



The Gift Of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14: 1–5

By: Benny C Aker

Pentecostals hold two fundamental positions regarding the nature of the gift of tongues based upon 1 Corinthians 14:1–5. One group believes that this gift is addressed to God and involves such things as prayer and/or praise. They believe that the one interpreting tongues should speak a praise or petition addressed to God. Tongues in this instance never contain a “message” to believers. Further, tongues are an inferior gift. W.G. MacDonald, a proponent of this position, recently summarized his view: “Glossolalia is always directed to God, and only to Him. In form, glossolalia is spoken or sung to Him. In content, biblical glossolalia consists of worship or prayer. It consists of praise or petition, thanksgiving or intercession. Because glossolalia is unidirectional to God, it cannot be an oracular utterance. Designed for individual edification, glossolalia when properly interpreted, rests at the bottom of the apostolic scale of gifts benefiting the congregation.”¹

The other group believes that, like prophecy, the gift of tongues can also be a message directed to the church when accompanied by the interpretation, and that this gift of tongues is no more inferior than any other gift when appropriately manifested.

I wish to present the case for the latter view in an inductive manner by simply allowing the Bible to speak for itself. First, let us examine the larger context of the relevant passage in 1 Corinthians.

The Larger Context of the Gift of Tongues: 1 Corinthians 12–14

It is well-known that tongues were abused in Corinth. According to these enthusiasts, glossolalia was the sign of spirituality and of the presence of God. Tongues did not need interpretation in such a context. In chapters 12–14 Paul provided correction to this situation, not just information. The structure of chapters 12–14 bears out this conclusion. For instance, 12:1–3 introduces this unit on charismata by addressing the matter of speech: “no one speaking by the Spirit of God says. . . .”² The rest of chapter 12 contains instruction about diversity within unity to broaden the reader’s perspective on the operation of the gifts. The topic of prophetic speech is woven throughout chapter 13 which provides much-needed direction about the function of love in such a context. In chapter 14 Paul returns to address specifically the relationship between tongues-speaking, its interpretation, and prophecy.

Certain terms punctuate this structure and further support our contention that the gift of tongues was a problem. At 12:1 is the problematic term pneumatikon. This Greek word, translated “spirituals,” is a plural adjective used substantively. This means that no noun appears in the Greek text; instead, this adjective stands for some noun which must be supplied by the translator/reader. This is the problem: what noun must be supplied for it and what does it mean? Nonetheless, Paul intended with it to introduce and summarize the entire contents of this section.

At 12:31, where he concluded his discussion on diversity within unity, the apostle used the noun charismata (“gifts”). This noun is in the accusative case, neuter in gender, and plural in number. Although the gender of the adjective “spirituals” in verse 1 cannot be determined (so that one cannot tell what noun it stands for), the adjective pneumatikon in verse 1 and the noun charismata in verse 31 more than likely refer to the same thing.

Having discussed the matter of love in relation to some charismata in chapter 13, Paul returned to the subject of

prophecy in 14:1.

Here he used again the adjective “spirituals” (pneumatika) substantively, the same adjective as in 12:1. But in this instance we know that the noun for which it stands is neuter and plural, since this is what the form of the Greek adjective is. This form (gender and number) matches that of charismata, the noun of 12:31. Therefore, the pneumatikon of 12:1 and the pneumatika of 14:1 should be translated “spiritual gifts.”

With Paul’s return in 14:1 to the subject begun in 12:1, and our determination of the meaning of these substantival adjectives in 12:1 and 14:1, we conclude that he intended the main point of chapters 12–14 to be a corrective of the abuse of spiritual gifts, particularly tongues as then practiced in Corinth. This observation is important for my thesis.

