

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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4. PROPHECY IS GREATER THAN TONGUES (1 Corinthians 14:1-25)

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We have been studying spiritual gifts. Chapters 12 to 14 of 1 Corinthians provide the most extensive teaching on this subject in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul showed us that the church is one body. Nothing sinful or selfish should be done to break the unity of the body of Christ. In that chapter, we learned also that there are different types of gifts from God to His people. Some gifts are greater than others, and we are to desire the greater gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31). The apostle ended the chapter by saying, "And yet I show you a more excellent way."

What is that more excellent way? He showed us, in chapter 13, that the more excellent way is the way of love. Love is the more excellent way because it is indispensable, it is unique, and it lasts forever. We have learned from that chapter that graces are more important than gifts. Put another way, Christian character is more important than all our abilities. Three graces were singled out for mention, namely faith, hope, and love. These were contrasted with the revelatory gifts of prophecies, tongues and knowledge. The revelatory gifts ceased with the completion of the revelation of God in the Bible. Of the graces, love is the greatest since it will last to eternity, while faith and hope will disappear at the second coming of Christ.

Healings and miracles uncommon

In chapter 14, the apostle leads us back to the topic of the spiritual gifts. He singles out prophecy and tongues for comparison. It is significant that he does not mention the gifts of healings and miracles in this chapter. Miracles and healings were listed among the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28, but they are not mentioned at all in Chapter 14. Charismatics often give the impression that healings and miracles were common occurrences among the Christians of the New Testament time. The Bible, however, does not teach that this was the case. In fact, we are told that only a small circle of people had the gifts of healings and miracles. We will have occasion to come back to this. At the moment, we wish only to point out that healings and miracles were not widely practised by the Christians of the New Testament time. These were the marks of the apostles (2 Corinthians 12:12). The problem in Corinth was not so much that people were performing healings and miracles. Rather, the problem was the exercise of the gifts of prophecy and tongues, and especially tongues.

The Corinthian church appeared to be agitated over these two gifts, and especially over that of tongues. When people spoke in foreign languages which they had not previously learned, there was that aura of mysticism involved. The dramatic element was more obvious. It was clearly a supernatural gift. When others uttered a prophecy, the drama was not there. A prophecy was uttered in a language known to the hearers. There was that difference between the two gifts. It is therefore easy to understand why there was so much attention given to tongue-speaking. It attracted the attention of the less stable. It distracted those who were not clear about the purpose of coming together to worship. In this chapter, Paul wishes to show that prophecy is in fact better than tongues. In so doing, he will be laying down some important principles of worship, and of how the gifts are to be used.

What are prophecy and tongues?

What was prophecy? And what were tongues? We have seen in our previous study that a prophecy was the inspired utterance of a man which conveyed the will of God to other people. It was the telling forth of God's revelation, which could include the events that God intended to bring to pass. A

prophecy was therefore not just “foretelling”, but also “forthtelling”. It was, by definition, infallible. Inspired revelation from God could not possibly turn out to be false. We are told in 2 Peter 1:21 that “prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit.” In the Old Testament time, those whose prophecy turned out to be false had to be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 18:20-22).

It should be noted that a gift may be possessed by a person who occupies an office as well as by others who do not occupy any office. Those who are called by God to be pastors should preach the word since that is the duty belonging to their office. However, other Christians who are not pastors may also be gifted with the ability to preach. They should preach the word whenever there is the opportunity to do so. The same may be said of prophecy. There were prophets in the New Testament time. Their job was to convey the revelation of God to men. Others, however, were, also occasionally given the ability to prophesy. In Acts 21:9, for example, we are told that Philip, the evangelist, had four daughters who prophesied. We are not told that they were prophetesses, in the same sense that Agabus was a prophet (Acts 21:10). Similarly, we are told in 1 Corinthians 11:4 and 5 that there were men and women who prophesied. This means that they were given the ability to convey the revelation of God to others in the church. Prophecies were the inspired revelation of God given to certain people, whether or not they were prophets.

