

Emphasis of Love

(Tongues and Prophecy)

1 Corinthians 14 – A Higher Calling

Background: When the believers received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit enabled them to speak in languages they had not learned. We call this the gift of tongues, since the word “tongue” is the same as “language.” In addition to being a way to communicate to unbelievers in different languages^a, this gift was a sign indicating who the true believers were^b, authenticating the message^c, and showing the indwelling of the Spirit^d. The main purpose of tongues is to be a sign to unbelievers^e, but it may have a role in the church when interpreted^f. It is building to a believer’s spirit^g, so it is used as a private prayer language by some. While this is the most common use of tongues today, it does not appear to have been the main use of tongues in New Testament times^h. This is an important distinction and will greatly affect a person’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14.

^a Acts 2:8-11 “And how is it that each one of us hears them in our own native language?...we hear them speaking in our own languages about the great deeds God has done!” NET

^b Mark 16:17-20 These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new languages; ¹⁸ they will pick up snakes with their hands, and whatever poison they drink will not harm them; they will place their hands on the sick and they will be well”... ²⁰ They went out and proclaimed everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through the accompanying signs. NET

Note: Every believer would have the Spirit, but not every believer would speak in tongues.

1 Cor. 12:7-10 To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the benefit of all. ⁸ For one person is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, and another the message of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another performance of miracles, to another prophecy, and to another discernment of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. NET

(See also: Romans 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:29-30)

^c Hebrews 12:4 ...God confirmed [Jesus’ followers’] witness with signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. NET

^d Acts 10:44-46 While Peter was still speaking these words [to Cornelius’ guests at Caesarea], the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were greatly astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God... NET

Acts 19:6 and when Paul placed his hands on [the believers in Ephesus], the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. NET

^e 1 Corinthians 14:22a So then, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers. NET

^f 1 Cor. 14:27-28 If someone speaks in a tongue, it should be two, or at the most three, one after the other, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no interpreter, he should be silent in the church. Let him speak to himself and to God. NET

^g 1 Cor. 14:4a The one who speaks in a tongue builds himself up.

1 Cor. 14:28 But if there is no interpreter, he should be silent in the church. Let him speak to himself and to God.

^h See footnote of 1 Cor. 14:22

Some will argue that the gift of tongues and other sign gifts ceased after its initial purposes were fulfilled. In other words, that the sign gifts ended after it was established that the Holy Spirit had come, that Gentiles could also be true believers, and the canon (collection of Scripture) started taking shape. While there is an indication that tongues will end (or have ended) at some pointⁱ, there is also an indication that the Holy Spirit will be poured out in the last days^j. So the argument of tongues ceasing is somewhat moot. Even if tongues ceased, they may start up again, and may already be active in today's world. Additionally, even if tongues ceased as the norm, that would not necessarily mean that the Spirit would never manifest Himself through the gift of tongues in unique situations. For example, those who believe that the gift of healing is not active in the church today in the same way it was in New Testament times, typically recognize that God can and does still heal in some special situations. In a similar way, even if tongues ceased as a commonly practiced gift, it would not mean that it ceased for all people, places, and situations.

There is much disagreement today related to the gift of tongues. Some people feel it is an active and important part of a Christian's walk with God, while others feel that it is something that was active in the early church, but not in modern Christianity. 1 Corinthians 14 is the longest discourse on tongues and so much of what can be learned about tongues comes from this chapter. When we study a passage, we often "read between the lines" and fill in other words and thoughts to help us try to understand the author's intended meaning. In the passage below, I've included my between-the-lines thoughts to help others get the fuller picture of how I am interpreting and processing the passage. My thoughts are in brackets and a different color to help highlight that these words are not part of Scripture. I've also included footnotes that will aid in further study and add commentary to why I am interpreting the passage the way I am.:

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 13:8b-10 But if there are prophecies, they will be set aside; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be set aside. ⁹ For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when what is perfect comes, the partial will be set aside.

^j In Acts 2 the disciples speak in tongues and in Acts 2:17-21 Luke points out that there is a prophecy from Joel explaining that God will pour out His Spirit in the last days. It is clear that Luke sees the speaking of tongues as a fulfillment of this prophecy. However, some parts of the prophecy such as the "sun will be changed to darkness and the moon to blood," sound more like end times events. So it would appear that the prophecy in Joel is partially fulfilled in Acts 2 and may be fulfilled in completion in the end times. It therefore would be reasonable to foresee a similar pouring out of the Spirit and spiritual gifts in the end times in a way that is similar to what occurred in the early church.

