



An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:20–25

By: Francis C.R. Thee

Did Paul misunderstand, misrepresent, or confuse the meaning of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah? Was Paul himself confused? What kind of sign leads to a lessened reception? These or worse problems may be experienced by the casual or uninformed reader of 1 Corinthians 14:20–25, for this passage contains two or three major puzzles for Bible students: the “Isaiah quotation” concerning tongues, and the “tongues are a sign” statement with its seemingly inverted sequel.

A look at the context and the general line of argument will aid to understanding the passage in which these questions occur.

Setting

First Corinthians was written to a church with numerous, quite “contemporary” problems, many of which Paul addresses specifically. Among these is the matter of spiritual gifts, the discussion of which, in chapters 12 through 14, forms the immediate context of this passage.

A closer inspection reveals that chapter 14 deals with the relation of tongues and prophecy.¹ The opening verses (1–5), continuing from the close of chapter 13, contrast the use of tongues and prophecy and show the superiority of prophecy to tongues in the assembly when speaking in tongues is not interpreted. This line of thought is developed in the next paragraph (verses 6–19), which expresses the necessity of comprehensibility in church speech. Verses 20–25 (the passage to be considered) contrast the purpose and results of tongues and of prophecy. Following this, Paul develops the same line of thought by emphasizing (verses 26–38) the necessity of order in the church, especially in spiritual manifestations. The passage concludes (verses 39,40) with an exhortation to desire both prophecy and tongues and to use them in an orderly manner.

With this background of the passage in mind, it will be helpful to take a more detailed look at the contents and meaning.

Exegesis

Preface (verse 20). As noted above, in the preceding discussion Paul had been emphasizing the significance of prophecy and its general superiority to tongues in church use. He concluded that section by stating his personal principle of action in this regard in verses 18 and 19.

Now the Apostle exhorts his readers to attain a similar level of understanding. The exhortation itself is straightforward, consisting of three contrasting lines, “Be not children in your (literal, the) minds; but be like infants in evil, and be mature in your (the) minds.”² The word for mind (“understanding,” KJV), the Greek *phren*, occurs here only in the New Testament. It referred originally to the diaphragm or midriff.³ Thus it is, as Grosheide notes, not just the mind, the thought center, but also the heart, the center of emotion — the whole man.⁴

The context shows the particular area of thinking in which the Corinthians are to be mature, that is, in regard to the use

The context shows the particular area of thinking in which the Corinthians are to be mature, that is, in regard to the use of tongues.

An Old Testament quotation (verse 21). To support his contention about the relative value of tongues, Paul here introduces a passage from the Law. The lines are from Isaiah 28:11,12; thus it appears Paul is here using the term Law to refer to the entire Old Testament revelation, a common Pauline and New Testament mode of reference.

The wording of the quotation does not agree exactly with the Hebrew (nor with the Greek of the Septuagint) but is reasonably close. The relation of the quotation to the original, and the extent and nature of Paul's modification, can be seen by comparing them line by line:

Isaiah 28:11,12	1 Corinthians 14:21
“For with stammering [strange] lips and [with] another tongue will he speak to this people to whom he said, this is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear.” ⁵	“ ‘By men of other tongues and by lips of others I will speak to this people and not even thus will they hear me,’ says the Lord.”

In the statement of the first three lines, Paul follows the essence of the Old Testament passage, although changing the person and making God directly the speaker. In the last line, he modifies and adapts the Old Testament wording to his new meaning. When, however, the Old Testament context is checked, it soon becomes obvious that Paul is applying the statement to quite a different set of circumstances.

In Isaiah the lines occur in the sequel to the “Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim” (Isaiah 28:1). In 28:7, Isaiah seems to turn his denunciations back to Judah (“they also,” KJV; “even these,” ASV), denouncing the religious leaders. The statements in verses 9 and 10 are problematic but seem to represent a challenge to Isaiah.⁶ The religious leaders are speaking back, questioning Isaiah's capability as a teacher: with his repetitious, monotonous message he is fit only to teach children, mere infants. The reply to this mockery begins with the lines quoted by Paul and continues with a flinging back of their own words: God will speak so to them.

