

## CHAPTER 9

### THE PURPOSE OF TONGUES IN THE ASSEMBLY

#### *1 Corinthians 14:21-26*

What were tongues for? What was the purpose of this gift? The one place in the New Testament which clearly sets forth the purpose of the gift of tongues is 1 Corinthians 14:22: “Wherefore, *tongues are for* a sign. . . .” The preposition translated “for” (*eis*) here denotes *purpose*. The verse is introduced by the particle “wherefore” (*hōste*), which means “for this reason, therefore.”<sup>16</sup> Paul’s explanation in verse 22 concerning the purpose of tongues is actually an inference based upon his words in verse 21. Therefore, the key to understanding the purpose of tongues must be found in 1 Corinthians 14:21. Verse 21 begins with these important words, “In the law it is written. . . .”

In verse 21 Paul cited an Old Testament passage, Isaiah 28:11-12. Paul knew that the *key* to understanding the Biblical purpose of tongues is found “in the law,” that is, *in the Old Testament Scriptures*. What does

the Old Testament teach concerning tongues? What was the significance and purpose of tongues in Old Testament times? When foreign tongues were spoken, what did this mean? The key which will unlock the purpose and significance of the gift of tongues is found "in the law."

Isaiah 28 is not the only passage in the Old Testament which deals with the significance of foreign tongues. Several such passages together set forth a very sobering Biblical principle—a principle which has been demonstrated repeatedly in history. To discover the significance of tongues in the Old Testament, the following important passages must be considered: Genesis 11, Deuteronomy 28, Jeremiah 5, Isaiah 28 (cited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:21), and Isaiah 33.

As these passages are examined in detail, the reader is encouraged to discover a pattern and sequence which is repeated again and again. This tragic pattern can be simply summarized as follows:

*God has a message for the people.*

*The people refuse to listen to God.*

*God causes tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment.*

*Dispersion follows.*

### *GENESIS 11*

In this important chapter describing the judgment upon Babel, *tongues* are mentioned for the very first time. Prior to Genesis 11 tongues (plural) did not exist!

There was only one tongue throughout the inhabited earth: “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech” (Genesis 11:1). Foreign tongues made their first historical appearance in Genesis 11.

*God has a message for the people.* Following the great Genesis flood, God gave this simple command to Noah and his sons: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1; cf. Genesis 9:7). How would the descendants of Noah respond to this divine command?

*The people refuse to listen to God.* Instead of filling the earth as God had said, the people refused to obey. In their opposition to God’s Word and God’s will, they decided to build a huge tower and make a name for themselves, “Lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4).

*God causes tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment.* For the first time in history foreign tongues were spoken: “Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Genesis 11:7). God’s judgment fell upon a disobedient and godless people.

*Dispersion followed.* “So the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:8).

## DEUTERONOMY 28

The Lord communicated His will to the nation Israel by giving the people His holy law. God set before

them a blessing and a curse: a blessing if they would obey the commandments of the Lord, and a curse if they would disobey (Deuteronomy 11:26-28). The blessings and the curses that would come upon the nation are clearly enumerated in Deuteronomy 28.

*God has a message for the people.*

And it shall come to pass if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all His commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth; And *all these blessings* shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God" (Deuteronomy 28:1).

*The people refuse to listen to God.*

But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command thee this day; that *all these curses* shall come upon thee, and overtake thee (Deuteronomy 28:15).

*God causes tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment.* One of the curses which the Lord promised to bring upon His disobedient people was the terrible invasion of a conquering nation. As the foreigners would approach, Israel would hear the strange tongues of the enemy:

The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; *a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand* (Deuteronomy 28:49).

*Dispersion follows.*

*And the Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the LORD shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind* (Deuteronomy 28:64-65).

### JEREMIAH 5

*God has a message for the people.* Through the Prophet Jeremiah, the Lord pleaded with His people Israel that they might turn from their evil ways and return to the Lord their God: “If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the LORD, *return unto Me*” (Jeremiah 4:1; cf. Matthew 11:28). God would have done so much if they had simply turned to Him (Psalm 81:8-16)!

*The people refuse to listen to God.*

O LORD, are not Thine eyes upon the truth? Thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; Thou hast

consumed them, but *they have refused to receive correction*: they have made their faces harder than a rock; *they have refused to return* (Jeremiah 5:3).