1 Corinthians 14:1-40 Pursue love and be eager^k for the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy [because it promotes love].² For the one speaking in a tongue [that is not understood by others] does not speak to people but to God, for no one understands^l; he is speaking mysteries by the Spirit.³ But the one who prophesies [by delivering God's message to others] speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement, and consolation.⁴ The one who speaks in a [language or] tongue [which is not understood by others] builds himself up, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.⁵ I wish you all spoke in tongues [and you were built up by doing so], but even more that you would prophesy [and promote love by building up others]. The one who prophesies [displays love and therefore] is greater than the one who speaks in tongues [that are not understood], unless he interprets so that the [people in the] church may be strengthened [which would be a way for tongues to also be a loving and building gift].

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues [among the church family], how will I help you unless I speak to you [in a language you understand] with a revelation or with knowledge or prophecy or teaching? ⁷ It is similar for lifeless things that make a sound, like a flute or harp. Unless they make a distinction in the notes, how can what is played on the flute or harp be understood? ⁸ If, for example, [when it is time for the trumpeter to sound a battle cry] the trumpet makes an unclear sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ It is the same for you. If you do not speak clearly with your tongue [using a language people understand], how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air [because only God understands what you are saying]. ¹⁰ There are probably many kinds of [tongues or] languages in the world, and none is without meaning^m. ¹¹ If then I do not know the meaning of a [tongue or] language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. ¹² It is the same with you. Since you are eager for manifestations [or gifts] of the Spirit, seek to abound in order to strengthen the [people of the] church [because that is the loving thing to do].

¹³ So then, one who speaks in a tongue [that he doesn't understand] should pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴ If I pray in a tongue [that is not understood], my spirit prays, but my mind is unproductive [because it doesn't understand the words]. ¹⁵ What should I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind [by praying in a language I understand]ⁿ. I will sing praises with my spirit, but I will also sing praises with my mind [by singing in a language I understand]. ¹⁶ Otherwise, if you are praising God with your spirit [only, by praising in a tongue that no one understands], how can someone without the gift [to interpret a language he doesn't know] say "Amen" [or give an audible agreement] to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ For you are certainly giving thanks well [because God understands you], but the other person is not strengthened [because he doesn't know what you said]. ¹⁸ I thank God that [when away from the church family] I speak in tongues more than all of you^o, ¹⁹ but in the church I want to speak five words [in a

^k 1 Cor. 12:31 encourages that the eagerness be directed toward desiring the "greater gifts," and 1 Cor. 14:12 clarifies that in that eagerness, gifts that build the church are preferred. 1 Cor. 14:39 encourages an eagerness for prophecy.

^l In Acts 2:11 people did understand the "tongues" that were being spoken because it was in their own corresponding language. Here in 1 Corinthians no one understands because they were speaking foreign languages among their own church members (1 Cor. 15:5) who did not know those languages.

^m All languages have meaning. A person using the gift of tongues is not just babbling or using nonsense words. He may be using a language that is not understood by those who do not know the language, but what he says would be understood by someone who knows that language.

ⁿ Here it is not clear whether Paul is saying that he will speak in tongues (with his spirit) and separately in his usual language (with his mind), or if he is saying that he will pray in his usual language using both his spirit and mind.

^o Note: Paul may be speaking in tongues as a private prayer language outside of the church, or he may be speaking in tongues to foreign people on his missionary journeys. It is not clear in this context why he is speaking in tongues more than others.

known language] with my mind to instruct others, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.^p [In other words, it is far more valuable to speak to people in a language that others understand than one that they don't!]