The strange lips and other tongues of the Isaiah passage seem indisputably to be those of the coming invaders (compare Deuteronomy 28:49), the Assyrians.⁷ Since this people had refused to hear the message of offered rest spoken in plain Hebrew, they would hear the message of consequent judgment spoken in “stammering” Assyrian.

If this is Isaiah's meaning, by what right does Paul quote Isaiah's words in connection with speaking in tongues? The next verse brings us to that problem.

Tongues as a sign (verse 22). This verse seems to be crucial in the logic of the discussion. It begins with the Greek conjunction *hoste* (wherefore, therefore, so, etc.) indicating that what is to be said is presented as a logical result of the preceding statement. What is said presents two problems: how tongues are related to Isaiah's statement, and in what sense they are a sign.

Various theories have been suggested to explain Paul's use of the quotation. One explanation is that Paul is simply using the words of the prophet with no relation to their meaning.⁸ (This is sometimes suggested as an example of “rabbinic” exegesis on Paul's part.⁹) This explanation is possibly the simplest, but it is not without some basic objections. The acceptance of such an explanation would lead to the establishment of a dangerous principle of interpretation, or else to a distinction of some sort between the Apostle's principles of interpretation and those valid for us. One such distinction would be to assert an apostolic prerogative to change the meaning of earlier scriptural statements (or to add to or modify earlier revelation, if such a wording is preferred). This is not entirely objectionable, and instances of

lesser modifications might be established (for example, Paul's use of Hosea 2:23 and 1:10, in Romans 9:25,26), but such a major change is hard to justify. Another distinction would be to explain the Apostle's methods of argumentation as simply products of their time (or possibly as an argumentum ad hominem), and thus not amenable to the standards of today. Such a procedure could only lead to undermining the authority of the Apostle and calling in question his inspiration (and inspiration in general).¹⁰ In view of these results, while this line of explanation cannot be categorically ruled out, if another valid explanation can be found, it would be preferable.

Such an explanation is perhaps to be found in the suggestion that it is not just the words, but the underlying principle upon which Paul is relying in his citation. In the past when the unbelievers refused to hear, God's final message to them was in a strange tongue, a message of judgment consummated. So in the present era, Paul says, the same principle applies: God is speaking, but by and large those to whom He speaks do not hear — it is a "sign ... to the unbelievers."

This explanation seems to be reasonable and acceptable, if it can be shown to agree with a plausible interpretation of the nature of the sign.

A third explanation to be noted is the view that Isaiah was really prophesying of speaking in tongues. This seems contrary to the text in Isaiah.¹¹

The tentative acceptance of the second explanation leads to a consideration of the second major problem in the verse, the nature of the sign.

First, it may be noted that the Greek word *semeion* and the English word *sign* in this type of context are roughly equivalent. The idea involved is that of conveying a meaning by an indirect method such as a symbol, a meaningful or power-demonstrating act, or some similar means.

If this is a correct understanding of sign in this context, and assuming the above explanation of the use of the quotation, then it is not the content of the speaking, but simply the fact of speaking in tongues that is the sign element. Further, the thing signified is not so much a call of the unbelievers to repentance as an indication that God has spoken His final message to them,¹² and that their judgment is already upon them in their rejection by God. It is a hiding of the further counsels of God from those who reject the plain ones.¹³ This idea strengthens Paul's contention about the preferability of prophecy: the major mission of the Church is to proclaim the message of repentance, not of the failure of repentance. In the church, just as the believers are not edified by an uninterpreted tongue, so the unbelievers are not normally converted by a display of tongues (the events on the Day of Pentecost constitute only a partial exception).

