

# Trichotomists, Charismatics, and

## 1 Corinthians 14

by  
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1 Corinthians 14 is one of the most popular chapters in the Bible for Charismatics. Practically every Charismatic author that writes anything on the gifts of the Holy Spirit will refer to this chapter. Ironically, 1 Corinthians 14 is one of the strongest rebuttals against the modern Charismatic teaching on tongues, but Charismatics are completely oblivious to this fact because they read the chapter with a trichotomous mindset. In a nutshell, this argument against Charismatic tongues goes as follows:

1. No Charismatic claims to understand the tongues-language that he speaks.
2. 1 Corinthians 14 plainly teaches that the Biblical tongues-speaker understood the words uttered from his own lips.
3. Therefore, the modern Charismatic phenomenon of tongues has nothing to do with Biblical tongues.

When a Charismatic reads 1 Cor 14:14, “my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful,” he reads this to mean that his spirit utters words which his own mind does not understand. Based on a trichotomy or tri-partite view of man, he claims that his spirit speaks a heavenly language that bypasses the mental understanding of his soul. However, a careful study of the scriptures concerning spirit and soul reveals that the Bible does not teach such a concept. This concept of trichotomy is rooted in Greek philosophy, not Biblical doctrine. Although common to Gnosticism and other mystery religions, the Bible knows no such Charismatic concept of edification apart from understanding. Indeed the Bible often uses spirit and soul interchangeably. Scriptures showing thought and cognitive understanding in one’s spirit are inescapable. See Matt 26:41, Mk 2:8, Lk 1:46-47, Acts 17:16, 1 Cor 2:11, 1 Pet 3:3-5.

Further, the Charismatic interprets the word “mysteries” in 1 Cor 14:2 to

mean unintelligible utterances, or tongues, from his own lips. However, the Bible never uses the word “mysterion” in such a manner. The entire New Testament defines “mystery” as the revelation of the gospel of Christ which was hidden in ages past but is now revealed to His saints. See Matt 13:10, Mk 4:11, Lk 8:10, Rom 11:25, Rom 16:25-27, 1 Cor 2:7, 1 Cor 15:51, Eph 3:2-6, Col 1:25-27. Jesus and Paul clearly use the word “mystery” in a completely different sense than the way Charismatics use it today. Mystery was revelational truth, hidden in the past, but now revealed and understood. Victor Budgen writes in his excellent book,<sup>[1]</sup> “Far from being something hidden or concealed, a ‘mystery’ is a gloriously ‘open secret’ which we ourselves would never have discovered had not God revealed it.” Clearly, if one does not understand the mysteries of which Paul speaks, he cannot be called a Christian!

### **Dichotomy versus Trichotomy**

Brian Onken astutely observes, in his excellent paper on the dangers of trichotomy,<sup>[2]</sup> that the trichotomous mindset leads to a denigration of the intellect and of rigorous doctrinal study. In fact, one of most commonly heard complaints of ex-charismatics is that their Charismatic church had become so anti-intellectual and anti-doctrine that they could no longer in good conscience subject their children to such mindlessness. I personally had a Charismatic pastor up in Connecticut that would tell me, “Dan, your problem is that you worship the Father, Son, and Holy Scriptures! You need to spend less time reading and more time learning to operate in the Spirit.” Anti-intellectualism runs rampant in Charismaticism and is a direct result of trichotomy. Some of the strongest proponents of trichotomy, including Watchman Nee and Andrew Murray, are widely read by Charismatics. Trichotomist authors quite blatantly claim that “soul power,” meaning the power of the intellect, hinders true spirituality. And the only way to live a holy spiritual life is to crucify the flesh and the soul life. Such views are more akin to Gnosticism than they are to a Biblical, Calvinistic, optimistic, postmillennial world view. Reformed folk understand that sin has affected all parts of man, not just his flesh and mind, and that Christ’s resurrection life applies to the total man, not just his spirit. Louis Berkhof observes that, for most of history, the church held to a dichotomy view of man, particularly from Augustine on.<sup>[3]</sup> The trichotomy view saw a revival in the nineteenth century and, not surprisingly, the Pentecostal/Charismatic revival fell right on

the heels of it.

