

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

(THE CASE AGAINST SPEAKING IN UNKNOWN TONGUES)

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It was quite a miracle when the Spirit of God gave the disciples the ability to speak with “other tongues” and “dialects” on that memorable Day of Pentecost, was it not? For they began to speak the mighty works of God in foreign languages which they had not previously learned, but which were clearly understood by an audience that had gathered from various nations around the Roman Empire (Acts 2: 4, 6).

In our previous article, *The Case For Speaking in Unknown Tongues*, we noted that many accredited commentators allege that “the gift of tongues” (*glossolalia*) in the church at Corinth was however, altogether of a different *genre* to the model Pentecostal languages.

They claim the “Corinthian tongues” were “unknown tongues” --- ecstatic utterances with no recognizable grammar and syntax, and therefore, bearing little resemblance to any language in use around the world. They also euphemistically call this phenomenon, “praying in heavenly tongues” or, “speaking in the tongues of angels”.

In recognition of this not insignificant commentary, I have tried to present the affirmative case as fairly (if indeed all too briefly) as possible. I have made it clear I do respect those who hold to the practice with all good conscience. I have any number of brothers and sisters in Christ who profess this experience, and whom I love and respect greatly.

WE NEED TO PUT OUR MULTIFOCAL GLASSES ON

In the interests of balance and reciprocal fairness, we must now investigate *The Case Against Speaking in Unknown Tongues* --- for another interpretation there surely is (excuse the pun). And I will suggest that in order to appreciate this alternate interpretation we will need, metaphorically speaking, to put on a different pair of glasses.

So far, in *The Case For Speaking in Unknown Tongues*, we have been reading almost exclusively through our reading glasses. Which is to say, so far we have only focused on the spot-texts used in support of “charismatic tongues”. This method represents a degree of fixation on the isolated and a pre-occupation that focuses primarily on the up-close.

True, those proof-texts when combined appear to make a strong case. However, I am going to prove they suffer from a degree of myopic deficiency. Proof-texting can be helpful in crystallizing a doctrine, but usually carries its own in-built weakness precisely because it lacks a big-picture perspective ---i.e., wider context.

It goes without saying (or does it?), that sound Biblical exegesis depends on our ability to skillfully maintain proper tension between the distant and the near views of any passage of

Scripture. Truth can never result even from stringing proof-texts together. Imagine walking around all day with only your reading glasses on! That's why I suggest we take our reading glasses off and put on glasses that are able to focus on *both* the isolated close-up proof-texts as well as the long-distance perspectives --- *simultaneously*.

LEXICAL FACTS ON "UNKNOWN TONGUES"

The first lens in our multifocals we need to look through concerns a rather obvious question, a question we have already flagged: What kind of "tongues" in Corinth is Paul talking about? Are they of a different *genre* from the miraculously endowed languages on the Day of Pentecost?

You will have noticed in the previous article that I placed the word "*unknown*" in italics whenever I referred to the "tongues speaking" as found in Corinth. The reason is because **The Authorised King James Version** (KJV) uses the phrase *unknown tongues* four times in **1 Corinthians 14 (verses 2,4,13,27)**. And naturally, because the KJV has been around from the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement, the phrase has stuck. (1)

It bears repeating that the Greek word *glōssa* is used in the New Testament around fifty times and never once is it used to refer to heavenly speech that no one could not understand. Furthermore, the word "*unknown*" is not found in the original Greek text, yet it gained popular traction from the earliest of days when the tongues movement took off.

The fact that the KJV itself puts the word "*unknown*" in italics indicates its translators knew they were adding a word not in the Greek text. Modern English translations, including **The New King James Version**, have corrected this unfortunate error by omitting "*unknown*". But old habits die hard. Traditions, once established, are extremely difficult to correct.

WHY ONLY THE SINGULAR "UNKNOWN TONGUE"?

There is however, one important fact here, which so far I have not seen in any commentary. Whenever the KJV inserts the italicised "*unknown*" it is always placed before the singular word "*tongue*". They never put "*unknown*" before the plural --- "*unknown tongues*". The KJV translators must have had a good reason for referring to the singular *unknown tongue*, but not to "*unknown tongues*". What was that reason?

Here's my best guess: We must first understand a little of the cultural background which prevailed in that first century situation. The city of Corinth was a large cosmopolitan city. It was the commercial hub on the isthmus (narrow neck of land) which joined Achaia by the Peloponnesus to mainland Greece. Corinth was a bustling sea port as well as situated on the major land highway joining the two regions. It was the melting pot and meeting place of every kind of culture, religion, commerce, and naturally, languages of all nations could be heard on the streets.