What about the gift of tongues? This was actually the ability to speak in human languages, not previously learned, which conveyed God's revelation to men. In Acts 2:4, we are told that the early disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues. What were these tongues? We are told in the subsequent verses that these were the languages of the people who lived around the Mediterranean region. The same Greek word, *glossa*, is used in Acts 2 and in 1 Corinthians. The word is translated “tongues”, meaning “languages”. When we ask someone, “What is your mother-tongue?”, we are actually trying to find out what language he speaks at home. Today, the word “tongues” is hardly used in everyday conversation. This has caused a lot of people to think that the “tongues” mentioned in the Bible were some unknown and extraordinary utterances. In the Indonesian Bible (the *Alkitab*), the word is translated as “*bahasa roh*” which means “spiritual languages”, or “languages of the spirit”. In the Malay Bible (the *Perjanjian Baharu*), the word is translated as “*bahasa yang aneh*” which means “unusual languages”. These translations are obviously wrong. They have reinforced the wrong assumptions of the charismatics that tongues are unintelligible sounds which come from the Holy Spirit. No, tongues were human languages! This must be kept in mind as we study 1 Corinthians 14. Otherwise, you will face difficulties in understanding this portion of Scripture.

Prophecy Edifies The Church (14:1-5)

The first point made by the apostle is that prophecy is greater than tongues because it edifies the church. He had just concluded the digression on love. He now says, in verse 1, “Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.” So far, in his discussion on the gifts, Paul appeared to have been rather negative and unenthusiastic about the Corinthian claims to the gifts. He might easily be misunderstood as wanting his readers to forget about the gifts altogether and, instead, to pursue love and unity in the church. This is where Paul corrects this possible misunderstanding concerning his view on the matter.

He tells his readers to pursue love, since love is so important. Love needs to be pursued, or followed after. The word “pursue” may be translated as “to press forward”, or “to make progress in”. Effort is needed to have more and more of this love. Love needs to be shown in increasing measure. Graces are different from gifts. Graces, such as faith, hope and love, are given to all Christians in different measures. Gifts, on the other hand, are given only according to God's sovereign will. Everyone has a gift from God, but not everyone has all the gifts. It may be that you desire to have certain gifts, but it is up to God to distribute them to you. We may desire the greater gifts, but we must never demand that God give them to us. Gifts are only to be desired, or coveted, while graces must be pursued. We see Paul making this point about gifts all the time. In 1 Corinthians 12:31, he said, “But earnestly desire the best gifts.” In 1 Corinthians 14:39, he tells the readers to “earnestly desire to prophesy”.

Why is prophecy to be desired more than tongues? Paul says in verse 2, "For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him*; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries." Before you jump to conclusions of your own, make sure that you seek out the meaning of these words from the Scripture. Speaking in tongues is not the uttering of gibberish. It is not the making of unintelligible sounds. It is the uttering of words that make sense. When a person spoke in a tongue, he would not be understood by others around him. That was because the language was unknown to them. It was nevertheless a human language that conveyed sense to those who could understand. If it were the mere utterance of a string of unintelligible sounds, it would not be considered as being spoken. The verse, however, shows that the tongue was being *spoken*. The person "*speaks* in a tongue", and he "*speaks* to God". This is the first thing to be noted from this verse. Speaking in a tongue is the speaking in a language.

The second thing to be noted is that the speaker knows what he is saying. Others might not understand him because he is speaking in a foreign language, but it is impossible that he himself does not understand what is being uttered. That is what is implied in the word "to speak". He speaks "in the spirit", meaning that he speaks what his inner self knows. The spirit of man does know. It says in Mark 2:8, "But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them..." In Luke 1:46-47, we read that Mary burst out in praise, saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour." In Matthew 26:41, the Lord told His disciples, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak." In all these passages, we see that the spirit is a reference to the inner being of a person. We see also that the spirit of a man is capable of knowing.

