
Speaking in Tongues

by: Ronald L. Dart

I want to discuss the subject of ‘speaking in tongues’ and particularly First Corinthians 14. I feel that as we come each year to the season of Pentecost, this question naturally arises. I felt that at some point in time I needed to explain in connection with Acts chapter two just what this fourteenth chapter of First Corinthians is all about.

There have come some rather strange ideas that people have about ‘speaking in tongues’, what it is all about, what it is for. It is rather electrifying, as a matter of fact, to be sitting in a congregation, or listening to a speaker on the radio, and all of a sudden, hear him break out into some language you have never heard before, and as matter of fact, no one else listening to him has ever heard before, and you think that this is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and it can be a very exciting thing that can take place to someone who believes in their heart of hearts that that is of God.

There are some problems connected with it.

Some Problems with Speaking in Tongues

I think if you turn back to 1 Corinthians 14, you will begin to readily see what I mean.

First of all, the very existence of 1 Corinthians 14 tells us that there was a problem, because if all that had been happening at Corinth was the routine manifestation of a gift that was commonly present in the church, let me repeat that if all we had going on here, was the manifestation of a gift that was routinely manifested in the church, there would have been no special reason for Paul to have made or written this particular chapter dealing with what is a problem in Corinth.

Most of the epistle is a problem solution epistle. Paul is dealing with specific problems and questions that existed in the Corinthian Church, that is fairly evident, the church was divided, and he deals with the question of division.

There was a problem with hair length, as a matter of fact, and he had to deal with that problem, there was a problem of meats offered to idols that he had to address, the attitude of the church relative to meats offered to idols and so he is bringing up things that created problems, even the observance of the Passover was a problem (1 Corinthians 5 and 11) in this particular church and in the eleventh chapter, He had to explain the observance of the Passover and in Chapters 12, 13 and 14, he addresses the question of ‘spiritual gifts’ which was apparently a point of considerable vanity in the Corinthian Church.

He tells them that he is aware of the fact that they come behind in no gift and he is very encouraging to them about the fact that they are a gifted church, but then he tries to show them that these gifts that exist in the church, these spiritual gifts should not, if they are of God, be any cause of division or disharmony in the church, but the fact is, it is very evident in 1 Corinthians 14, that whatever was happening in Corinth was contributing to division in the church. It was a problem to these people, if it had not been a problem Paul would not need to have addressed it.

What is rather remarkable is that the manifestations of 'speaking in tongues', now a day, when it occurs in those churches where 'tongues speaking' is not a part of their tradition of that church, it is almost automatically a source of division in the church.

I think in most Pentecostal churches where 'tongue speaking' is a part of the church's tradition, that it is not necessarily a point of division, but when it first came to appear in this country, when the 'tongues movement' began to appear there was a considerable amount of opposition to it, and a great deal of division began to arise in churches where 'tongues speaking' began to, I choose the word erupt or appear or to be manifested in one way or another.

Now we have 'tongues speaking' Catholics, 'tongues speaking' Baptists, 'tongues speaking' Methodists as this has come along, but evidently as researchers who have looked into the subject have found, it does create division in the congregation. Now that alone should be enough to give a person pause, to ask himself why would that take place?

Paul is dealing with this question, not merely of tongues, but 'spiritual gifts' in general, but 'tongues' is what he focuses in on.

It seems to be, though it were a peculiar focus of the problem having to do with division, with the attitudes of people in the church and with their responsiveness to and from one another.

Now as I said, I feel that what we have happening in 1 Corinthians 14 is something quite different from what took place in the second chapter of Acts. The reason I say this is because, if it was exactly the same, it would not have been worthy of comment. Paul said that "I speak in tongues more than you all" (1 Cor. 14:18.) He himself was a 'tongues speaker' in some sense, the question is, in what sense? What was it that was wrong with 'speaking in tongues' in Corinth and was creating the problem? This is the question that I think we need to address. Before we do, let's go back to the second chapter of Acts and refresh ourselves as to what really took place there, and so that we can understand to what extent it is the same as or in what way it differs from what was going on in 1 Corinthians 14.

Speaking in Tongues in Acts 2

Acts 2:1 Now "when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place."

I think some commentators feel that this was the Temple, the ready access of information out from these people to others who then rushed in where they were, implies that it was a relatively

public place, and there is no reason to doubt that they were in the Temple or a segment of the Temple on the Day of Pentecost.

"And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. {3} And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them" (Acts 2:2-3)

Now this is a strange manifestation, a roar, there is no wind (verse 2) not a leaf would be stirring, but a roar like wind came through the whole place and then all of a sudden, an apparition appears of distributed, not divided or forked tongues, but distributed tongues coming out and settling on each one of these people who were assembled in this place. It must have been a hair-raising experience. I can't imagine how it must have felt, say either a participant or a nonparticipating observer of this particular thing, it would have scared you half out of your wits.

It then says: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4.)

What is Tongues?

Now, what do you mean tongues? What does this mean? Does it mean languages? Does it mean known languages? Does it mean unknown languages? Are these known tongues or unknown tongues? This is a valid question to ask. It is answered in the second chapter of Acts.

"And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven." (Acts 2:5.)

