

11. TONGUES, THEN, ARE FOR A SIGN!

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Therefore tongues are for a sign ... (I Corinthians 14: 22)

We have placed the famous “Love Chapter” into its original setting and seen that **First Corinthians chapter 13** is at the very heart of a hard-hitting *rebuke* of the misuse and abuse which “the tongues question” was causing in the Corinthian Church.

The “Love Chapter” has shown us that spiritual gifts are no guarantee of spiritual maturity or godly character. For, unless we are being controlled by the Spirit’s love, and using the gifts God has given to each of us for the **edification of the church**, the net effect is that we are like **a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal** --- making a lot of empty noise --- and we are **nothing** and **gain nothing** (13: 1-3).

Paul says, **love never ends** (13: 8). Or, as some translations read it, **love never fails**. (¹) Now watch carefully how Paul contrasts the *temporary* nature of the miraculous gifts of tongues, prophecies and knowledge over against the lasting power of love;

Love never ends. **But** as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only *in part*, and we prophesy only *in part*; but **when the perfect comes**, *the partial* will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only *in part*; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (13: 8 - 13).

The contrast between the endurance of love and that which is temporary and only partial is stark. Love will never end nor fail, but the gifts of tongues, knowledge and prophecies will come to an end.

TWO OPPOSING INTERPRETATIONS

But *when* will that end come? The inspired answer is, **when the perfect comes**. But exactly what is “**the perfect**” which will complete the partial? There are essentially two competing interpretations.

First, there are those who favour the belief that these miraculously inspired gifts will continue until the end of this present Age. For them, **the perfect** (or, **the complete**) must refer to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when we shall see our Lord **face to face**, for only

¹ ἐκ πίπτει (from *ekpipto*) meaning, to fall, to fail, to cease, to die, to be destroyed.

then **will we know fully even as we have been fully known**. This is what Pentecostals, charismatics, and a good section of evangelicals believe.

Second, there are those who say the gifts of tongues, prophecies and knowledge died out once the apostles and that first generation of Christians had passed away. This is the traditional Reformed Protestant “cessationist” view. For them, **the perfect** refers to the completed New Testament canon which we call, the Bible.

I will return to the various strengths and weaknesses of these two interpretations in the next article. There, I will propose a third alternative.

But first, to help us better answer as to when the supernatural *charismata* will cease, we must back up and ask an obvious question:-

WHY TONGUES IN THE FIRST PLACE?

When I ask my Pentecostal and charismatic friends, “Why do you speak in “tongues”, they almost invariably answer, “Because tongues are the sign that we have received the fullness of the holy Spirit. The gift of tongues proves we have been baptised with the holy Spirit.”

Let’s compare that answer with Paul’s explanation in **1 Corinthians chapter 14: 20- 22;**

Brothers and sisters, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. In the Law it is written:

**With other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people;
And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me, says the LORD.**

Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.

Paul does say, tongues are for a sign. But --- contrary to charismatic doctrine --- he says tongues are **not a sign given to Christians!** Tongues are **not a sign to those who believe.**

Read Paul’s lips! **Therefore, tongues are for a sign, NOT to those who believe ... but to unbelievers.** If we go by this clear Bible statement, the Pentecostal and charismatic doctrine is out the window! Tongues are **not** the sign that the *Christian* believer is filled with the Spirit of God! They are a sign *to the lost*, to the ones who do not believe in Christ.

Here then, is **the key** that unlocks the whole question; *Why* tongues?

THE PURPOSE FOR TONGUES IS FOUND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT!

To prove his point, notice the apostle quotes from the Old Testament --- **Isaiah 28: 11-12** to be precise --- for he writes, **In the Law it is written**. And to whom was “**the Law**” given? Right. To the nation of Israel, first and foremost. Or, to use the actual words from Isaiah, **to this people**. We must again underline this critical truth: If we do not know our Old Testament we will misinterpret the New Testament. Sounds pretty basic, and we all give

mental assent to it, but the tongues question is a classic case in point where failure to do so can result in hurtful tangents.

TONGUES ARE A SIGN TO THE UNBELIEVING JEWS!

The Law was written to this people who were the Jews in the Land of Israel. So, what on earth can Paul possibly mean when he says that tongues are a sign to the unbelieving Jew? To answer this, we must pick up the context of **Isaiah 28: 11-12**.

The whole of **Isaiah 28** concerns God's judgment upon a people who are not listening to God's pleas. They are in fact, behaving as though they are intoxicated with wine, and indeed, many really are inebriated (**vs. 1,3,7**). King, priest and people are compared to those who have **erred through wine ... through intoxicating drink**. They are stupefied, stumbling around with blurred vision. There is the **vomit** and the smell of alcohol everywhere (**vs. 7-8**). No one seems to be in a fit state to hear the word of the LORD which Isaiah was delivering.

