

PREFACE

We continue now in the apostle Paul's treatise on the superiority of prophecy over the Spirit-gift of speaking in tongues.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:5-9.

v5

Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues,

Why would Paul wish that every Corinthian spoke in tongues?

For one reason, to answer the behavior of those who considered themselves more "spiritual" than others because *they* spoke in tongues. The inescapable conclusion from a passage like 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 is that there were some in the church—especially those with the gift of tongues—who considered themselves superior—more gifted, more elite, more "spiritual"—than those without that particular gift. One condition that would democratize the situation would be if the Spirit chose to endow every believer with that gift—a purely hypothetical situation. Then no one could consider themselves superior in that regard.

More to the point, however, Paul acknowledges there is value, there is edification, at least for the individual who speaks in tongues. In this he would be expressing a thought similar to that of Moses regarding prophesy, in response to Joshua.

Read Numbers 11:27-29.

That is, Paul is saying, *I wish that all of you could experience for himself the benefits I have by speaking in tongues.* What sort of benefits? David Garland cites (without quoting directly) Gerd Theissen:

[Speaking in tongues] affords access to the unconscious dimensions of the soul and allows repressed impulses to the consciousness. It enters into an inner space dissociated from the everyday realities surrounding them and it may result in a feeling of peace and even euphoria (Esler).

I think some of us perceive any and all Spirit-gifts in much the same way, as an official endowment from God, labeling and categorizing each of us by that gift—henceforth to be known as someone with that gift. And in some individuals that may be the case. Most of us are familiar with individuals who exude the qualities of their Spirit-gift in every aspect of their life, as with the gifts of helps, or wisdom, or knowledge.

Some gifts, however, such as healing, may come and go. Using the example of healing, and cautioning against the institutionalizing of gifts, this is how D. A. Carson explains it:

Carson: If a Christian has been granted the *charisma* to heal one particular individual of one particular disease at one time, that Christian should not presume to think that *the* gift of healing has been bestowed on him or her, prompting the founding of “a healing ministry.”

What I believe Thiessen, a respected German theologian, is saying, and what Paul may be insinuating, is that the gift of tongues can be one of those supernatural methods God employs to disengage His children from the spirit-deadening world in which we dwell. To be sure, He uses other, less sensational methods more often: prayer, fellowship with other believers, His printed word, devotional contemplation. But there may be times when He feels it necessary to use, as it were, the Big Guns, the momentary *charisma* of tongues to break us loose from our over-indulgence of this temporal world, to reconnect us in a dramatic way with Him.

The Lord God is not a passive, inert spectator to the lives of His children. When He sees them becoming too enamored of the world, or too enmeshed in their own sin, He often does something about it. He does something to draw us back to Him, to revive us, to cause His Spirit to quicken in us. One way He might do this is through the *charisma* of tongues.

Before we move on, however, we must allow for a brighter reason for the speaking of tongues—especially in the privacy of the prayer closet. That is, instead of the *charisma* being unleashed because of a separation from God, it can become an energetic component of unbridled praise and exultation in His presence.

To the best of my knowledge I have never spoken in tongues—there *have* been times when my spoken or written words have required interpretation, but that is a topic for another day. Even though I may not have been speaking the language of heaven with my lips, however, I have experienced private worship of such powerful intensity that it seemed my very skin would burst from the pressure, that my head would split apart from the inexpressible joy I was experiencing, bowed before the throne of God. Given that, it requires no effort at all to imagine that in some individuals in such a moment, beckoned by the Holy Spirit, would come forth from their lips words spoken in the language of heaven—words unintelligible to mere humans.

but even more that you would prophesy;

Paul, too, is concerned about the lives of the individual, but right now, in this context, he is more concerned with the integrity of the church, the integrity of *its* relationship with God, and its members with each other.

Why? He has already stated the basis for this.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:2-4.

Paul, in this letter, is all about the integrity and building up of the church. That is uppermost in his mind. How it must have broken his heart to hear what was going on in Corinth—as well as to hear the wrong-headed attitudes voiced in the letter sent to him from the church.

God's word teaches many beliefs and practices that are important in the life of the individual believer and the life of the church. For the individual the first priority is salvation: repentance, confession, and embracing Christ Jesus as Lord. After that, however, for both the individual and the congregation, comes the long and treacherous road of sanctification: becoming steadily more like Christ. It is through the edification of the church that this takes place, and it is a grievous thing if it is *not* taking place. The body of Christ "builds up" itself and its members through preaching, teaching, prophecy, and fellowship.

and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues,

At the end of Chapter Twelve Paul begins his segue into his treatise on love with, "But earnestly desire the greater gifts." Then he uses the same word translated "greater" (*meizon*; from *me-gas*) here to refer not to the gift, but to the individual *with* the gift. But neither application—to the gift or to the person—is really his point.

The Spirit-gift is not "greater" in and of itself, neither is the person with that gift "greater" in and of himself. We should all desire to contribute to the edification of the church, and, in Paul's eyes, one of the best ways to do this is through the Spirit-gift of prophecy. What Paul considers "greater" is the work done *by* the gift in the church.

Albert Barnes: The idea here is, that talents are not to be estimated by their "brilliancy," but by their "usefulness." The power of speaking in an unknown tongue was certainly a more striking endowment than that of speaking so as simply to be "useful," and yet the apostle tells us that the latter is the more valuable. So it is always. A man who is useful, however humble and unknown he may be, really occupies a more elevated and venerable rank than the man of most splendid talents and dazzling eloquence, who accomplishes nothing in saving the souls of people.

We have discussed that Paul draws a distinction between tongues in the prayer closet and tongues in corporate worship. David Guzik makes an interesting point regarding this.

Guzik: Since Paul is focusing on when the Corinthian Christians come together as a church, it is clear why he regards the gift of prophecy as greater. However, if one were to ask Paul, “Which is greater for one’s devotional life: the gift of tongues or the gift of prophecy?” He would no doubt say “the gift of tongues,” because who do you prophesy to when you are alone with the Lord in your prayer closet?

That which is considered the “greater” Spirit-gift will change when the venue changes. For example, if one has a gift for evangelism, it will not be the more useful gift if one never leaves the body of Christ; it must be used out on the streets, on the mission field. But a gift of teaching or prophecy will be more useful within the body of Christ, rather than in those external venues.

unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.

Let’s think about this for a moment.

Question: Assuming a public setting, what is, for the congregation, faithfully interpreted public speaking in tongues? That is, what is the effective result for the congregation of interpreted tongues? Answer: prophecy.

Of course this depends on the content of the language spoken to God with tongues. Nonetheless, Paul remains on-topic: Public speaking in tongues only when it may benefit, build up, the body of Christ by being interpreted. And, depending on your translation, in two places Paul suggests that the one with the Spirit-gift of tongues may also be the one with the gift of interpretation.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:12-13.

Here Paul seems to state explicitly (in all our versions) that it should be the prayer of the one speaking in tongues that he will also be able to interpret his own words. Here in v5, most of our common translations say the same thing—i.e., “greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless **he** interprets.” The ESV and NIV2011 make it, “unless **someone** interprets”—which does not eliminate the speaker, but includes others.

In either case, and as pointed out, tongues are transformed into prophecy when they are interpreted. And only then is the body edified.