

"Bodybuilding 301" 1 Corinthians 14:1-12, Part 3

Introduction

- For those of you here as guests or maybe you've been in and out due to the holidays let me quickly remind you where we're at. We've been working our way through Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Lessons from a failed church. Corinth, for all it had going for it, was a mess. In a sea of churches, they were the oil spill. And the point of this series is to learn from their mistakes so that we as a church might navigate the waters of body life smoothly, clearly, without incident.
- By the time you get to chapter 14 it's pretty clear that one of the mistakes the Corinthians made had to do corporate worship and an imbalanced practice of spiritual gifts; specifically prophecy and tongues. Last week's message on prophecy and this week's on tongues are somewhat of an excursus. Hopefully, in addition to clarifying what these two gifts are, we'll be more prepared to make sense of Paul's line of thought in chapter 14. This week speaking in tongues. Next week 1 Corinthians 14:13-25.
- Speaking in tongues is such an odd phenomena, and later I'll define what I think it is, that it's best to step back from the particular passages that address it like in Acts or Corinthians and think more broadly. What does the bible say about languages or foreign languages or common languages?

Transition

So where to begin? How about the beginning? The garden. I want you to see how speaking in tongues fits into the grand scheme of God's plan of redemption.

- In the beginning there was only one common language. Before sin estranged mankind's relationship to God, God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the garden. He talked to them face to face. They shared a common language with complete understanding. But things change starting in Genesis 3 when man and woman rebel against God. No longer does mankind speak with God face to face; in fact, Adam and Eve are banished from the garden, banished from God's presence. Things grow increasingly worse as you move from the Fall in Genesis 3, to Cain's murder of Abel in chapter 4, to Noah in chapter 6. They become so bad that it says in Genesis 6:5-6 that *The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.* God's judgment comes in the form of a flood; he wipes out humanity in Genesis 6-9 and starts fresh with Noah's descendents.
- However there is still a common language. Until Babel. Genesis 11:1 *Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.* The alienating power of sin had separated man from God but had not yet alienated mankind from each other until the hubris of Babel. To use the words of [Max Turner](#), "In an exquisitely crafted story the descendents of Noah, one people with one tongue, combine to gain access to heaven (and a proud name for themselves) by building a high temple-tower. Unimpressed by this puny edifice, God comes down to

inspect it. Perceiving that their arrogant endeavor is made possible only by their common language, he acts. In mockery of their words ‘Come let’s make bricks (*nilbenah*)...God says, ‘Come let us mix up (*nabelah*) their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech. The project is thereby brought to an abrupt halt, and the city (Babel-which means mixed, confused) is left deserted as the peoples are scattered over the face of the earth. This divine ‘gift’ of different tongues is clearly portrayed as a judgment, the deepening of the alienation which began the fall.”¹

- What we need to understand is that from the standpoint of biblical theology, multiple languages and the confusion of speech, those things are a result of sin. Unintelligibility is a sign of God’s judgment. In Isaiah 28:11-12 God judges his people by speaking to them in a foreign tongue, the language of the Assyrians, because they failed to listen and obey him when he spoke to them in clear and simple terms.
- The hope of the Bible is that one day the alienation caused by sin will end. Biblical hope is for a Messiah will come and reverse this condition of alienation—between God and mankind and among the peoples of the earth. And we get little glimpses, little hints of what this will mean for languages and speech.
- The reversal of fortunes begins with God’s call of Abraham and the promise given to him in Genesis 17:4. God tells Abraham that he will be the father of many nations. There is an ethnic and linguistic diversity to the future people of God. And presumably, if God calls people to himself from every nation, something will have to be done about their uncommon speech.
- Turn to Zephaniah 3:9-10. *"Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. 10 From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.* The prophet Zephaniah looks forward, he anticipates some future time when sin is eradicated and there will be pure and presumably unified speech from God’s people. The redeemed from the nations praise God by means of a common language.
- At the end of the story, in Revelation we see the fulfillment of this. Turn to Revelation 7:9-12. *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"*
- The saints, the entire people of God, from every nation, tribe, people and language, call out in a loud voice triumphant praise to God. It is highly significant that “this is the first time [in the book Revelation] that anyone other than a celestial being has appeared before the throne [of God].”² The banishment from the Garden, over. God’s people are welcomed back into his presence to see his face in front of his throne. The promise to Abraham is

¹ NDBT, p. 628.

