



**151<sup>st</sup> Church of Christ**  
**Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS**  
by Richard Wolfe

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**AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH**  
*A Study in 1 Corinthians*  
**CLASS – Lesson 20**

**GENERAL OUTLINE**

**1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40, Unity and spiritual gifts**

**OUTLINE: Lesson 20**

**1 Corinthians 14:1-40, Gifts in the assembly (i.e., “in church”)**

**14:1-5** General statement: prophecy is preferred over “tongues”

**14:6-19** Extended explanation of the limited usefulness of uninterpreted “tongues”

14:20-25 Tongues, prophecy, unbelievers, and believers

14:26-40 Specific guidelines for orderly church assemblies

We often overlook the fact that Paul sometimes introduces a topic that was creating a problem in the Corinthian congregation, but then presents extensive foundational material that leads into very specific instructions or commands to the church. For example, at the beginning of chapter 8 he eased into a discussion of food involved in idol worship but gives direct and binding instructions only in chapter 10. We find the same process in chapters 12-14.

The announced topic relates to the use of spiritual gifts, but then veers off into the foundational material about the nature of the church as a body of interdependent members. This is followed by a discussion in chapter 13 of the overriding principle of love to govern all of church life. Finally, in chapter 14, he draws on this foundation to explain the relative importance of various spiritual gifts. Finally, in the second half of the chapter he gives binding instructions that apply to the use of spiritual gifts in a specific setting.

Throughout this series of studies, we have made a great effort to limit our attention to Paul’s stated teachings in this letter and to avoid excursions into related matters, but matters that are not developed in this letter. At this point, however, it seems useful and even necessary to include a short side study of the topic of speaking in tongues. Paul does not describe the exact nature of this gift, primarily because he and his Corinthian readers knew exactly what kinds of tongues were involved. Today, this topic no longer benefits from this same uniformity of understanding. But if we are going to follow the thought of the discussion in 1 Corinthians 14, we will do well to clarify what is meant when our various translations speak of “tongues.”

**A Brief Study of “Speaking in Tongues”**

There are three key Greek words used in the New Testament in reference to speaking in tongues. The first is *glossa*. The primary use of *glossa* is to designate the literal tongue found in a person’s mouth (e.g., Mark 7:33). It can also refer to the physical tongue, but specifically as the

organ of speech (e.g., James 1:26). From the tongue as the organ of speech, the word came to be applied to that which is spoken: in other words, a language.

Another word that is implicated in this subject is *dialektos*, in which we can see the root of our word dialect, but which is generally translated as language. *Dialektos* is used only in the book of Acts, and in the NKJV and ESV is always translated language. In the NIV it is rendered as language in the first three uses, and simply omitted in the last three (cf. Acts 1:19; 2:6, 8; 21:40; 22:2; 26:14).

The third word of interest is *phone* (long o and long e), and most of the time is translated as voice. It is translated “sound” twice in 1 Corinthians 14:7, 8, and twice as language (1 Corinthians 14:10, 11).

The problem comes when *glossa* is mentioned as a spiritual or miraculous gift and is then interpreted by some students as an ecstatic utterance that is no language known on earth. Others (this writer included) believe that *glossa* refers to a human language and not some special ecstatic spiritual language. We should note that Paul’s main point about using this gift for the edification of the church rather than for self-aggrandizement remains the same regardless of the kind of tongues involved.

None of the passages that use *glossa* include any clear reason to conclude that it is anything other than a normal language, but was a language that the speaker had not studied or learned by normal processes and could speak as a miraculous gift of the Spirit. In the course of our study in this lesson and the next, we will look at a few statements that, at first glance, seem to suggest otherwise, but on closer observation fit with this understanding. When these three words are used to refer to the body of words spoken by people, they are synonyms and have the meaning of language. They are used interchangeably, although several times *glossa* is used alone and clearly refers to languages spoken on earth.

The first four questions below will look at passages in Acts and Revelation that refer to “tongues” or languages. This will lead into a study of the text of 1 Corinthians 14 where Paul discusses the shortcomings and proper uses of spiritual gifts with special attention given to the gift of speaking in “tongues.”