This is a fairly normal thing, through the period of the diaspora in which the Jews had been dispersed everywhere. I suspect that there was not a nation under heaven, at least any inhabited or civilized nation under heaven, you cannot be sure how inclusive Luke intends to be with his language here, whether he is speaking metaphorically of every civilized language or if he literally means every single one, I think he is probably speaking in more general terms. It doesn't really matter for the purpose of what he is driving at.

He says: "there were Jews." Now these Jews, many of them had been out there for many generations, had been born, had lived their entire lives, begat children and grandchildren, and still they are living there, the third and fourth generation Babylonian Jews, who were at this time living in Jerusalem. They came, and they went, and many, for whatever reason, would come home to Jerusalem, for education, they would come to Jerusalem to study with the rabbis to renew their religion, though they were Jews of some wealthy means in most cases, to have been able to have picked up and left Mesopotamia or Babylon and come and have lived in Jerusalem, for, as I said, for education or some other purpose. Commerce played a large part as to why many of these Jews moved back there.

The important thing to realize is that the native languages of these people that were born in Babylon was Babylonian, and they considered Babylonian to be their native language like a Jew

born in the United States would speak English. A Jew born in Germany would speak German and one born in France would speak French.

Now in many cases they have another language, Yiddish now-a-days, and certainly it was true in these days that they also spoke Greek or Aramaic, a version of Hebrew.

The linguistic situation here, of people living or dwelling in Jerusalem, after having been born in say, Babylon, would leave them probably bi-lingual probably speaking Greek or Aramaic if they lived in Palestine, and their Babylonian language as well.

Now the consequences of this is rather interesting. It really wasn't necessary for the purpose of communicating with a large body of people for them to be given the gift of every language known under heaven. It just wasn't necessary, because the chances are that virtually, the majority, ninety percent of the population of Jerusalem would have understood them perfectly well in Greek, of which they spoke.

Aramaic was probably the common language that these gentlemen spoke but judging from subsequent events they also spoke Greek. They could have been speaking in Greek or Aramaic and they would have been understood by most of the population. There really was not a need for the pure purpose of preaching the gospel.

Now, what happens here, because it says that there were Jews living there of every nation under heaven.

"Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded" or troubled in mind, "because that every man heard them speak in his own language. {7} And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? {8} And how hear we every man in our own languages, wherein we were born? {9} Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, {10} Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, {11} Crete's and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our languages the wonderful works of God" (Acts 2:6-11.) Now there are sixteen nationalities represented here.

I think it is important to realize that

one of the themes in the book of Acts is the transition that is taking place from a Jewish sect into a universal church (the word catholic has a bad connotation for some people), to appeal to all men, of all languages everywhere. This miracle is highly symbolic, as well as being a manifestation of God's power, as well as being useful for communication of the gospel, is extremely symbolic, because the purpose of the miracle is to demonstrate God's intent to take the gospel to every nation under heaven, in their language and to communicate to human beings.

Now, I asked the question earlier, are these known tongues or unknown tongues? Clearly, they were known tongues. Clearly, apart from the manifestation of God's intent to take the gospel into these nations, every nation under heaven, there is the intent in the 'gift of tongues' to use that for

human communication. I think this is very important for us to understand that in the second chapter of Acts, we are not dealing with the communication between man and God, or man and angel. There is absolutely no need whatever for man to need a language, so that God can understand what man is saying, God need not give man a language to communicate with Him, for God can communicate in any language known to man, God even understands our groaning, he even understands our crying out without words, a cry of pain, a cry of anguish, the weeping and shedding of our tears, He understands every form of language of which a man is capable of communicating.

So as far as a need for a prayer language in which to communicate with God, this is not necessary in the first place and second place that is not what is going on in the second chapter of Acts. They were speaking forth the 'wonderful works of God' in the languages that men understood.

Tongues are for a Sign

Now, going to 1 Corinthians 14, I want you to go down a little ways into the chapter, all the way down to verses 22 through verse 24, because in these verses we have a peculiar contradiction, and I think that by starting here we can begin to understand or grasp the fact that we have not always approached this fourteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians with the right premise and consequently have been led to some wrong conclusions.

In verse 22 Paul says: "Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not". Clear enough! Tongues are for a sign. We understand what that means. I think what that means is that when many people read this they say, tongues are for a sign, that means, an outward manifestation to impress, or to prove or to demonstrate the power of God, OK, we have unbelievers and we speak in tongues as a sign to them, a sign of what? A sign that God's power is here, we see this and we are really impressed by the fact that this is a miracle of God and we have it and we use it as proof. Some people would actually read that as tongues are for a proof, not to them that believe for they need no proof, but they are a proof to unbelievers.

Is that what it means? Let's read on. "prophesying serves not for them that believe not, but for them which believe" (verse 22.) Then Paul gives us an illustration: "If therefore the whole church come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that you are mad? " (verse 23.)

Now wait a minute, just before we have seen that some people have interpreted this verse that says: "tongues are a sign to unbelievers not to believers," to mean that this is offered to unbelievers as something to prove to them or to be a sign to them, or a witness to them, and yet this says that the result of 'speaking in tongues' before unbelievers is that they will think you are mad.

And indeed, even in speaking in languages that were known to men that they thought they were mad in the second chapter of Acts.

Going on, on the other hand he said: "if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: {25} And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so, falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth."

