

25. What about tongues in the church today?

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When I was in my junior high school in South Korea, I was taught English by the Korean English teachers who were educated by Japanese teachers who probably had the most horrible English accents in the world. When I was in the senior high school, I continued in English as my first foreign language and German as the second foreign language. While I was in college, I tried French. That didn't go well, so I said, "Adieu," to French and stayed with English only.

Now that I no longer use my native language Korean, I forgot the majority of vocabularies in speaking and listening. If I see the Korean in writing, I still can understand it, but conversation with other Koreans is pretty much out the window. In other words, I practically speak no Korean and not much English.

Understanding foreign language is rather difficult unless you have some knowledge of it. Speaking in tongues that can be another human language or heavenly language is no different. Unless someone interprets it, we have no idea what that person is saying.

I am weary of some immature Christians who learn their bad Christian habits and knowledge regarding the spiritual gifts from TV evangelists and preachers who do not know much better than their viewers, because they don't study or teach according to the Bible in context. Often, these immature Christians who try to interpret tongues and to prophesy are doing these things to show off themselves, not necessarily for the glory of God. How do I know? Because Karen and I have been in the church where they violated what this chapter teaches us not to do for the sake of their denomination rules and their own personal opinion.

Often we miss what is important in God's sight and end up chasing after what fascinates us emotionally. The chapter 14 is teaching us what to do with speaking in tongues in comparison with prophesying. Obviously the apostle Paul had a great deal of problems with the Corinthian Christians about this speaking in tongues. The whole chapter is dealing with which one is more valuable between tongue and prophecy, how speaking in tongue need to be done and Paul even put the limit in speaking in tongue, but not discarding speaking in tongue. I hope that we learn the way God wants us to speak in tongues and prophecy properly, so that we don't cause havoc in the body of Christ.

The portion of the Scripture, we're going to study this morning provides strict guidelines on the value and role of tongues. As we examine the apostle's answers, we will gain insight into handling this issue in our own church, not according to a denomination's way or my personal opinion, rather according to what the Lord says in His Word, Amen?

A. 4 INTRODUCTORY POINTS

1) We are studying the Book of 1 Corinthians, not tongues.

It's easy for us to sidetrack into the pros and cons or get bogged down in details. But we're going through this Book systematically in expository study method, not through a topical study.

2) The main subject of chapters 12 through 14 is spiritual gifts as a whole, not just speaking in tongues.

The gift of tongues is emphasized in chapter 14, but only as it relates to all the spiritual gifts and to the entire body of believers.

3) The apostle Paul addresses chapter 14 to the church, not an individual.

Because speaking in tongues is a spiritual gift, and spiritual gifts should benefit the whole church, the apostle is dealing with tongues as a public gift rather than a private experience.

4) The apostle wants to correct a problem in the Corinthian church, not elevate the gift of tongues.

He knew that the Corinthians were abusing this gift, like many immature Christians in the 21st century. He spends time on this, not to exalt it, but to show the insignificance of speaking in tongues in relation to other gifts. As a matter of fact, the whole chapter 14 is pretty much dedicated with the restrictions on speaking in tongues.

B. THE GIFT TO EDIFY, EXHORT, AND COMFORT

1 Corinthians 14:1-5 Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. 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. 3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 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.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul spoke of prophecy and the gift of tongues only in the context of the other gifts of the Spirit. Now, he will focus on the gifts of prophecy and tongues, and how they should function in the church congregation. Obviously, in the Corinthian church, there was an over-emphasis on tongues, and an under-emphasis on prophecy.

Gently transitioning from his eloquent chapter 13 on love, Paul evaluates the gift of tongues by contrasting it with the gift of prophecy in v1.

We tend to think of prophecy as predicting the future. But that is not all. As I taught you before, prophecy is the telling-forth of God's message in a particular situation, always in accord with His Word and His current work. Yes, sometimes this has the character of foretelling the future, as in Acts 21 and Acts 27.