*God causes tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment.* When a people refuse to come to God, judgment must inevitably follow. The forbearance and long-suffering of God must someday come to an end. If Israel would not respond to Jeremiah's warnings, then God would speak to the nation in a way they would never forget. Though they could not understand the strange tongues of their invaders, the message of their swords would be long remembered:

Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel, saith the LORD: it is a mighty nation, it is an ancient nation, *a nation whose language thou knowest not, neither understandest what they say* (Jeremiah 5:15).

*Dispersion follows.*

And it shall come to pass, when ye shall say, Wherefore doeth the LORD our God all these things unto us? then shalt thou answer them, Like as ye have forsaken Me, and served strange gods in your land, *so shall ye serve strangers in a land that is not yours* (Jeremiah 5:19).

For Israel, to be in the promised land was a sign of God's blessing. To be out of the land, scattered and persecuted, was a sure indication that they were under God's curse.

*ISAIAH 28*

In his important discussion concerning the purpose of the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 14:21-22), the Apostle Paul cites Isaiah 28:11-12 as evidence that tongues was given as a sign “to them that believe not.” A proper understanding of this important Old Testament passage is crucial in determining the Biblical purpose of tongues.

In Isaiah 28:9-10 ungodly Jews were apparently mocking the message of God’s prophet, Isaiah. They were expressing their indignation at Isaiah’s infantile teaching methods! They questioned, “Does he take us grave and revered seigniors, priests, and prophets, to be babies just weaned, that he pesters us with these monotonous petty preachings, fit only for the nursery, which he calls his ‘message?’”<sup>17</sup>

Isaiah’s message was clear and simple and even monotonous! Line upon line, line upon line. . . . Sin brings judgment, sin brings judgment. . . . Turn to God, turn to God. . . . Isaiah used the Chinese water-torture technique of teaching: drop, drop, drop . . . sin, sin, sin . . . judgment, judgment, judgment . . . repent, repent, repent. . . . So it is not a surprise that his hearers began to say, “Who do you think we are, Isaiah? Babies? To whom do you think you are lecturing? Your repetitious preaching is fit for infants: “*Sav lasav sav lasav, kav lakav kav lakav, ze’er sham ze’er sham*” (see NASV marginal note). These unbelieving Jews rejected God’s message, they rejected God’s messenger, and they re-

jected God's messenger's teaching methods.

The Lord responded to their unbelieving scoffing by imitating their mockery and setting forth the unintelligible language of a foreign conqueror (verse 11). God first spoke to them through Isaiah's clear and simple message. Now He will speak in *judgment* to them through a foreign tongue. He will speak to them with stammering lips and *another* (different, strange, foreign) tongue (cf. Acts 2:4 and 1 Corinthians 14:21—"other tongues").

These people closed their ears and refused the proclamation of a heavenly message. God then became, as it were, a barbarian to these people. The Assyrian tongue, which soon surrounded the Israelites, must have sounded to them like the lisping of children. It was a much less cultivated language than Hebrew, and had only the three basic vowels: a, i, and u. Because they would not hear words of comfort in their own language, they had to hear the enemy's harsh sounds.<sup>18</sup>

God graciously would have given the people the *rest* that is found in Himself (cf. Matthew 11:28; Isaiah 30:15-17; Psalm 81:8-16), but they refused to listen. God's wonderful promise of comfort and rest was tragically rejected. The Israelites were sick and tired of Isaiah's repetitive assertions that sin was rampant, judgment was coming, and a return to God was the only answer.

Finally, in verses 11-13 Isaiah tells these mockers that God will indeed speak to this people. This time His message will not come through Isaiah, but through a foreign tongue. When the enemy would enter their

borders, killing many, and taking others captive, they would begin to get the message! Once again the terrible pattern is repeated:

*God has a message for the people.*

To whom He said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing (Isaiah 28:12).

*The people refuse to listen to God.*

Yet they would not hear (Isaiah 28:12).

*God causes tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment.*

For with stammering lips and another tongue will He speak to this people (Isaiah 28:11).

*Dispersion follows.*

That they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and *snared, and taken* (Isaiah 28:13).

### *ISAIAH 33*

To the nation Israel, foreign tongues was a sign of God's judgment and curse upon them. Likewise, the *absence* of foreign tongues is a sign that the nation

is under the blessing of God.

In Isaiah 33:17 Israel is given a wonderful promise concerning the future millennial kingdom: "Thine eyes shall see the king in His beauty." Certainly, during the kingdom age, Israel will enjoy God's richest blessings! No longer will they be under God's curse. Never again will they be invaded by foreign nations. They will dwell safely and securely in the land of promise, protected by the King Himself. Thus, the absence of foreign tongues will be a sign of God's abundant blessing upon the nation:

You will no longer see a fierce people, a people of unintelligible speech which no one comprehends, of a stammering tongue which no one understands" (Isaiah 33:19 NASV).