² Osborne, p. 319.

fulfilled. Every nation is represented. The unintelligibility of Babel is reversed. Zephaniah 3:9-10 fulfilled. The multitude of saints, while retaining individual and distinct ethnicities, cries out praise in a common tongue.

- That's coming. But right now you and I are positioned in the middle, in this intermediary time called the church age. We're beyond Zephaniah 3. Our redeemer Christ has come. Sin and death have been defeated. By the blood of Jesus the way into God's presence has been opened for all who call upon his name—regardless of language, tribe, nation, ethnicity. But we're not yet to the point of seeing God face to face and the common speech of Revelation 7. And in the church age, even as it relates to language and speech, is a partial fulfillment, there is a foretaste of all that come about when Jesus finally returns for his followers.
- Turn to Acts chapter 2. Verse 1. *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" 13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."* Something's different. It's not quite Babel. But it's not quite a common language. It's a middle ground.
- To sum up; speaking in tongues is a sign that Babel and the consequences of the Fall have been reversed. Not completely. But the pendulum has started swinging in the other direction. It is a signal that something's different. Unintelligibility is partially reversed as Christians speak in languages they do not understand but are understood by others. But more than that, at the very point at which the gospel is about to go out to all nations fulfilling the promise made to Abraham, tongues speaking occurs. It is a signal that the church's mission has begun—non-Jews are about to be included, enfolded into the people of God. With the beginning (the garden) and the end (Revelation) in mind; I want you to see how for us in the middle of God's story something like speaking in tongues makes perfect sense.

Transition

Keep this framework in mind as we now get more specific. What is speaking in tongues? [Slide #1] By the way, please also keep in mind our handy dandy triangle from the last couple of weeks in mind. While I personally believe the miraculous gifts, including tongues, are valid for the church age I hold that position very loosely. We're talking theory here—something open to vigorous debate.

- Alright, here's the definition. This is not original to me. I'm borrowing. "Speaking in tongues is prayer or praise to God spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker."³ By the way, even though I think speaking in tongues is valid, personally, I've never spoken in tongues. Paul says to pursue the gifts that build up the church, 1 Corinthians 14:12, so that's what I've tried to do. Speaking in tongues doesn't build up the church so I haven't pursued it.
- **First** thing about this definition I want you to notice. Speaking in tongues is speech directed to God. 1 Corinthians 14:2. *For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.* There is no such thing as a message in tongues for a group of people. It's prayer or praise to God. 1 Corinthians 14 verses 15 and 16.
- **Second**, its language. Syllables. Speech. Paul used "tongues" and "languages" interchangeably in 1 Corinthians 14. Language, I think, is the most natural meaning of the word.⁴ Speaking in tongues is not nonsensical babbling in the Spirit. Its language. Now, what kind of language it is, that's a whole different issue. Some say it's the ability to speak in unlearned languages. Personally, I don't think that's the case. As [David Garland](#) puts it, "Corinth was a cosmopolitan seaport with a transient, multilingual population, and so if Paul came speaking in tongues [or unlearned languages] he surely would have been able to communicate with someone."⁵ But Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:6 if he did come speaking in tongues no one would understand him.
- Some say because of 1 Corinthians 13:1 tongues is an angelic language. *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels.* It's certainly possible.
- At Pentecost speech in tongues was definitely in known languages. And those speaking were understood by those who were listening. *Each heard in his own language,* Acts 2:6. But the speech was not understood by the person speaking—that's what amazed the crowd, Acts 2:7. I like the balance [Wayne Grudem](#) brings. He says, "It seems at times that speaking in tongues may involve speech in actual human languages, sometimes even languages that are understood by some of those who hear. But at other times—and Paul assumes that this will ordinarily be the case—the speech will be in a language that no one understands."⁶
- I think that during the present age the gift may manifest itself as various kinds of speech ranging from human to angelic. That kind of diversity helps to explain the ambivalence and fuzziness of various English translations; *ecstatic speech* in one, *unlearned languages* in another. This range of speech from human to angelic "may help to explain the discrepancies between many modern claims to tongues as a foreign language and the conclusions of recent linguistic analysis that it is *not* a language."⁷ That's all I'm going to say because I just don't know.
- **Third** point about speaking in tongues. Because speaking in tongues is normally unintelligible speech, if there is no interpretation, the church is not edified, which means there's no place for it in public worship. 1 Corinthians 14:27-28. *If anyone speaks in a tongue, two--or at the most three--should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.*

