

Spiritual Gifts: Tongues / Interpretation of Tongues
A series on Spiritual Gifts: part 5

Tongues / Interpretation of Tongues

“Tongues” is translated from the Greek term “glossolalia” which has the meaning of “organ of speech,” “language” or “speech.” Contemporary scholars of the 20th century have added an additional meaning of “ecstatic utterances” as a description for unintelligible non-human language.

Because of the controversies concerning tongues, it is worthwhile to learn about the culture of Corinth (see “The Culture of Corinth”) and, despite developing after Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, gain an introduction to Gnosticism (see “Meaning, Origin and Character of Gnosticism (P. Schaff”).</p>

The Purpose and Procedure of the Spiritual Gift of Tongues

When Paul introduces the concept of spiritual gifts, he indicates that this personal endowment of God’s grace is intended for the edification of the local church assembly (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28; Eph 4:11). When Peter alludes to spiritual gifts, he emphasizes the overarching context of glorifying God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 4:11).

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:7)

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13)

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. (1 Pet 4:10)

Of all of the spiritual gifts only tongues is discussed the most and singled out as a gift that does not edify the church when exercised publicly in the presence of those unfamiliar with the language or without another with the spiritual gift of tongue interpretation (1 Cor 14:9-13). Why does Paul place a focus on tongues?

Significant to this question of edification is the meaning of 1 Corinthians 14:2-4:

For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Cor 14:2-4)

This NASB translation, as well as others, poses a contradiction: if spiritual gifts are bestowed expressly for the purpose of edifying the church, how is it possible that this singular gift can be used to edify its recipient?

Some scholars resolve this problem by calling attention to the English translation of the Greek term “theos” found in 1 Corinthians 14:2. In their view, the Greek term “theos” should be translated as “god;” thus, it would appear as the following:

For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to god (**theos**); for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. (1 Cor 14:2)

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Translators usually translate “theos” as “God” when a definite article (i.e. the English “the”) precedes it (Acts 7:2) or, in its absence, when there is an antecedent noun or the context of the passage demands it (Acts 7:6), otherwise the translation is “god” as Paul’s epistles exemplify (1 Cor 8:5; Gal 4:8). 1 Corinthians 14:2 lacks the definitive article (Greek: “ton theos”) but the context is debatable whether it pertains to the one true God.

Translators who see that 1 Corinthians 14:2 as “God” often make a reference to Paul’s letter to the Romans (Rom 8:26-27):

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:26-27)

It is difficult to understand how Romans 8:26-27 can be an exegetical reference as they concern the intercession of the Holy Spirit whose “groaning is too deep for words,” which means that these groaning cannot be spoken as speech. In contrast, 1 Corinthians 14:2 is regarding a human being whose spirit “speaks mysteries” that no one understands. Thus the comparison of the Spirit’s intercession does not provide any insight into the meaning of a human being’s spirit who speaks mysteries.

If the correct translation should be “god,” then Paul makes clear that this type of tongue speaking is not a spiritual gift and instead a form of pagan worship.

While this view has merit, it is not entirely conclusive as the context of 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14 is about spiritual gifts and the translation “God” for the Greek “theos” would seem appropriate. In some ways, introducing the idea of a foreign god within this passage may seem out of place.

Regardless, whether the translation of 1 Corinthians 14:2 should be “God” or “god”, it is safe to conclude that Paul does not support the practice when the church is not edified.

By their nature, gifts of the Holy Spirit are defined by their function in serving and edifying the church (1 Cor 14:12). When Paul encourages the Corinthian church to “desire earnestly spiritual gifts” (1 Cor 14:1), he is placing an emphasis on loving others through edification (1 Cor 13:1-13). He implies that the tongue speaker who speaks in a language that no one understands (1 Cor 14:2) as not having the spiritual gift of tongues by drawing a contrast to one with the spiritual gift of prophesy (1 Cor 14:3).

Is it possible that Paul was being charitable to the Corinthians by presuming that their unintelligible speech was directed to God?

When Paul writes “but in his spirit he speaks mysteries,” the Greek term “mysteriōn” for “mystery” was usually a reference to religious secrets or a pagan cult that demanded secrecy from its participants in the ancient world. Yet Paul does not condemn the practice so it is unlikely that he was referring to pagan worship.