Now which of the two responses from an unbeliever who comes into our group here, do we want to have? That he stands there and says that we are crazy and turns around and leaves or that he comes to worship God and recognizes that God is with us. Obviously, we want the latter.

Therefore, what we want is 'prophesying' not 'speaking in tongues', right? And yet in verse 22 does not Paul say: "Tongues are a sign, not to them that believe but to them that believe not?"

Prophesying serves not for them that believe not, but to them that believes. Now either Paul was confused or else there is something that we are reading here or something that we have not seen and not understanding or have not grasped about what Paul is trying to say.

We have to realize that we have approached this with some preconceptions and ideas that I think has caused us to take some wrong turns.

Let's go back to verse 1 of First Corinthians 14 and analyze what we read here and see if we can come to understand what it means and what the consequences are and what Paul was dealing with in Corinth.

"Follow after love" he says in verse 1, Paul has just discussed love at great length in chapter 13, "and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that you may prophesy." He rates prophesying far above any other spiritual gift other than love. He rates prophesying high, because of the change that it makes in people's lives.

"For he that speaks in an *unknown* tongue." The word 'unknown' you will notice is in italics in your Bible and it really is not there, but the translators may have been correct for inserting that because at least as an interpretation, for it does appear, that even though the tongues in Acts were known tongues, that the tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 were unknown tongues. Now reading on he says: "he that speaks in a tongue speaks not unto men, but unto God: for no man understands him; howbeit in the spirit he speaks mysteries" (verse 2.)

Now is Paul here discussing the way things ought to be or the ways things were in Corinth? In other words, was he describing 'tongues speaking' as it occurred as a normal manifestation in the church when he says, "he that speaks in the church whenever he may be, in an unknown tongue is not speaking to men but unto God." But back in Acts 2, they were speaking to men, in languages that men understood about God, they were not speaking to God in the presence of men in languages that men did not understand. Is Paul then here talking about the way it ought to be or the way it was in the church as a whole or is he describing the particular manifestation of tongues as it was happening in Corinth? Whatever is happening here, did not happen in Paul's presence, he was not there, whenever it took place, whatever had happened there, he had received a full report on the manifestation, he had a report on what had been done, who had done it, the effect on the church, but he had not seen it himself and I rather gather that it was not only a

problem for the church as is evident as we read on through the chapter, but secondly that Paul did not fully understand what was going on himself for he is groping a little bit in his attempt to deal with 'speaking in tongues' in Corinth.

I have become persuaded frankly, that what was happening in Corinth at this time is not at all that different from what happens in some Protestant churches today who have no history of tongues speaking in their church, and suddenly a tongues movement breaks out or begins to move into a particular congregation upon some of its members.

I think we may have very well been seeing in Corinth at that time, an identical manifestation of what happens in the charismatic movement in the Catholic Church today. The charismatic movement in the Methodist Church and others and it creates a problem for those churches when it does rise and in which many people are at a little bit of a loss to know what to do with it.

They are reluctant to attribute 'tongues speaking' to demonism because the fruits of demonism are otherwise not there.

The people seem to have a great deal of love for one another, they are compassionate, they are helpful, they manifest Christian duties in their lives and there is none of the strangeness that we often attribute to demonism or any of the other fruits that you can subtly connect to it.

'Tongue's Speaking' is not a Purely Christian phenomenon.

I was surprised to learn for I had not realized until I began to do some research on the subject that 'tongue's speaking' is not a purely Christian phenomenon. There are instances of what is called ecstatic speech in the ancient Egyptian religions and certain instances of 'tongue's speaking' that have taken place in the Greek religions.

There is no reason, first of all, to assume that 'speaking in tongues' is immediately a representation of either God or the Devil. It may possibly be a human phenomenon.

Some men have done research which has indicated that that may very well be the case. There are certain psychological factors with a turn to regression. They had an interesting theory to account for 'speaking in tongues' as a purely human phenomenon. There are too many instances that I can think of where I would be totally reluctant to attribute what I had seen or heard to the Devil, because the fruits of that were not manifested in the peoples' lives and I couldn't attribute it to God for the fruits of that were not manifested either.

There is only one alternative left and that is a peculiar human phenomenon that can take place in certain people not dissimilar that can take place in hypnosis in many cases.

Tongues as a phenomenon may be of God as the gift of tongues may be manifested, it possibly could also be a purely human manifestation.

I will leave the nature of specific instances of 'tongues' speaking', just like Paul left them, for God to show us or to reveal to us for some other time.

Let's go back to verse 2 of First Corinthians 14: "He that is speaking in a tongue is not speaking to men, he is speaking to God for no man understands him, howbeit in the spirit he speaks mysteries."

The way I understand that, is that Paul has heard, someone has arrived there and has told him what was going on in Corinth, that someone had stood up in church, had spoken in a language that not one person in the congregation understood and so Paul is writing back to them, and said "this people in Corinth are speaking in these tongues are not speaking to men because nobody in the congregation understood a word they were saying, only God can understand them." This is what I think Paul is saying. He is not necessarily saying that 'tongues speaking' as a rule is strictly for the purpose of speaking to God. Why? Tongues Speaking isn't necessary to speak to God!

God speaks English as well as any of us do. He is able to communicate with us that way, and if we were to speak French or German or any other language we could speak to God as well in that language.

