

PREFACE

God, in His boundless wisdom, decided that we were having it a little too easy in our progress through Chapter Fourteen, so He decided to throw in a passage to slow us down and exercise our gray cells. Once again, in vv21-22, we have before us a “notorious crux”—a passage that more than one scholar has deemed to be “one of the greatest challenges in the entire corpus of Pauline citations.”

In v21 Paul presumably quotes Isaiah 28:11-12, but his text does not align with either the LXX or the Masoretic Hebrew text (MT). Moreover, v22 *seems* to contradict what he will say in vv23-25. This has been so troublesome to scholars over the centuries that even the venerable and honorable J. B. Phillips, in his otherwise laudable NT paraphrase, throws up his hands and, of his own volition, reverses “unbelievers” and “believers,” claiming in an endnote that “he felt bound to conclude, from the sense of the next three verses, that we have here either a slip of the pen on the part of Paul, or, more probably, a copyist’s error.”

Instead of struggling against the apparent contradiction between v22 and vv23-25, we will use vv23-25 to help us interpret v22. As we typically do, I want to begin by reading the paragraph, but as we work our way through it, our understanding will be helped by re-reading it from other versions.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25.**v21**

In the Law it is written, “BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,” says the Lord.

Right off the bat many take issue with Paul for saying, “In the Law it is written...” since Isaiah is in “the prophets,” not the Pentateuch. But Gordon Fee points out that this reference is simply “a carry-over from his Jewish heritage.” That is, it was a common manner of speaking for Jews.

The quotation itself, however, is problematic—indeed, it is better not to refer to it as a “quotation.” Both Fee and Garland use the word “adapt” to describe Paul’s use of the OT passage:

“...by adapting a passage from Isaiah...” (Fee)

“...14:21 represents an interpretive paraphrase of the text that he adapts to this context.” (Garland)

Paul draws from Isaiah 28:11-12; let’s read that, but add v13.

Read Isaiah 28:11-13.

In the Isaiah passage Yahweh rebukes Samaria and Jerusalem for rejecting His counsel. So now He tells them that since they won't listen to His word, He would speak with a voice of judgment through the barbarian tongue of the Assyrian invaders. Paul draws from this the key elements of speaking in an alien tongue, along with the phrase, "but they would not listen," to make the point, "Just as the experience in Isaiah 28:11-12 did not result in the conversion of the hearers but instead expressed alienation between God and His people, so also [according to Paul] the use of tongues in the church will result not in the conversion of unbelievers but rather in their further alienation" (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner).

Garland: When God speaks intelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to reveal. When God speaks unintelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to judge.

In v22 the apostle begins his application of the OT passage.

v22

So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

We cannot yet breathe easy, as, at first glance, this at least *appears* to contradict the verses that follow it. We can show that it actually does not by examining Paul's use of the word translated "sign" (*semeion* [see-me'-on]). And, again, the answer lies in understanding *this* verse in light of what follows—not the other way around.

Semeion is used only once in v22; the second instance in the NASB and ESV is inserted for clarification to denote that it is implied. Here's v22 in the 1900 KJV:

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.

(The KJV inserts, instead, "serveth" because the Greek hasn't a verb in the second part of the verse.)

Throughout his writings Paul uses "sign" in a number of different ways: as an "outward token," "miracles" (i.e., "signs and wonders," both positively and negatively), as evidence of God's confirmation or approval, and a distinguishing handwriting mark. None of these fit the context of our passage, however.

It will help us understand this by replacing "for a sign," in the first half of the verse, with "an indicator." That is, *So then tongues are an indicator, not to those who believe but to unbelievers.* Indicator of *what* to unbelievers? When they step into a church and hear and witness all the incoherent babbling, they can have only one conclusion: That these people are nuts!

It does not indicate the same thing to believers; they may not understand what is being said, or even *approve* of the use of tongues, but they understand what is going on. So it is not a “sign” or indicator to them in the same way. But Paul uses “sign” here in a negative sense because—just as in the passage from Isaiah—the unbelievers’ response will effectively harden their unbelief. “These people are crazy! Why would I want to believe what *they* believe?” Just as Paul says in v23, if all in the assembly speak in tongues, it will *repel* the unbelievers.

...but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

We can apply the same method to this second part of the verse: *but prophecy is an indicator, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.* What does prophecy “indicate” to believers? We need to back up here and remember the context, the situation in the Corinth assembly. They were using speaking in tongues to demonstrate (or we might say “indicate”) the active presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst, and to demonstrate the speakers’ exalted level of spirituality.

Paul’s argument in the second part of v22 is that it is not tongues, but prophecy that is an indicator of the presence and blessing of God on the assembly. The believer—the one who already has a relationship with Christ Jesus—is edified immediately, because no interpreter is necessary (as with tongues). And, in harmony with vv24-25, if there is an unbeliever present, he will hear the truth of God in a comprehensible language that just might draw him into a relationship with Christ—or at least the realization that “God is certainly among” them.

Garland: Prophecy delivers the greatest good for unbelievers and Christians alike since it communicates, enlightens, and convicts. For Christians, the conversion of unbelievers through their prophecy is another sign [or indicator] of God’s presence among them.

So again,

Garland: When God speaks intelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to reveal.
When God speaks unintelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to judge.

Through prophecy God reveals Himself to unbelievers, but when unbelievers hear what is to them the gibberish of tongues, they are driven further away from Him, and hence into judgment.

v23

Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?

With our examination of v22 we have already done most of the work for understanding v23-25. Those “unacquainted with Christianity” (Findlay)—and I might add even Christians ignorant of the use of tongues—will be repelled by such a demonstration and declare the glossolalists insane. Paul will go on to specify that if there are tongues in corporate worship, it must be carefully circumscribed and orderly.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:27.

That is, limited to only a few; not all at the same time, but one after the other; and there *must* be interpretation.

v24

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;

Paul will go on to say that even the more edifying prophetic utterances should be limited to only a few (v29) for good order, but here he does not mention any limitation.

v25

the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

We know that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the conviction that comes upon an unbeliever’s heart—the conviction that leads to faith, repentance, and justification leading to salvation. More often than not, the Spirit works through the agency of human beings as they witness and deliver the gospel to the unsaved.

When considering the difference between tongues and prophecy in the setting of the public assembly of the church—to put it in crass human terms—when everyone is speaking in tongues before an unbeliever, the attendant Spirit responds, “What can I do with this?! How can I possibly use this gibberish to convict the heart of this unbeliever?” Whereas, in a room filled with prophecy the Spirit responds, “Now I’ve got something I can work with.”

In the corporate assembly the Spirit-gift of prophecy has the miraculous ability to convict the hearts of believer and unbeliever alike. By contrast, in the same setting the Spirit-gift of tongues has the capacity to send the unbeliever out the door—and perhaps never to return.