Again with the gift of tongues, the speaker is speaking to God, not to men. Disregard of this verse leads to one of the most significant misunderstandings regarding the gift of tongues, believing tongues is a supernatural way to communicate "man to man," instead of "man to God."

With the gift of tongues, the intention is to speak to God and not man. Therefore, it is fine, if no one understands him. The exception to no one understands him is when the tongue is publicly interpreted. Even then, it is not the tongue itself that is understood, but the interpretation of the tongue. Speaking in tongues is a prayer, a praise, or any other communication with God.

Acts 2:4-11 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. 5 And there were

dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. 7 Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."

Does it mean that speaking in tongues can be foreign languages for other foreigners to understand? Yes, it can be if that is what the Holy Spirit chooses to do. This is the case in point. Whether it is in an earthly foreign language or heavenly language, speaking in tongues is about "wonderful works of God, or giving thanks to God or praising Him or praying on behalf of us because sometimes we just don't know what to pray or how to pray for that situation" by the Holy Spirit.

Since he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, it follows that it is a gift for self-edification, not church edification. He who prophesies edifies the church. Because prophecy can be understood by all, a true word of prophecy builds up everyone.

A word of prophecy will edify – build up someone, not tear them down.

A word of prophecy will exhort – encourage someone, not discourage them.

A word of prophecy will comfort – strengthen someone, not weaken them.

C. THE GIFT THAT NEEDS ANOTHER GIFT

1 Corinthians 14:6-14 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? 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? 8 For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? 9 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. 10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. 11 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. 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. 13 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.

Speaking in a tongue is great, but without interpretation, it is foreign and not beneficial to anyone who hears, including the speaker. By using an illustration of musical instrument and foreign language, the Holy Spirit teaches us through the apostle Paul that we need to be careful about speaking in tongues.

Interpretation of tongues also is misused in a great deal due to the ignorance of the Scripture. After someone spoke in tongues, someone else gets up and starts to go through a motion of interpretation by saying, "Thus saith the Lord," as if God is speaking to men. This happens for 2 reasons:

1) They didn't learn and understand the truth about speaking in tongue properly from the Bible.

2) They saw and copied other Christians who also do not know much about these gifts.

Another misuse can be found in prophesying in churches. Again, some people get up and using the King James language with a different tone of voice than their normal voices, they start with, "Thus saith the Lord." Then they start to quote Scriptures. The content of prophecy is, as we studied before, prophesying what the Lord has in mind about some particular circumstances as the Holy Spirit gives revelations to the speakers so that everyone who hears understands. Not in general, but a specific way. It is not necessarily about foretelling the future, but forth telling the heart of God for the situation with edification, exhortation, and comfort in mind.

D. TONGUES DON'T MINISTER TO THE ASSEMBLY, BUT PROPHECY DOES

1 Corinthians 14:15-19 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. 16 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? 17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. 18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; 19 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 used the gift of tongues, both in prayer and in song, and he used it often. Paul's use of tongues was pretty much focused in his devotional life with the Lord.

Paul here makes reference to how we can sing in the spirit. God can give us the freedom to exercise the gift of tongues in a melodic way, so it flows in with worship. However, based on the principles in this chapter, if this is done, it should never be done in a way that would draw attention to oneself or distract others.

Let's say someone has a problem with his weight because he loves to eat food. The solution to the weight problem is not eating food at all, but eating food with control. The Corinthians had the similar problem, they were misusing the spiritual gifts without any control. From this lesson, we are not supposed to abandon the spiritual gifts, but learn how to use the gifts with a proper control according to the Word of God.

Paul saw great value in the gift of tongues for his own devotional life before the Lord. V19 brings up the conclusion of this morning's study.

E. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Being aware of your spiritual gifts is pleasing to God.**
- 2) Being willing to use your gift is constructive to the whole body of Christ.**
- 3) Being satisfied with your gift is an honor to its Giver.**
- 4) Being a proper user of speaking in tongue for the glory of God, not oneself.**