

## 8. WHAT ABOUT THE “PRAYER-TONGUES” IN CORINTH?

### THE CASE FOR SPEAKING IN UNKNOWN TONGUES

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Having looked at the three historic occasions in the **Book of Acts** when “tongues” were used to advance the Gospel of Christ in the world, we now come to exceedingly muddy waters! We are going to ask the question: *What About the “Prayer-Tongues” in Corinth?*

Those who believe the “tongues” in **First Corinthians chapters 12 - 14** are “ecstatic utterances” with no recognisable language components of grammar and syntax, must explain that these “prayer tongues” are essentially a very different kind of language to what we have in **Acts chapters 2, 10 and 19**.

Recall that the Spirit-inspired “tongues” in **Acts** were languages always understood by an audience. Interpretation of the languages in **Acts** is not indicated as ever needed, for they were languages understood and addressed **to men** in the context of preaching the Gospel. It was always **Tongues and Prophecy** --- languages **for** preaching the Good News.

Can it be demonstrated then, that when we come to the “gift of tongues” at Corinth we meet a different *genre* altogether --- that of “*unknown* tongues” (as per KJV) ? If the modern practice of “speaking in *unknown* tongues” is to be justified, the case must be made that the **various kinds of tongues (12: 10)** are valid “heavenly tongues”.

#### MY METHOD

Before we get in earnest, I need to lay out how I am going to approach this hot-potato subject. It would literally take me an entire book to adequately deal with every aspect of the matter. Indeed, whole libraries have already been written on it!

So, here is what I propose. I would like to present the two sides of the discussion as best and as briefly and as fairly as I understand them. I am not claiming exhaustibility. I am not claiming infallibility or the last word on it either. I am open to new insight and will continue to seek to be open to the truth and to the leading of God’s holy Spirit. I want God’s absolute best for myself and for His people whatever that may look like.

I will show how both sides claim to give valid Biblical reasons for their respective positions, even though they appear to be diametrically opposed interpretations! I will let you, my reader, decide where you wish to land after considering the evidence.

At the end of the day, this must be one of those subjects where we will have to allow room for liberty of conscience. Winning an argument, taking sides, is not the point.

So, with the method of my approach stated, I will first give the case that the “tongues” mentioned in Corinth bear little, if any, resemblance to the recognised and regularly spoken

languages as recorded in **Acts** and that they are in fact, “ecstatic utterances” of a different nature and purpose altogether.

## THE CASE FOR “UNKNOWN TONGUES”

Given today’s widespread practice of “*glossolalia*” there must be a number of verses in the **First Book of Corinthians** which, upon their natural reading, must appear to lend strong support for “praying in *unknown* tongues” for personal profit and, by extension, for profiting the church --- otherwise no honest Christian could justify the phenomenon. The most-often appealed to verses are these:-

Now there are varieties of gifts ... but to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given ... various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues ... and God has appointed in the church ... tongues ... (I Cor. 12: 4,7,10, 30).

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels ... (I Cor. 13: 1).

For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God ... in his spirit he speaks mysteries ...one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself ... I Cor. 14: 2,4).

Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful (I Cor. 14: 13-14).

I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all ... (I Cor. 14: 18).

Tongues are for a sign ... (I Cor. 14: 22).

Do not forbid to speak in tongues (I Cor. 14: 27, 39).

## WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH SERVICES?

“Tongues” are not mentioned in the other “gifts of the Spirit” [*charismata*] listed in **Romans 14**, **Ephesians 4** or **First Peter 4**. So the only thing we can say for sure is that the phenomenon in Corinth was either unique to that place --- or more probably, that only in Corinth had excesses needing correction developed. ( <sup>1</sup> )

**William Barclay** outlines the typical majority consensus amongst Biblical scholars as to what was happening in the Corinthian church. ( <sup>2</sup> ) During a church service someone would fall into an ecstasy and out of their mouth would pour forth a torrent of unintelligible vocalisations that had no semblance to any other known language in earthly use.

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<sup>1</sup> I have already indicated that just because “tongues” are mentioned only in **First Corinthians** that we cannot argue they were therefore not practised in any other churches in that First Century. After all, it’s only in **First Corinthians** that the Lord’s Supper is mentioned in any of the pastoral epistles too, but no one for a second believes the early churches did not regularly practice that! Without the abuse there would have been no need for Paul’s teaching and his mention of those subjects.

<sup>2</sup> This is my *preces* of Barclay’s explanation from his *The Daily Study Bible : The Letters to the Corinthians*, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 7th impression, 1965. [My *preces* in this colour.]