²⁰ Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking. Instead, be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹ It is written in the law^q: “By people with strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, yet not even in this way will they listen to me,” says the Lord. [If you recall, the Assyrians spoke in a foreign language to the Israelites when they were taken captive. When this prophecy was fulfilled, the speaking in “tongues” was a sign for the unbelieving Israelites that the prophesied judgement had come.] ²² So then, tongues are a sign not for believers [in the church who don't understand the language] but for unbelievers [outside the church who do understand the language]^s. Prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers [outside the church] but for believers [inside the church]. ²³ So if the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and unbelievers or uninformed people enter [and hear languages they do not know], will they not say that you have lost your minds [since it will just sound like a bunch of babbling to them]? ²⁴ But if all prophesy [in a common language within the church], and an unbeliever or uninformed person [who has no idea why people would be speaking in languages no one understands] enters, he will be convicted by all, he will be called to account by all [even though prophecy is not primarily for unbelievers^t]. ²⁵ The secrets of his heart are disclosed [by the conviction that is being brought by what is being said], and in this way he will fall down with his face to the ground and worship God, declaring, “God is really among you.” [Because he understood the language that was used.]

²⁶ What should you do then, brothers and sisters? [What is the practical application?] When you come together [in your church meetings], each one has a song, has a lesson, has a revelation, has a tongue [which someone can interpret], has an interpretation. Let all these things be done for the strengthening of the church [family, in accordance with these instructions:]. ²⁷ If someone speaks in a tongue, it should be two, or at the most three, one after the other [in other words, one at a time], and someone must interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no interpreter [to explain what is being said in the commonly understood language], he [the one speaking,] should be silent in the church [as the gift is not like an unstoppable flow of water. It is to be under the control of the speaker]. Let him speak to himself and to God [rather than to the church. He can speak in tongues privately, but not publicly]. ²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak [standing up, and one at a time] and the others should evaluate what is said [to ensure that it is correct]. ³⁰ And if someone sitting down receives a revelation, the person who is speaking should conclude [and let the other person speak]. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one after another [or rather, two or three from among you can], so all can learn and be encouraged. ³² Indeed, the spirits of the prophets are subject to the [minds of the] prophets, ³³ for God is not characterized by disorder but by peace. [In other words, people still need to use their minds to determine when it is appropriate to speak either in a tongue, or with a prophecy. Just because God has given you something to say does not mean that it must be said then and there.]

^p Paul's reluctance to speak in tongues in the church may indicate that he did not have the gift of interpretation.

^q Isaiah 28:11-12

^r Comparing the “tongues” in the early church to the foreign language of the Assyrians is an interesting argument to make that's strength is not readily apparent to the modern reader. It is interesting to note that the origin of language itself at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:7) was a sign to unbelievers of the judgement of God, so perhaps tying tongues closely with pronouncing judgement on unbelievers is not the stretch it may first appear to be.

^s Tongues are a sign for unbelievers. This reveals the main purpose of tongues. If the main purpose of tongues was as a private prayer language, it would have made complete sense to say so here, and would have been a stronger argument against the use of tongues in the church than the argument he just used related to the Assyrians.

^t 1 Cor. 14:22

As in all the churches of the saints [or believers], ³⁴ the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak [in certain ways such as to the men in a way in which they are exercising authority over them, or asking questions publicly that should be asked of their husbands. They *are* allowed to pray and prophesy as mentioned earlier in this letter^u, but not in every situation]. Rather, let them be in submission, as in fact the law says. ³⁵ If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home, because it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church [in such a way]. ³⁶ Did the word of God begin with you, or did it come to you alone? [If you did not get direct revelation, but were instructed and taught as the word of God was passed on to you, then listen to my instruction in these matters as well.]

³⁷ If anyone considers himself a prophet or spiritual person, he should acknowledge that what I write to you is the Lord's command. [It is important that you understand that this is not just my opinion. It is God's. If you have an argument or complaint, it is with God.] ³⁸ If someone does not recognize this, he is not recognized [as being part of the church family]. ³⁹ So then, brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy [because that is the loving thing to do], and do not forbid anyone from speaking in tongues [in the manner prescribed]. ⁴⁰ And do everything in a decent and orderly manner. [Again, not just speaking without restraint, but using your gifts as appropriate to the situation.]