Some people might argue that the last phrase of verse 2 should be translated without "the" before "spirit", so that it reads, "in spirit he speaks mysteries". That way, the phrase would sound like John 4:23 and 24 in which the Lord says that those who worship God must worship "in spirit and truth". That cannot be right, however, because the word "in" is not found in 1 Corinthians 14:2 as in the passage in John's gospel. Moreover, comparison with verses 14 to 16 of 1 Corinthians 14 shows that Paul is talking about the spirit of man, for there, the definite article is found before the word "spirit". Of course, we are not excluding the idea that one must pray sincerely, from the heart, "in spirit". We must, however, be more precise in our understanding of Scripture. Paul is referring to the spirit, or soul, of man. We have noted that, in Luke 1:46-47, Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour." The words "soul" and "spirit" are used interchangeably to refer to the inner being of a person, in contrast to the body. The spirit, of course, expresses itself through the body. What we are pointing out is that the person who speaks in the spirit knows what he is saying. He does not go into a state of ecstasy in which there is no consciousness of what is being uttered.

We note next that the word "mystery" carries a different meaning in the Bible compared with the way it is used in everyday life. Many of us grew up on a diet of Enid Blyton's books which often involve the solving of mysteries. To many people, therefore, the word "mystery" means an unknown, inexplicable and perplexing occurrence. When the case is solved, it ceases to be a mystery. The Bible, however, uses the word in a different way. We read in Romans 16:25-27 these words, "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith - to God, alone wise, *be* glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen." Here, the word "mystery" is a reference to the gospel. The gospel is the message about Christ and how men of all nations are to be saved through faith in Him. The saving of all nations was a truth totally unknown to the non-Jews and hidden from the understanding of many Jews. The identity of the Saviour was also unknown to everyone before the time of John the Baptist (John 1:31). All these were now being made known through the apostles. The message of salvation would have remained hidden if not revealed by God. Although made clear now by revelation, it continues to be called a "mystery". A mystery, therefore, is something that would have remained hidden from the knowledge of men if not revealed by God.

The word "mystery" is used in the same way in Ephesians 3:2-6. The passage says, "...you have

heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel..." The word is used in the same way again in Colossians 1:25-27, "...I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." We see, from all these passages, that "mystery" is not something that is unknown. Rather, it is something that is now made known by God. It is a reference to the revelation of God.

Coming back to 1 Corinthians 14:2, we note that the one who speaks in a tongue is not uttering something unknown. Rather, he is speaking in a human language the things revealed to him by God. The thoughts, or ideas, expressed by that language are known to God and to the speaker.

We take pains to clarify this point because the charismatics are saying that those who speak in tongues do not know what they are uttering. In fact, they are teaching people to speak in so-called "tongues" by emptying their minds, and letting loose their tongues to produce some sounds, and letting their tongues roll without being hampered by thoughts. This sort of teaching is not found anywhere in the Bible. We do not find a single passage anywhere teaching people how to get the gift of tongues. This teaching is, in fact, contrary to what we know of God's dealings with man. God would never reduce a person to a mere robot, such that he utters words or sounds without understanding. The rational faculty in man is always preserved and respected. The importance of the mind is constantly emphasized in the Bible. We are constantly exhorted to be sober-minded (Romans 12:3; 2 Timothy 1:7; Titus 1:8; 2:6).

The contrast between tongues and prophecy is not yet completed. Paul goes on to say, in verse 3, "But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men." People are able to benefit from prophecy simply because they understand what is being spoken. This is clear when taken together with the earlier verse in which Paul said that no one understands when a person speaks in a tongue.

In verse 4, the apostle says, "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church." Why is prophecy greater than tongues? When a person speaks in a tongue, only he himself knows what is said. God may have revealed something to him, which he now utters out by an unknown language. If others in the church do not understand that language, they are not edified. On the other hand, if he makes known the revelation of God in a known language, that is, if he prophesies, others will be edified. For people to be strengthened and built up in the faith, they must hear the word of God with understanding.

The only way tongues can edify others is when they are interpreted. As long as those tongues are not interpreted, people will remain ignorant of what has been said. This is made clear by Paul when he says, in verse 5, "I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification."