## DISCUSSION

### Tongues and languages in Acts and Revelation

- 1. Is there any reason to think that the tongues (*glossa*) of Acts 2:4 & 11 are something different from the languages (*dialektos*) of verses 6 & 8 (cf. 1:19)?** Note: *Glossa* is also used in verse 3 to describe something that looked like a tongue-shaped flame.

2. Acts 2 never mentions or suggests the presence of interpreters. If no interpreting was provided, how could the several different groups “from every nation under heaven” understand the tongues (*glossa*) and languages (*dialektos*) that the apostles were speaking?
  
3. At the time the apostles began speaking in tongues/languages, was the audience made up of believers or unbelievers in Christ?
  
4. *Glossa* is used eight times in Revelation. In each case, based on a normal reading of the verse, identify what kind of tongue is intended: literal, ecstatic speech, or human language/language group. (Note: Some versions translate *glossa* as tongues and others as languages.)

Revelation 5:9 \_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 7:9 \_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 10:11 \_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 11:9 \_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 13: \_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 14:6 \_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 16:10 \_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 17:15 \_\_\_\_\_

**1 Corinthians 14:1-5, General statement: prophecy is preferred over “tongues”**

This is an introductory paragraph for the instructions presented in chapter 14. Later, Paul will specify the setting and give some clear regulations for the use of prophecy and speaking in languages (tongues). But in this introduction, there are no regulations, only general observations.

5. Love is the topic of chapter 13 and is promoted in 14:1. Love is not mentioned again in chapter 14, while edification (vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26) becomes the main focus. What is the relationship in Paul’s mind between love and edification?
  
6. What is the main advantage of prophesying over speaking in languages (tongues)?

- 7. What setting or occasion is implied in Paul's comments about when they would prophesy or speak in languages? (This setting will be examined more closely as we go through the chapter.)**
  
- 8. In this setting, who hears and who understands or benefits from uninterpreted languages (tongues), and in what way do they benefit?**

**1 Corinthians 14:6-19, Extended explanation of the limited usefulness of uninterpreted "tongues"**

In the first five verses, Paul merely stated that prophecy is more useful than languages unless the languages are interpreted. He now illustrates and presses the point.

- 9. Which part of a symphonic concert is the most enjoyable and meaningful, hearing the musicians tune their instruments or hearing them play the compositions? Why?**
  
- 10. What, in your opinion, might Paul think, as suggested in this chapter, of church services that target exuberance, excitement, and personal experience over objective edification (revelation, knowledge, prophesying or teaching)? What is the purpose of congregational singing according to Ephesians 5:19-20 & Colossians 3:16?**
  
- 11. Let's look at the differences between languages and tongues in chapter 14.**
  - a. If a person who has learned a foreign language by normal means speaks that language in church services (v. 12) without interpretation, who would or might understand his message?**
  
  - b. If someone speaks that same foreign language by virtue of a miraculous gift with no one to interpret, who would or might understand his message?**

**12. Discuss what it might mean to pray, sing, or give thanks “with the spirit,” but without understanding. Note that in most translations “spirit” is with a small s (vv. 14-16). Why is this “spiritual experience,” even when enabled by the Holy Spirit, not sufficient or appropriate for the church assembly?**

**13. In verse 16, “the place of the uninformed” (NKJV) is literally, “the room of the unlearned.” Who is this person who is unable to say “Amen” to the prayer of thanks offered “in a tongue”?**

### **The setting**

It is now time to clearly identify the setting in which Paul is concerned about the misuse of some spiritual gifts, and particularly the gift of speaking in languages (tongues).

**14. Prior to verse 19, Paul has implied a specific setting in which he frowns upon speaking in tongues. In verse 19, he clearly identifies that setting as “in church.” (Note: the article “the” is not in the Greek. Cf. ESV.) What does “church” mean in this verse? What is Paul’s main objection to speaking in uninterpreted languages “in church”?**

**15. The word “church” is used 9 times in 1 Corinthians 14. Find them and determine the meaning in each case. We can choose from three options: the worldwide body of Christ, a local congregation, the assembly (a church service) of the local congregation. (See Lesson 16, question 7.) Is it appropriate or accurate to say, “We are going to church”?**