

## CHAPTER 8

### THE VALUE OF TONGUES IN THE ASSEMBLY

#### *1 Corinthians 14:1-20*

Follow after charity [love], and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy (1 Corinthian 14:1).

Continuing his movement of thought from the previous chapter, Paul sets forth a command: “Follow after [run after, pursue, chase, as a hunter would chase after prey or as a runner would run to the finish line to receive a prize] love.” The reason is obvious: “Love edifies [builds up]” (1 Corinthians 8:1). Love seeks to please his neighbor for his good to edification (Romans 15:2). Love seeks the highest and best for the person loved. And God seeks the highest and best for His assembly. Indeed the highest and best gift is that of prophecy (forthtelling and communicating God’s truth to God’s people). Prophecy excels in edificational value!

For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries (1 Corinthians 14:2).

The word “unknown” was added by the translators of the King James Version. The problem in the Corinthian assembly is that the tongue which is spoken is unknown to all who are present (just as the Russian tongue would be an unknown tongue to most Americans). The person speaking in a *tongue* (unknown foreign language) does not speak to men (because no one understands what is being said) but he speaks to God (because God understands all languages). No one *understands* (literally “hears”; see Deuteronomy 28:49 in the Septuagint) the tongues-speaker! He is speaking mysteries.

The term “mystery” in the New Testament refers to truth that was once concealed and hidden and unrevealed—truth that was not previously made known (see Ephesians 3:4-5,9; Colossians 1:26; Romans 16:25). This is in contrast to verse 6 where Paul discusses truth that is revealed and made known and communicated. Truth conveyed by tongues remains mysterious *until* it is interpreted (made known, revealed, and thus understood).

But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

The New Testament gift of prophecy is here defined by Paul. Prophecy involves God's message going forth in a clear and understandable way with the result that the saints are edified, exhorted, and comforted. This is what produces a healthy body of believers.

He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church (1 Corinthians 14:4).

Paul now explains why the tongues-speaking at Corinth was so problematic. Tongues did not edify the Church. The tongues-speaker may edify himself, but certainly no one else. But the entire assembly could *profit* from *prophecy*.

I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying (1 Corinthians 14:5).

Paul desired that all of the Corinthians might participate in the experience of speaking in tongues (although he knew that not all believers were so gifted—12:29-30), but much more he desired that they might exercise and enjoy the gift of prophecy. Paul did not forbid tongues, but he showed the Corinthians that prophecy was far superior to tongues on the edificational priority list. Prophecy is greater than tongues *unless* tongues are interpreted. If tongues are interpreted,

then they are of the same edificational value as prophecy. In other words, tongues are edifying to the Church *if* they are interpreted. Tongues, therefore, must have edificational content! But the doctrinal riches of tongues are unlocked only by interpretation, and only then can the Church be edified.

Prophecy = God's message understood (*edifying*)

Tongues = God's message not understood (*non-  
without interpretation edifying*)

Tongues = God's message understood (*edifying*)  
with interpretation

The KJV translation "except *he* interpret" is probably misleading. The verb is in the third person singular, and there are two possible ways of translating it:

1. unless *he* [the tongues-speaker] interpret (see KJV, RV, NASV).

This implies that the tongues-speaker would be his own interpreter. It was perhaps possible that the same person could have both the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation, but this was not necessarily the case.

2. unless *one* [someone other than the tongues-speaker] interpret (see RSV).

This is more likely, especially in view of verses 27-28. Verse 13 may also be translated, “that *one* may interpret.”

Now, brethren, if I come unto 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 Corinthians 14:6)

What profit is tongues, *unless* tongues are converted by interpretation into these four methods of communicating the mind and will of God:

*Revelation*—revealing and unfolding God’s precious truth.

*Knowledge*—making known the unsearchable riches of Christ.

*Prophecy*—telling forth God’s life-changing message.

*Doctrine*—teaching God’s holy Word of truth.

And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? (1 Corinthians 14:7)

Paul now gives two illustrations to show that *communication* is impossible apart from the recognition of *known sounds*.

Musical instruments, such as the pipe or harp (lyre), must make a recognizable *distinction* (difference) in the notes that are played. It is very easy to make

nonsense sounds on a musical instrument (even a cat walking across a piano can make plenty of sounds). But to play a tune that others can recognize takes some skill and effort. One cannot play just anything. There are distinct sounds that must be played in order to produce music that sounds good and is appreciated.

This is similar to the way a foreign tongue sounds. Nothing seems to make sense. Nothing seems to go together. The ear strains for sounds that are recognizable. It *seems* and *sounds* like nonsense!

For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? (1 Corinthians 14:8)

Here is Paul's second illustration—the language of trumpets. If the trumpet makes an *uncertain* (unclear, indistinct, vague) sound, then the soldier will not know whether he should charge or retreat. He will hear an unfamiliar sound coming from the trumpet and he will say, “What does that mean? I have never heard that before. Please interpret!”

So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air (1 Corinthians 14:9).

With these illustrations in mind Paul applies the principle to the Corinthians. You must utter *words* that are *easy to be understood* (intelligible, clear, easily recognizable). This implies that tongues were

*words* (not nonsense syllables) that were *not* easy to be understood. Words conveyed in a foreign tongue are not recognizable. “How can it be known what is spoken?” This implies that the gift of tongues was something that was spoken and something which had significance, but its significance could not be known *unless* the words were given in recognizable speech. If you fail to speak understandable words, then it is like speaking into the air. Your words are of no value. And the Church is not edified.