Edification

"He that prophesies speaks unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort" (1 Cor 14:3.)

The word 'edification' is interesting and very important and is used several times in this chapter. The King James translators in their choice of the word 'edification' were probably quite correct because the archaic meaning of the word 'edify' included the concept of building something, and the idea of building a building and using the term 'edify' for the concept of building or 'edification', we have the word 'edifice' today which refers to a large building, but we do not today use the term 'edify' in the sense of 'to build something'. I would not say "I am going to 'edify' a house" – I would say "I am going to build a house."

There is a difference in the understanding or use of the term. The Greek word for, where here is translated 'edification' and later translated as 'edify', still retained an ambiguity in the word. Today the word 'edify' does not retain any ambiguity in the English language, it simply means 'to teach, or by teaching to instill character or moral principles or guidance', that's the idea of 'edify'. Whereas the Greek word could be used equally well of the building of a building and for example the word 'edify' does not retain that meaning in our language but it did retain it in the Greek. You would actually say, if we were going to say, to use 'edify' in exactly the same sense as the word here in the Greek translated 'edify', we would say to ourselves, I am going to 'edify' an 'edification'. Thereby saying I am going to build a building. The fact of the matter is the only translation that is really valid in the twentieth-first century English of the word, the Greek word here translated 'edification', is the word 'building'. For 'building' does retain the ambiguity that the Greek word did and still used in two ways where 'edification' is not used in two ways any longer. 'Building' is, we talk in terms of building character, we talk in terms of building a congregation, we think in terms of building people's moral standards or building relationships. We use 'building' that way, and at the same time we also use it for the structure that we may live in or work in. We say that "we will build a building", we say "we will build a relationship." So

'build' is a much better word for us to understand this with, now it is very important to understand this ambiguity, it was not lost on the Corinthians, but it tends to be lost on us.

First of all, "he that prophesies speaks to men to building, exhortation and encouragement {4} He that speaks in a tongue builds himself, but he that prophesies builds the church" (1 Cor. 14:3-4.)

The concept, and I think that the way that oftentimes is understood by people who believe in 'speaking in unknown tongues', is the idea that actually the person who 'speaks in tongues' is improving himself. They take the modern English usage of the word of self-edification or the building character in yourself or building a relation with God in the meaning of this, but the truth of the manner is that the structure, the way Paul uses the term and throws it off to building a church, says essentially that the persons who 'speaks in tongues' is 'self-oriented', he is building 'himself', but the person who 'prophesies' is building the church showing there is a negative side to the use of tongues as it was taking place in Corinth, and yet Paul is cautious, he is not ready to attribute this manifestation to the Devil, and I think we have to be very careful about saying things are satanic, or of the Devil or demonic in anyway at all, because of the possibility of a false accusation that you would be making.

Prophecy to Build the Church

"He that speaks in a tongue 'builds' himself, he that prophesies builds the church." {5} "I would that you all spoke with tongues, but rather that you prophesied" (1 Cor. 14:4-5.) Now that's fascinating, if Paul had a choice at this point in time, he is telling them he would far rather that they have the gift of preaching rather than the gift of tongues. Of course you find tongues always listed very low in the gifts of the Holy Spirit and yet for some reason, probably the most exciting, I guess the reasons are very obvious for it, it is the most exciting, the most thrilling, the most sought after gift of people who are looking for gifts is the gift of tongues, because it is a public manifestation, it is an open manifestation, like having the very validation of God on your being and your spirit. I can't think of anything better to give a person his own internal uplift, but Paul is not that sure. He said that he would prefer that we all be able to preach, to persuade, to speak with inspiration, rather than to 'speak in tongues'.

For greater is he that prophesies than he that speaks with tongues with one exception, if he is able to interpret so that the church may receive 'building'. Fascinating isn't it? Paul here says how he understands the purpose of tongues. Paul feels that tongues is nowhere near as important as prophesying, he relegates it to a very low position, in the spiritual gifts of the church. He says that it has one purpose that renders it on the level of prophesying and that is if it is interpreted so that the people who are listening can be 'built'. For the truth is, he says, nothing happens to this congregation, if I stand up here and I speak to you in French, or if I speak to you in German, or if I speak with the tongues of angels, nothing happens to you! That's Paul's point, and it is an important one, his conclusion is that the way tongues are being used in Corinth, is purely for the 'building' of the self, and he seems to be implying that that's not the way that God's Spirit works.

"Now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine?" (1 Cor 14:6.)

Why, he said, if I come to you and speak to you, what's the point? Unless we are engaging in human communication. Paul understood, his whole attitude, his approach to tongues was that of Acts 2, his experience with tongues up to this point was with the second chapter of Acts type of 'speaking in tongues', with the true Pentecostal speaking in tongues, where he was able to go into a place, where he had not learned the language and speak in the language of those people.

He did 'speak with tongues' but he understood the purpose of tongues was to communicate with people, not merely to aggrandize himself, or to make his self-feel better in some way.

Pipe or Harp

"Even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, unless there is a distinction of the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped?" (1 Cor 14:7.)

Now any man who has been in the military for any period of time have probably, in most cases, learned the difference between 'mess call' and 'officers call' as far as bugles are concerned, of course now-a-days with our squawk boxes, in the twenty-first century, they not only give you the bugle, they then get on the box and tell you what it is all about, so most of us were pretty safe as far as getting lost, all of us knew the difference between 'taps' and 'reveille', that's really simple to figure out.

