



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – 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.

There is no reason given in the text to think that tongues and languages are not synonyms of the same thing. Note the similarity of word choices and phrases.

The apostles “began to speak with other tongues (*glossa*)” (v. 4).

The audience said that “we hear them speaking in our own tongues (*glossa*)” (v. 11).

“Everyone heard them speak in his own language (*dialektos*)” (v. 6).
And in verse 8 it says that “we hear, each in our own language (*dialektos*).”

The word choices and phrases are so similar that it is forced and unnatural to claim that “tongues” are one thing and “languages” are referring to something different. Acts 2 is the first and most detailed description in the New Testament of speaking in tongues, and should serve as the basis for understanding later passages on the topic. If *glossa* refers to human languages here, it probably means the same in other passages.

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?

No interpretation was needed if the apostles (there were 12 of them) were speaking in the various languages that were spoken and understood by the people present. If the “tongues” spoken by the apostles were ecstatic gibberish, then interpretation would have been necessary. But to find any interpretation occurring on the day of Pentecost, the reader must insert something into the text that the writer did not write. The most direct understanding of what happened is that the apostles spoke human languages that were spoken in various parts of the Roman Empire, but languages that the apostles had never learned by normal means. These languages are called equally tongues (*glossa*) and languages (*dialektos*).

An even more unlikely explanation is that the apostles spoke in a language (Aramaic or a miraculous tongue) and the people miraculously heard in their mother tongue. In other words, the multitude received the gift of interpretation. Nothing in the text suggest any miraculous gift other than the apostles’ ability to speak in languages.

3. At the time the apostles began speaking in tongues/languages, was the audience made up of believers or unbelievers in Christ?

Clearly, though they may have been faithful Jews who believed in God, they were not believers in Jesus as the Christ. This will be relevant when we arrive at the statement in 1 Corinthians 14 that tongues are a sign for unbelievers.

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 ___ a human language___ Revelation 7:9 ___ a human language___

Revelation 10:11 ___ a human language___ Revelation 11:9 ___ a human language___

Revelation 13:7 ___ a human language___ Revelation 14:6 ___ a human language___

Revelation 16:10 ___ a literal tongue___ Revelation 17:15 ___ a human language___

From their use in Revelation it is firmly established that “tongue” or “tongues” can be properly translated and understood as languages spoken normally on earth.

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?**

Love, in this context, will always be concerned with edifying, building up, or benefitting members of the church body. This idea brings together the themes of chapter 12 (members of the body), chapter 13 (love) and chapter 14 (do all things for edification). The Corinthians were using prophecy, speaking in languages (tongues), etc., for benefitting self with no regard to the benefit of other members of the church. Love is about elevating others.

6. **What is the main advantage of prophesying over speaking in languages (tongues)?**

Prophecy offered immediate edification or instruction to the audience. Speaking in other languages brought no benefit to the congregation unless the languages went through the additional process of interpretation. Paul emphasizes throughout the chapter that without interpretation, the languages were of no immediate benefit.

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.)

The setting will be more specifically identified later, but Paul already implies that the setting is when the church is meeting together. The edification is for "the church" (14:4, 5, 12). Paul's discussion in this chapter is always in connection with edifying the church.

8. In this setting, who hears and who understands or benefits from uninterpreted languages (tongues), and in what way do they benefit?

God hears, the speaker hears himself, and we assume anyone nearby hears the languages, but only God understands them. The speaker doesn't understand uninterpreted languages (cf. v. 14) but nevertheless, he is still "edified." This probably means that he is encouraged by the mere fact that he has received this gift. This is a personal blessing, but it doesn't benefit the church or show loving concern for the building up of the church. Though it stirs his spirit, it does not build the "understanding" of the speaker.

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?

Prior to a concert, the musicians make noise as they each tune their instruments. The sound becomes a bit more pleasing when the 1st violin plays a single note and the rest of the orchestra plays the same note to make sure they are in tune with each other. But no one pays for a ticket to hear musicians warm up even if they do so with sincerity and enthusiasm. When the proper notes, harmonies and rhythms of the musical score are clearly played, then we have music. Prior to that we have noise.

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?

Paul would not think too highly of such services. "Spirit-filled" does not mean exciting and enthusiastic if there is little substance. Nor should the goal be, "what I get out of it." The goal isn't simply to be edified, but to edify each other.

Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16 call for "teaching and admonishing one another" (edifying) and "giving thanks...to God." Having an exciting "worship experience" is never mentioned.

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?

A. The person speaking would understand his own message, and anyone who happened to know the language he used would also understand it. Others would be "foreigners" to him.

B. Only someone who happened to know the language would understand the message. The speaker would get some satisfaction from the experience (v. 4), but would not understand his own message. He could get the same experience at home alone. *The difference is not the language, but the means (miraculous or not) by which it is spoken.*

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?

While there seems to be some involvement of the Holy Spirit, it is the human spirit that Paul mentions. The inner person or maybe personal emotions are involved. The person is stimulated and to some extent built up (v. 4). It would indeed be an exalting experience to do anything in the assembly of the church or elsewhere by miraculous power.

But the concern should be to benefit others and not merely to get a good personal experience. Self-centered participation in the activities of the church was a key problem in the Corinthian church.

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”?

It is anyone who does not know or understand the language being spoken. He would be informed if he knew the language used, or if someone interpreted.

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”?

In this case, church means the assembly of the congregation. “Assembly” is the most basic meaning of the Greek word for church (*ekklesia*). We could also say that this is about conduct in “church services.” Paul doesn’t directly address the matter of speaking in miraculous tongues in private, though there may be implications in verses 13-14. He is explicitly and mainly concerned with speaking in uninterpreted languages in the assembly of the church because all that is done in that setting should be for the edification of the entire group, that is, the congregation (vv. 4, 5). In general practice, uninterpreted languages would not edify the local congregation.

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”?

vv. 4 & 5: the congregation

v. 12: the assembly (or possibly the congregation)

v. 19: the assembly (a church service)

v. 23: the congregation (when “the whole congregation comes together in one place” would be a church service, or an assembly).

v. 28: the assembly (a church service)

v. 33, 34: these could be the assemblies of the congregations or the congregations themselves.

v. 35: the assembly (a church service)

If we mean that we are going to the assembly or a meeting of the church, then it is entirely appropriate to say that we are going “to church.” In verses 19, 28 & 35, and possibly in vv. 33 & 34, he literally says “in church,” meaning the moments when the congregation is assembled for a regularly scheduled meeting.

We will examine more closely the purpose, nature, and correct designation of “the assembly” in our next lesson.