

The Truth About Tongues, Part 3

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 14:20–25

Code: 1873

First Corinthians chapter 14, and we'll be sharing with you from verses 20 through 25, which is the heart of this particular passage. Now in the fourteenth chapter, we have another in the long line of issues which the apostle Paul deals with in Corinth. And here, he is correcting the carnal Corinthians on the basis of their misuse and perversion of the gift of tongues, or languages. Now I apologize, in a sense, for those of you who were here last time, because it's so difficult to get any part of this chapter without getting all of it; but I'll do the best that I can to bring you into the context.

There is a true gift of tongues in the New Testament era, and it was the ability to speak a language unknown to the speaker but known to someone present; and God had a very definite purpose in it, which we'll see later on this morning. But in the Corinthian assembly, they had taken the true gift and had twisted it for an untrue use. And in addition to that, they also had added to the true gift a counterfeit gift.

It was common in pagan mystery religions of that day – and we've supported that to you on multiple occasions. It was common in the pagan religions of that day for the people to believe that they could enter into a state of frenzy or a state of ecstasy, and consequently, they could, as it were, slip out of their body, and they could commune on another level with a deity. And when they did that, they would speak to that deity in an unknown language; they would literally be talking the language of the gods. And they believed, consequently, that this was some kind of an ecstatic, supernatural phenomenon that was very self-edifying, and was a great act of devotion toward that god.

As in the case of the Corinthian church, all the way through the book, every part of the world's system that they knew had come into the church, and this area was no different. So basically what you have in the fourteenth chapter is Paul saying to them, "Look, number one, you are misusing the true gift; and number two, you have brought in this counterfeit thing and doubly confused the issue," so that they were actually believing that the gift of tongues was speaking in ecstatic speech, ecstatic babble, gibberish, or whatever term you want to use, and supposedly communing with God in a private prayer language.

Now the apostle Paul writes this chapter, number one, to dispense, or to dispel I should say, the idea that the true gift is that kind of ecstatic gibberish. Two, to make sure that when the true gift did exist, it existed properly and in the right context to accomplish the right purpose. And, of course, as we look at the fourteenth chapter, it's a very urgent chapter for us today, because Charismatics are telling us all the time that it's necessary for us to have this experience in order to realize the full manifestation of the Holy Spirit, the full expression of His power in our lives. They're crying out to us loudly to experience it, and we need to understand what Paul is saying here.

Now the Corinthian church, as I said then, had taken the true gift and twisted its use; and they had added to it a counterfeit gift, which just confused everything all the more. And so Paul writes this chapter as a corrective, as he has the thirteen chapters prior.

Last time, we talked about the position of the gift of tongues, and we said it was secondary. Paul makes it very clear that the position of the gift of tongues is secondary. And, secondly, the purpose of the gift of tongues, which we'll consider today, is as a sign. And, thirdly, the procedure for the gift of tongues, systematic. In other words, there is a very careful system in which God has designed this gift to function, and we'll consider that next Lord's Day morning.

Now let's come to the second point. The purpose of the gift of languages, or tongues, is as a sign. Now this is an exceedingly vital area of study, because if we can forever, once and for all, determine the purpose of the gift, then it's very easy to evaluate what's going on today, or any time in history, relative to this gift. It either fits the biblical purpose or it does not. Consequently, we can determine whether it's legitimate or not.

Now let me begin by reiterating what is often offered as the purpose of tongues, particularly today among our brothers and sisters in Pentecostal/Charismatic fellowships, they tell us that the purpose of tongues is primarily for personal edification and devotion. In other words, this is your private prayer language, and when you do it you are built up; and this is the way which you can have your devotions with God in a supernatural way, communicating in a language that is your own private language with God.

Now we saw from our last study that that is, in fact, precisely what the pagans thought about their ecstatic speech, that it was a private, self-building act of devotion to a god. And that is precisely what Paul is denying insofar as the true gift is concerned. In a sense, he indicts them for that.