The LORD God laments, "To whom can I **teach knowledge?** Who can I **make to understand My message (v. 9)?**" It can't be to these babies who are devoid of understanding and can only handle breast milk! **This People** have to be spoon fed, **precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little (v. 10)**.

Now, unfortunately I don't read Hebrew, but I believe those last words are very suggestive in the Hebrew tongue. When uttered, they sound like baby talk. I will apologise to readers of Hebrew, but as best as I can reproduce the phonetics, it's something like this; "**Sarv la Sarv, Sarv la Sarv; Karv la Karv, Karv la Karv.**" When pronounced aloud, and quickly enough, you might be forgiven for thinking it's mimicking the babblings of a toddler.

The people were mocking Isaiah. They were jeering the prophet to his face as he was delivering God's message to them. In effect they were saying, "Isaiah, you sound like you are babbling like a baby --- **"Sarv la Sarv, Sarv la Sarv; Karv la Karv, Karv la Karv."**

But, the LORD will not be mocked. His response is a message of judgment. He is going to judge His rebellious and stubborn people. He will turn the tables on them. Mock the prophet, will they? Treat him as though he's the one who is babbling, will they? "Okay", says the LORD in effect, "if it's babbling you want, it's **stammering lips** you will get;

For with stammering lips and another tongue I will speak to this people ... and they will not listen ... and they will fall backward, and be broken ... (Is. 28: 11-12)!

God was predicting, "The day is soon coming when you will hear foreigners speaking their stammering tongues in your streets. When you hear the foreign tongues of invaders filling your land, you will know My judgment has fallen upon **this people**. My judgment will fall upon unbelieving Israel in the form of invading Gentile armies, and the sign it's fulfilled will be to your ears like babbling tongues."

The immediate fulfilment of this prophecy occurred when Assyria's armies invaded the Land of Israel just a few years later; [God spoke to Israel through the strange Assyrian tongue in retribution, not to confirm their faith but to consummate their unbelief.](#) (²)

TONGUES ARE A SIGN OF [JUDGMENT](#) UPON UNBELIEVING ISRAEL.

The great Moses himself had also warned the Jews that, if they rebelled against the LORD, then He would [bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand ...](#) (Deuteronomy 28: 49).

God's judgment upon Israel as indicated by foreign tongues is repeated;

["Behold, I will bring a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel,"](#) says the LORD. ["It is a mighty nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say"](#) (Jeremiah 5: 15).

Our Lord himself prophesied the same truth;

[But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near ... And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled](#) (Luke 21: 20).

From the day those solemn words were uttered by Jesus, God put Israel on notice. Failure to repent of their rejection of their long-promised Messiah would once again unleash His judgment upon a stubborn and rebellious people. *Foreign tongues were the sign to [unbelieving Israel of God's judgment](#) --- Gentile trampling.*

In His mercy, God gave the Jews one generation --- roughly forty years --- to repent of the blood of Christ. A remnant did turn and believe. Most did not. Most refused. Most hardened their hearts. This time it was the Romans under Titus in AD 70 who became God's instrument of judgment. [Jerusalem was trampled by Gentiles](#) and utterly dispersed.

Thus, [In the Law](#), foreign tongues being spoken by invaders of the Holy Land are a sign of judgment upon unbelieving and rebellious Israel, i.e. to [this People](#).

The [Book of Corinthians](#) was written between Jesus' dire pronouncement and the fall of Jerusalem. Although under Roman occupation when Paul wrote the epistle, Israel was still in the Land, Jerusalem's walls and her Temple still stood.

The book of [Acts](#) is the recorded history of why and how tongues were used during this transition period.

TONGUES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS WERE A WARNING SIGN TO THE JEWS

Now, follow the trail here please!

² *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Gen. Ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., LL.D., Vol. 2, 1956, p 910 (Italics original).

Remember that God's original call to Israel was that they might bear the light of God to the nations. Jesus had said, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4: 22). The Gentile nations should have heard from national Israel's lips the mighty works of God. But it ended up being only from a handful of Jesus' disciples --- a remnant of the nation if you will.

The rest of the nation was now on notice. Judgment was temporarily suspended, but like **Damocles' sword** that swung over his head, the threat of coming judgment was still hanging over Israel and awaiting her response.

The Day of Pentecost put them on notice. Jews were now hearing God's praise through supernaturally bestowed "tongues". What a reversal --- Gentile tongues declaring God's works suddenly being heard in Jerusalem and Judea.