### *THE PATTERN REPEATED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT*

Those who fail to learn from the lessons of history are bound to repeat its mistakes. The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities should have taught Israel a lesson. On the pages of the New Testament, however, the same disastrous pattern emerges.

*God has a message for the people.*

Come unto Me . . . and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28; cf. Jeremiah 4:1; Isaiah 28:12).

*The people refuse to listen to God.*

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and *ye would not* [you were not willing, you refused] (Matthew 23:37).

*God causes tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment.* The Lord Jesus predicted the terrible judgment that would come upon the nation which had refused God and rejected His Messiah:

Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. . . . Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down (Matthew 23:38; 24:2).

The destruction of Jerusalem took place in 70 A.D. as the city was invaded by the Roman armies, led by General Titus. For the next two thousand years the living God would not dwell in a temple made with hands, but He would dwell in a unique body of believers, and in each member in particular (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 1 Corinthians 6:19). God's program was shifting from Israel to the Church.

Years earlier God had caused foreign tongues to be spoken and heard as a judgmental sign to the nation Israel (Acts 2; 10; 19, etc.). For those Jews who were familiar with their Old Testament, the sounds of foreign

tongues gave no cause for rejoicing! Tongues were a sign of God's curse, not of God's blessing. Tongues signified a coming invasion, and conveyed an ominous message of rebellion, judgment, and dispersion. When God spoke in tongues, the Jews understood the message (Isaiah 28:11; 1 Corinthians 14:21). Tongues were a sign-gift, given to an unbelieving, Christ-rejecting nation:

“Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not” (1 Corinthians 14:22).

*Dispersion follows.* The nation Israel has been scattered throughout the world for nearly two thousand years! They have been out of the land, severely persecuted, and God's curse has been upon them: “*His blood be on us, and on our children*” (Matthew 27:25). Although a small remnant has returned to the land, the nation is still without a temple and there is no rest or peace in the land. The destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A.D. was something from which the nation of Israel has never recovered!

### *THE DURATION OF TONGUES*

When did tongues cease? If foreign tongues were really a *sign of coming judgment* upon the nation Israel, then once this judgment had come, the sign-gift would no longer be necessary. Any Jew who knew his Old Testament should have recognized foreign tongues as a solemn warning of coming judgment. Once the judg-

ment had come, the warning sign was no longer needed!

God graciously waited four decades following the crucifixion of His Son (Israel's rejected Messiah) before He brought final judgment upon the nation. But in 70 A.D. the Romans under General Titus brought the Christ-rejecting nation to its final ruin. Ever since A.D. 70 there has been no question that Israel as a nation is under the judgment of God. The Jews have been forced out of the land. They have been scattered and persecuted throughout the world. It is obvious that God is no longer working through His chosen *nation*. His program has now shifted and God's witnesses are among all *nations*. The Jews are *out of the land*, a definite sign that they are now under God's curse (cf. Deuteronomy 28).

In every nation where they have been scattered they constantly hear foreign tongues (Russian, German, English, etc.) as a continual reminder to them that they have refused the blessing and rest of God. Interestingly enough, not one book in the New Testament was written in the language of the Jews. Not only did God shift from Israel to the Church, but He also shifted from Hebrew to Greek as the language through which He would give His Word! God has not cast away His people Israel (Romans 11:1), but He has cast them aside for a time. The final and ultimate event which marked Israel's judgment was the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., an event that was predicted by our Lord forty years before (Matthew 23:38; 24:2).

Therefore, it must be concluded that tongues as a

*sign-gift* were no longer needed after 70 A.D. *Tongues must have ceased on or before 70 A.D.* The last historical mention of the gift of tongues is in 1 Corinthians which was written about 55 A.D. There is no evidence historically that the genuine gift of tongues ever occurred after 70 A.D. Tongues served their purpose, and *tongues ceased*, even as God had predicted through the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 13:8).

Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe (1 Corinthians 14:22).

As previously noted, tongues were a *sign* for the unbelieving, rebellious, Christ-rejecting nation of Israel. The *believers* in the Corinthian assembly needed to understand the purpose of tongues, but much more they needed to avail themselves of the gift of prophecy, which is valuable towards edification and exhortation and comfort (verse 3). Not only is prophecy of value for believers, but prophecy is also of value for potential believers (those visiting the assembly), as Paul explains in verses 23-25.