Donald Gee, who was a rather historic Pentecostal, has said, "The revealed purposes of the gift of tongues is chiefly devotional, and we do well to emphasize the fact." Larry Christenson, who is a more modern Charismatic Lutheran, says, "One speaks in tongues, for the most part, in his private devotions. This is by far its most important use and value." So they are saying that this is a new way to have your devotions, a new way to edify yourself, a new way to build yourself up, a new way for you to have communion with God and experience something deeper and more meaningful than you could in any other manner.

Now Paul in the first nineteen verses has really shown that this is not true. In fact, he chides them for this. And I showed you last time the most interesting Greek distinction between the singular use of *glōssa* and the plural use, and showed you why I believe that when it is singular, in the fourteenth chapter, has reference to the gibberish of ecstatic speech; and when it is plural, it has reference to languages, the true gift. And so in verse 2, we saw that Paul says, "He that speaks in gibberish" – or that speaks in ecstasy, ecstatic speech like the pagans – "speaks not to men, but" – literally in the Greek – "unto a god, and in his spirit he is speaking mysteries."

In other words, he is saying to them, "You are doing what is done in the mystery religions by people who are speaking to their gods, and that this is not what the design of a spiritual gift is, because all spiritual gifts are designed to use to speak to men," – or to speak to others, or to serve others. First Corinthians 12:7 says, "The gifts were given to profit all." So that they had misused this gift. All gifts are given for you. My gift is for you, not me; and the idea of self-edification really turns out to be a perversion. And it is nothing more than speaking mysteries, the mystery religions to a deity, to a god, and not speaking unto men, as the gifts of the Spirit are designed to do.

And then, of course, in verse 4, that very important verse – again using the singular and always consistent. And I'm sure that's why the King James interpreters put "unknown" in, because they recognized that difference. Wherever it is plural, they do not put "unknown." "He that speaks in gibberish" – or in this jargon of ecstasy – "edifies himself." Now that is not telling you to do it for that purpose. We showed you how that this concept of edifying, very often in the Corinthian letter, is bad. In other words, it's a bad, self, ego-building edifying. "He is really building himself up," is what he says. And that's wrong, because no gift is ever designed with the intention of selfish use. My gifts are for you, that's the point.

And he says, "You are actually speaking in this gibberish for the purpose of building yourself up. But the truth of the matter is" – in verse 14 – "your understanding is unfruitful, totally fruitless." And verse 16: "Nobody who hears you can even say, 'Amen.' You are totally ignoring the people around you. You are selfish. Your own mind is unfruitful. The people around you can't say, 'Amen.' And as a result," – he says – "I'd rather speak five words than ten thousand." And ten thousand isn't literal, it's *murios*. It is the largest number in the Greek counting system that had a name. It would be like saying "quintillion," see.

He is saying, "It has no point. Self-edification isn't the point here. You're doing it for that, but that isn't his point." He almost seems to agree with them, in verse 4, that they are edifying themselves.

But that's only a tacit kind of taking them where they are, and then he takes them where they ought to be. It's like in 1 Corinthians 6:12, you know, where he says to them, "All things are lawful," and he's quoting – remember their little phrase? Remember how we studied that? They were going around in their liberty, saying, "All things are lawful. All things are lawful. I'm in grace; I can do whatever I want." And he's saying, "Well, yeah, all things are lawful," and that's where they are.

But by the time he gets to verse 18, he says, "Flee fornication." That's where he wants them to be. They may be concluding that all things are lawful, but God isn't. They may be feeling that this thing is edifying them, but God says, "That's not its point," see. That's the approach he's using there. So he has already dealt in great detail with the fact that tongues were never intended for the purpose of edification.

I showed you last time that they can't edify the church in any way, because the church doesn't know what's being said. And even when they're interpreted, it is the gift of interpretation that edifies, not the gift of tongues. It can't edify an individual then, because his mind is unfruitful. It can't edify the church, because no one knows what's being said. And if somebody is there who does speak that language, and it had its intended use and its intended purpose, it would have to be translated so that it wouldn't be unedifying, so that the church would gain some benefit. But then again, it would be the gift of interpretation, not tongues, which edifies.