Trichotomy also has a strong effect in evangelical denominations who would not normally call themselves Charismatic, particularly the more liberal denominations who have little to no emphasis on the historic creeds and confessions. Southern Baptists come to mind here. Although not calling themselves Charismatic, there is no doubt a strong Charismatic influence in the SBC and many Southern Baptists look like Charismatics without the speaking in tongues. When trying to correct some doctrinal error with such folks, we've often heard statements like, "Well, I hear what you're saying but I'll just go home and pray and see what the Holy Spirit says to me about these scriptures." In spite of an often outward display of humility when saying such things, trichotomy has given them an excuse to reject God-ordained church authority and the historic creeds of the church fathers. Trichotomy breeds a hyper-independence and individualistic mindset that is blind to the covenantal and corporate aspects of the Holy Spirit.

In contradistinction to trichotomy, it is Christ Himself, not the Trinitarian Godhead, that shows us what the ideal spiritual man looks like. Christ was the perfect sinless Israelite fulfilling all the requirements of the Law, the true Seed of Abraham through whom all nations are blessed, the eternal heir of David's throne, who has a fully resurrected body that eats and drinks with His saints. It is this, "One Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man;"<sup>[4]</sup> it is this Christ, who is both God and Man, who was raised from the dead to be seated on His throne at the right hand of God. And just as the Son submitted His entire dichotomous Being to the Father and His entire dichotomous Being was raised from the dead, so we submit our entire beings to Christ in the hope of our mortal bodies being resurrected at His second coming, 1 Cor 15:20-28, 1 Th 4:13-17. We avoid the error of the Apollinarians, yet we also avoid the error of the Nestorians by neither denying nor confusing Christ's Divinity and His Humanity.<sup>[5]</sup>

Numerous reformed authors have dealt with the arguments for dichotomy and trichotomy (as well as monism). So, we'll only briefly review the arguments

here. Dichotomy, or the view that man is a unity of body and soul, or body and spirit, sees material and immaterial parts joined together in man. Spirit and soul are used interchangeably for the same immaterial element in man but from different points of view. A few scriptures supporting dichotomy include; Gen 2:7, Job 32:8, Job 33:4, Eccl 12:7, Is 10:18, and Matt 10:28. Sometimes the scriptures speak of a dichotomy of body and soul, as in Matt 6:25 and Matt 10:28, and other times of a dichotomy of body and spirit, as in Eccl 12:7, 1 Cor 5:3-5, 1 Cor 7:34. Death is referred to as giving up the soul, as in Gen 35:18, 1 Kg 17:21, Acts 15:26, and as giving up the spirit, as in Ps 31:5, Lk 23:46, Acts 7:59. The immaterial part that survives death is referred to as the soul, as in Rev 6:9, Rev 20:4 and as the spirit, as in Heb 12:23, 1 Pet 3:19. The soul communes with God in Jam 1:21 and Heb 6:19 and the spirit communes with God in Rom 8:16 and 1 Cor 6:20. 2 Cor 7:1 speaks of sin affecting flesh and spirit and Eph 2:3 speaks of sin affecting flesh and mind. The dichotomy present in the scriptures is obvious, but so is the interchangeable use of soul and spirit. John Calvin clearly demonstrates the dichotomous view when he writes:

Moreover, there can be no question that man consists of a body and a soul; meaning by soul, an immortal though created essence, which is his nobler part. Sometimes he is called a spirit. But though the two terms, while they are used together, differ in their meaning, still when spirit is used by itself it is equivalent to soul.<sup>[6]</sup>

Likewise, Charles Hodge defends the traditional dichotomy view in his second volume:

This doctrine of a threefold constitution of man being adopted by Plato, was introduced partially into the early Church, but soon came to be regarded as dangerous, if not heretical. Its being held by the Gnostics that the *pneuma* in man was a part of the divine essence, and incapable of sin; and by the Apollinarians that Christ had only a human *soma* and *psuche*, but not a human *pneuma*, the Church rejected the doctrine that the *psuche* and *pneuma* were distinct substances, since upon it those heresies were founded. In later times the Semi-Pelagians taught that the soul and body, but not the spirit in man were the subjects of original sin. All Protestants, Lutherans and Reformed, were, therefore, the more zealous in maintaining that the soul and spirit, *psuche* and *pneuma*, are

one and the same substance and essence. And this, as before remarked, has been the common doctrine of the Church.<sup>[7]</sup>