The Corinthian Christians admired this ecstatic gift greatly. They coveted it more than the less spectacular and less publicly admired gifts because they believed it was evidence that a man was speaking under the direct influence of the Spirit of God. Often the ecstatic speaker did not understand their own “tongue”, yet sometimes the person doing the ecstatic utterance interpreted their own utterance to the benefit of the congregation. Sometimes another with the “gift of interpretation” would help the congregation to comprehend the word.

Accordingly, those who had this “gift of [ecstatic] tongues” tended to develop a definite spiritual pride which the apostle sets out to correct. But it’s informative to note that Paul never seemed to question the validity of this experience of “ecstatic tongues”. He certainly recognised its inherent dangers for hysteria and some sort of self-hypnosis, hence his corrections.

The one thing the Corinthian church could never be accused of was that church meetings were dull and uninspiring! Everybody turned up to church services expecting things to happen! And Paul seems to have encouraged everybody to participate towards that living worship (14: 26f).

The modern “charismatic” practice of “tongues” is based upon this model. The fact that Paul seems to claim superiority over the Corinthians in this very phenomenon for himself seems to give strong support for it. He boasts --- was it to chasten their proud sense of superiority? --- **I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all ... (I Cor. 14: 18).**

Many times throughout his missionary journeys, the apostle experienced visions, revelations, and trances. Indeed, he revels in these ecstasies. ( <sup>3</sup> )

However, as we move into post-apostolic times, the church exhibits the tongues phenomenon less and less. Was this decline due to the increasing ecclesiastic developments of “orthodoxy” and the corresponding waning of apostolic fervour? Or were other factors at play?

The fact remains, there are no references to *glossolalia* in the **Apostolic Fathers** (those who had first-hand contact with the apostles and their generation --- and to be distinguished from the later falsely-called **Church Fathers** ). ( <sup>4</sup> )

In later Christian settings “*unknown tongues*” occur very rarely and very randomly amongst certain revivalist groups, such as the **Cevenoles** in Southern France. It was not until the late Nineteenth Century that another major outburst occurred in England amongst **Edward Irving’s** followers. ( <sup>5</sup> )

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. 5:13; 12: 1-4 indicate Paul was rich in ecstatic experiences. Cf. Gal. 2:2, Acts 9: 12; 16: 9; 22: 17; 27: 23, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Although there are 12 references to “the tongue” in terms of the ethics of speech and one reference to the peoples of the languages of the world being gathered in judgment. It would appear that by the Second Century this phenomenon had been subsumed under the general term *prophecy* which, by the way, suggests the historic occurrences of *glossolalia* in Acts were the definitive criteria for later doctrinal classifications.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly **Irving** himself never received the gift!

The occurrence was still relatively unknown until its phenomenal rise in connection with Pentecostalism in the late 1800's and early Twentieth Century, particularly in America. ( <sup>6</sup> ) Since then "speaking in *unknown* tongues" has gained international and cross-denominational acceptance.

**Smith Wigglesworth** is one of the best-known heroes of this continuous and relatively recent Pentecostal movement, and he is on record as earnestly seeking the "gift of tongues" and not resting until he found it. He testifies how initially he ...

Was confusing the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians with the second chapter of Acts. These two chapters deal with different things: one with the gifts of the Spirit, and the other with the baptism of the Spirit with the accompanying sign. ( <sup>7</sup> )

Now, it would be an easy matter to quote many commentaries and scholars who hold this opinion. No less an authority than **The Expositor's Greek Testament** says of **I Cor. 13: 1**;

*"Tongues of men" does not signify foreign languages as are supposed to have been spoken on the Day of Pentecost; they are, in this whole context, ecstatic and inarticulate forms of speech, such as "men" do sometimes exercise: "tongues of angels" ... describes this mystic utterance at its highest ... a mode of expression above this world.* ( <sup>8</sup> )

This commentary says that, in the exercise of this particular charismatic gift, the intelligence of the speaker is suspended and that, The "tongues" of this Epistle cannot have signified the power to speak strange tongues in missionary preaching, as many have inferred from the terms used in the account of the manifestation of the Day of Pentecost ... the indications of this Epistle point to the breaking out of an exalted and mystical utterance differing from all recognised human speech ... ( <sup>9</sup> )

As already indicated, this is the only way the current practice of speaking in "*unknown* tongues" can be Biblically defended. It alleges that the tongues phenomenon in **Acts** relates to the initial one-off baptism with the holy Spirit, whereas "the gift of tongues" is not transitory but rather is permanently given to the believer to exercise in his or her personal life and for the benefit of the church in her worship meetings.