¹ It is a matter of significant interest that the **KJV** is inconsistent in its own practice. For instance, why did they not use *unknown tongues* in the previous chapter 13 (i.e. in vs. 1,8)? And why not consistently use the phrase *unknown tongues* even in chapter 14 where they use the phrase (e.g. in vs. 5, 6)?

The church in Corinth reflected that society's diversity. In their Christian community the major languages of the Empire were all represented. The *lingua franca* or common language binding all together was Greek. Being a Roman colony, another major language group would have been Latin. There was also a significant Jewish community, so Aramaic and Hebrew would have thrived.

No doubt, many Corinthians were multilingual. Even today, for example, in many European countries it is not uncommon to find folk who can fluently speak 2, 3, 4, 5 and even more languages!

However, there were other enclaves of peoples from all over the Empire living in Corinth, each with their own dialects and sub-dialects (recall that in Jerusalem there were at least 15 different languages spoken by the disciples to the pilgrims who had come from all over the Empire to celebrate Pentecost).

This is why, when a believer stood up in the church with his/her particular contribution to the worship in the form of **a psalm, or a teaching, a tongue and/or an interpretation, or a revelation (14: 26)**, everything had to be done **decently and in order** to avoid **confusion** so that all could benefit **(14: 27f)**. Paul forbids languages without interpretation. Paul wants all to follow his own example, and to **pray, sing, and speak with the understanding** so that everyone can say **"Amen to that!"** and so all can **give thanks** because they are **edified (12: 14-17)**.

Occasionally however, someone from a minority ethnic background might stand up and start speaking in their own native language which nobody else was familiar with. I believe it's this situation which the KJV translators understood when they inserted their **"unknown"** before the singular **"tongue/language"**.

This is where I think, for good reason, the KJV reads that, **he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries (14: 2)**. Here was one foreign language unknown to anybody else in the congregation!

And should this singular language be persisted in without proper interpretation, either by the individual or by another who has the gift to interpret that particular tongue, all that ended up happening was he ended up edifying himself and nobody else was built up and encouraged by the message.

In this case persisting in this **"unknown language"** required a rebuke, for all he was doing was puffing his own ego up, showing off, or to use Paul's word, he was only **edifying himself (14: 4)**. **If there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God (14: 28)**. Otherwise he is just babbling **into the air**, just uttering **mysteries (14:2)**, which is to say, the audience is only hearing an unknown foreign language **without signification** as far as they are concerned **(14: 10)**.

We can only wish that our Pentecostal and charismatic friends who love the Bible ardently would drop all reference to **unknown tongues** or **unknown languages**. We must not be

guilty of adding to or subtracting from the words of Scripture. Bible words and Bible phrases ought to be sufficient for Bible doctrines otherwise wrong impressions are fostered, even if innocently.

With this important matter cleared up, we may now ask an important question: Is there any compelling contextual reason why *glōssa* should not carry its normal Greek Lexical definition of languages in regular and daily use?

This would not of itself necessarily deny that the speakers of such languages were not exercising their gift under the direct influence of the Spirit's inspiration. After all, this is exactly how the miraculous tongues were first given on that model DoP --- without the need to painstakingly learn those languages previously.

Fortunately, we do not need to rely solely on finer matters of lexical definitions, precise points of grammar and linguistics, foundational as they are (but we must never be guilty of making up our own definitions which no lexicon supports!). There is not just one lens in our multifocals!

CONTEXT MUST SUPPORT THE LEXICON

Somebody well said, "If you take the text out of context all you are left with is a con!"

As always, the local context must define how any word is to be interpreted. How does Paul himself define the word *glōssa*? Listen to the apostle's own usage;

There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me (First Corinthians 14: 10-11 New King James Version). (²)

Here, Paul defines how he uses *glōssa* in a straight-forward, unambiguous manner. He explains that In the world there are **many kinds of languages**, and every one of them has **significance** precisely because they convey **meaning** to the listener. *Signification* means intelligent content is being communicated to another. *Signals* carry messages and are sent to be received by another with the understanding.

Paul defines the *glōssa* as normal languages being used **in the world**, for he goes on to explain that, **if I do not know the meaning of the language** in which I am being addressed, then all I am hearing is a foreign tongue and the speaker **will be a foreigner to me**.