What is Paul saying? He is saying, look, even things without life, we have life, we are human beings, so when we stand up to make a sound, sounds should have some meaning because even with a pipe, or a trumpet or a harp, there is a distinction in the sounds. If I stand up here and blow a series of notes that are the same and spaced the same, just a series, straight down, or if I blow a long blast on the trumpet, I can only convey by a long blast on the trumpet one thing, we would have had to agree about it before hand, I will have to tell you that a long blast on the trumpet means, that the enemy is on the horizon, and so if I want to try to tell you something else, if I want to tell you that if he is on the right flank or I want to tell you I just got a message from somebody that he is behind us, I can't do that, because I can't blow the trumpet for that way.

If I tell you that to blow the trumpet means to assemble, then if somebody comes and I want to tell everybody to run for the hills, I have no way to do that if I blow the trumpet, all they will do is come in. I can't tell them to go out, so, we have to agree, we have to have something that is understood that if we blow the trumpet this way, it means this, if we blow it the other way it means that, if we have this combination of long and short, high and low notes it would convey some other meaning, I can call them in for chow, I can call the officers in, I can call a general assembly, I can sound charge, I can sound retreat, I can do anything I want to do, I can have a whole spectrum of little tunes that I could play, all of which would convey meaning, to the people who hear me.

Paul's trying desperately to find some way of getting across to his listeners that the whole point of standing up and speaking in church is to convey meaning. It is as simple as that, and yet for some reason, it gets lost somewhere along the way.

"For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (1 Cor 14:8.)

If some guy stands up and plays what is supposed to be 'charge' and it comes out as some garbled thing that you can't recognize, people would start milling around wondering what do we do next?

Speak into the Air

"So likewise, you, unless you utter by the tongue words significant" not just 'easy', the margin says 'significant' is "to be understood, "how shall it be known what is spoken? You shall speak into the air" (1 Cor 14:9.)

Now we are getting down to understanding what Paul is saying. Is he trying to say that the purpose of tongues is to speak to God? NO, NO, what he is saying is, in your congregation, God is the only person who could possibly understand what these people are saying, it is a polite way of saying; "God only knows."

Does that mean that God really does know? No, what he is trying to say is that no human being can understand what is going on, the only person who could is God, and yet what he really means to say about all of this is, unless you are talking to these people, in words that they can understand, you are speaking into the air. For example, if I were to stand here with my very limited ability to speak French, and speak a little bit, assuming that I could make myself clear in French, how many of you would understand what I would say? So, I could even be uttering words significant to be understood and perhaps, only one person might be able to struggle through and understand part of what I say in French, because the audience doesn't understand, what I would be speaking. I would be speaking into the air. Would God understand me? Oh, yes, He would understand me, as far as that part was going, but I can speak to God without words, I don't need French, to speak to Him, I would feel much more comfortable in English.

Paul says, "There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification" (1 Cor 14:10.) The word 'signification' means 'meaning', none of them is without 'significance' or the word 'significance' comes from the word 'sign' or a sign which is a type of thing that we use to convey meaning from one person to another. It may be 'signing' for example, for a deaf person, which would mean something totally different from what it means to you. 'Signing' then means that a particular series of the movements of the hand conveys words, letters of the alphabet, or numbers so that they can communicate and sometimes quite rapidly, with the use of their hands, but even that, has 'signification', has signs to convey meaning.

"Therefore, if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaks a barbarian, and he that speaks shall be a barbarian to me." (1 Cor 14:11.)

Now let's pause just a moment and stick ourselves back again into the first century to the apostle Paul, writing this letter from some place away from Corinth, back to those people there, trying to deal with a problem that took place since he left, a manifestation of 'speaking in tongues', where the people who were sitting out there do not understand what someone is doing when they stand up in the congregation and speak. No one there, not one person there, understood a word that that person was saying.

Paul is trying to explain desperately that the purpose of speaking is to communicate, that is the whole point, and what was wrong with the 'speaking in tongues' in Corinth is that it was not communicating.

Now for all we know, the people may have been speaking Swahili. They may have been speaking a real language, of real people that weren't there, for all we know it may have been nothing more than a glossolalia, an ecstatic utterance, a series of syllables that no human being who has ever lived would understand. We don't really know what the person was doing and in a lot of ways it doesn't make any difference, because of what Paul is saying, that in the church, as far as our relationship with one another is concerned, we are to speak with understanding.

Different Ways to Look at it

Paul said "Even so you, forasmuch as you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that you may excel to the building of the church {13} So let him that speak in a tongue, pray that he may interpret. {14} For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful" (1 Cor 14:12-14.)

It is not at all clear to me what Paul means by that. I can look at it two or three ways. One way is that often times if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but I don't understand what I am saying. Is that what Paul means? It seems strange, why on earth would God want to enable you to pray to Him in a way that you did not understand? What is the purpose? What is the object? I would be a little spooky about the idea of my communicating something to God and I did not know what is coming out of my mouth.

Where is the thought originating that is coming out of my mouth? If it is not originating in my mind and I don't understand what it is all about, that makes me very nervous about that idea. Why would God need to do anything like that? What is the purpose of such a thing taking place along that line? It is difficult to fathom a purpose, and none is explained here.