³ Grudem, p. 1070.

⁴ Garland, p. 584.

⁵ Garland, p. 584.

⁶ Grudem, p. 1072.

⁷ ISBE, volume 4, p. 872.

28 *If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.* In [verse 20](#) Paul calls chides the Corinthians, he calls them childish for failing to observe this principle. They forgot that unintelligibility was a sign of judgment. That's why in [verse 21](#) Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12 to remind them that God judged the Israelite's by speaking in the language of the Assyrians—words they could not understand. The problem in Corinth was not tongues per se but uninterpreted tongues in the public assembly.⁸ Paul's counsel? No interpretation? No tongues.

- **Fourth.** It is rational, controlled speech. There is no loss of control. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Why would this be any less the case when speaking in tongues? Nowhere does Paul give the impression that speaking in tongues is this wild, trance-like free-for-all. Instead speaking in tongues is done with the mind, 1 Corinthians 14:15. It's rational. Thought out. Yes, it's an expression of profound emotion from the deepest recesses of the soul.⁹ But the mind is fully engaged.
- **Fifth.** While I think the Bible teaches that speaking in tongues is to be a natural part of the Christian experience it is not the experience of every Christian. Not everyone speaks in tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:30. Look at it. *Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?* The implied answer to all of Paul's questions from [verse 29](#) on is no. Not everyone speaks in tongues. So what do we make of those disciples in Acts who had the experience of speaking in tongues? We've got to remember that Pentecost marks the transition between the Old and the New Covenant. I think what you have in Acts 2 are followers of Christ who are still living with an Old Covenant understanding the Holy Spirit. "These believers, who had received an old covenant less-powerful experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives, received on the day of Pentecost a more powerful new-covenant experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives."¹⁰ Pentecost was unique. The disciples received this remarkable new empowering from the Holy Spirit precisely because they were living at a time of remarkable transition. What's recorded in Acts is not a pattern for us; we don't live during a similar transition. Not everyone speaks in tongues.
- The desire to have every Christian speak in tongues (even though Paul says not all speak in tongues) is probably motivated by a prior conviction that views baptism in the Holy Spirit as an experience subsequent to conversion, and sees speaking in tongues as an initial sign of receiving this baptism in the Holy Spirit.¹¹ But there are serious questions about that doctrinal position. If want more information about baptism in the Holy Spirit and what it is see me after the service.
- It seems to me that when you start mandating that all Christians should speak in tongues you end up creating a two-class Christianity. [Slide #2] Spirit baptized Christians and ordinary Christians. That's dangerous, unhealthy and a dichotomy that is foreign to the bible. That was the error of the Corinthian church. Some were viewed as more spiritual because of their gift. But the Bible teaches that if you're a Christian you have the Holy Spirit. You are spiritual. Period.

⁸ Garland, p. 629.

⁹ Garland, p. 585.

¹⁰ Grudem, p. 771.

¹¹ Grudem, p. 1076.

- [Slide #3] A better alternative is this. Christians are all at different places when it comes to maturity. There is no two-class Christianity. There are Christians and there are non-Christians.
- [Slide #4] And while we may be in different spots hopefully we are all growing, progressing in sanctification.

Conclusion

- And that's what I want to end with this morning. [Slide #5]. What God wants most is for us to grow in holiness. That only comes about through humility and repentance and confession of sin.