That the abuse of tongues is the specific point of the section can also be supported by observing that much more material exists about inspired speech, i.e., tongues, interpretation, and prophecy, than any other single topic. For instance, chapter 14 (all about tongues, interpretation, and prophecy) has more material (over 79 lines of text in Greek) than chapters 12 and 13 (77 lines) together, and this does not count the references to tongues, interpretation, prophecy, throughout chapters 12 and 13.” Furthermore, it is significant that tongues and interpretation of tongues (paired in 8–10, 29–30) or tongues (by itself in 28) are last in the lists of chapter 12. Tongues are not last because they are insignificant or the least, they are last because they are the problem. This then brings us to an overview of the paragraphs of chapter 14, which is necessary to set 14:1–5 in an appropriate context.

Overview of Chapter 14

The first paragraph, 14:1–5, serves an important purpose in this section (12:1–14:40) on charismata as well as in chapter 14 itself. In a thesis-like manner Paul brought the reader to the point of the argument regarding the proper use of tongues in a public service. Paul’s enduring principle is body edification, which comes through understanding. (References to the necessity of intelligibility include 14:2, 6–11, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24.) If no one understands, no one can be edified or brought under conviction. Thus, Paul appealed for interpretation when tongues occurred.

What follows in chapter 14 arises from the point of this first paragraph. Verse 6 with its “but now” plus the rhetorical question (“if I come to you speaking with tongues, what good will I be to you ... ?”) directs the reader to the Corinthian problem of exclusively speaking in tongues. In verses 7–11 the apostle illustrates from other life situations the point: people have to understand to act or react appropriately. At verse 13 the “wherefore” introduces a movement forward in Paul’s exhortation and counsel about what to do in a public worship setting: if a person does anything in the Spirit, i.e., in a tongue, praying, blessing, etc., it should also be translated so everyone can be edified. This exhortation concludes at verses 18, 19 where Paul pushed the point of tongues and interpretation in a public assembly.

In the next paragraph, verses 20–22, Paul turned the Corinthians’ thesis on its ear. For them, speaking in tongues was a sign of God’s presence and their own spirituality. Gordon Fee is instructive in his interpretation:

“Although it cannot be finally proven, the flow of the argument from v. 20, including the strong ‘so then’ of this sentence, suggests that Paul is setting up this antithesis with the Corinthians’ own point of view in mind. That is, ‘In contrast to what you think, this word from Isaiah indicates that tongues are not [sic] meant as a sign for believers. They are not, as you make them, the divine evidence of being pneumatikos, nor of the presence of God in your assembly.’⁴

This resolves the difficulty contained by these verses. With this interpretation, Paul’s logic becomes clear. The Corinthians’ own experience of tongues contradicted their erroneous reasoning for their manifestation of tongues in the assembly. From verses 23 to 25, Paul continued his argument. The unbeliever or ignorant person in a public assembly will only respond if he/she understands.

In verses 26–33, Paul embellished the principle stated plainly in verse 26b: “Let all be done for edification.” Paul gave guidelines for “speech” manifestations. If one has a tongue, let it be interpreted, either by someone else or by the person himself. If it is not interpreted, remain silent, i.e., in ongoing situations. Furthermore, prophecies should be judged and limited. The limitation on both tongues, interpretation, and prophecy followed the principle given throughout this section in 1 Corinthians 12–14, and encouraged diverse manifestations of the charismata.

A difficult, intrusion-like topic about women occurs in verses 33–36. I am not sure that Fee’s handling of it is acceptable to all. He says that this portion is a later addition and not original with Paul.⁵ Admittedly, the passage is extremely difficult and uncharacteristic of Paul. What the context suggests is that the women are involved somehow in the confusion caused by the abuse of tongues, thus somehow violating the principle of edification through understanding and order. (See verses 33a and 40 which “bracket” this paragraph with references to order/disorder.)

Paul then appealed to his authority in verses 37 to 38 and restates his thesis in verses 39–40. “Be eager to prophecy — do not forbid to speak in tongues [sounds as if tongues are important]; and let all be done decently and in order.”