Personal observations (or points to facilitate further discussion and deeper understanding):

- There are people I know whom I trust and respect who speak in tongues. They have found tongues to be a meaningful part of their relationship with God.
- I don't personally know anyone who has the gift of tongues in a way in which they can speak to someone in a foreign language as occurred in Acts 2.
- There are people I know who faked speaking in tongues, and others who taught people to speak in tongues in ways that make me doubt the veracity of the event (such as having them start with tongue twisters) as experienced in their lives.
- There are people I know and respect who didn't believe in speaking in tongues or other similar spiritual outpourings, but experienced them anyway. This makes me think something authentic is happening.
- At times in my life, I have prayed to receive the gift of tongues, either as a personal prayer language, or as the ability to speak a language I don't know. It would not surprise me or bother me in the slightest if others did the same.
- In an effort to follow Scripture and in caution to desire verification of every miracle, act of the Spirit, and answered prayer, we can become skeptical. Skepticism can help anchor us to the truth ("Test everything and hold on to the good."), or it can be in opposition to faith. It is unlikely that we are cautious in a perfectly balanced way.
- Care must be taken to not elevate personal experience over sound biblical teaching or we can be given to false teachings and practice. There are certain disturbing practices in some branches of the charismatic movement. Examples include being slain in the spirit, holy laughter, and holy barking. These do not have any biblical foundations and are not representative of the sign gifts or of the orderly worship talked about in 1 Corinthians 14.
- There is a danger in being overly skeptical and there is a danger in being quick to embrace everything as being of the Spirit.
- Each of us is going to have a certain leaning. We may tend to be skeptical or we may be quick to embrace the miraculous. We should embrace one another and recognize the values and dangers of each approach.

^u 1 Corinthians 11:5

What 1 Corinthians says about tongues and the Spirit:

- The emphasis of 1 Corinthians 12-14 is not that you need the gift of tongues, but that you should love.
 - 1 Corinthians 12:1 With regard to spiritual gifts... I do not want you to be uninformed.
 - 1 Corinthians 12:31 But you should be eager for the greater gifts. And now I will show you a way that is beyond comparison.
 - 1 Corinthians 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
 - 1 Corinthians 13:13 And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.
 - 1 Corinthians 14:1 Pursue love and be eager for the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.
- I appreciate the desire for a greater filling of the Spirit. The emphasis of 1 Corinthians 12-14 is not that you need more of the Spirit. 1 Cor. 12:7-11 makes it plainly evident that you already have the Spirit, who is manifesting Himself in various ways in different people. The rest of the chapter teaches that your particular gift mix is an important part of how God made the body. As such, the emphasis is not that you are *missing* something, but that you *have* something/someone special (the Holy Spirit).
- 1 Corinthians 14 does not stress speaking in tongues as playing a significant role in a believer's personal relationship with God. It does not negate that possibility, but this is the clearest and longest discourse on the matter, and it is not clearly addressed or emphasized. I appreciate the desire for a more spiritual relationship with God. However, I do not believe the Bible stresses a pursuit of tongues or other spiritual gifts as a way to pursue a deeper relationship with God.
- Paul's heavy emphasis is not that we should speak in tongues, but that we should love and desire the gifts that build the church. "Eagerly desire *the greater gifts*." Even if you don't have the gift of prophecy, it would be good to do things that build people up, and to speak to them for their "strengthening, encouragement, and consolation."
- 1 Corinthians 12-14 shows the Spirit actively working in the believers' lives. We should be careful not to downplay the role of the Spirit. I am confident that every believer already has the Spirit, but I also recognize that there is a biblical case for people being filled or moved upon by the Spirit in some greater sense. I believe a greater filling of the Spirit is something that every Christian should desire.
 - Ephesians 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, which is debauchery, but be filled by the Spirit
 - Galatians 5:22-23a But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, and self-control.
- 1 Corinthians 14 downplays the role of tongues *in the church*.^v It is not to be forbidden,^w but it should be practiced biblically. In accordance with what is taught in 1 Corinthians 14, if you have a message from the Spirit in a tongue, it should be shared in turn and only if someone can interpret. In our church, this would be most fitting at a Fiesta meeting (where the structure is more of a participatory teaching time like the meetings of the early church). If you are confident you have a message from the Spirit on a Sunday morning, it would be most appropriate to share what God has given you after the message has been given.

^v 1 Cor. 14:19 but in the church I want to speak five words with my mind to instruct others, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

^w 1 Cor. 14:26 ...When you come together, each one has a song, has a lesson, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all these things be done for the strengthening of the church.

1 Cor. 14:39 So then, brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid anyone from speaking in tongues.