It seems this was happening when the whole church in Corinth assembled together;

Therefore, if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with languages [*glōssa*], and there come in those who are outsiders or unbelievers, will they not say you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy and an unbeliever or outsider comes in,

² Paul uses a different word here for **languages** --- *phōnē*. The context demands this because, till this moment, he has been talking about languages --- *glōssa*. Many English translations recognise this flow by translating *phōnē* as 'language'.

he is convinced by all, he is judged by all ... and [he will] fall down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you I Cor. 14: 23f).

The apostle also uses everyday examples to drive his obvious meaning home. Even **lifeless instruments** such as **flute or harp or trumpet** make a **distinction in their sounds**, otherwise **how will it be known what is piped or played ...** or what message is **blown (14: 7f)?**

So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy [*eusēmos* means **distinct and well-marked**] to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? You will be speaking into the air (14: 9)!

Paul is saying the obvious: If you talk to people in a language you know they don't understand, then you are just talking **into the air (14: 9)**. To all intents and purposes you are just talking to yourself and, in effect, to God alone Who does, of course, understand you.

THE WHOLE CONTEXT CONCERNING TONGUES IS A REBUKE OF SELFISHNESS!

As we look through this second and complimentary lens of our multifocal glasses we are now able to stand back and look at **the wider context** of the whole book of **First Corinthians**. Armed with our lexical and contextual perspectives our view of the "tongues" in **chapters 12 - 14** is brought into clear focus. Failure to read the text with this multifocal vision has led, I am convinced, to *a signal failure* (!?) in the interpretation of what was happening in their misuse at Corinth.

THE CORINTHIAN CATASTROPHE

Some have suggested a suitable title for **First Corinthians** could be, **"The Corinthian Catastrophe"**. This is a convenient rubrick, because it sums up the whole reason for Paul's epistle. Here was a church which was **enriched in speech and knowledge of every kind ... and not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. But** they were racked through by in-fighting and quarrels which he calls "carnal" or "fleshly divisions". He chastises them for behaving as **mere men of the world (I Cor. 1: 5,7; 3: 3, etc.)**.

Paul is sad because he could not speak to them **as to spiritual people, but as to people of the flesh, as infants in Christ (3: 1)**. Evidently a church and its individual members can be working within their own charismatic giftedness and still be motivated by selfish aims! *Spiritual gifts and spirituality are not necessarily synonymous!*

He then proceeds to give instructions and corrections concerning a wide range of questions (such as the need to defend his own apostolic credentials from impudent criticism; marriage matters with particular attention to divorce for any reason; food eaten before idols; gluttony and even drunkenness at the communion table --- of all places; the roles of women in church meetings; the toleration of sexual immorality with prostitutes, and also sexual immorality in the form of incest not even found in the pagan world! etc.).

Having dealt with these disturbing matters of self-centred individualism, spiritual immaturity, divisions, and toleration of sin in the extreme, Paul sets out to correct the “charismatic question”. This must be a significant problem because he devotes **three chapters** to correcting their abuse of “tongues” and how it was upsetting the regular church gatherings.

In these chapters he attempts to correct a group of egotistical “show offs” in the matter of “tongues”. This group was, frankly, behaving like **idiots** (a word he actually uses to describe their selfish behaviour as we shall see in the next article).

The root of the Corinthian problems was thus a lack of true spiritual maturity. They were exercising “tongues” for personal promotion and display. But let’s pick it up from the beginning of his treatment of the “**spiritual gifts**”.

Now concerning the spirituals (³) brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12: 1-3).

Before correcting the Corinthian preoccupation with inspired speech, Paul reminds them that not every spontaneous utterance is from the Holy Spirit. He recalls their pre-conversion days when they were pagan idolaters; **You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.**

I used to wonder why Paul wrote this. At first sight it seems like a punch below the belt, so to speak! I mean, to remind the Corinthians who came from a Gentile pagan past that they were once idol-worshippers who used to be out of control and **carried away** in states of ecstasy towards their false gods, might seem a little harsh.

Why drag up their pagan past? Could it be that they had not completely left it behind? They would not be the first new Christians to bring over in their Christianity some unhelpful beliefs and practices from the past. Syncretism has always been an enemy of pure Christianity. Complete conversion to Christ requires a **renewing of the mind** which can take a long time (**Rom. 12: 2**).

Many of the Corinthian converts had been involved in the mystery religions of Greece where the devotees would get caught up in emotional hysteria and babbling in ecstatic speech. This phenomenon is well documented by writers like **Plato** and **Virgil**. Paul seems to be suggesting that the Corinthians’ excessive preoccupation with “the gift of tongues” is more like their old pagan days when they used to be uncontrollably **carried away** unto excesses.

