teachings in these chapters where he is attempting to correct the Corinthians on this matter.

- Spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Spirit through believers for the common good of the whole body.
- The church is like a human body in that it is one body made up of many members.
- Every member is equal in importance yet, uniquely gifted according to the sovereign will of God.
- Everyone should embrace the gift that they have been given and not covet other people's gifts.
- The overarching motive for the use of spiritual gifts should be a love for the body of Christ that stems from a love for Jesus himself.
- Love is the primary thing and without it all the gifts are useless.

The purpose of today's passage is to teach the Corinthians about the supremacy of the spiritual gift of prophecy over the spiritual gift of tongues. The standard by which Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to judge the gifts is based on their contribution to the building up of the entire body. Spiritual gifts are primarily

manifestations of the Spirit for the edification of the whole body of believers.

In order to accomplish his purpose, Paul teaches what the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy are. When these two gifts are understood properly it becomes clear to see how prophecy is more profitable to the body as a whole than the gift of tongues, and thus should be preferred over the two, and possibly others.

Here are some prerequisites that need to be addressed before exegeting the text.

1. **Prioritize the Scriptures as the main source of information.** There are many different interpretations of this passage of scripture. Too many of them have been developed by placing too much emphasis on experience, tradition, and extra-biblical sources. I believe the best approach for dividing the Word of God rightly is to let it interpret itself. In other words, we must gather the evidence that exists within the Bible and let that evidence speak before we bring anything else into the conversation.

In my preparation for this sermon, the use of commentaries and extra-biblical resources came after a lengthy time in the text itself. I inductively explored the text using the original Greek and a few reliable English translations before referencing other people's interpretations and opinions. I'm not claiming that it was perfectly unbiased. We all know that's not entirely possible. But I do want you to know the method that I use in trying to interpret scripture, which I believe to be the best.

2. **Exercise liberty with this subject.** There are many differences of interpretations because of the lack of information that we have on the subject. If we are being honest with ourselves there's not a whole lot of information in the Scriptures regarding the gift of tongues. The biblical

information on tongues could fill a mud puddle but the extra biblical information that has accumulated over 2000 years could fill an ocean. People can honestly arrive at different interpretations and not be all together heretical.

We need to keep in mind that the gift of tongues is not an essential doctrine that serves as a hill to die on. Two Christians can lovingly disagree on how they interpret the scriptures in regards to tongues. It is not like the essential gospel doctrines like the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection, substitutionary atonement, the return of Christ, and so on.

Having said that, there are some absolutes that we can deduce from the Scriptures. For example, tongue speaking is not evidence of genuine Christianity. That is a view that some people hold that we can know for certain is not biblical.

3. Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing, which is the good of the BODY. At the heart of the Corinthian's error was self. If a love for the body of Christ is our primary motivation in all things we will show liberty on this issue. That is the very teaching that Paul wants the Corinthians and all other Christians to learn from this chapter.

4. Above all - Pursue Love, and in particularly a love for the Body of Christ as a whole. It is not my goal to see that everyone agrees with my interpretation and opinions when you leave here today. It is my greatest desire that you leave here today loving the body of Christ more than when you came. It is my desire to see everyone seeking the spiritual gifts that contribute most effectively to building up the body of Christ, simply because you love it.

Here is how I hope to accomplish that goal. I will first walk through an exegesis of the text. I will seek to include not only my interpretation and understanding but also some contrasting

views and evidences for those views as time allows. After we exegete the text we will summarize our findings and attempt to answer some questions and determine some of the absolutes revealed in the text. Then we will conclude with some application.

1. Exegesis of the Text (1-19)

Pursue love, (Priority number one is to seek to show love to the body as a whole. This could be said, “In light of everything we just learned in chapter 13, pursue love.”)

and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, (The gifts are given to the church for the very purpose of building up the whole body of Christ. I do believe he is encouraging them to desire the gifts as a church and not encouraging individuals to covet each other's gifts.)

especially that you may prophesy. (The gift of prophecy was the most important gift in the Corinthian church because of its content and benefit to their congregation at this particular time. Prophecy contained divinely inspired instruction and application to living the Christian life. They did not have the Bible like we do today. No one can argue that the Corinthians needed crystal clear teaching from God. They received revelation directly from God through the spiritual gifts of prophecy and tongues, but we will see from this passage that prophecy was the primary and preferred method for receiving revelation.)