It is important to realize that the unbelievers mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 are very different than the unbelievers mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:23-24, even though the same Greek word is used (*apistos*). In verses 21-22 Paul describes rebellious and disobedient unbelievers, who heard God's message but then refused

it and even rejected the God who gave it. These were unbelievers who would not hear God (1 Corinthians 14:21). They stubbornly refused God's gracious offer of rest (Isaiah 28:12). These were unbelievers who belonged to "this people" (1 Corinthians 14:21; Isaiah 28:11), which in the context of the Isaiah passage can refer only to the people of Israel, the Jews. Tongues were a foreboding sign of coming judgment for an unbelieving nation who would not listen to their God.

But the unbelievers described in 1 Corinthians 14:23-24 are in marked contrast to the rebellious, God-rejecting Jews just mentioned. These were unbelievers who had come into the assembly. Paul was most likely thinking of unbelieving Gentiles who decided they would visit the Corinthian church and see what was going on there. They were willing to come and to listen to whatever the church had to offer. Apparently these unbelievers were seekers. In fact, they were *potential believers!* Paul knew that the one thing potential believers need more than anything else is prophecy, not tongues.

The Bible teaches, in 1 Corinthians 14:22, that tongues served as a judgmental sign to the nation Israel.<sup>19</sup> Does this mean that wherever tongues were spoken, there had to be unbelieving Jews present? Such a position is very problematic. Why would a rebellious, Christ-rejecting Jew be present at a church service in Corinth? Assembling with Christians would be the last thing he would want to do. Also, there were no unbelieving Jews present in Acts 10 or Acts 19, when the tongues-speaking occurred. The Bible never says that unbelieving

Jews must be present whenever tongues are spoken, and Paul did not include this in his list of regulations in 1 Corinthians 14:27-35.

But then could tongues serve as a sign to the Jews? It should be understood that the unbelieving Jews in the Roman empire knew about the Christian church. They were conscious of the Christian community in their midst. The Christians were the talk of the synagogue! Indeed, the Jews were very much aware of the fact that some of these Christians had the amazing ability to speak in foreign languages—languages that they had never learned. They had at least heard of this amazing phenomenon.

How can it be said that the unbelieving Jews were aware of the gift of tongues? It is important to think back to the day in which the Church first began and tongues were first heard. On the day of Pentecost there were assembled Jews “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5-6). These Jews all witnessed the gift of tongues in operation. Many of them believed the gospel as Peter preached it, but many did not (compare the “mockers” of Acts 2:13). As these Jews returned to their homes they must have told their kinsmen about the remarkable things which they saw and heard. One can almost imagine such a conversation:

“Have you heard what went on at Jerusalem? The followers of Jesus of Nazareth were claiming that their leader had come back from the dead. On the day of Pentecost the most amazing thing happened! They spoke in foreign languages. It was remarkable! The men who

spoke in these tongues were Galileans!”

Many years go by and then: “Do you remember when you told me about that tongues-speaking in Jerusalem? Well, certain Christians have started meeting in our city and I have heard a report that some of them speak in foreign languages also!”

It is not necessary to be present in a church to know what takes place there. Reports go out and word gets around! In the days of the early Church people were aware, at least to some degree, of what was taking place in the Christian assemblies. The same was true in Old Testament times. When the Assyrians or Babylonians came to invade the land, the news was spread quickly. The Jews did not need to see their enemies and hear them speak to know that they were coming!

In 1 Corinthians 14:22, the Greek article precedes the word “tongues” in verse 22 and is very significant. It is an article of previous reference (pointing back to what has just been mentioned).

“Wherefore *the* tongues are for a sign.”

“What tongues are you talking about, Paul?”

“The tongues I just finished talking about in verse 21, namely foreign tongues.”

Thus if the tongues in verse 21 are foreign languages (Isaiah 28), then the tongues in verse 22 (the Corinthian tongues) must be the same thing.

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, will they not say

that ye are mad? 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: 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 (1 Corinthians 14:23-25).

In order for the Corinthian assembly to have an effective testimony before the lost, its members must manifest the life of Christ. The world needs to see a healthy, growing *organism* (not organization). The number one characteristic of an organism is that it possesses life. The local church is animated by the very life of God (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15—"the assembly of the *living God*"). The assembly is pulsating with God's life because it is indwelt by the living Christ (Colossians 1:27).