Paul is not trying to stop anyone from speaking in tongues. At the time of writing, the gifts of tongues and prophecy had not been withdrawn. The Bible had not been completely written. Those gifts were still available to some people. All gifts from God would accomplish some good, tongues included. But Paul would rather that the Corinthian Christians prophesy so that the whole church might be edified. He wants them to stop thinking of themselves, and their own edification only. He does not want them to be selfish and self-centred. He wants them to think of the good of others. The one who is able to edify the church is greater than the one who only edifies himself. Prophecy is greater than tongues because it edifies the whole church while tongues only edifies the speaker.

The Understanding Is Important (14:6-19)

Before proceeding to another reason why prophecy is greater than tongues, Paul wishes to spend some time on explaining the importance of the understanding. He does this in two steps. First, he shows that prophesying is immediately understood by the hearers. Then, he shows that tongues must be interpreted so that the hearers may understand.

Prophesying is easily understood

He says, in verse 6, “But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?” It is possible that, here, Paul is repeating “revelation” and “knowledge” by using as alternatives “prophesying” and “teaching”, for emphasis. In prophecy, the revelation of God is imparted to the hearers, and in teaching, the knowledge of God's will is imparted. Whatever the case may be, we should not miss the thrust of the sentence. The main point is that the hearers will be able to profit only when they understand what is being spoken. We may paraphrase the verse like this: “But now, brethren, what will you gain if I speak to you in any language unless you understand what I am saying?”

The importance of the understanding is further stressed by two illustrations. It says, in verse 7, “Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?” Musical instruments, like the flute and the harp, are useful only when intelligible sounds are produced. The notes have to be distinct and they must be arranged in sequence, according to certain combinations, so as to produce music. Otherwise, these instruments will merely be churning out useless sounds that irritate the ears. We all know what it is like when a child blows on a harmonica or strikes a piano in a haphazard way. It is certainly not pleasing to the ears! And we would not call that music!

The next illustration is taken from the battlefield. In the old days, battles were fought by the armies of the two opposing parties coming together in battle arrays. They then clashed and fought hand-to-hand combats. The soldiers were summoned to battle stations by the blowing of certain prearranged notes on the trumpet. The apostle Paul asks the rhetorical question, in verse 8, “For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?” The obvious answer is, “None!” No one will prepare for battle since the call for battle has not been given clearly. Before anyone will act, he must understand the notes of the trumpet call. The understanding is so important!

Verse 9 says, “So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.” The phrase “speaking into the air” means speaking in vain. A similar phrase was used by the apostle in chapter 9 of this same epistle, in which he said, in verse 26, “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air.” There, he was using the illustration of the public games to exhort believers to live a disciplined life. A person running in the Olympic games will run with determination. A boxer will ensure that his punches hit the opponent, and not the air. To “beat the air” was to punch in a useless way. To “speak into the air” is to speak uselessly. All your speaking, in whatever language, amounts to nothing if the words are not understood by the hearers.

Verses 10-11 say, “There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them *is* without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks *will be* a foreigner to me.” The word translated as “foreigner” literally means “barbarian”. It is a reference to uncivilized, uncultured people. Civilization and culture are, of course, relative terms. What is meant here is that the two parties meeting together will be total strangers to each other. What Paul is saying may be paraphrased like this, “All languages in the world do convey ideas. If I do not understand the language spoken, I will be a total stranger to the one speaking and he will be a total stranger to me.” We have an expression in Chinese which describes such a situation: the two parties concerned will be “like a chicken and a duck”. The chicken may continue saying “Chick! Chick! Chick!”, and the duck “Quack! Quack! Quack!”, but it will be useless. One cannot understand the other!

Paul now relates the importance of the understanding to the spiritual gifts. He says to them in verse

12, “Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual *gifts*, *let it* be for the edification of the church *that* you seek to excel.” Put another way, Paul is saying to them, “You have been competing with one another to have the gifts; why not seek to excel in edifying the church by speaking in a known language?”

Tongues must be interpreted

Since prophecy is immediately understood by the hearers, it readily edifies them. Paul’s preference is that his readers desire this gift to tongues. Tongues, however, is also a gift from God. Paul has not forbidden his readers from speaking in tongues, if indeed that is the gift of God to them. This he has made clear in verse 5. All he has been stressing is the need to think of edifying others by speaking in such a way that they can understand. He now needs to say something to those who claim to have the gift of tongues.