³ τῶν πνευματικῶν or the spirituals (from *pneumatikos*) is variously translated to mean “**spiritual gifts**”, “**spiritual things/matters**”, “**spiritual persons**”, **spiritual conduct**”, etc. depending on which nuance the translator emphasises by the italicised word he chooses for ‘clarification’.

Paul is rebuking them by saying this should not be happening now. The holy Spirit of God does not produce this kind of unbridled behaviour. He will go on to say, **The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets (14:32)** and that the ones under the holy Spirit's leading will be self-controlled so that **all things may be done decently and in order** when they are together for their worship services **(14:40)**.

Another obvious test whether a person is speaking by the Spirit of Christ or not is **that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.** It took a lot of courage to openly confess Christ in that imperial culture. It could cost you your head!

So it seems to me Paul is not saying that those who are being **carried away** by their own sense of superiority because they could speak in "tongues" are not genuine Christians, nor that they are doing the Devil's work! They just needed to hear his correction and curb their inappropriate and selfish use of languages and control themselves!

I think this explanation fits the rest of the chapter twelve, for Paul goes on to say that **we** don't get to choose our place nor our gifting in God's Church. 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)**.

When we use our God-given gifts in the service of the church and for the benefit of others, unity amongst believers will flow, and Christians will dwell in beautiful harmony and God's saving mission in the world will move forward mightily. Every believer has a God-given gift and none is more important than anybody else.

The important truth to note is that, in this division of the gifts amongst all members of the church body God is Sovereign and appoints the offices and the gifts as he sees fit. Not everybody has the same gift, otherwise there would be no body. Not everybody can be an apostle. Not everybody can be a teacher. Not everybody can be a worker of miracles. Not everybody is given the gift of speaking in foreign languages. Not everybody can interpret the languages being inspired by the Spirit.

AN ODD TRANSLATION!

Now, this brings our brief excursus of chapter twelve to its close. And as most translators render **verse 31** apparently Paul writes, **But earnestly covet/desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.**

For years I read this verse thinking it just didn't make sense! In fact, it outright seems to contradict what Paul has just written. He has just told the Corinthians that in the choice of who gets what gift(s) for the church, God is Supreme and Sovereign. By His distribution the Spirit of God chooses where each believer is situated and what gift or gifts are determined for each individual in the Body of Christ, for the overall good.

So how can Paul suddenly do an about-face, do a complete 180-degree turn-around and say, “Well, if you are not content with what gift(s) God has given you, and if you are not satisfied with where he has placed you in the church, and if you want a “greater” gift than the one(s) you already have, well, just **earnestly covet** something better!?” (⁴)

One day the lights came on for me. This is one of those delightful times when the Greek verb may be translated as either a command or as a fact. (⁵) Which is to ask; Did Paul command the Corinthians who were jealous of the more spectacular gifts of tongues, “**Earnestly covet the best gifts**”? (That way, taken as a command, Paul seems to encourage their individualistic selfishness.)

Or, did Paul simply state his disappointment and sad estimation of their “fleshly” condition by summing up the facts of their case; “**But you are coveting** --- what you consider to be --- **the best gifts**”? (Taken as indicative, Paul is stating what they are doing in the form of a reprimand.)

Which do you think best fits the overall context? Before you answer, consider another thing. Usually in Scripture the word “**covet**” carries negative connotations. Not always, but normally. The overwhelming majority of times when coveting is employed in the Bible, it conveys a forbidden and negative nuance. Whilst this fact is not decisive in this verse, when we add it to the overall negative tone of Paul’s correction, I think it probably should carry its usual and predominant flavour of something to be avoided.

So, if we have our multifocals on, we can properly focus on Paul’s big picture here. He is not commanding the Corinthians to all speak in miraculously given foreign languages! He has just asked his rhetorical question, **Not all speak in tongues, do they?** The answer is, no, of course not all speak in miraculously given languages!

I believe this interpretation is not only grammatically permissible, not only contextually probable, but is further strengthened by his continuing argument into the “Love Chapter”, which he describes as **the more excellent way (12: 31)**. There Paul is going to contrast the selfish way the Corinthians were behaving by craving what they considered to be the more spectacular and showy “language gifts”, with the way of mature love, chapter thirteen ...

⁴ We dealt with this matter in, *The Case For Speaking in Tongues*. For the relevant comments from the Pentecostal and charismatic point of view, see page 5 in that previous article.

⁵ ζ η λ ο υ τ ε (*zēloute*) can be imperative or indicative.