During our Lord's incarnate life and ministry here upon the earth, *God was manifested in the flesh!* But the great mystery that thrilled the heart of the Apostle Paul is that *today* God is incarnate in a body upon this earth (1 Timothy 3:15-16; Colossians 1:26-27). Christ now has a body on the earth, in addition to His resurrected body in Heaven.

The world cannot see Christ directly, because He is in Heaven, but it can see His body which is upon the earth—a living organism manifesting the heavenly, resurrected life of Christ! The Head is in Heaven, but the body is upon the earth, for the purpose of bearing witness to the Head! And there is only one way that

the world can see Christ today. It must see “*Christ in you!*” (Colossians 1:27) It must see Christ in the Church, because Christ is today manifesting Himself in a body, which is His Church, “the fulness of Him that filleth all in all” (Ephesians 1:23). How precious the assembly must be to the Lord!

According to Colossians 1:27-28, there is only one way that the living Christ can truly manifest Himself in and through the assembly. *Every* single member of the body must be warned, *every* single body member must be taught, and *every* single member of the body must be well fed! When the members are well fed, then the body is going to be healthy; when the body is healthy, then the life of Christ will be manifested, sinners will be convicted, and God will be glorified!

In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul describes the local Church as the house of God, indicating that the Most High God lives and dwells in the assembly. What a marvel—the indwelling presence of the living God in the Church! If the expression, “house of God” (*oikos theou*) were to be translated into Hebrew, the resultant word would be *Bethel* (*Beyt-el*). If one is ever going to understand the New Testament “Bethel” (1 Timothy 3:15), then he must first realize what Jacob discovered about the Old Testament Bethel in Genesis 28.

When Jacob awoke from his dream, he exclaimed, “Surely *the LORD is in this place*; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! *this is none other but the house of God*. . . . And he called the name of that place *Bethel*” (Genesis 28:16-19).

“The LORD is in this place” and Jacob did not even realize it! And those who belong to the New Testament Bethel often fail to realize this very thing. Paul wrote to the Corinthian “Bethel” and said, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16) God dwells in the assembly. The Church is the habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22).

Ephesians 4:11-16 makes it very clear that God's priority is a healthy organism. In 1 Corinthians 14 (especially verses 3,4,5,12,17) it has been noted that the body of believers must be edified and healthy. The world needs to see a healthy assembly, not a sick one!

What will happen when an unsaved person comes into an assembly that is functioning *contrary* to the principles of edification? The answer is found in 1 Corinthians 14:23. He will say, “This is a madhouse! These people are out of their minds!” But what a difference when he comes into an assembly that is functioning according to principles of edification (verses 24-25). Now he sees a healthy organism, and he sees Christ-like saints! So, falling down on his face he will worship God and say, “God is in these people. God is in this place. How dreadful is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is not a madhouse. This is the house of God! Bethel.”

Is this what unbelievers notice as they come into local churches today? Do they see a healthy organism? Do they see well-fed members? Do they see “Christ in you”? Are they convicted by the awesome Presence

and Person of God?

The greatest testimony before the world results when the local church functions as an “edificational center,” not as an “evangelistic center.” The greatest need today is for a lost world to see the Lord Jesus Christ manifesting Himself in and through a healthy assembly of believers. This cannot be produced by preaching “John 3:16” salvation sermons every Sunday. The saints need nothing less than a steady diet of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-32; Matthew 28:20; 2 Timothy 4:1-2; etc.).

How is it then, brethren? when ye 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 edifying (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Paul now gives the summarization of the last twenty-five verses. “*Let all things be done unto edifying.*” In contrast, the motto of many “soul-winning” churches today seems to be, “Let all things be done unto evangelism.” But the Apostle Paul realized that a lost and dying world needs to see Christlike believers who understand and practice God’s Word. When God’s people are fully equipped for the work of the ministry (Ephesian 4:11-16), they certainly will not be lax in gospel outreach, nor allow mission programs to suffer. When a church makes its priority that of edification, then true evangelism cannot help but be enhanced, as 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 illustrates so well.

Interestingly enough, the cults do not establish evangelistic centers. Rather they establish edificational centers to train their people to go out and do the work of the ministry. The people are immersed in a program of total indoctrination. The average Jehovah's Witness, for example, is ready always to give an answer to every man that asks him a reason of the false hope that is within him. The average Bible believer is horribly ignorant of God's truth. The devil knows what system really works! The cults do not lack for converts.