2 For one who speaks in a tongue (Paul now shifts his focus on the gift of tongues because it was clearly the most sought after and revered of all the gifts, albeit for the wrong reasons. We can assume from everything we've studied thus far that the reason was because they were enamored by the gift of tongues. They

thought it was the coolest of all the gifts. Paul is going to contrast tongues with prophecy to prove to them that prophecy should be the primary gift in the church if their hearts and heads were in the right place.

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; (We can deduce from the text that Paul is speaking about a particular type of tongue that is not intended to speak to men but to God. We can also assume that he's talking about prayer. Prayer is the act of individuals speaking directly to God.)

(Here is why this type of tongue is not better than prophecy) ***for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. 3 On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.*** (In a plain reading of the text we can see that this type of prayer tongue or language is not intelligible to other hearers. Even though it doesn't seem to be an intelligible language it does have content, which is mysteries in the Spirit. The purpose of this tongue is to build up the speaker. In contrast, prophesying is the primary way to speak to all the people in order to build them up, encourage, and console them.)

- * Let me say a quick word about an opposing view of this interpretation. John MacArthur believes Paul is actually condemning the Corinthians misuse of tongues, which he believes to be a Pagan practice brought into the church from temple worship. This presupposition profoundly changes the way he sees the rest of this chapter. Here are his 2 main arguments from verses 1-4.
- Speaking to “God” should be translated to “a god” because the Greek lacks the definite article before *theo*. The problem with that is that there are other places in the New Testament

where the definite article is missing but the context clearly defines *theo* as the one true God. In the first chapter of John, the word 'God' ('theos' in Greek) is used 12 times. In almost half of these instances (five times) it does not have the definite article.

- He also believes that speaking in the Spirit should be translated speaking in "his spirit", referring to the speaker's spirit. He argues, "the spirit to which Paul refers is not the Holy Spirit, as some interpreters claim, but the person's own spirit, as implied in the Greek (locative case) and indicated in the NASB by the word *his*." It is worth mentioning that the NASB is about the only reliable translation I found that translates it that way.

I believe the real difficulty with John MacArthur's view is the rest of the chapter.

5 Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophecy. (This one verse destroys any notion that Paul was condemning speaking in tongues. In particular, tongue speaking in a prayer language. He is however, primarily making the case that prophecy is much more valuable and the thing they should be focusing on most. He goes on to say..)

The one who prophesies is greater (greater in the sense that he is more valuable to the body, which is the goal of using spiritual gifts) **than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.** (again, here is a clear evidence that Paul is not condemning the use of tongues completely in the church during worship gatherings. He is making the case that tongues must be interpreted to have any value in building up the church when gathered for worship.)

Here is his illustration: **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 believe Paul is saying that tongues can bring revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching but not without an interpretation. And, without that interpretation the tongues are useless to the body.)

Paul goes on to illustrate this point. ***7 If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?*** (Here Paul likens the use of tongues without interpretation to a cacophony, a group of instruments playing random and discordant notes.) ***8 And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?*** (A particular tune was played on the bugle to communicate the command for troops to prepare for battle. If that tune was randomized and chaotic, it would serve no purpose in preparing anyone for battle.)

9 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. 10 There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, 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. (The point is, speaking in tongues without an interpretation when a church is gathered is useless and a waste of time. When believers gather for worship, time is valuable. There is a great purpose in our gathering. We are here to praise the Lord and build one another up. To build one another up is to strengthen one another's faith. It is to equip and encourage each other to continue to fight the good fight and walk the good walk in manner worthy of our calling. It is an absolute necessity for the believer. We cannot live without it and when we do it we must not waste a second. ***12 So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.***

13 Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. (Again, Paul is not completely condemning the use of tongues when the body is gathered. The Corinthians must conclude that if anyone's going to use the gift of tongues when the church is gathered, they must be interpreted. I also believe that Paul is permitting a tongue speaker to also be the interpreter. However, I believe in 14:27 he is making it preferential that someone else interpret.)

14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. 15 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. 16 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? 17 For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.