Clearly, although subject to sad abuse and misuse --- which the apostle Paul was writing to correct --- "speaking in tongues" was part-and-parcel of the church in Corinth. Paul considers "the gift of tongues" will continue **until that which is perfect has come (I Cor. 13: 10)** --- whatever that should mean! Paul expects tongues will continue to be a part of the regular church meetings at Corinth --- but under strict operational guidelines **(14:13f)**.

It would appear then, that the original setting for "tongues" for the purpose of **declaring the mighty works of God** for evangelism to carry out the Great Commission as recorded in

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<sup>6</sup> The earliest recorded instance was at Topeka, Kansas in 1901 when "the baptism of the Spirit" fell on **Agnes Ozman**, a student at the Bethel Bible College.

<sup>7</sup> *Smith Wigglesworth: The Complete Collection of His Life Teachings*, Compiled by Roberts Liardon, Albury Publishing, Ok., 1996, p139

<sup>8</sup> General Ed. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., LL.D., Eerdmans, MI, 1956 Vol II, p 896 (Italics all original).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p 889

the historical narratives in the **Book of Acts**, had morphed into the setting of regular church worship services in Corinth.

Perhaps **Smith Wigglesworth** and modern “charismatics” have a fair point after all? Perhaps we should differentiate between the “tongues” in **Acts** and those described in Corinth? Let's build this side of the argument fairly and accumulatively ...

## THE REASONS FOR “SPEAKING IN “UNKNOWN TONGUES”

1. **We are encouraged to seek the gifts of the Spirit:- Covet earnestly the best gifts ... Desire spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12: 31; 14:1).**

God loves a hungry heart that seeks His best, especially when we crave to be better equipped to serve Him effectively. One of the Lord’s complaints with the church at Laodicea was that they were content to be lukewarm, content to be **neither hot nor cold**. Jesus was sickened by such tepidness and vowed to spit them out of his mouth unless they got on fire for him again. It is said of Jesus himself that zeal for his Father’s house ate him up (**John 2: 17**)! So, surely it must be a good thing to **covet earnestly the best gifts** and to **desire spiritual gifts?**

Now, someone may observe, “But doesn’t Paul say that God Himself chooses the gifts and their allotment in the Body of Christ? **We** don’t get to choose our place nor our gifting in His Church.” True. The **varieties of gifts, services, activities, manifestations** are all given for **the common good** and are all **activated and energised by one and the same Spirit which God allots to each one individually as the Spirit chooses (12: 4ff).**

So, do we get a say in the gifts we receive or not? Should we actively ask God and seek our preference for any of the gifts, or do we sit passively just waiting for His pleasure and endowment? How can we eagerly seek to have something that can only be given as a Sovereign gift?

Some scholars try to solve this dilemma by suggesting Paul is just being sarcastic. Paul just wants to show the Corinthians how silly and immature they are to be coveting certain gifts. And it is true that sometimes Paul “plays the fool” in order to make a point with his readers. I do not think we can totally dismiss this explanation in this case, however, there is probably a better one to hand. ( <sup>10</sup> )

The NT does teach in several passages that the believer can let their gifts atrophy by failure to use and practice them appropriately and regularly ( <sup>11</sup> ). It’s the classic, what you don’t use you lose scenario! God’s sovereignty in the gifts does not eliminate personal responsibility to develop and grow them.

Furthermore, Paul clearly does go on to tell the Corinthians that they are to be **zealous** and to **strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy (14:1)**. There’s nothing wrong with desiring certain gifts if they are going to bless the church and help her reach her

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<sup>10</sup> See **2 Cor. chapters 11 and 12** for an example where Paul uses sarcasm to stir better motives from his readers.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. **1 Thess. 5: 19; I Tim. 4: 14; 2 Tim. 1: 6.**

missional goals. And there is certainly nothing wrong with a congregation asking God to raise up individuals who will exercise the more necessary of the gifts!

I think often the church suffers lack and gets what she craves for --- nothing! God's sovereignty waits to be persuaded by our initiative!

Bottom line: I see no reason for a Christian who hungers and thirsts for God's best not to ask for certain gifts under these beneficial provisos. The question then is: Is the gift of "unknown tongues" on the list of the most desirables? Ah, you already know the answer! The Corinthians imagined they did too!