As a contrast, when Paul spoke of the mysteries or secret of God, he spoke of something formerly hidden but was now revealed by God for all to know (Rom 16:25-26; 1 Cor 2:7-10) (see the article “What are Paul’s Mysteries of God?”).

Paul expands his thoughts on the “unintelligible speech” of 1 Corinthians 14:2:

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Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. (1 Cor 14:7-9)

Through figurative language, Paul illustrates that communication in unintelligible utterances (i.e. a flute's sound that is unrecognized as a flute, etc) is meaningless.

There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me. So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church. (1 Cor 14:10-11)

Through shared experiences, Paul indicates that while all known languages have meaning, different foreigners are still unable to communicate with each other.

Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. (1 Cor 14:13-17)

Through a contrast, Paul shows that unintelligible utterances do not engage the mind of the speaker whereas the speaker of the spiritual gift of tongues is intelligible, engages the minds of everyone and is preferred.

Paul appears to indicate that there are two forms of tongues.

1. Not a known language (i.e. unintelligible utterances). This form of tongues is intended for the edification of oneself and is confined to private prayer and thanksgiving (1 Cor 14:2, 14, 16-17). Because it edifies only the individual, it is not the spiritual gift of tongues.
2. A known language. In public worship, and in the absence of those who would understand the language, this form of tongues is the spiritual gift that requires an interpreter. Paul considers this spiritual gift important for the benefit of the church, because he instructs the church not to forbid it (1 Cor 14:39).

In this light, the gift of tongue interpretation is the translator of a known foreign language.

It is worthwhile to note that in all the instances of tongue speaking (Acts 2:1-13; 10:44-46; 19:1-7), the Bible records the Holy Spirit as coming upon the recipient who appears to lack some control of their speech. In contrast, the recipient of the spiritual gift of tongues determines when to exercise their gift. To learn more about baptism of the Holy Spirit, see the article "What does it mean 'baptism in / with the Holy Spirit'?"

Because "tongues" was a recognized gift of the Spirit and at the disposal of the Spirit, Paul's desire "that you all spoke in tongues" (1 Cor 14:5) reflected his desire to see evidence of the Spirit in the Corinthians. However his discussion and emphasis on the spiritual gift of tongues implies that the worship service of the church of Corinth glorified unintelligible utterances perhaps for reasons of pride and the image of being spirituality superior. The contrast with the spiritual gift of prophecy was intended to place an emphasis on the edification the church as the means to defining what the spiritual gift of tongues was (1 Cor 14:3).

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In his conclusion about the purpose of tongues, Paul implores the Corinthians, “but in your thinking be mature” (1 Cor 14:20); think about the natural consequences of speaking unintelligibly. Paul makes a reference to the Law (1 Cor 14:21) in his arguments as he reminds the church of earlier instances where foreign languages were spoken to but not understood by God’s people. Paul paraphrases Isaiah 28:11-12:

Indeed, He will speak to this people
Through stammering lips and a foreign tongue,
He who said to them, “Here is rest, give rest to the weary,”
And, “Here is repose,” but they would not listen. (Isa 28:11-12)

Here Isaiah speaks of God’s judgment for the nation of Israel (Judah) because they would not listen and obey His voice in Hebrew. If the nation of Israel will not listen to the voice of their prophet, God will speak to them but in a foreign tongue (Assyrian) as Isaiah is speaking with the Assyrian conquest of Judah in view.

Paul’s paraphrase of Isaiah finds its basis in Deuteronomy 28:49, which is where Moses is telling the nation of Israel the consequences of disobedience. The predominance of a foreign language means subjugation:

The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, (Deut 28:49)

“But in your thinking be mature” - in Israel’s past, the public display of a foreign language that was not understood was a sign of judgment!

“But in your thinking be mature” – today, the public display of a foreign language that was not understood by people unaware of spiritual gifts would cause the speaker(s) to be perceived “as mad”! (1 Cor 14:23).

While tongues is a sign to those non-Believers who understand the foreign language (Acts 2:4-39), the spiritual gift is intended for edification (1 Cor 14:26). In addressing the Corinthian church’s practice honoring those with the more spectacular gifts such as tongues (1 Cor 12:22-30; 13:1; 14:6-12), Paul concludes his discussion on the purpose of tongues with how the spiritual gift of tongues should be expressed.

If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. (1 Cor 14:27-28)

God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Cor 14:33).

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