In considering the rest of verse 22, an understanding of the contrast of believers and unbelievers is necessary. Related, but distinct forms are used, not the positive and negative of the same form. For the former term the present active participle of the verb to believe is used as a noun with the article, meaning, literally, "the ones who are believing." For the latter the form used is the negative of the adjective faithful or believing, again used with the article as a noun, meaning "the unbelieving ones," "the unbelievers." Paul apparently did not use matching forms, either the negative of the participle¹⁴ or the positive form of the adjective, because he wished to convey some difference in emphasis by the distinction. Since the participle conveys a more active, dynamic idea, while the adjective is more static, this seems to be the clue to the intended difference. "Those who are believing" would include all in whom faith resides, from the moment of its inception, and who are actively believing (and this conceivably could include, proleptically, those with a readiness to believe that is demonstrated as soon as an opportunity is given).¹⁵ The adjective form, "the unbelievers," would indicate those who at some time had decided against the claims of God and thus belonged to the class of (confirmed) unbelievers.¹⁶

Tongues, then, is a sign to the unbelievers, "not to those who are believing," since the latter are not under God's judgment and other, better, means of assuring them of God's continuing favor are available. For the believers prophecy is the sign, not indeed of judgment, but of grace; but it is a sign, for seemingly Paul refers here not to its content, but to the fact of its existence in the church. Conversely, for the unbeliever (despite the appearance of verses 24 and 25), prophecy is not a sign, for the fact of prophecy is not immediately significant to him. Since prophecy lacks the shock value of tongues, it is not at once apparent to the outsider that a divine manifestation is taking place. It is only as the

situation develops, as in verses 24 and 25, that he recognizes God speaking; and then it is through the content that he comes to such a recognition (this, of course, is normally impossible with tongues), and not simply the fact of its occurrence.

The results (verses 23–25). Having established a basic understanding of the relation of tongues to the unbeliever, Paul proceeds with his discussion. The “therefore” indicates that there is a logical connection with the preceding: what he has to say proceeds directly from it. The reader needs to keep in mind, however, the larger discussion. The following statements are also part of the presentation of the relation of tongues and prophecy.

In his presentation here, Paul pictures the entire church gathered in the same place, and then shows the results of two courses of action. First he pictures them as all speaking in tongues, and then as all prophesying.¹⁷ In both cases outsiders enter. Paul mentions two classes, “those who are unlearned” (idiotes, plural idiotai), and unbelievers. The significance of the latter has been discussed above. The basic significance of the former is that of a private person (from idios, one’s own, relating to oneself), or a layman from some point of view. In this case it would refer to someone not a member of the church, yet not classifiable as an unbeliever; presumably someone interested in Christianity but not yet fully understanding and committed.¹⁸

In the case of tongues (verse 23), should persons of this type enter, they will not be converted but will be repelled by the seeming confusion. They will call it madness rather than evidence of divine activity.

In the case of prophecy (verses 24,25), however, the result is different.¹⁹ As the message is given forth, various results follow: the individual is reproved, or rebuked; he is judged, or subjected to judicial examination;²⁰ and the secret, hidden things in his heart are revealed, at least to himself, if not to others. Seeing himself so accurately pictured, either as a result of a special revelation to one or another of the prophets, or as seeing himself in a general picture of sin and judgment, he falls on his face before God. The result, instead of a charge of madness, is his report, “Truly God is among you.”

On this note, which supplies its own conclusion to the previous line of argument, this section closes, and in the next verse Paul takes up a different aspect of the overall question.

Conclusion

To summarize, the following conclusions have been suggested:

1. Every believer should give attention to growth in spiritual understanding.
2. Paul, in using the Isaiah statement, is applying a principle found in the prophecy.
3. Tongues is a sign of judgment on the unbeliever.
4. For gatherings of believers and in general church use, prophecy is preferable to tongues unless there is an interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5), but tongues are not to be forbidden (14:39).