So it isn't possible that we can conclude that this is a self-edifying prayer language to God. In fact, if you study prayer in the New Testament, you will never find any place in the entire New Testament where you are told to pray to God in an unknown language. In fact, when Jesus laid out the model for prayer in Matthew chapter 6, verses 9 to 13, He said, "Pray this way," didn't He; and then He told them how to pray. And there wasn't any gibberish; there wasn't any ecstasy. And I don't think that we can come up with a better model than that of our Lord Himself.

People say, "But tongues in this language is a way to praise God. It's a way to praise God, a free, new, marvelous way to praise God. Then I would ask this question: the greatest area of praise, the greatest time of praise, the greatest amount of praise will be offered in heaven. And why then does 1 Corinthians 13:8 say, "Tongues will cease"? If it's such a great way to praise, and praise is the very character of heaven, why would this cease? So, you see, we can't conclude that it is for self-edification or devotion; that's just a thumbnail sketch of what we did last time.

Secondly, others suggest not that it's edification, but that it's for evangelism. Some people say that the gift of tongues in the New Testament was to enable somebody to preach the gospel in another language. That it sounds like a good idea, and somewhere on a mission field sometime, God may have done something like that, given somebody the ability to speak a language they didn't know in order to give the gospel to somebody in a very critical situation; I wouldn't deny that. But you can't support the fact that the gift of tongues in the New Testament was to preach the gospel to people who didn't understand. Do you know why? Because you never have an illustration of that in the whole New Testament.

You say, "What about Acts 2, when they all spoke, and everybody heard them in their own language?" Yes, but you know what they heard? They heard them speaking "the wonderful works of God." And if you study that simple phrase – it comes out of Judaism – what it simply means is that they went over the great, historic things that God had done in the Old Testament – why? – to draw the attention of the Jewish crowd so that Peter could get up, and then in their language preach the gospel.

So rather than say the gift of tongues would be useful for evangelism, you might say that it was a kind of preevangelism; it gathered the crowd, and then the gospel needed to be preached. So, Charismatics have suggested that it's for edification. Others have suggested it's for evangelism. But those don't really fit the New Testament.

Thirdly, it has been suggested that the gift of tongues is the proof of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And we discussed this at length in chapter 12, that the gift of tongues is the proof of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Now there are several problems with that. Number one, look at chapter 12, verse 13. First Corinthians 12:13 says, "For by one Spirit," – now watch this – "for by one Spirit were we all baptized." Now I'll ask you a question. How many were baptized? All.

Look at verse 30, and this is a form in the Greek which implies a negative answer. That's not a guess on my part, that is the Greek form of construction here. "Have all the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues?" And what's the implied answer? No. Now, notice: "All are baptized; all do not speak in tongues." You cannot equate those two.

Further, I would add this. In Acts 2:38, Peter preached. He said, "Repent, be baptized because of the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Three thousand people did that, and do you know how many of them spoke in tongues? The Bible doesn't say that any of them did.

In Acts chapter 4, verse 31, "The place was shaken; they were filled with the Holy Spirit," – and they spoke in tongues? No. "They simply preached the word with boldness." You see in Acts 2 and Acts 4, people filled, people receiving the Spirit, no tongues. You can't equate those two, it just doesn't fit.

You say, “Well, John, if it isn’t the baptism of the Spirit sign, if it isn’t for evangelism, if it isn’t for the purpose of actually proclaiming the gospel, if it isn’t for the purpose of actually building myself up in some private way, well, what is for?” Well, that’s what we’re going to study. Look at verse 20, and we’ll get into it.

“Brethren, be not children” – or, literally, stop being children – “in understanding; however, in evil,” – kakia in the Greek means actually evil, just general evil – “be ye infants.” It’s a younger word than the first word for children. The first word for child would mean like a five to ten-year-old; the second word would mean like a one-year-old or less. “Brethren, stop being children in understanding; however, in evil, be infants, but in understanding be men.”

Now this is a rather strong indictment, and so he starts with “brethren” to kind of conciliate them a little bit before he hammers them. And the admonition here suggests that because of their misuse of tongues, they were really evil. Let me show you what I mean. They were children in understanding. In other words, they hadn’t really grown up to understand solid doctrine. They were like Ephesians 4, “Tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine.”