The two primary scriptures used to support trichotomy (the view that man consists of three parts; spirit, soul, and body) are 1 Thess 5:23 and Heb 4:12. But the first cannot be used to support trichotomy any more than Mk 12:30 can be used to support tetrachotomy. The second passage does not say “dividing between” but “to division of.” It is talking of the power of God’s word to pierce to the deepest and remotest parts of man, both his immaterial and material parts. It speaks of “soul and spirit” in the same manner that it speaks of “thoughts and intents of the heart,” two views of the same thing. So neither of these passages provide clear support for trichotomy, and of course these must be interpreted in light of the rest of scripture which gives overwhelming evidence for dichotomy.

### **1 Corinthians 14:1-33**

Approaching 1 Cor 14 with a dichotomous view and understanding the Biblical definition of “mystery” results in an understanding of this passage that is completely opposed to the modern charismatic teaching on tongues. Verses 2-4 says that the tongues-speaker “speaks mysteries” (understandable gospel revelation) and is himself edified, thus he understands the words from his own mouth. But the others in the church do not understand him and are not edified. Paul’s entire argument in this chapter is that there can be no edification for anyone in the church if understanding is absent. Significantly, 1 Cor 14 was used by the Reformers to demonstrate the evil of conducting worship services in Latin, a language that the common people did not understand. The Bible knows no concept whatsoever of edification apart from understanding. On these verses, Victor Budgen writes,<sup>[8]</sup>

We are not interpreting Scripture properly if we suddenly turn to Buddhist or mystic categories of thought when we think of the edification that the gift of other languages brought. Obviously it came to the individual with precisely the same effect as public prophecy to the congregation. The speaker understood and was strengthened, encouraged or comforted.

The Charismatic finds no support for his views in Matthew Henry’s commentary. Commenting on 1 Cor 14:4, Matthew Henry writes, “He that speaks with tongues may edify himself, v. 4. He may understand and be

affected with what he speaks; . . . but he that speaks with tongues, or language unknown, can only edify himself; others can reap no benefit from his speech.”<sup>[9]</sup> O. Palmer Robertson also skillfully deals with the Charismatic error in his book and writes on these key verses,<sup>[10]</sup>

If one who spoke in a tongue could be edified even while not understanding what he was saying, could not the congregation expect to be edified in the same way? If the sensations associated with uttering a sound like *quesrylespoyou* have the capacity for edifying the speaker, why could not those same sensations vibrating in the ears of the hearer have the effect of edifying? But an audience is not edified one whit, no matter how zealous the speaker may be, if the message is unintelligible. Paul makes this very point. No one is edified when no one understands (1 Cor 14:2). Edification through a verbal gift is linked intrinsically to understanding the utterance.

Verse 5 demonstrates the equivalence of tongues to prophecy when coupled with interpretation. The importance of this is seen in verse 28 where Paul forbids tongues without interpretation to be spoken in the assembly. Paul clearly understood the symbolic meaning of tongues without interpretation in the congregation as evidenced by his quoting Is 28:11, 12 in verse 21. The Biblical Jew understood from this passage, as well as many other OT scriptures such as Deut 28:49, Jer 5:15, and Gen 11:7, that unintelligible foreign languages in the congregation was a sign of imminent judgment upon that congregation of people. This is why the Jews in Acts 2 responded with the accusation of drunkenness or being out of their minds. Speaking foreign languages in the holy temple area on a high holy day, when Hebrew should only have been spoken, was either sacrilege or a sign from God of imminent judgment. The latter was proved to be the case 40 years later.

Verses 6-13 demonstrate that the problem of tongues by itself is that the other person doesn't understand what is spoken. Paul is not concerned about the understanding of the speaker because the speaker obviously understands what comes from his own lips, as shown by earlier verses. Paul wants the tongues-speaker to pray that he might interpret also, so that the congregation is edified along with the speaker. One might ask why the tongues-speaker needed the gift of interpretation if he understood the words uttered from his own mouth. Have you ever tried to recite from memory an entire Psalm or chapter of



scripture after hearing it only one time? Making an inerrant translation of the revelation into another language would no doubt require the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit.