He says, in verse 13, “Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.” The tongue, being a language not understood by the hearers, will not be able to edify them. It therefore needs to be interpreted. It may be that some others present are able to understand that language and have the ability to interpret it for the other hearers. This is also a gift from God, as has been made clear in 1 Corinthians 12:10, which says, “...to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another *different* kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.” What if there is no one present who is able to interpret? The one who speaks in the tongue must then pray for the gift of interpretation.

It may sound strange that the one who speaks in a tongue needs to pray for the gift of interpretation. We have established the truth earlier that the one who speaks in a tongue knows what he is saying. He is actually speaking out what God has revealed to him. Since he knows what he is saying, why doesn’t he just speak the same thing in the language that everyone knows? We must understand that not a few people have difficulty in expressing what they know. They are “tongue-tied” when it comes to expressing themselves. Knowing is one thing, expressing what they know is another. We do have friends who are like that. Perhaps some of our readers also have this difficulty. This being the case, we would understand that the person who had the gift of tongues would need the help of God to speak in the language that he and everyone else knew.

The more likely explanation, however, is to be found in the very irony of the situation. Here is someone who utters truth in a foreign language. Why doesn’t he utter the same truth in a language known to everyone present? “Pray for the gift of interpretation,” says Paul! The apostle is here employing the device of “holy sarcasm” to jolt us. We are going to see more of this before the end of this chapter. For the moment, we only wish to note that Paul is engaging in remonstrance with the Corinthian Christians. He is almost exasperated with their childish and selfish attitude. This comes across clearly in the verses following.

He says in verse 14, “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.” We have already seen that the spirit is the inner being of man. The spirit is capable of understanding and knowing. In the earlier verses, Paul has stressed the importance of ensuring that others understand what is being said so that they may be edified. When a person speaks in a tongue, only he himself understands. The hearers do not understand him. All his speaking will therefore be understood by himself, and of course, by God. A difficult person may still insist on speaking in tongues. He may say that he wishes only to pray to God. Paul is here saying that the person may indeed be praying sincerely, in his spirit, to God, but his understanding remains unprofitable to others. What he understands is not understood by others. So what profit will it be to others? Remember that the emphasis being made throughout this passage is the need to edify others. Earlier, in verse 4, Paul had said, “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.” Here, in verse 14, he is saying that a person who prays in a tongue is only benefiting himself and not others.

That is the way we should understand the word “unfruitful”. The understanding of the one praying bears no fruit. It produces no spiritual benefit. It is useless. That is the way the same word is used elsewhere in the Bible. It says in Ephesians 5:11, “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful

works of darkness, but rather expose *them*.” It says in Titus 3:14, “And let our *people* also learn to maintain good works, to *meet* urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful.” It says in 2 Peter 1:8, “For if these things (namely, faith, knowledge, self-control, etc.) are yours and abound, *you will be* neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The point is made.

We move on to verse 15, which says, “What is *the conclusion* then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.” If we read this verse without taking note of the context, we might think that the spirit and the understanding are opposed to each other. We will then have difficulty understanding what this verse is saying. Keeping the context in view, however, and remembering that Paul has been advocating the fruitful use of the understanding, no such difficulty will arise. What Paul means is that one should pray and sing so as to be understood by others. Literally, the spirit can pray and sing, but the understanding cannot pray and sing. The spirit is the inner being of man. It is his soul, expressing itself through the body. The total person can pray and sing, but the isolated faculty of understanding, or the mind, cannot possibly pray and sing. Paul, however, does not intend us to take the phrase literally. He is basically saying to us that the understanding should be used fruitfully just as the spirit acts fruitfully. The understanding should edify others just as the spirit is edified. In life, we often use such metaphorical expressions. We would say the hunter is “going into the jungle”, or the fisherman is “going to sea”. What we mean is that the hunter is going into the jungle to hunt, and the fisherman is going to the sea to catch fish. To “pray and sing with the understanding” means to pray and sing in such a way that people benefit by understanding.