They didn’t use their minds. Their minds are unfruitful, just as it says in 14:14. And they were not thinking through the right things, the biblical things, the things out of the revelation of God that they had received. And so in understanding, they were children rather than men; and they should have been mature and their minds should have grasped the truth. But they, in malice and evil, should have been children when they weren’t.

You say, “What do you mean by that?” Well, a little infant has no evil thoughts toward anybody, has no malice. A little infant is all love, and gentleness, and kindness, and tenderness, care, sensitivity. And you see, what he’s saying is, “Why don’t you treat each other like that? Why don’t you be little infants when it comes to the way you act to each other, and be mature in your thinking, instead of being infants in your thinking and mature in your evil?”

You see, what he means is that by virtue of their selfish exercise of these gifts for the purpose of self-edification and selfish ego-building, they were ignoring the rest of the family of God, they were ignoring the congregation. There was total confusion; there was no room for the real teaching of the Word of God. The people who visited their congregation thought they were mad. The people who were there, a part of the congregation, couldn’t get anything out of it. It was just total chaos as everybody did his own thing.

What it really boiled down to was anti-intellectualism in favor of an existential experience. And that’s really what we see in the 20th century today, a pervasive kind of anti-intellectualism, I think, has allowed the Charismatic movement to kind of sweep into the area that the world has provided, the spirit of the age, and accommodate that thinking. “Stop being children,” he says. “Stop treating people unkindly. Start thinking like adults.”

Now having said that and called them to attention, he tells the purpose of tongues – now watch – because if we can decide what this is, it’d really solve our problem. Verse 21: “In the law it is written, ‘With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me,’ says the Lord. Wherefore, tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them

that believe not. But prophesying serves not for them that believe not, but for them who believe.”
Now stop there.

Now if you don't know anything else, beloved, if you never learn anything else about tongues, you sure know this: “Tongues are for a sign, not to them” – what? – “that believe.” You know that. That statement alone, that is the heart of this fourteenth chapter. That statement in and of itself should call any current so-called tongues to task, to deal with the reality of that statement. It couldn't be any more simple. “It is to them that believe not.”

Now let me show you what happens. On your outline in a list, I put three things down: a sign is of cursing, a sign of blessing, and a sign of authority. And these are basically the purposes of tongues or language as a true gift. Now let me show you number one: a sign of cursing. This is the primary thing. Now maybe you've never thought about it this way, but this is, as I see it, the way the verses here indicate.

Let's look at verse 21 again. “In the law” – and the law does not always refer to the Pentateuch; it frequently refers to the whole Old Testament, as it often does in Psalm 119 and other places as well in Romans. So he's saying, “In the Old Testament, it is written,” – and then he goes on to quote Isaiah 28:11 and 12. And he's rather freely quoting it. He quotes Isaiah 28:11 freely, and just throws in the end of verse 12: “And He says, ‘With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak to this people,’ – and this people refers to Israel in the text there – ‘and yet for all that will they not hear me,’ saith the Lord.”

And then having stated that Old Testament statement of Isaiah to Israel, he then applies it: “Therefore,” – he says – “now if that was true then, if that was the use in the time of Isaiah, therefore tongues are” – not were, but still are – “for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not.” So he draws a conclusion from the Old Testament text, and the conclusion is that tongues are not for believing people, but unbelieving people.

Now I want you to notice something most interesting. It says in verse 22, “Tongues are for a sign.” See the three little words, “for a sign.” In the Greek, that's eis, and eis indicates purpose unto. Now, the word here then is saying this: it isn't that incidentally they are a sign, it is that tongues' purpose is as a sign to unbelievers. It's not anything incidental.

In fact, that particular expression “for a sign” appears ten times in the Greek Old Testament, and every time it means “purpose,” so that the purpose of tongues is for a sign to unbelievers. What unbelievers? Well, “this people” in verse 21 has only one reference in mind; that's Israel. So it is a sign to unbelieving Israel. Then that's carried right into the Corinthian situation.