There is another way of understanding verse 14: He says: "If I Pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my understanding does not bear fruit." What did he mean by that? It means that I understand something, and I speak in an unknown tongue but there are no results. Why? Because no one understands it, and I think that is what Paul is saying. He says: "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit, my mind is praying", if his spirit is praying, that is what he means, my mind, my innermost being is praying, but my understanding, in other words, it isn't because he doesn't understand, he does understand, my understanding is unfruitful, it does not bear any fruit in your mind.

Object of Speaking

One of the objects in speaking is to take an idea in my mind, placed there by God or reasoned there by me, or thought up by me and to convey to you and plant it in your mind, so then that you can evaluate it, test it against the Scriptures and arrive at certain decisions. But if I pray before you, in a language that you don't understand, my mind, my heart, my spirit is praying, but my understanding is not bearing any fruit with you.

"What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also" (1 Cor 14:15.)

Understanding by who? By himself or by you? You see what he is talking about here is not private worship but the collective worship of the church. "I will pray with my mind, but I will also pray to be understood. I will sing with my heart and my spirit, but I will also sing being understood." What is it then? Here is the explanation that comes through: "Else when you bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupies the room of the unlearned say Amen at your giving of thanks, seeing he does not understand what thou say?" (1 Cor 14:16.)

Now that verse explains as clear as possible what Paul means by the preceding verses. He is not talking about some sort of gibberish coming out of his mouth that he does not understand, he is talking about the fact that he is praying, he is singing, but that you don't understand, so that consequently for me to stand here at a dinner table, and I am quite capable of speaking in English, and to pray over the food and give thanks in French, and at the end I say 'amen', and you say 'amen'. How can you say 'amen'? 'Amen' means 'verily' or 'so be it'. How can you join yourself to that prayer when you don't have the faintest idea of what I said? You might do so because you had confidence that I would not say anything wrong, but your 'amen' before God means nothing, for as I spoke, you understood nothing, and so 'amen' means 'amen' to whatever I said.

Paul is talking about a situation and it seems a little hard for us to understand because we weren't in Corinth. We weren't there, we had not seen the manifestation, I think the verses would be quite clear to the people that were there.

"Verily" Paul says "For you give thanks well, but the other person is not built" (1 Cor 14:17.)

Notice that the prayer is a specific meaningful prayer of giving thanks, not something that even the giver of the prayer does not understand. You verily give thanks well but the other person is not built up, "I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than you all: {19} But in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding." What does he mean? I had rather speak five words being understood "than ten thousand words in an tongue" {20} "Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be your children, but in understanding be men. {21} In the law," now we are coming to that segment having to do with the question of tongues for a sign for unbelievers, "In the law, it is written, with men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, says the Lord. {22} Wherefore tongues are for a sign, but to them that believe not." Now how are we to understand what Paul is saying here? What does he mean? Are tongues given as a gift to the church as a miraculous outward sign as a proof of God's Holy Spirit in the church? Is that the point that Paul is making?

In the Law it is Written

Remember, we got down a few verses later and that concept fell apart on us, and that Paul even seemed to be contradicting himself, right there. The particular scripture says: "In the law it is written". Where in the Law? You could look in the Pentateuch in vain to find it, because that particular reference is found in Isaiah 28.

I want you to turn back there with me, so we can understand specifically what Paul is saying. The marginal reference you have may say Isaiah 28:11-12 but we need to go to verse 9 to the context of what it is that Paul is citing to his readers in Corinth.

"Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk and drawn from the breasts. {10} For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: {11} For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people" (Isa 28:9-11.) Now there is our scripture that is being quoted. Why is he doing this? "To whom he said, this is the rest wherewith you may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing; yet they would not hear" (Isa 28:12.)

What is God (through Isaiah) talking about?

He is talking about the Israelites whom he brought out of Egypt into the wilderness, whom He was leading in the way into the promised land for their symbolic rest, and they would not listen to Him because they didn't believe, because of their unbelief, because of their lack of faith, He spoke to them in another tongue and with stammering lips, and in a strange way that they would not understand, that's what the point is!

"For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people" (Isa 28:11.) Why? "To whom he said, this is the rest wherewith you may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear

{13} But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little." Why? "That they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken."

Parables and Riddles

God spoke to these people with other languages to keep the truth from them! Now that is a profound concept. I will never forget the first time that someone pointed out to me the reason Jesus spoke in parables, because I had been taught in Sunday School, I had grown up believing that parables were like illustrations or analogies that you use when speaking with people, and all trained public speakers use them all the time, we will say, now for example, or let me give you an illustration, or let me draw an analogy, and we begin to explain by a story of something in nature that we can use as an illustration, and it is logical to assume, that that is what Jesus was doing, but the disciples having heard Him speak to them in parables, knowing what the meaning of a parable is, by the way which is almost like a riddle. The word 'parable' is really far closer in its meaning to a riddle than it is to an illustration, that is lost on many people, but the fact of the

manner is, He said to them, and there would be no reason for them to come to Him afterward and say why are you speaking to these people in illustrations and analogies, because the use of illustrations and analogies is obvious. Jesus' disciples came to Him and said "Lord, why are you speaking to them in parables? (Matthew 13:10-11.) Jesus said: "It is because it is given to you to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, but to them it is not given." That shot me right out of the saddle the first time I saw that and realized what it meant, that there were certain people to whom God would not reveal His truth, that He intended for some people to see and He intended for some people not to see. For some reason up to that point in my life I believed it was God's intent for all men to see! I didn't understand that once God encountered rebellion in a people, He blinded them and concluded them in a state of unbelief so that at a later time He might have mercy on them, for as if He would have spoken to them plainly, and continually, they would have rebelled anyway and would lose any chance for salvation they would ever have had.

