

Text: 1 Corinthians 14:6-25

Title: Tongues and Understanding

Truth: Tongues do not accomplish in the church what is needed: meaningful understanding.

Date/Location: February 14, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

I have already addressed the subject of tongues several times in our expositions of chapters 12, 13, and 14:1-5. We have learned this:

- (1) the gift of tongues was destined to become obsolete, and it did so when the New Testament was completed (13:8-12);
- (2) not all believers had the gift of tongues even when it was available to the early church (12:30);
- (3) it is sinful to speak in tongues—or use any other spiritual gift—if the purpose is to puff up the speaker (12:21);
- (4) all spiritual abilities, including ability in a foreign language, is to be used to build up the church and to honor God (14:1-5).

But the apostle Paul is not done writing on this subject, which means God was not done with it, which means we are not done studying it. The problem exposed by tongues in the church in Corinth is important enough that Paul takes at least 20 more verses to deal with it.

Nearly two millennia later, the world is still racked with problems surrounding the gift of tongues. Some naming Christ demand you speak in gibberish in order to demonstrate genuine salvation; people lose heart because they have not received that gift yet; people ask God to give it to them when in fact He will not; church services are in total disorder and not accomplishing the teaching and preaching of God's Holy Word; associated "miraculous" gifts supposedly operate in the church but are actually lies, such as fake healing services; and this false doctrine along with the prosperity gospel is preached and believed among 300 million or more souls.

I. Key Themes

Breaking this passage down into manageable segments was difficult. But upon a careful reading, the themes are not hard to spot:

- A. Understanding:** This word or a derivative like *intelligible* or *thinking* or *clear* or *know* or *meaning* or a phrase like *(un)fruitful mind*, or *with the mind*. It is used in verses 9, 14, 15 (2x), 16, 19, and 20 (2x), for a total of 8

times. Words like *distinction* and *significance* convey the same idea. It is obvious that our emphasis from 14:1-5 on understanding carries through these verses. The larger point that we must grapple with is that cognition is critical in the Christian system of thought. Real understanding comes along with things like consistency and logic and truth and such, without which, the message is muddy and unclear.

Remember, verse 2 introduced the idea of a tongues-speaker not being understood because of the language barrier. This was contrasted with those who edify the church with prophecy that results in building up, exhortation, and comfort.

B. **Tongues.** Between verses 2 and 39, there are 16 direct references to tongues. The word is used in the singular and the plural. Some interpreters make a distinction: the *singular* refers to ecstatic gibberish, while the *plural* refers to real human languages. But I disagree with that analysis. The uses of the singular in 1 Cor. 14:9, 13, 14, 19, and especially 27 seem to weigh against there being a distinction. If a *tongue* were truly gibberish, then it would not be interpretable by anyone, and therefore it would not be even remotely acceptable to Paul. My understanding is that the singular refers to an individual human language, and the plural refers to multiple such languages. All are human languages that have real meaning.

II. The Imperative of Understanding, v. 6-12

A. There is no spiritual profit without understanding, v. 6. Only if there is a communication of divine revelation, knowledge from God, proclamation of divine truth, or teaching of Christian doctrine can there be any kind of profit.

Profit refers not to money, but to assistance, help, aid, benefit, or accomplishment. In the context, the help is in matters related to God, to “spiritual matters” as we generically call them. Actually, “spiritual” matters touch every area of life, not just the religious department. To know Christ, to understand God’s ways, to know Scriptural wisdom, etc. *is* profitable for every area of life. Think of profit like this: when you encourage someone who is down or needs guidance, and they respond, “That helps me,” that is what is meant by *profit*.

B. Paul gives a neat illustration of musical instruments, v. 7-8. Even instruments, under the direction of their user, make a distinct series of sounds in which is encoded some meaning. Random notes do not convey anything. A warning-tune on the trumpet tells people to get ready for

battle. A flute plays beautiful music with a rhythm and melody, and often the song has associated words. But without the careful arrangement of the notes, the “music” is not much better than noise.

- C. Application of the illustration, v. 9. In the same way as the musical instrument conveys information through an orderly arrangement of notes, so also we have to speak in a way that easily is understood. This way, people can know what we are talking about. Just like we must use our brain to make an orderly arrangement of musical notes, so too we must use our brain to make an orderly arrangement of words that can be understood.
- D. Languages are like instruments in that they must convey significance and meaning, v. 10-11. Otherwise, you will sound like a barbarian—literal translation—to the audience. There will be no understanding.
- E. Therefore, don’t be a stranger: speak so that the church will be edified, v. 12. Since the believers were real desirous of spiritual gifts, they should have been all the more desirous of the *results* of good spiritual gifts, namely edification, which comes through understanding.

III. Understanding is Key for All Aspects of Ministry, v. 13-19

- A. Speaking, praying, singing must be done with understanding, v. 13-15. If there is no translator, then it is useless. Paul resolves that the church must speak, pray, and sing with understanding.
- B. Note that speaking/praying/singing are done in conjunction with the “spirit,” lowercase s. In this context, this refers to the human spirit. But since the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, these activities are also to be done with the Spirit, capital S. And, to carry the thought one step further, we need to know that singing or praying with the Spirit *is by definition* and *must be* done with understanding. There is no divorcing the two ideas, such that you could say “I’m singing in the Spirit, and I don’t have to understand it.” NO! If you are not understanding, it is not a product of the Holy Spirit nor pleasing to Him.
- C. Otherwise, someone who does not know the Lord will not be able to agree to what you are saying, 16-17. This moves into the realm now of considering the effect of your divine enablement (spiritual gift) on others, even upon those who are not (yet) believers in Christ.
- D. Paul spoke with tongues, but desired understanding over tongues, 18-19. He is so emphatic about this that—and get this—even in the age when the gift of tongues was still given by God, and while Paul himself knew several languages by God’s gifting, he preferred to speak in plain

language to be easily understood. “Showing off” in another language accomplishes nothing. The 5 words versus 10,000 words comparison shows the relative value of clarity.