Now let me give you a little bit of background. Turn in your Bible to the twenty-eighth of Isaiah 28, and I'll show you what is a most fascinating account. In Isaiah 28, we find ourselves in the southern kingdom of Judah in the reign of King Hezekiah. The year is approximately 705 B.C. In 722 B.C., some fifteen or so years earlier, the northern kingdom Israel had been taken and destroyed by the Assyrians; and the reason it happened was because of their unbelief and apostasy. God had come in terrible judgment against the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.

And now it's 705 B.C., and the southern kingdom is behaving in a terrible, disobedient manner. And

so God speaks to them through the prophet Isaiah to warn them that the same thing that happened to the northern kingdom is going to happen to the southern kingdom because of their unbelief and apostasy. And that is the message of the first fifteen verses of Isaiah 28. It is a warning from the prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom, that they are going to receive the same kind of judgment that the ones in the north received. And, in fact, it will be the Assyrians, or the babbling Babylonians, if you will, who will come in judgment against them.

Now let's see how Isaiah approaches the problem. He finds the leaders of Israel, the prophets and the priests and the leaders in a drunken stupor, in verse 7. "But they also have erred through wine, through strong drink are out of the way." They had failed to fulfill their function as leaders because they were drunk. "The priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink. They are swallowed up of wine; they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision; they stumble in judgment."

And look at the ugliness of verse 8: "For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there's no clean place." He finds them literally in a drunken stupor, having vomited. They're at some party, and he unloads his message on them of terrible rebuke and the coming of judgment. And do you know what their reaction is? They mock him; they scorn him; they chide him; they deride him.

Look at what they say in verse 9: "Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? Those who are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts? Who could he ever teach? Babies." – why? – "Because he always goes precept on precept, precept on precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little. He must think we're babies; he keeps repeating the same simple stuff over and over." And they mock him. They don't appreciate his attitude, so they begin to sneer at the prophet and call his teaching simple childish teaching. Does he think they're babies, that he's got to repeat this same stuff over and over?

But they didn't ever hear it; they didn't ever hear it. So in 11, he speaks for God. He says, "For with stammering lips and another tongue will He speak to this people. To whom He said, 'This is the rest by which you may cause the weary to rest, and this is the refreshing; yet they would not hear.'"

Now God says, "You wouldn't hear the simple, repeated, childlike message of Isaiah, so I'm going to talk to you in a language you'll never understand." And what He meant was the babbling Babylonians who would come and encompass their city, and who would take them out of their land, and destroy them and slaughter them and burn them. And when they began to hear that unintelligible language of Babylonia that they couldn't understand, they would know the judgment of God had fallen. And it happened in 588 B.C. And because of their unbelief and apostasy, God brought a terrible judgment.

This wasn't the only time they'd been warned. Back in Deuteronomy chapter 28 in verse 49, back in the 15th century before Christ, listen to this, 28:49. "The Lord shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand." I believe that most likely could have reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. So in the 15th century, God warned them that when they heard a strange language it would be judgment.

In the 8th century, Isaiah, God warned them that when they heard a strange language it would be judgment. "Jeremiah" – that great weeping prophet – "said, 'Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel,' saith the Lord. 'It is a mighty nation. It is an ancient nation, a nation whose

language you know not, neither understand you what they say,” Jeremiah 5:15. And God had clearly pointed out in their minds that when they were going to be judged, there was going to be a sign, and the sign was they would hear a language they couldn’t understand. Do you see?

Now when Paul quotes that – now you can go back to 1 Corinthians. When Paul quotes that here, he is saying, “Look, just as when Isaiah said it, just as when Moses said it, just as when Jeremiah said it, those languages are a sign to the unbeliever that God is about to act in judgment.” That’s what he’s saying.

You say, “Well, what did it mean in this generation in which Paul lived?” Well, listen; when they began to speak those languages on the day of Pentecost, every Jew should have known that the judgment of God was eminent. And do you know it wasn’t but just about thirty years later when the Roman Emperor came in and wiped out Jerusalem, and with it, Judaism as such. The sacrificial system ended and it’s never been restored. They should have known the judgment of God was going to fall.