There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification (1 Corinthians 14:10).

“There are many *kinds* [*genē*—cf. *kinds of tongues*—1 Corinthians 12:10,28] of *voices* [*phōnōn*—*sounds*] in the world.” In fact, there are more than 3,000 languages on the earth!

Without doubt this verse is speaking of *foreign languages*. The word “voice” is commonly used in the sense of “language.” Genesis 11:1 in the Septuagint reads: “And all the earth was one lip, and there was one *language* [lit., voice] to all.” In other words, ever since Babel, there have been many kinds of voices in the world! Another example is Deuteronomy 28:49 (Septuagint): “The Lord shall bring upon thee a nation . . . whose *voice* [language] thou shalt not understand.” Also in 2 Peter 2:16 the dumb ass spoke in a human *language* that Balaam could understand! So it is

with justification that the NASV translates the verse as follows: "There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of *languages* in the world." And none of these languages are without signification. They all convey meaning to those who understand the language. The problem comes when a person does *not* understand the language!

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

The problem comes when a person does not know the meaning of the *voice* (language). This word translated "meaning" (lit., power, force) is used of the significance or force of what is spoken. For example, a man may preach a *powerful* and *forceful* message, but if one cannot understand his language, he will not feel the *impact* of what the preacher is saying, *unless* someone interprets.

A *barbarian* is a foreigner, one who speaks in a strange, unintelligible tongue.

If I do not know the meaning of the language [even though all languages have meaning—verse 10], I shall be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me" (verse 11 RSV).

Here is verse 11 restated in light of the point Paul was making: "If I do not know the meaning of the tongue, I shall be to the tongue-speaker a foreigner, and



the tongue-speaker shall be a foreigner to me”—there would be no communication and thus no edification!

Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret (1 Corinthians 14:12-13).

God’s priority is a healthy assembly, and the Corinthian believers are encouraged to seek that which will edify most of all. Thus, if the gift of tongues is exercised, there *must* be an interpreter! And the tongues-speaker should pray that “one might interpret” (see the previous discussion under verse 5). The *chief concern* of the tongues-speaker is that his message might be interpreted. Otherwise it is of no value to the assembly and he is merely speaking into the air!

For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful (1 Corinthians 14:14).

It is possible for a believer to pray in a tongue, but his *understanding* (mind) is unfruitful or fruitless. That is, he does not understand what he is praying. He prays with his spirit but not with his understanding (mind).

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 Corinthians 14:15).

God expects the believer to use his full mental faculties in worship—to worship Him not only in spirit, but in spirit and *in truth* (John 4:23-24; cf. John 4:22, which describes *ignorant worshipers*). The believer must fully concentrate on the *meaning* of what he is praying and what he is singing. Otherwise it can easily become vain repetition. He must *understand* what he is praying and what he is singing.

Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified (1 Corinthians 14:16-17).

If a person gives thanks in a tongue, how can anyone say “Amen”? You cannot say “Amen” unless you *understand* what was said and *agree* with what was said.

What was spoken in a tongue was not meaningless utterances or nonsense syllables. In each case Paul makes it clear what the *content* of the tongue was:

Verses 14-15—A prayer to God

Verse 15—A song of praise

Verse 16—The giving of thanks

What was spoken was meaningful, but the meaning was not understood, and “the other was not edified.”

I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all (1 Corinthians 14:18).

Paul himself had the gift of tongues. The problem was not with the gift, but with the *use* of the gift. Paul never implied that the Corinthians did not have the real gift of tongues. Neither did he say that their tongues-speaking was satanic. These believers had a genuine charismatic gift, but it was not being exercised in love. And God was not the author of the confusion that resulted from their fleshly exercise of this gift.

Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue (1 Corinthians 14:19).

What a comparison! Five words that can be understood are better than *ten thousand* words (myriads) in a tongue! Imagine telling a preacher to limit his Sunday morning sermon to five words! (1) Very (2) little (3) can (4) be (5) said! But those five words are better and more edifying than ten thousand words in a tongue!

It takes about one and a half hours to speak ten thousand words! It only takes two seconds to speak five words! Paul would rather take two seconds to say "Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3), than to speak two hours in words not understood. Paul's greatest concern was for the health of the assembly, and he knew that innumerable words in a tongue would

all be in vain unless the interpretation was given.

Tongues is here said to consist of *words*. The gift of tongues was not ecstatic utterances; it was words. Tongues-speaking was not nonsense syllables or foolish gibberish; it was *words!* Words must convey meaning. Words are sounds that symbolize and communicate meaning. Trench says that a word (*logos*) is “a word, saying, or *rational* utterance of the mind . . . being as it is the correlative of *reason*.”<sup>15</sup> Tongues were not ecstatic utterances; they were rational utterances—*words!* Tongues were such a problem because the words were in a foreign tongue, and therefore not understood (cf. verse 9).

Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Paul now rebukes the Corinthians for their immaturity. They were spiritual babies and they needed to grow up into full manhood and maturity (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-2; Ephesians 4:14; Hebrews 5:13). They needed to put away childish things.