Had not the newly risen Jesus instructed his disciples to start their evangelistic programme in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, thence to Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth (Acts 1: 8)? The apostle Paul was later to say that the Gospel was for the Jew first, and also for the Greek (Rom. 1: 16).

God's salvation-plan for the world will not be thwarted. Beginning on the Day of Pentecost, this People --- consisting of Jews from Jerusalem, from Judea, from Samaria and from the Jewish Dispersion from all over the empire --- were given a message both of hope and of potential judgment. **Whoever shall call on the Name of the Lord shall be saved** but they must avail themselves of God's offer in Messiah Jesus (Acts 2: 21).

They heard the mighty works of God in supernaturally given languages. Their attention gained, Peter stood up, raised his voice and addressed that great crowd: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let it be known to you, and listen to what I say ... " (Acts 2: 14).

Observe carefully how Peter specifically addresses his audience: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem ..." He is directly addressing the Jews who are still living in the Land. Of course his Gospel announcement applied to the other Jews (and proselytes) who had come from all the nations to celebrate Pentecost, but it was first and foremost to those from Jerusalem and Judea.

Tragically some, perhaps many, of the Jews resident in the holy Land mocked the sign of the miraculous gift of tongues saying, "They are full of new wine" (v. 13). But Peter corrected them, "These are not drunk, as you suppose ... " (v. 15). He tells them why they were hearing the supernaturally inspired languages. God has raised Jesus from the grave, thus reversing their verdict unto death. Jesus is indeed their risen Messianic Lord and Messiah.

Finally, Peter warned them, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Acts 2: 40). Some were cut to the heart. The supernaturally inspired foreign tongues combined with Peter's explanation brought thousands to their knees before the Lord (Acts 2: 37, 41).

Isn't that significant? Isaiah had prophesied to that stubborn and stiff-necked people who were behaving like drunkards, "With foreign languages and stammering lips I will speak to this people ... and they will not listen ..." And now, on the Day of Pentecost, Israel was hearing the mighty works of God through the sign of holy Spirit-inspired foreign languages. Some believed. But most hardened their necks.

The Spirit had put God's praise into pagan tongues as a sign against their unbelief (2: 11).

Confirmation we are reading this right, is found in the record of the overall Jewish response throughout the Book of Acts. The growing and persistent storyline is that only a relatively small number of the Jews responded in faith to the Gospel as it spread out, but as a whole they became increasingly hostile to the point of blaspheming against the Lord.

Everywhere the apostle Paul went, Jewish hostility and jealousy was aroused. His custom was to first preach to the Jews in the synagogues, but almost without exception only a relatively small number of them believed. The majority turned against the missionary party. This pattern reached a crescendo when a fierce mob of Jews sought to kill the apostle in Acts 22.

The crowd listened intently to his defence from the steps where the Roman guard was protecting him from their insane violence. They respectfully listened to Paul's preaching as he made his defence in the Hebrew tongue until --- when? Yes, until he says that the Lord commissioned him to, "Go ... far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22: 21).

Up to this point they listened to him, and then they shouted, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live" (Acts 22: 22).

The Jews hated the idea that God was saving Gentiles apart from the need to join national Israel. The fact that God was pouring out His Spirit upon Gentiles without them needing to submit to the Mosaic covenant caused a huge stir amongst the Jews. It took even the Jewish Christians a lot of convincing about this as the council in Acts 15 bears out!

At one crisis moment --- significantly it was at Corinth! --- and after multiple attempts on his life, and after continuous rejection of their Messiah, we read; When they [i.e. the Jews] opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (Acts 18: 6).

Finally, Jewish rejection of the Gospel of grace reached its climax in the last chapter of Acts. There Paul is found contending with the Jews for two whole years, preaching the Good news from the Law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. Most are still stubbornly rejecting God's word. Thankfully, some believed (Acts 28: 24).

The book ends with Paul pronouncing God's judgment;

'The holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah, 'Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen but never understand ... this People's heart

has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing ... so that they might not listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn --- and I would heal them.' Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, they will listen' (Acts 28: 25f). (³)

THE THREE OCCASIONS IN ACTS WHEN LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN

Now, you may be wondering why I have taken this excursus in Acts when we are dealing with the question of "tongues speaking"? The answer is --- the big picture.

"Why Tongues?" can only be answered in the context of unbelieving Israel. For, interspersed at critical parts of the story's development through the book of Acts, three times --- and only three times --- we read where 'languages' were said to be spoken.