It is God's mercy that causes Him to back off and speak with stammering lips and another tongue to a people who are hard hearted and will not believe.

Now back to 1 Corinthians 14:21 "In the law it is written, with men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that they not hear me, says the Lord. {22} Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying is not for them that believe not, but for them which believe."

Do you realize what he is saying? He is saying to those people who have hardened their hearts and won't believe, He said that I am going to speak to them in tongues, tongues are more or less a sign against, not believers, but unbelievers, the hard hearted and rebellious.

Now if that is what it means, we may find this makes sense as we go along, on the other hand 'prophesying' is not for those who are not willing to believe. Prophesying and preaching is not for the hardened non-believer, it is for the believer.

"If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers" (1 Cor 14:23.)

In this sense I don't think Paul necessarily means hard hearted unbelievers, he means those who just don't believe, or are unlearned, unaware, and not knowledgeable about these things.

Is the Preacher Reading Your Mail?

"Will they not say that you are mad? {24} But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: {25} And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest." How? How many times in a sermon have you suddenly felt that it was almost like the preacher had been reading your mail? How many times have you said, boy, he really stepped on my toes today, or how many times have you said, he has stopped preaching and gone to meddling now. Whenever suddenly the preacher got right down to the secrets of your heart and secrets that he obviously doesn't know, but secrets that God does. Of course, one reason that preachers can get down into the secrets in your heart is because they are

preaching to themselves and they are just like you are, that's why sometimes it clicks, and you feel like the preacher has been reading your mail.

Tongues is for the Stubborn Believer

"And so, falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth."
(Verse 25.)

I think that makes a lot of sense when you understand what Paul is saying, he is not saying that tongues are a miracle to convince the unbeliever, he said the only way a non-believer can be reached at all is by the clear statement of the truth, the convicting of sins, the laying bare of the innermost secrets of his heart before his own eyes so that he can see them.

You are not going to reach an unbeliever with some sort of manifestation of people up there in church speaking a language that he has never heard before!

Tongues, historically as far as God's use of it in His work, the manifestation of unknown tongues is for the stubborn unbeliever, not for the believer, not for the church, not for those people who need to be edified and built or strengthened in the faith of God.

It's kind of funny sometimes how you can begin to misunderstand things or read things into things that are not intended to be there.

"How is it then, brethren? when you come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto building" (1 Cor 14:26.)

Paul doesn't exactly say it this way but the obverse (or opposite) of that is the idea of doing things for self-aggrandizement. Paul wrote to the Philippians and he said: "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves" (Phil 2:3.)

Are You Argumentative?

I am afraid that there are some of us that are that way. We just tend to be argumentative people, we tend to like an argument, we like to play the Devil's advocate, sometimes we will just take the other side of an argument regardless of how we feel about it, because it is fun.

Let's not do that in the church, let's not do things for strife, or vain glory. He wrote to the Corinthians: "Let all things be done unto building. {27} If any man speaks in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. {28} But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God" (1 Cor 14:26-28.)

If he speaks to himself then I presume that he understands, of course, if he is speaking in a language, Paul assumes it is a language in which God will understand.

Now this is fascinating, because a little later Paul says: "do not forbid to speak in tongues", but he has just forbidden them to speak in tongues in the church for any purpose other than for human communication, hasn't he? Don't speak in tongues in church unless there is an interpreter and it can be done for the building of the church.

The Spirits of the Prophets are Subject to the Prophets

"Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge. {30} If anything be revealed to another that sits by, let the first hold his peace. {31} For you may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be encouraged. {32} And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Cor 14:29-32) That is a very important statement.

If I am speaking in a language in prayer to God, I, myself do not understand, is then the spirit of this prophet subject to this prophet? Is that spirit subject to me? Not if I don't understand it, it's not. The spirit of the prophets, he says, is subject to the prophets, that means that there should be nothing going out of my mouth that is not under control of my mind. This is important. God's Spirit does not possess. Satan possesses. Demons possess. God does not possess human beings. The spirits of the prophets, even when they fall under the influence of the Spirit of God, those spirits are still subject to the prophets.

What is Paul saying? When he says that the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, he is saying, what happens in church is, that somebody up here is speaking and while he is speaking and making a very important point somebody pops up and begins to speak in another language, and somebody rebukes him later and he says, "I am sorry brother, but the Holy Spirit made me speak and I couldn't control myself and I had to speak". Paul says nonsense; you could control yourself, because the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

Let's speak one at a time and that all things in the church are done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40.)

Paul may not have been there, but the power of his influence and his authority come through in writing to these people. Like I said, he doesn't just stop them from speaking in tongues, but for all practical purposes he does.