Listen, if the judgment of God fell on the unbelief and apostasy of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C., if the judgment of God fell on the unbelief and apostasy of the southern kingdom in 586 B.C., then believe me, it will fall on a nation that turns its back on and crucifies its own Messiah in the 1st century; and it did.

Seems to me that once the destruction of Jerusalem came in 70 A.D., the whole purpose for the gift of languages ceased. That’s what the text says; that’s not my opinion. It never was intended to be something for a Christian, it’s for one who doesn’t believe. Which one? A Jew, one of this people, that they might know God is acting in judgment.

Jesus said, in Luke 13:35, “Behold, your house is left to you desolate.” And then in Luke chapter 20 in verse 21, He carried it a step further. He said – let’s see, Luke chapter 21, verse 20 rather: “And when you shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then you know that its desolation is near.” And verse 24, “They shall fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down by the Gentiles.”

Jesus said, “Hey, judgment, judgment.” All through the apostles’ ministries judgment was coming on Israel. Jesus preached it, and the sign of languages again showed it. And that, I think, is why Paul refers to Isaiah 28. And even in spite of that, he says, at the end of verse 21, they wouldn’t listen, they wouldn’t listen.

This purpose can be traced and be seen to be true in the book of Acts. In Acts chapter 2, “Many unbelieving Jewish people were present.” And later on, when you have another incident of speaking in tongues on the occasion of, perhaps, chapter 8, chapter 10, chapter 19, even though in each case, those people become believers. Yet the occurrence of this same phenomenon becomes a reinforcement of the reality to the Jews who saw and would tell their countrymen what had happened; because in Acts 8, Acts 10, Acts 19, where tongues occurred, there were always believing Jews present who would come back and report that they had seen the same thing. So it was not only to link those new elements of the church up with the Pentecost occasion and with the Jews there, but it was also to reinforce to the Jewish nation that indeed God was going to judge.

So, first of all, it's a sign of cursing. But I want to add something to that; it's also a sign of blessing. This is what I call a residual benefit of number one. Number one is the primary purpose for this gift: cursing. And I haven't given you all the study on this, but just some of it.

The tongues at Pentecost were saying, "Look, God's not going to any longer work through one nation. God's not any longer going to speak just one language. God's not any longer going to favor one people. God's going to go to the world, and through the world to build His church, see, the kingdom for all nations."

And, you know, the very fact that they spoke in all those languages was God's way of saying, "It's all over for the uniqueness of Israel, and I'm going to speak in the world's languages, and build that church that's hidden in the Old Testament." So tongues speak primarily as a sign of a curse on Israel.

But notice, no sooner have I said that, than I have to say they speak too of the blessing that's going to come to the whole world; because as Christ turned away from a rebellious people, He opened His arms to the world. So it becomes a sign of blessing, residually. It's like Romans 11, you know, where Paul says, "The fall of them is become the riches of the world." Jerusalem destroyed, Israel set aside; and yet, in their setting aside, we became beneficiaries – don't we? – because God reaches out to us.

So God's New Testament apostles and God's New Testament prophets suddenly burst out spontaneously declaring the wonderful works of God in every language. Read Acts 2: an unmistakable sign that a transition had come; a curse on one hand, but then a blessing on another hand; because even Jews could still come, couldn't they? Three thousand did on the day of Pentecost. So, in a sense, while being a judicial sign of a curse, residually it's also a sign of blessing.

Then, thirdly, it's a sign of authority, and this is tied up in it as well. Who were the great messengers who preached this transition? Who were the men of God who spoke of the curse and the judgment? Who were the men of God who spoke of the blessing to come to all nations? They were none other than the apostles and the prophets; and it was to them that God gave the ability to speak these languages as an authenticating, validating sign that what they were saying was indeed the truth; because to the Jewish mind, it would be so shocking and so shattering, so incomprehensible, so stupendous, that God would change this way, that there must be reinforcement that what they were saying was true. And so God gave them the ability to speak these languages.

Paul says, in 14:18, "I speak in these languages more than you all." As an apostle, this was an authenticating sign, such as the other sign gifts that he had. He even says, in 2 Corinthians 12:12 that, "I had all the signs of an apostle, and signs and wonders and mighty deeds." So it was a sign of authority to those who preached the message of transition.