IV. Tongues are for Unbelievers, v. 20-25

- A. Verse 20 seems like an interlude...but what Paul is saying is that he wants the readers to not be infantile in their spiritual maturity level. He wants them to be unsophisticated in malice (like innocent children) but he wishes them to be mature in understanding. He will next point out something they should understand.
- B. Tongues are a sign to unbelievers, not to believers, 21-22. The Law supports this point in Isaiah 28:11-12. This is a very shocking truth for those who have been emphasizing tongues in and for believers. Their emphasis is *entirely* unbiblical. Tongues are actually a sign of *judgment*, not a sign of *blessing*.
- In contrast, prophecy (today = preaching) is for believers, 22.
- C. The response of reasonable outsiders can guide us toward sanity, v. 23-25. An unbeliever or uninformed person observing a service full of tongues will think the church is crazy, and right he is.

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who follow Christ—believers—and those who do not. Paul here speaks of the second group, which can be divided again into two sub-groups. First, there are those who do not have faith, and second there are those who are altogether ignorant about Christianity. In the end, unbelieving or uninformed are in the same boat.

But God is calling some of these ones to Himself. By the word *calling*, we first mean *inviting*. When the good news about Jesus is offered to someone, that is a general “calling” or invitation to faith. Then, God may be pleased to grant conviction and repentance about sin. This is when *calling* takes on a second idea of actually “bringing a person to saving faith.” According to Matthew 22:14, many are called—in the first sense—but a much smaller number of people are chosen in the sense of being saved. How do you know if you are called? Whenever you hear the gospel, you are called in the first sense. If you believe in Christ, then you are called in the second sense.

We are never told to find out if we are called before we can believe. We are told that we are sinners, we need to be saved, Jesus died for our sins and rose again, and that we must believe. We obey God by believing in Christ. Leave the calling to God. You do the believing.

D. But, you might object, “Are not tongues *for* the unsaved?” Yes, if they were used in an evangelistic way they would be advantageous for the unsaved. However, tongues were also a sign of judgment, not of advantage. Foreign languages signified to Israel that God was moving his program away from Israel to the Gentiles. The fact that the hearers could not understand was judgment in itself—God’s revelation was hidden from them, which *is* a judgment. Israel had fallen under judgment and will not be the centerpiece of God’s program for a time. What was judgment for Israel lead to blessing for the Gentiles (Romans 11:12).

It makes sense that you should not have a church service filled with foreign languages which signify judgment to those who cannot understand! You need clear speech, especially since the church service is populated by mostly Christians. We do not need a sign of judgment!

E. If people in the church are proclaiming the truth in an easy-to-understand way, the same visitor can realize his sin and be convicted to worship God. He will see that God is truly in the church. Of course, there is no guarantee, but you can most certainly guarantee the other way—that if people are speaking in unknown languages, the person will definitely *not* understand anything and not be convicted about anything.

V. Application

A. **Scripture memory.** Which is better: memorizing without understanding, or understanding without memorizing? Certainly memorizing *and* understanding is the best. But the understanding of Scriptural truth is so important that we cannot sacrifice it. We cannot be satisfied with mere memorization and a hope that “our kids will understand it later.” They may not, or they may only after much heartache ensues because of disobedience. Based on the principle in this passage, edification only occurs with understanding. It behooves us to bring understanding to the table as much as possible *initially*.

If we are encouraging memorization but cannot explain the verses for understanding, we need to do some more homework! If we are teaching a verse in Truth Trackers or Sunday school, we have to work hard to help our young people understand it in its true context.

In fact, “hiding God’s word in your heart” does not mean “rote memorizing it.” It means to learn and understand it.

Deeply and repeatedly thinking about a verse and committing it to memory is important work and we should do it. Do not take what I am saying as an attempt to throw memorization under the bus!

Example: In school, we should be about more than memorizing formulas. Real learning means to really grasp the material and be able to know where the formulas come from, and how to use them, and how to adapt them to different situations.

- B. **Listening to sermons.** You might not feel like you have understood everything in the pastor’s message or in the devotional. But do not despair as long as you are understanding good portions of it. Work at it—that is, really think, really pray, really sit down with your Bible and ponder. Do not give up. But certainly do not be satisfied if you do not understand. Pursue wisdom!
- C. **Communication.** Clear, direct speech is a Christian virtue. To “couch” your language or obfuscate not only does not convey the full truth to your listeners—it can leave them confused—it also can show that you are not clearly thinking yourself. I have had people say something, and it is evident that they are “talking around” the issue at hand. When I repeat it back to them as to what they are *actually* saying, then it sort of shocks them. They themselves did not realize what they were saying, but they were saying it. Therefore, in concert with Paul’s principle of plain and understood speech, be clear with others *and* with yourself!
- D. **Translation.** A team of FBC Ann Arbor and Howell believers, plus some from a few other sister churches, are working on getting the Bible available in digital form. We do this under the auspices of Bibles International, a department of Baptist Mid-Missions. Three languages we work with have very small populations. But often these people know another language—they must, in order to get by in a world that does not know their native tongue. You might wonder, “what is the value of translating into a “small “language if they know that other language, or can be taught another language?” This passage gives us the impetus. Even if you understand 80% of the Bible you are taught in your second tongue, or 90%, that is not good enough. We must strive that *all of it* can be understood by people in their best language.
- E. **Worship.** If you do not understand the words of the songs or preaching, then we need to do something as soon as possible. We need better singing, better diction, more careful speech, louder speakers, whatever.

MAP