There is no reason to do it unless somebody interprets to the church. If you think about this a little further, if I can't interpret it to you, what's the point of my saying it in French and interpreting it in English or what is the point of saying it into the tongues of angels and interpreting it in English? Why don't I just say it in English in the first place.

I think what you are dealing with in some cases is people who did not speak a language of the Corinthians, didn't speak Greek at all, they were present there. Corinth was a commercial hub and you had people from all over the known world there. I think you had people who were unable to speak to that church in a language that they could understand and tried to speak in languages that were unknown to the church, and he said they were not to speak unless there was an interpreter so that the church could be edified.

Studies on Interpreters

It is rather fascinating, these people who did a study on 'speaking in tongues' tried to do a study on interpreters and they recorded from a number of people who spoke in tongues and they took them to a number of people who claimed to have the gift of interpretation and played the same recordings for the different groups of people. They never got any correlation on the interpretations of the tongues. When it was pointed out to the people who did the interpretations, they weren't offended by it, they said, well the Lord revealed this interpretation to me and revealed another interpretation to him, which means that the original message meant nothing. It was the interpretation that was important, so why not give the interpretation in the first place. If God has something He wants to say to you, why doesn't He reveal His message in a language that all of us would understand. There is no reason not to.

"For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. {34} Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also the law says. {35} And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. {36} What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? {37} If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor 14:33-37.)

I would have to conclude that anyone who speaks in tongues in a church service without an interpreter, when he could speak to the people in their original language in the first place, is in conflict with the commandments of the Lord, isn't he?

"But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. {39} Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy," desire earnestly, he said to prophesy, "and forbid not to speak with tongues" (1 Cor 14:38-39.)

Paul did not want to get into the category of trying to attribute what might be a gift of God to Satan the Devil, he didn't know, but that God may have given the guy a gift of some language down in Egypt that he had never heard or some dialect that he had never heard before. He didn't want to be in a situation where someone tried to muzzle the poor guy, but the one thing he did forbid was for him to speak in the Corinthian Church without somebody to interpret into a language of which that church understood! While Paul didn't forbid to speak in tongues, he got almost there, he nearly did, for all practical purposes.

"Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40.)

It's fairly obvious to me that what was happening in Corinth was wrong, there was a misuse of something that may have been a spiritual gift, we are not sure if it was a spiritual gift or if it was merely a human manifestation, there is no way to know at this point.

Paul was apparently convinced that it was not something that was Satanic or demonic, because he did not deal with it that way and he said don't forbid to 'speak in tongues'.

Paul is concerned, if again it is the abuse of a spiritual gift, it was something that was going on that is not a manifestation of what he had come to understand as ‘speaking in tongues’, it was not a manifestation of what had taken place on that first day of Pentecost on the church when the tongues were poured out from on high because men who were standing by understood the things that they were saying.

As I said, I am rather convinced that Paul is dealing with a manifestation that came on that church, a phenomenon that happened after he had left, that while he had a full description of what had happened he did not fully understand what had happened. He knew that some of the things that were going on were in contradiction to reason, in contradiction to the Scriptures, in contradiction of good order, in contradiction of decency and decorum in church services and so he writes to these people to try to straighten them out.

What Gift Should You Pray For?

I think that we can understand, if you were going to pray today and ask God to make manifestations of spiritual gifts to God’s Church, when you think about the needs that the church has for spiritual gifts, when you think about all of the things that could exist in this church, such as the number of people that could be healed, the mysteries that need to be revealed, the depth of understanding of the gospel so that we could preach it more effectively, of the ability to prophesy, when you think of all the things that you need, what on earth does this church need with the gift of tongues? It seems that, one of the first things when people begin to pursue spiritual gifts do is to seek the gift of tongues.

Now we started in the middle of things with 1 Corinthians 14 because there were two chapters that went before this that dealt with spiritual gifts. The center chapter, the center piece of this whole thing is the thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians and we are familiar with it as the ‘Love Chapter’, and we can quote segments of it by heart.

If you take chapter 12 and read through to the end of chapter 14 with the awareness of what I have gone through with you, you will become aware clearly of one thing, that if you were going to get on your knees before God and agonize with Him in prayer, if you were going into a period of time of fasting and really seeking God, if you are going to reach out for a spiritual gift from God, to be poured out upon His Church, which spiritual gift should you seek first? I think you can figure it out!

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the gift of tongues is?
2. Have you ever encountered someone who supposedly spoke in 'tongues'?
3. If you have, was there anyone that understood what they were saying?
4. Did you know that 'tongue speaking' is not a Christian only phenomenon?
5. Have you ever considered that prophecy is second to the gift of love?
6. Some ministers believe that some of the gifts of the Spirit do not manifest themselves today, like prophecy (as in foretelling), healings, miracle working, tongues, basically the miraculous gifts, what do you think?
7. What is the primary purpose of the gifts of the Spirit?
8. What are your thoughts about what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:12-14 - *Even so you, forasmuch as you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that you may excel to the building of the church {13} So let him that speak in a tongue, pray that he may interpret. {14} For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. -?*
9. Do you agree with Mr. Dart's conclusion that speaking in tongues is "more or less a sign against, not believers, but unbelievers," thus fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah chapter 28?
10. We all know that the most important gift is love, and we definitely should be praying for God's outpouring of this gift among His people. So, other than the gift of love, which gift would you like second? Why?