And the point is this:- **In every single historical instance where "tongues" are mentioned, Jews were present!** (Acts 2; Acts 10: 45f and Acts 18:28 through 19:1-9).

WE HAVE THE KEY!

Recall our major point at the beginning of this article that, tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers ... (I Cor. 14: 22). We asked, how can tongues be a sign to the unbeliever? The answer is so different to the modern tongues movement which says, "Tongues are a sign for the believer that s/he has received the fullness of the Spirit."

Now that we have **the key** for understanding the "tongues question", we see that Paul is referring to Jewish unbelievers who perchance come into the worship services in the Corinthian Church. They knew the Law. They understood the purpose of tongues. When they heard the mighty works of God being proclaimed in miraculously inspired Gentile languages they recognised a potent sign of God's impending judgment on unbelieving Israel.

THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

The history of the founding of the multicultural Corinthian Church is found in Acts chapter 18. When Paul arrived in the city, he stayed with two Jewish Christians, Aquila and his wife Priscilla (v.2).

From that base, the apostle preached Christ every Sabbath in the synagogue, persuading the Jews and the Greeks (v.4). Paul was particularly urgent with the Jews, being pressed in the spirit, and testified to them that Jesus was the Messiah (v.5).

But the Jews in his audience in large measure opposed and reviled him. We have already noted that at this critical juncture Paul shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (Acts 18: 6).

³ To demonstrate the great number of references to the Gospel spreading out from hostile Jews to Gentiles in Acts here is a sample: Acts 1:8; 10:45; 11:1,18; 13:42, 46-48; 14: 2,27; 15:, 7,19; 18:6; 21: 19; 26: 17; 28: 28.

He walked right out of the synagogue with a solemn gesture of protest. Then he set up his “pulpit” right *next door* in a property owned by a Roman, i.e., a Gentile, named **Titius Justus** (v. 7). One of the ‘trophy of grace’ who left the synagogue and joined the apostle was **the official of the synagogue, Crispus**, along **with all his household** (v. 8).

Paul took some convincing to stay in Corinth, because the Jews were hell-bent on murdering him. The Lord had to appear to Paul in a vision to encourage him to stay for the next year-and-a-half assuring him, **“I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many people in this city who are My people”** (v. 10).

The Jews dragged Paul before the Roman proconsul, **Galio**, demanding this heretic be prosecuted. But **Galio** dismissed the case, saying it was an internal Jewish question. Not accepting the verdict, the unbelieving Jews tried to force **Galio’s** hand by beating another official of the synagogue named **Sosthenes** (who must have been sympathetic to Paul’s message, if not a convert) right in front of the tribunal (v. 17)!

Now here’s the point. I imagine that after 18 months there in Corinth, quite a large church had become established. After Paul had walked out of the Jewish synagogue many Jewish seekers apparently still continued to come over to the Christian meetings. And when they heard the phenomenon of miraculous tongues, they knew from their Law what this *sign* being addressed specifically to them conveyed.

This is why Paul was able to encourage those who had the miraculous gift of tongues to continue to speak in them (provided those messages were interpreted for the benefit of all the church). This is why Paul was able to say, **“I thank my God that I speak with tongues more than you all”** (I Cor. 14: 18).

Above all others, Paul craved for his Jewish brothers and sisters to repent and to believe. He hoped that when they heard the Spirit’s utterance in these miraculous tongues, that some of those Jews would **fall down before God and worship Him declaring “God is really among you”** (I Cor. 14: 25). And with interpretation, even the uninitiated Gentiles who had no idea as to the Law’s reason for tongues, would also hear the prophetic message. (⁴)

Used in that setting in Corinth “the gift of tongues” was an appropriate sign-gift.

But the question still remains: It’s the question we asked at the start of this article but had to hold over till now: “When will tongues cease?”

For the moment we must cease, take a breather till the next instalment ...

⁴ **Verses 23 and 24** refer to the **unlearned** (as e.g. per KJV) or to the **uninformed** (as e.g. per NKJV). This is better than the NRSV’s **outsider**, although acceptable enough. Paul has just quoted from **the Law**. So, the **informed** unbeliever is the Jew who knew the Scriptures and who recognised the sign of impending judgment when he heard tongues being spoken in the Corinthian Church. Whereas the outside pagan with no previous exposure to the prophets was ignorant of the Law’s stated purpose for tongues. This second group hearing “tongues” without interpretation in the church would have said, “This mob is crazy!” Whereas the informed Jew would have ‘twigged’ straight away! The word **ἰδιώτης** (from which we get our word “**idiot**”) referred to a private person who was uninitiated into the secrets of a professional guild or trade, or even one of the mystery religions.