The next two verses confirm the correctness of our interpretation of this verse. It says, in verses 16 to 17, ‘Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.’ It was the custom of the churches in those days, and it ought to be our custom today, to say a hearty “Amen” each time a person finished praying. The early churches did not practice a corporate prayer in which everyone prayed aloud at the same time. This is done in many churches today, but it was never the practice of the early churches. This passage, together with 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, which we will study next, teach the need to pray one at a time in a public meeting. That way, the other people present will be able to say “Amen” at the end of the prayer. That is because they have understood the prayer and are in agreement with it. They are, therefore, able to say to God, “So be it,” which is what “Amen” means. How are the other people to say “Amen” if the prayer has been in a language unknown to them? Are they to blindly say “Amen” despite not knowing what has been prayed for? That is certainly not the sense of Paul’s words here.

Paul ends this section by saying, in verse 18 to 19, “I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Paul is saying that he would rather seek to edify others by speaking in a language known to them, thereby conveying to them instruction, than utter words that cannot be understood by them. He has the gift of speaking in many tongues, which he seemed to have used whenever he preached the gospel in foreign lands. In the church, however, he would rather speak in a language understood by the people.

Prophecy Convicts Non-believers (14:20-25)

Having explained and emphasized the importance of the understanding, Paul is now ready to give another reason why prophecy is greater than tongues. He has already shown that prophecy is greater than tongues because it edifies the church while the gift of tongues only edifies the individual speaker. That was covered in verses 1 to 5. From verses 6 to 19, he explained that the understanding is so important for there to be edification. In the present section, namely verses 20 to 25, he shows that prophecy is greater than tongues because it convicts non-believers. Prophecy, then, has these two advantages over tongues: it is able to edify believers, and it is able to convict non-believers.

By this time, Paul has almost spent himself. He has explained, in chapter 12, that the unity of the body of Christ needs to be preserved. He has explained the great importance of love, over against gifts, in chapter 13. In the present chapter, he has gone to great length explaining the importance of edifying others through their understanding. He is now exhausted. He is saddened by the whole situation. We

can almost hear Paul sighing as he writes verse 20, “Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.”

He is saying to his readers, “Stop being children. Be babies, if you like, in things that are evil. But as far as your understanding goes, be grown-ups!” Three grades of maturity are referred to here: the stage of infancy, the stage of childhood, and the stage of adulthood. Paul does not want his readers to be children in understanding, but to be adults. However, in things evil, they are to be babies. They are to be as ignorant as possible, to be as innocent as possible, with regard to things evil. But in understanding the things of God, the church, and the use of the gifts, they are to be mature.

He goes on to say, ‘In the law it is written: “With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,” says the Lord.’ This is a quotation from Isaiah 28:11-12, in which God made known His intention to send foreign nations to judge the stiff-necked nation of Israel. God had spoken clearly and plainly to the nation, but the Israelites had continued refusing to listen. He therefore sent the Assyrians to attack the Israelites. Despite this, God’s people had continued in their unbelief. He finally sent the Babylonians to punish them. Paul draws from these incidents in the history of Israel the truth that unknown languages are a sign of judgment to unbelievers. He says, in verse 22, “Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.” Unknown languages are a curse, not a blessing, to those who refuse to believe. When Christians spoke in unknown languages, as on the day of Pentecost, it was to benefit those who could understand those languages. Those who were unbelieving found it all so confusing, and they could only mock.

This reminds us of the teaching of the Lord in Matthew 13:10-17. You would remember that there, the disciples asked the Lord why he spoke in parables to the people. The Lord’s answer was that the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven were being revealed to those who believed, but hidden from those who were unbelieving. The parables were the means of conveying truths and blessing to the believing. The same parables were a stumbling block and a curse to the unbelievers. The apostle Paul says the same thing in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16. He says that the preaching of the gospel is “the aroma of death *leading* to death” to those who are perishing, at the same time, that it is the “aroma of life *leading* to life” to those who are being saved. The preaching of the gospel accomplishes these two effects at one and the same time. It saves believers, and it condemns the unbelievers. Here, in 1 Corinthians 14:22, Paul is saying that tongues are meant to convey the gospel to those who would believe, but they are a sign of God’s judgment upon the unbelieving. In the church, which is the assembly of believers, the Corinthian Christians should be prophesying instead of speaking in tongues.

