

1st Corinthians 14: Tongues & Prophecies in the Early Church

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1st Corinthians 12-14: The exercise of spiritual gift in the local assembly.

Ch12: Gifts are sovereignly distributed to believers by the Holy Spirit of God, in order to mutually profit the whole company (ch12v7,11).

Ch13: The exercise of any gift is utterly worthless if it is not accompanied by love (ch13v1-3).

Some gifts of the Spirit (prophecies, tongues, knowledge) that operated in the early Church were temporary, and the time would come when they would cease & be done away (ch13v8-13).

Ch14: Apostolic instructions as to how those early gifts of the Spirit that were still in operation at the time should be exercised in the local assembly, for the edification of the saints of God & the local assembly.

Note the words '*edification*', '*edifieth*', '*edifying*' or '*edified*' 7x in ch14 (vs3,4,5,12,17,26).

v39: "***Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues***"

Summarises the teaching of v1-25; the superiority of the gift of prophecy over the gift of tongues.

Paul is writing ch12-14 to wean the saints of God away from the excessive & inappropriate use of tongues.

In the 2 lists of gifts in ch12 (v8-10, v28-30), the apostle puts "***diversities of tongues***" last in each list.

Tongues had to operate along with the complimentary gift of "***the interpretation of tongues***" (ch12v10).

In ch14, Paul is teaching that there would be greater profit for the company if there was a greater emphasis put upon the gift of prophecy, i.e. direct revelations from God (see vs1,3,22-25).

Prophecies would have a much more profitable outcome than tongues, particularly in relation to the "***unlearned***", i.e. uninstructed believers & even for unbelievers as well (see vs23-25).

v40: "***Let all things be done decently and in order***"

Summarises the teaching of v26-38; gifts of the Spirit are to operate in the local assembly in an orderly way, and that will again be for general edification, v26 "***Let all things be done unto edifying***".

In v27, tongues are to be limited to at most 2 or 3, and "***by course***", i.e. separately, one man at a time, and "***let one interpret***", for it would be disorderly & totally unedifying for there to be no interpretation.

In v29-33, in relation to prophetic utterances, that gift should also be operating under spiritual control and with a dignified orderliness, v33, "***For God is not the author of confusion (tumult), but of peace, as in all churches of the saints***".

New Testament Teaching on the Gift of Tongues:

The modern '***charismatic movement***' (NB. '***charisma***' = '***a gift of grace***', see Rom 5v15, Rom 12v6, 1st Cor 12v4) has seriously departed from the NT scriptural teaching on gifts of the Spirit of God.

Of the 3 principal NT passages on spiritual gifts, only 1st Cor 12-14 speak about the gift of tongues, and emphasise its inferiority to other gifts, and that it was about to cease altogether (ch13v8-13).

As to other Scripture passages that deal with this subject, we have mention of tongues by the Lord Jesus immediately prior to His ascension (Mark 16v17), and then we have 3 particular examples of tongues in operation in the book of Acts (chs2,10,19), associated with 3 essentially unique occasions.

The Purpose & Nature of Tongues in the Apostolic Period of the Church:

When God sent His Son into the world, He was borne witness to by God by “***miracles and wonders and signs***” (Acts 2v22) that He performed (see John 2v11, 12v37). It was similarly by signs, wonders & miracles done by the apostles, that God was accrediting the Church in its infancy as being of Himself.

When the Saviour went back to heaven after His death & resurrection, the work He began on earth was perpetuated by the apostles, and God likewise bore witness to their testimony of Christ “***with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost***” (Heb 2v4).

Mark 16v15-20: v17 “***And these signs shall follow them that believe; In My name shall they cast out devils (demons); they shall speak with new tongues***”.

This first reference in the NT to tongues clearly describes it as a sign gift. The Lord’s servants would go forth to all the world as messengers of the gospel, doing signs confirming that their message was of God (see v20).

Acts 2: v4 “***And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance***”. The Galilaeans were not speaking in their own native language, but these tongues were recognizable languages of men (see vs6,8), it was intelligent & honouring to God (v11).

God was giving indisputable signs to the unbelieving nation of Israel that the One who they as a nation had crucified & put to death, was now risen, ascended & exalted at God’s right hand (see v32-33).

1st Cor 14v22 “***Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not***”.

Acts 10: In the house of Cornelius, the believing Jews along with Peter “***were astonished ... because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God***” (v44-46). The tongue-speaking was a sign to those of the circumcision of the reality of the descent & pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, who were now being brought into the Church.

Acts 19: Paul meets 12 devout disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus; they believed on the Lord Jesus, were baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon them, “***and they spake with tongues, and prophesied***” (v6).

It was a sign of the accomplished redemption in the Lord Jesus, and the commencement of the new dispensation of grace, during this unique transition period from the past age of the law & prophets.

All 3 instances of speaking in tongues in Acts were uniquely special occasions that will never be repeated.

These miraculous things in the book of the Acts are not the normal for Church practice & experience today.

At Corinth, the gift of tongues was operating in the local church, but not in an orderly, edifying & God-honouring way, and Paul does prohibit its public use if no interpreter was present (ch14v28).

The Temporary Nature of Tongues – A gift that has now ceased

1st Cor 13v8-13 confirms the temporary nature of these early gifts, including tongues, “***when that which is perfect is come***”. The completion of NT Scripture (see Col 1v25-26), in particular the truth of the mystery of Christ & the Church, completed the revelation of God for this age, and brought these early gifts to inactivity & cessation. Likewise, the gift of healings clearly ceased in later NT times (see Phil 2v27, 2 Tim 4v20).