Interpretation of 14:1–5

With this brief overview of the flow of Paul’s argument, it is time to turn to a detailed interpretation of the paragraph at hand.⁶ With the clause “pursue love” (introduced without a Greek connector), Paul recapitulates the point of chapter 13. “And” (de) with “be zealous for spiritual gifts” connects the point of the argument with 12:1 (“spiritual gifts”) and moves from the general to the specific to bring the reader face to face with the specific issue: “but rather that you may prophesy.” With this movement, Paul introduces the problem. The “but rather” (mallon de) is a mild connector indicating the specific topic within the larger topic of charismata and identifying the spiritual expression preferable to tongues without the interpretation. “That [hina] you may prophesy” gives the purpose of the verb “be zealous” appearing in the earlier clause.

The Greek gar (“for”) in verse² introduces the next two clauses and thereby provides two stages of explanation, i.e., each clause gives a reason for Paul’s statement, “be zealous to prophesy.” The first explains the reason for preferring prophecy: “for he who speaks in a tongue [i.e., gives an utterance in another language unknown by the inspired speaker] does not speak to people [anthropois; not androis = “males” or “men”] but to God.” The second further explains why prophecy is preferred to the gift of tongues: “for no one understands. But [de] he speaks by the Spirit in mysteries [i.e., he speaks something mysterious or unknown to the mind of a human in a tongue].” The “but” before “he speaks mysteries” mildly contrasts and explains the “he speaks mysteries” with the “no one understands” (akouo — literally, “hears”). God is the only One to understand.

Verse 3 begins with a contrasting connector, “but” (de). The sentence, “But he who prophesies speaks edification, consolation, and exhortation to people [anthropois],” contrasts the activities of “he who speaks in tongues” (described in the two preceding clauses in verse 2) with that of “he who prophesies.”

Verse 4 begins without a Greek connector; this occurrence is “asyndetic.” This particular phenomenon brings into sharp contrast what tongues do for the individual and what prophecy does for the church. “But” (de) contrasts the individual with body edification: “He who speaks in tongues edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.” The two contrasting clauses of verse 4 set up in verse 5 the recapitulation of the problem and his point of the argument thus far: “But [de] I wish all of you to speak in tongues, and especially that you may prophesy.”⁷ Paul did not want tongues to cease — he still encouraged the proper use of this gift (5a). The reason Paul preferred prophecy is given in the next part of the verse (5b): “And [de] greater is the one who prophesies than the one who speaks in a tongue, except he interpret, so that the church may receive edification.” The “and” connects the preceding clause (5a) with the “greater ...” and the exceptive clause to bring out Paul’s point: if one speaks in tongues, he/she should interpret. When this happens, people understand and are edified. This has the same result as prophecy.

Let me make several, further points. The word used to express the intended result for both tongues + interpretation and prophecy in verse 5 is oikodomen (build up, edify). The same word (14:12,7,26) and related words (14:19,31) occur in the contexts for both prophecy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues and express the same concern for understanding.

Furthermore, the exceptive clause in 14:5b drives home the point that tongues plus interpretation equals prophecy. The term “except” (ektos ei ti) in Greek in verse 5 is, particularly in the New Testament, a Pauline expression. This term occurs eight times in the New Testament, six instances of which are in Pauline epistles. Ektos is used both as an adverb and as an improper preposition. With the accompanying two words, ei me, it occurs only in 1 Corinthians 14:4 and 15:2. This expression underscores the point we are trying to make. “Except” here acts much like “if” would in a conditional sentence. This paraphrase may help to see this more clearly:

“If one does not interpret an inspired utterance given in another language, the utterance does not have the edifying impact upon the congregation as a prophecy would have. But if the one who delivers such an utterance interprets it, then the utterance and the interpretation have the same impact as a prophecy.”

It is helpful to set forth this sentence in diagram form, noting the relationship of the various clauses and, especially, showing the exceptive clause. The order and spacing of the various parts indicate the order in which they occur in the Greek text and their syntactical relationships to one another:

But
[is] greater
the one who prophesies
than
the one who speaks in tongues
[is]
except
[when the one who speaks in tongues]8 interprets
in order that the church might receive edification.