Now I like to call this the ABC of the purpose of tongues: C – cursing, B – blessing, A – authority. That's it, folks. You don't see private devotions there. You don't see evangelism there. It's just very unique purpose. And, you see, once the event came, the destruction of Jerusalem, once the event came, the transition was made and the church was born; the sign was no longer necessary.

You know, when I take a trip somewhere, I'm driving and maybe I'm going up the coast, and I see a

sign that says “Sacramento 300 miles.” Next time, I see a sign that says “Sacramento 200,” “Sacramento 150,” “Sacramento 30,” and all of a sudden I’m in Sacramento. I get past Sacramento, there’s no more signs. I’ve been there. They’ve stopped.

Tongues is a sign. It isn’t a thing in itself, it’s a sign. And a sign is to point to something. And it pointed, and it pointed to a curse that came on a people, and it came. And once the curse came, the sign was not necessary.

But on the other hand – I love this. And, beloved, I don’t have an axe to grind, I’m just trying to understand this the best I can. But in verse 22, he says, “But prophesying, prophesying serves not for them that believe not, but for them who believe.” Boy, this has a long-range thing here. This isn’t just for an unbelieving nation; this is for believing people through all the years of the Church Age.

In fact, you know in the New American Standard, I’m a little sorry that they put this in italics. They put “Prophesying is a sign.” Do you see it there if you have a New American? But it’s in italics. Why did they do that? Prophesying isn’t a sign. Prophesying isn’t pointing to something, prophesying is something in itself. And I’ll tell you, prophesying is the thing that edifies.

“He that prophesies” – verse 3 says – “speaks to men to edification, exhortation, and consolation.” In verse 4: “Prophesying edifies the church.” Verse 1: “Seek that you should prophesy.” What does it mean? It means to simply proclaim the Word of God. If you came to the Corinthian church, you would have heard all this massive hysterical, selfish, self-centered, ego-building confusion. And Paul says, “Cut that stuff out. That has a specific purpose for a specific time, to accomplish a specific thing. But when you meet together, seek to prophesy or to proclaim the truth.” Far more important to preach the Word.

Do you want to know something interesting? I just thought of this this week. Do you know we have absolutely no record in the entire Bible of anything ever said by anybody in tongues? Do you know that? Why? Because it was a sign meant to pass away. It had no lasting value, even in a revelatory sense. But on the other hand, this entire book Peter calls “a more sure word of” – what? – “prophecy.” You see, there’s just no comparison between something that’s a sign and something that is the reality.

So tongues are a sign to unbelieving Jews, attached irretrievably to one point in redemptive history. They served well to show that Christianity was not to be distinctly Jewish, but worldwide. They served to corroborate and authenticate the speakers and the messengers who brought that message, and they served to show Israel that they had again rejected God in unbelief and apostasy.

And, beloved, people say, “Well, don’t you think tongues could have a purpose today?” Listen, we don’t need to say that again today. If tongues were around, they’re going to have to have the same purpose. And what point would there be in signifying today that God is moving away from Israel to open the gospel to the nations? He already did that 2,000 years ago. That’s fairly clear to us, isn’t it? We don’t need more information on that, that’s done.

Now having stated that purpose, watch how Paul relates it to the assembling together of the Corinthians in 23. Watch: “If therefore” – what’s the “therefore” there for? To take you to the next step based on what was just said, since this is the purpose of tongues – “the whole church be come

together into one place.” I would like to just mention, there are some people who think the church shouldn’t meet together except in homes and little private groups. But that verse indicates that the church does come together in one place.

“And if it did and everybody speaks languages, even the true gift,” – and it’s a plural here – “if everyone used the true gift of languages,” – do you know what would happen? – “there would come in an unlearned, or unbelievers, and he will say you are” – what? – “mad.”

Why? Well, there’s two reasons. Reason number one: He is a gentile – right? – and he doesn’t understand the sign. Reason number two: He may be even a Jewish unbeliever. But you know what; because everybody’s doing it, it doesn’t make any sense. And I tried to point out to you last time that that gift was used when – in the book of Acts in chapter 2 – when somebody there understood the language. And Paul, in 14:27, says, “When it’s used right, there will only be two or three, and in order, not all at the same time.