Note, by the way, that the comparison with the Assyrians and Babylonians shows that the tongues under discussion are actually human languages. The comparison would break down, otherwise. The same word for “tongues” is used of the languages of those nations as it is of the gift under discussion. Paul moves smoothly from verse 21 to verse 22 because he is referring to human languages throughout.

The apostle now wishes to conclude this section. This is indicated by the “therefore” of verse 23. The earlier “therefore” of verse 22 should rightly be translated as “so then”. It was more to link that verse with the earlier one. We have now the closing verses, 23 to 25, “Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those who are* uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.”

The situation in Corinth was very much like churches today. In any church, there will be found visitors who are either non-believers or ignorant believers. Remember that Corinth was a busy port visited by traders from all over the world. When the church gathered together, there would have been curious non-believers who came in to find out what was happening. There would also be believers from other parts of the world who joined in the meetings. If the Corinthian Christians began to speak in various unknown languages, wouldn’t these visitors think that they were mad? This is exactly what

happens today. We can collect together countless testimonies of friends who have been stumbled by observing so-called tongue-speaking in charismatic churches. They had gone to those churches to worship God, or to find out more about the Christian faith. The babbling that they heard had caused them to be confused. Many had even been frightened by what they observed. They had wondered whether the Christians were in some way possessed by spirits, like those in pagan religions.

If, instead of speaking in unknown languages, the Corinthian Christians proclaimed the truths of the gospel in a known language, the unbeliever or the ignorant believer would be convinced and convicted by what was said. The same is true today. The gospel is not to be found everywhere or anywhere. You cannot buy the gospel from the supermarket. You do not hear the word of God on the radio or television, at least not in most countries in the world. If visitors come to the church, it must be to hear the word of God declared. If they understand what is said, the secrets of their hearts will be revealed. They will acknowledge the presence of God in the midst of His people. There will be those who are converted through hearing the word, and they will join the church and worship God.

The proclamation of the word of God is badly needed today. Why waste time on speaking in unknown tongues? Souls are perishing for want of the gospel. So many believers are stunted in their faith because of not being fed the word of God. Why should we be clamouring for the gift of tongues? Why are we not desiring the greater gifts of preaching and teaching God's word?

Prophecy is greater than tongues because it edifies the church. Prophecy is greater than tongues because it convicts and convinces non-believers. We must seek to be understood, by speaking in a language known to the hearers, and not by speaking in unknown tongues.

Conclusion

We must draw to a close. The charismatics are wrong in so many ways about their view of the gifts: (i) They are wrong in claiming that tongues are some unintelligible, incoherent sounds. When challenged, some of them would claim that these are tongues of angels or some unknown languages. But they have never been able to prove their claim. What they utter is nothing but babbling and gibberish.

(ii) They are wrong in emphasizing feelings at the expense of truth. They wrongly equate their feelings with the "praying with the spirit" of 1 Corinthians 14:15. Many of those who "speak in tongues" actually go into a trance, in which their mind is emptied. This is contrary to the teaching of Scripture on the importance of being self-controlled and sober-minded.

(iii) They are wrong in claiming that tongue-speaking may be engaged in for personal edification while other gifts are meant for the edification of the church. This claim is made by taking verses 2, 4 and 14 out of context.

In our study on 1 Corinthians 13, we have seen that there are no more prophecy and tongues today. The gifts have been withdrawn because their purpose has been fulfilled with the completion of God's revelation in the Scripture. What then is the relevance of 1 Corinthians 14 to us? It is still God's word for us today, and we may learn from it a number of lessons. Although the gifts are no more, the principles underlying those gifts are still relevant to us. We learn, firstly, of the need to always think of edifying others. We are not to think selfishly of our own good but to think of building up the church. Secondly, we learn that understanding the truth is important if people are to be edified. We must therefore desire the greater gifts of preaching and teaching the word of God. Non-believers need to hear the gospel in order to be saved. Believers need to hear the word of God in order to be built up in the faith. We need, therefore, to learn to be effective teachers of the word.

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