Several comments are in order about this diagram. First, the two clauses (1, the one who prophesies and 2, the one who speaks in tongues) express a comparison which pertains to value, i.e., edification, benefits, and not to status, i.e., an inferior gift. Note, please, that this is a comparison, not a contrast. A contrast sets one clause against the other, as one is entirely different from the other. So, when a condition (i.e., intelligibility) is present with both clauses, both participate in similarity. It is true that the linguistic manifestation of tongues, interpretation, and prophecy is different, but the fundamental character or nature of the three is the same—they are inspired speech whose intention is to edify, etc.

Second, the clause which begins with “in order that” expresses the purpose of the verb “interprets.” The subject of this verb is what I have included in brackets and is clearly understood. The clause can read this way: “The one who speaks in tongues [should] interpret in order that the church might receive edification.”

So, I maintain that Paul means that tongues, interpretation, and prophecy alike are inspired speech, function similarly, and (should) have similar results. The three in a public worship setting intend to edify, exhort, and/or console. Note, however, that in verses 26–33 Paul also limits the display of these inspired gifts to encourage other fruitful manifestations.

The Direction of Tongues

The question remains: to whom are tongues addressed, God or people? Several areas must be explored to answer this adequately. The first one pertains to the meaning of several verbs in 1 Corinthians 14:1–5, especially in verses 1–3. These verbs are “speaks” (lalei, et.al. in v. 2 and 3) and “hears” (akouei in v. 2). Specifically, what does it mean to say that when one speaks in a tongue, he speaks to God? In the view which looks somewhat negatively upon the gift of tongues, speaking to God assumes a unidirectional meaning; thus tongues-speech is addressed to God, and prophecy to people. Now the use of the Greek dative case in the nouns (“to God,” “to people”) serving as the objects of the verb “speaks” in the above verses does suggest that interpretation. But lexicology (meaning) in context does not support it. The living context (the meaning of the verb and related matters in actual use) always overrules, and gives direction to, abstract grammar (such as, in this instance, the case ending of the Greek nouns). I submit, then, that “does not speak to people but to God” (14:2) has reference to understanding instead of direction. In fact, in verse 2 the clause “but speaks mysteries by the Spirit” says that very thing. The reason is that God in His omniscience knows/understands but people do not. So “to speak” means “to speak an understandable/intelligible language,” and only God understands all forms of communication. The emphasis of “speaking” falls on the one who is able to comprehend the message or contents. One really does not speak, then, unless it is understood by others, which is the social dynamic in a Mediterranean society. This cultural dynamic connects with the second verb in verse 2: “for no one hears.” It is not that no one hears noise, i.e., sound waves reverberating against the ear drums. “Hears” (akouei) really means “understands,” which is the usual meaning of this Greek word. Something is not heard unless someone understands and acts positively upon it. For instance, consult the word “hears” in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, especially verse 16: “But blessed are ...

your ears because they hear.” So, I maintain that “speaks to God” does not have directional significance; rather, it has to do with understanding.

Something should be said about the sociological significance of tongues and the lack of understanding that results when tongues-speaking is not interpreted. For one person to do something which relates only to an individual — such as being personally edified and not being concerned about interpreting the tongues and thus edifying the group — is quite shameful in a kinship oriented society. This social orientation pertained both to Paul and his Corinthian audience.

To take tongues as unidirectional is to be caught up in a modern western mind-set, quite foreign to the mind-set of the first-century Mediterranean world. Such a view: 1. ignores the social dimension and 2. the tendency toward an overly strict categorization (hardening of the categories). Read the prophets of the Old Testament and Psalms, for instance, and one finds multiple perspectives of prophetic speech, both on the part of the speaker and on that of the addressee.