So when an unbelieving Gentile came into the Corinthian assembly, he said, “These people are mad,” mainomai in the Greek. It is a word that means “frenzied,” and Plato says it is a the word to describe the ecstasies of the pagans when they go into their ecstatic experiences with their deities. In other words, an unbelieving Gentile is going to go in and say, “Hey, this is no different than the temple of Diana.” An unbelieving Jew is going to go in and say the same thing.

You say, “But it’s supposed to be a sign to him.” Yes. But if it was done in a chaotic fashion where everybody did it, it wouldn’t mean anything to them, even if it was the true gift used in the wrong way. So, you see, this is a specific gift that must be used at a specific time, in a specific way, with a specific person in mind, with a specific intent. And apart from that, its significance is nonexistent.

“On the other hand,” – Paul says – “instead of doing that in your assembly,” – verse 24 – “if all prophesy, proclaim,” – prophēmi, to speak before, speak before somebody, speak the Word of God – “and there comes in one that believes not, or one is unlearned, he is convicted of all, he is judged of all; and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.”

Listen, tongues are useless to edify either the church or an individual, and they’re useless to evangelize, see. They were simply a pre-evangelism sign to a nation that it’s been cursed. So he says, “What you should do is to make sure you are proclaiming God’s Word to edification, exhortation, consolation. And when an unbeliever comes in,” – watch the sequence – “first, he will be convicted, feel guilt. Then he will be judged. The verdict will be rendered that he feels guilty because he is guilty. And then, all of a sudden, the secrets of his heart will be made manifest; his sin will become apparent. It’ll become unmasked. And then in humiliation and a sense of self-condemnation and self-hatred, he will bow on his face and worship God, and he will say, ‘I have found the true God here in your midst.’” In other words, “You’re going to get results if you prophesy.” He sees God, he says, “God is here.”

Beloved, don’t we want that to be the case? Don’t we want the people who come to be in our fellowship to see God? Don’t we want that? We don’t want confusion. And so we are obedient to God’s pattern. What a thrilling promise to a church that exalts the proclamation of the Word of God; the impact will be tremendous. But a service of tongues will produce sterility in the congregation and

confusion among the visitors.

So, you see, this gift was very limited, very regulated for a day and a time long since passed. And what we're seeing today, I'm afraid – and I say this with love – but I'm afraid we're seeing the Corinthian perversion all over again. I'm not questioning their motive; I'm just saying that they have the same approach to the individual, private prayer language that made up the system known as the mystery religions. Beloved, we want to exalt the Word of God, and lift it up; where therein lie the answers to everything, in this more sure word of prophecy.

I hope you're devoted to the truth. I've been discipling a fellow for the last three years patiently. And he called me recently, and he said, "I just had the greatest spiritual breakthrough ever." He said, "Something's happened in my life this week, dramatically transforming me. For the first time, I finally understand what you've been saying to me for three years. I want the Word of God so much that it's consuming me."

Well, of course, I was ecstatic on the other end of the line, in a good sense. And he said, "I just want you to know that if somebody told me I would have to choose between my Bible and food and water, I would say, 'Take the food and take the water, and leave me my Bible, because that's the sustenance I have to have to live.'" That's great, isn't it? God help us to be people of the Book, not seeking the experience but seeking the truth; fruitful in our understanding; ministering to each other that which edifies and builds up. Let's pray.

Well, Father, it's not easy to talk about these things, because so many dear people don't see this the way we do. And in love and kindness to them, we don't accuse them of not loving You or not seeking the best, but maybe just not knowing how because they've been not taught properly. But, Father, we pray that You somehow would use us to help those who are confused in this area. And help us to be, most of all, a loving blessing to all those who are in Your family.

Thank You for the great love we've shared this morning in this hour, great music and fellowship, and the truth of Your Word. Thank You for every dear person here: every mom, every dad, every husband, every wife, every young person, every single person, every child. Father, I pray that in each life the Spirit will bear fruit that remains, that Jesus may receive the glory. In His name we pray. Amen.

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