We come now to verse 14, the key verse in this passage for Charismatics. The dichotomist understands that one's spirit cannot pray without conscious understanding. Such a concept is completely foreign to the scriptures. Thus, when Paul says, "but my understanding is unfruitful," in the context of what he's been talking about all along, which is the edification of the assembly, Paul is obviously saying here that the tongues-speaker's understanding does not produce fruit in the assembly. "My understanding" implies that the tongues-speaker understands. How can one have understanding without understanding! But that understanding is not fruitful, and in Paul's mind fruitfulness means edification of the congregation. This interpretation is also reinforced by verse 17 where Paul says, "you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified." So, taking these verses in context, the praying and singing "with the spirit" in verses 15-16 imply that the speaker understands and is edified himself. "With the understanding" implies that the congregation also understands and is edified.

We see Paul's incredible humility and others-orientation in verse 19. Although he thanks God that he speaks in tongues, he would rather speak five words that edify the congregation than receive 10,000 words of direct revelation from God that only edifies himself. Contrast this with the typical self-centered Charismatic, who goes about always seeking "a personal word from God!"

As mentioned previously, the Jew understood the symbolic meaning of unintelligible languages in his home country. Thus, Paul says tongues are a sign to these unbelieving Jews in verse 22. So if this Jew came into a congregation where uninterpreted tongues were uttered, he would naturally say, "are you out of your mind?" But Paul again says that prophecy (or interpreted tongues) edifies the congregation by bringing about repentance and worship of God (verses 24,25). He commands them to do all things for the edification of the entire congregation (verse 26) and forbids tongues without interpretation (verses 27-28). Paul's use of the phrase, "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" in verse 32 also shows conscious understanding and speaking by the spirit in man, which contradicts the

trichotomous view of Charismatics.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a trichotomous interpretation of 1 Cor 14 is necessary to support Charismatic doctrine, but this leads to all kinds of inconsistencies and problems within the chapter and with the rest of the Bible. A dichotomous interpretation of 1 Cor 14 is consistent with the context of the chapter and the rest of the scriptures, but leads to a conclusion completely opposite to Charismatic teaching on this chapter. The trichotomist Charismatic calls unintelligible speech in the congregation a good thing whereas the dichotomist sees it as a bad thing. The trichotomist is necessarily lead towards introspection and individualistic thinking (just me and God) as he attempts to distinguish what is spirit and what is soul, whereas the dichotomist sees this passage teaching us to be others-oriented. The trichotomist sees this passage as validating modern Charismatic tongues, whereas the dichotomist sees it as clearly refuting Charismatic tongues. Yet the dichotomist who understands these things is also commanded by this chapter to seek and work towards his Charismatic brother's understanding of these things as well, in order that "all may learn and all may be encouraged."



## FOOTNOTES:

- [1] Victor Budgen, *The Charismatics and the word of God*, p. 48, Evangelical Press, 2001. ISBN 0-85234-264-0.
- [2] Brian Onken, “Dangers of the ‘Trinity’ in Man”, Statement DT170 of Christian Research Institute, P.O. Box 7000, Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688. Paper can be found at: <http://www.equip.org/free/DT170.htm>.
- [3] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 192, Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1984.
- [4] *Nicene Creed*, originating at the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and adopted by the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 to refute heresies on the Trinity and dual nature of Christ.
- [5] R. J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order*, pp. 24, 56, Thoburn Press, 1978.
- [6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, Chap XV, Sec 2.
- [7] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol II, p. 51, Hendrickson Publishers, 2003. ISBN 1-56563-459-4.
- [8] Victor Budgen, *The Charismatics and the word of God*, p. 49, Evangelical Press, 2001. ISBN 0-85234-264-0.
- [9] Matthew Henry’s Commentary, *Acts to Revelation*, Vol VI, p. 578, MacDonald Publishing, ISBN 0-917006-21-6.
- [10] O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word*, p. 29, Banner of Truth, 1997. ISBN 0-85151-659-9.

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shade tree in a bluegrass/gospel jam, belting out mindless tunes.