In connection with these points, the following items should be noted also:

1. Paul is speaking about conduct in the church, not the value of tongues to individuals (or necessarily of interpreted tongues in the church).
2. He is laying down general rules; exceptions might occur (note the further regulations in 14:27,28).
3. In this passage, he is not discussing the purpose but a purpose of tongues.

Endnotes

1. This chapter naturally breaks down into five main paragraphs marked off by the recurrence of the address, “Brethren.” This approach to the structure is utilized in the following analysis.

2. This and other New Testament quotations are personal translations. Catchwords and phrases are frequently taken from the King James Version as a matter of convenience.
3. A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 768.
4. F.W. Grosheide, Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians ("New International Commentary on the New Testament"; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 330.
5. Old Testament quotations are mostly from the King James Version. Modifications are indicated by brackets.
6. See, among others, Joseph Addison Alexander, Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 450ff; or Frank M. Boyd, Book of the Prophet Isaiah (Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1950), 113.
7. See, for example, Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, The Oxford Annotated Bible Schuyler English, et al., eds., The New Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1967), 734,735; R.B.Y. Scott, "The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39: Exegesis," The Interpreter's Bible, eds., George Arthur Buttrick, et al., (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), V, 319.
8. For example, Farrar, "1 Corinthians: Exposition," The Pulpit Commentary, eds., H.D.M. Spence and Joseph H. Exell (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 458,459.
9. Frederick Carl Eiselen, et al., eds., The Abingdon Bible Commentary (New York: Abingdon Press, 1929), 1189.
10. The situation and implications here would be basically the same as the attempts to explain some of Christ's statements in this manner.
11. It might still be explained as an example of double reference, but even this requires a greater degree of similarity in the events prophesied. (John Peter Lange, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Corinthians, trans. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.], 290, cites with approval Meyer, who in his third edition takes it typically.)
12. Or that He is speaking His final message to them in one last attempt to bring them to repentance (Grosheide, op. cit., 331), or is demonstrating their state of unbelief to their own consciences (F. Godet, Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, [2 Vols., "Classic Commentary Library"; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957], II, 292).
13. Godet, loc. cit., notes the parallel case of Christ's adoption of parables as His means of speaking to Israel (Matthew 13:10–13).
14. The negative of this exact verb form (pisteuo) does not occur, however, and the related negative form (a-pisteo) seems to be used in a slightly different sense.
15. For a further presentation of this line of thought see Godet, op. cit., II, 293.
16. Zane C. Hodges, "A Symposium on the Tongues Movement: The Purpose of Tongues," Bibliotheca Sacra, Vol. CXX, No. 479 (1963), 226–233, esp. 229,230, proposes a different distinction, identifying the unbelievers as the Jews. To support this view he appeals to the Old Testament quotation, obviously addressed to the Jews, and argues that this is definitive for Paul's use here. In addition, he finds it necessary to distinguish between Jewish unbelievers in verses 21 and 22 and the average unbelievers in the immediately following verses. The former contention is hard to maintain in regard to a man who could see the conversion of the Gentiles in Hosea 1 and 2 as Paul does in Romans 9. Possibly the best answer to Hodges' arguments are the positive presentations of such commentators as Godet and Grosheide.

17. It is not entirely certain whether Paul expects us to conceive of all speaking at once or in sequence, but the latter seems reasonable (otherwise the prophecy might seem like madness also).

18. The “unlearned” man here is probably to be distinguished from the one “occupying the place of the unlearned” in 14:16 (compare Godet, op. cit., II, 282, and Grosheide, op. cit., 326 and 332, n. 19; per contra see William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], 371).

19. Note here, with Godet (op. cit., II, 296), the shift to the singular, marking the more individual character of the event.

20. Anakrinetai. See Arndt and Gingrich, op. cit., 57, and Godet, loc. cit.

© Francis C.R. Thee

Reprinted from *Enrichment* journal, used with permission.