I believe that Paul is making reference to two types of tongues that were prominent in the Corinthian church. A prayer tongue and a praise tongue. In the beginning of the chapter he had already introduced the prayer tongue. It is a prayer in an unintelligible tongue to humans, between the speaker and God. And it is primarily for the edification of the speaker. It is a prayer from the speaker's spirit and not so much the mind. The second tongue that Paul speaks about is a singing tongue of praise. This is also a song of praise from the spirit and not so much the mind. Paul is making it clear that when the church gathers, a prayer from the spirit and a song from the spirit are of no value to the body unless they engage the mind also and are shared with others. In other words, an interpretation must be given so the outsiders can agree and say amen. And I'll say it again, I do not see Paul condemning the use of these tongues in a worship service. He says, **For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.** He is clearly condemning the use of any gift that does not build everyone up.

Concluding this particular section of the argument Paul says, **18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.**

19 Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. (Just in case the point has not been made clearly, Paul is not condemning the use of tongues. In fact Paul boasts about his gift of speaking in tongues. This is not meant to be a prideful boast to provoke jealousy, it is hyperbole used to express his love and gratitude for the gift of tongues. Paul knows that not everyone will speak in tongues (12:30). However, as much as he loves the gift he would still rather speak five intelligible words to the body of Christ than 10,000 unintelligible words that do not build anybody up but himself.

2. A Summary of the Text

- The main goal of the spiritual gifts is the building up of the whole body of Christ, as an expression of our sacrificial love for one another, that flows out of our love for Jesus, which was born out of his love for us while we were yet still sinners.
- The gift of speaking in tongues is a legitimate and good spiritual gift but the very individual nature of the gift makes it inferior to the gift of prophecy. I would argue, inferior to almost all of the other spiritual gifts.
- In this passage I see 3 possible types of tongues:

Personal prayer tongue between the speaker and God meant to edify the speaker and the congregation only when interpreted . (1 Cor. 14:2;15)

Personal praise tongue to express praise to God meant to edify the speaker and the congregation only when interpreted. (1 Cor. 14:15-16)

A miraculous tongue used to speak revelation, prophecy, knowledge, or teaching to the congregation and unbelievers but must be interpreted. I could be wrong about this one. He could be saying that if he spoke in tongues only and did not also bring these other things, then his visit is meaningless (1 Cor. 14:6).

A fourth type of tongue is found in Acts that occurred at Pentecost. A miraculous tongue, which is either the ability to speak a known language that is unknown to the speaker, or the ability to speak an unknown language that people miraculously hear in their native language occurring only at Pentecost. (Acts 2:1-13)

3. Some Absolutes and Applications

- A. The gift of tongues is inferior to Prophecy (next week we will delve into more detail on this). We know that for certain beyond a doubt, but I believe tongues are not only inferior to prophecy, I believe they are inferior to all teaching gifts. Therefore, we should never prioritize tongues over any other gift that teaches, admonishes, exhorts, encourages, or builds up other believers through the use of the Word of God in a clear and intelligible language.
- B. No tongue gift should ever be used when the body is gathered for corporate worship unless it is clearly interpreted and proves to be beneficial to the hearers.
- C. Tongues are not worthy of division and thus no believers should ever argue or debate with the wrong spirit about tongues and absolutely, other than the absolutes we have discussed so far, no one should pass judgment on another believer for their interpretation and/or exercise of the gift of tongues. I want to. Be very clear on what I'm saying here.

Conversation is good with the right heart and spirit, but arguing and debating with the wrong heart and spirit is inexcusable and will not be tolerated in this church. In love we will not allow any unhealthy debating and/or division over this topic.

In Closing:

Let me repeat the prerequisites listed discussed in my introduction:

1. **Prioritize the Scriptures as the main source of information.**
2. **Exercise liberty with this subject.** Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing, which is the good of the BODY.
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4. **Above all, Pursue Love**

CG Discussion Questions

Discussing the Prerequisites

1. What does it mean to prioritize the Scriptures as the main source for interpreting passages of the Bible and why is that important? Does that mean using commentaries and other extra-biblical sources is bad or wrong?
2. Why is it important that we give liberty when it comes to people's interpretation about the gift of tongues?
3. If we are keeping the main thing the main thing, what is the main thing?
4. Why is it important that we pursue love above all else?

Discussing the Text

5. What are the 3 types of tongues that we discussed in the text and do you agree that Paul is in fact speaking about "various types" of tongues?
6. What was the fourth possible type of tongue we discussed found in Acts 2?
7. Paul is clearly teaching the inferiority of tongues over prophecy when it comes to the gathered body of Christ. Why are tongues inferior to prophecy?
8. Why do tongues have to be interpreted if they are going to be used in worship?
9. What are the three absolutes discussed in the sermon and can you think of any others that did not get mentioned?