2. **Speaking in tongues is the best direct link to God:- For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God ... in his spirit he speaks mysteries ...one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself ... I Cor. 14: 2,4).**

If you often struggle in your prayer life and, if you often feel you battle to get to first-base as you seek God's presence and, if you often feel God seems remote and that you are missing some dynamic "other" in your personal devotional prayer-life, then "tongues" are your answer!

Who amongst us doesn't experience this dryness and remoteness? Even **Billy Graham** towards the end of his illustrious Spirit-empowered career is on record as saying his one regret was that he didn't pray more. And listening to the glowing testimonies of those who have "the gift of tongues" is a real spur to seeking a gift that evidently **edifies** --- builds up --- one's self in our relationship with God.

Then, when we add on the extra enticement that praying in these "unknown tongues" comes with the bonus of speaking **mysteries in the spirit**, the whole package takes on a superabundant appeal. After all, isn't Christianity a faith based on the supernatural interventions of the Living Creator? Take the supernatural out, take the miraculous away from our Faith and all you have is just another world-religion with no power to save, no power to transform, no power to bring heaven's touch into our lives which we so desperately need.

Speaking in tongues gets you that hot-line to the very presence and throne of God Himself, where you are not speaking **to men, but to God**.

Remember the song, "Telephone to Glory, oh what joy divine; I can feel the current moving on the line; made by God the Father for His very own ... you can talk to Jesus on the royal telephone!" ? ( <sup>12</sup> ) Well, the song perfectly expresses what it's like to speak in "unknown tongues".

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<sup>12</sup> As a teenager I received a personal letter from **Pat Boone** --- which I still have in my possession. His letter was a reply to a letter I wrote to him after reading his book *I Sing a New Song* (I stand perhaps to be corrected on the exact title) which was on the charismatic revival and the attendant gifts of the Spirit during the 1960's. I am quietly confident that, although he did not write the song, **Boone** sang it as a veiled testimony to his reception of the "gift of tongues" and it's value in his life.

3. Speaking in tongues bypasses the mind altogether:- If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful (I Cor. 14: 13-14).

Sometimes our troubles and our circumstances come crashing upon us leaving our minds rather numb and lost for words. And even in the best of times, often we just don't know how to properly express ourselves before the Throne of Grace.

Our minds are so earth-bound, so accustomed to the natural world, so tied to our physical senses, that we must be cut free from such material restrictions before our spirits can soar into the heavenlies where God Himself Who is Spirit dwells. So ...

This is where tongues can come in. In the words of Paul, **the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8: 26-27).**

Speaking and praying in "unknown tongues" sets our spirits free when the **mind is unfruitful** and limited. It adds a real supernatural element to our devotional life.

4. **The apostle's own practice is held up as a model for emulation:- I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all ... (I Cor. 14: 18).**

There is nothing like having the best of the best as your example to emulate! And there are many other great men and women of God --- albeit only in the last century-and-a-half at most it would seem --- whose testimonies can be added to Paul's experience. "Follow us" is the mantra. "*Unknown* tongues" have helped us immensely. And who can dismiss such testimony lightly?

5. **Tongues are the universal sign that the believer has received the fullness of the Spirit:- Tongues are for a sign ... (I Cor. 14: 22).**

This is where we strike some differences of opinion within the Pentecostal and charismatic circles themselves. The more 'moderate' school is that tongues are not for every believer. Tongues do not prove that a Christian has received the baptism or the fullness of the Spirit --- **not all speak in tongues, do they (12: 29)?**

However, a significant portion of the Pentecostal denominations do insist that **the sign** of the fullness of the Spirit must be that every Christian speaks in "an *unknown* tongue". No "tongue"? Then you have not been baptised with the holy Spirit.

An even more radical Pentecostal teaching is that speaking in other tongues is **the sign** that you are "saved". However, we may safely say that whatever these internal differences may be, they have one thing in common: Speaking in tongues is **the sign** the believer has the Spirit.

6. Tongues are perfectly permitted:- Do not forbid to speak in tongues (I Cor. 14: 27, 39).

Since the apostle instructs the church not to forbid the practice, then who are we to deny its relevance for today? To fail to teach these blessings, and worse --- to deny the practice in our churches today --- would be to disobey the apostle's instruction that it be permitted.

### SUMMING UP THE CASE FOR "UNKNOWN TONGUES"

Combined, all of these reasons would seem to give *prima facie* encouragement to "unknown tongues" for today. Green lights everywhere! To deny their relevance and helpfulness is to quench the Spirit and rob the Church of her power.

But not so fast, for;

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him (Prov. 18:17) ...