In the second area we explore the implications of the Greek word used in Acts 2 in regards to prophetic inspiration. This verb, *apophtheggesthai* (“to speak out”) occurs twice: in verses 4 (“as the Spirit gave/enabled them to speak out”) and 14 (“Peter ... spoke out to them”). In these two places, the verb describes both 1, tongues as the initial experience and 2, prophecy. In both the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in non-canonical texts, this word is used unquestionably for divinely inspired speech. It is true that Acts tells us that the people heard the apostles glorifying God in tongues (cf. verse 11). But it is also true that Peter’s inspired sermon explains, i.e., interprets, the tongues. In one sense we have tongues plus interpretation/explanation/prophesy resulting in the edification of the church (i.e., 3,000 added to their number, v. 41). I do not mean by this that these phenomena are identified as the gift of tongues and interpretation. It just so happens that this is what the Spirit did at this time. Tongues in Acts 2 functioned like a power encounter, catching the attention of unbelievers. Peter’s inspired sermon explained the implication of tongues and brought many of these hearers to Christ. These tongues witnessed to the dawn of the eschatological era. What I do mean is that tongues, even initial evidence, is of the same character as prophecy in that both are inspired speech.

This is what Luke intended us to understand, and Paul in 1 Corinthians did not see them any differently.

Conclusion

Part of the problem with these two interpretations of the gift of tongues, as in other areas, relates to use of words. I think all of us are a bit careless in our use of words for these manifestations. Take “oracle,” for instance. Because of its use in Scripture, it is best to think of an oracle as a part of the larger world of prophecy.¹⁰ The term “message in tongues,” as well, can be used too ambiguously. When tongues and interpretation are manifested in praise (or prayer), for example, is it not better to call this a praise and not a message?

But the same obtains for the operation of prophecy. In fact, Paul, speaking about the gifts, in Romans 12:6 (prophecy) and 8 (exhortation) may already be using more precise language. He may intend something a bit different or may be speaking about the same manifestation from different perspectives. In 1 Corinthians 14:3 exhortation is the result of prophecy.

Furthermore, I think that the Bible teaches that tongues are important and that they are inspired speech. By “inspired” I do not place these manifestations on the same level as Scripture. But I mean that the Holy Spirit empowers in a certain way to speak blessings to his church, etc.

Tongues, nonetheless, need interpreting in a public setting. Several kinds of tongues exist: initial evidence, private use of tongues for personal edification, and the public gift of tongues. Every Christian should have or manifest the first two. The last one is a special gift of the Spirit, which all need not have, though open to all. This article has addressed this last gift. Nonetheless, it is desirable that we would “stir up” all the facets of inspired speech (initial evidence/baptism of the Spirit, tongues, interpretation, and prophecy) given by the Spirit for personal edification, for building up the body of Christ, and for glorifying the Lord.

Notes

1. William Graham MacDonald, “Biblical Glossolalia — Thesis 7” *Paraclete* 28:2 (Spring 1994):1.
2. Unless other indicated, Scripture quotations are from the author’s own translation.
3. Also, explicit references to tongues occur at least 19 times in chapters 12–14, and tongues-speaking is the only gift included in all seven listings of spiritual gifts (12:8–10,28,29,30; 13:1–3; 13:8; 14:6; 14:26) in this passage.
4. Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987) 681–82.
5. *Ibid.*, 699–708.
6. I use the Greek text in this discussion, with my translation. This will not match the NIV, necessarily but it is important since the Greek text more clearly reveals Paul’s logic. The method I will use in this paper engages this logic. This is in contrast to the atomistic interpretation used by some, MacDonald included.
7. “Especially that you may prophesy” or “but rather that you may prophesy” (mallon de hina propheteuete) in 14:5 is identical to the Greek clause in 14:1b.
8. 14:13 is the direct correlation to this assertion and flows out of this statement in verse 5: “Wherefore, let the one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.” I have also taken the liberty to remove all punctuation from the Greek text in this diagram because it gives the wrong suggestion. Modern editors have placed in Greek texts punctuation, which is not inspired.
9. It appears in different forms in the two places, of course.
10. Consult, for instance, even the brief discussions of George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), S.V. “Oracle,” by I. Mendelsohn; and R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Word-book of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), s.v. “μαν” by Leonard J. Copes.

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