

## Powerful Christian Living

### Chapter Sixteen

#### Tongues, Interpretation of Tongues and Prophecy

In the Christian church today there is great confusion concerning how and why and when the holy Spirit is to be manifested when believers are gathered together. So much of what goes on in many churches, supposedly under the inspiration of the Spirit, is nothing more than personal opinion and expression. But our rule and standard for manifesting the Spirit must be the Bible alone, just as it should be for all that we do in life. 1 Corinthians 14 will provide us with three fundamental principles that must govern every public meeting of the church, especially as it relates to manifesting the Spirit. The three principles are:

- First, everything we do must edify or build up the other believers.
- Secondly, all that we do must be understood and have meaning and purpose.
- Thirdly, the church service must flow with godly order and divine design.

With these three principles in mind let us begin our study of 1 Corinthians 14.

- **Everything we do must edify or build up the other believers.**

Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy. 2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him*; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Corinthians 14:1-4)

In verse 1 the word “gifts” is in italics and should be omitted. We are not dealing with spiritual gifts, as we will see, but with the manifestations of speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues and prophecy. Also, in verse 2 the word “him” is in italic and must be omitted. The believer who speaks in tongues does not understand what he or she is saying. However, when you speak in tongues you are speaking divine mysteries. Speaking in tongues is designed for your personal prayer time.

As you speak in tongues God works in your heart preparing you for life and service in the church. Speaking in tongues is beneficial, building you up and making you stronger spiritually. But personal edification is not the goal when the church is gathered together. When we are

gathered together we must encourage and build up the other believers. Therefore what we say must be understood by those who are gathered together for prayer and worship.

But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification. (1 Corinthians 14:3-5)

God desires for all of His children to speak in tongues. The Bible says in verse 5 “Now I want you all to speak in tongues.”<sup>1</sup> Speaking in tongues in your private prayer times is good; it edifies you and builds you up. But even more than this God desires for us to bless and serve others. The person who prophesies or interprets his speaking in tongues is greater than the person who just speaks in tongues, because he or she is bring words of encouragement and comfort to the church. When you speak in tongues and then by divine inspiration interpret what you have spoken or when you prophesy, you are speaking words from God that will encourage and comfort God’s people.

- **All that we do must be understood and have meaning and purpose.**

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? 7 Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? 8 For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?

9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. 10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. 11 Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks *will be* a foreigner to me. 12 Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual *gifts*, let it be for the edification of the church *that* you seek to excel. (1 Corinthians 14:6-12)

All languages, from the most primitive to the most advanced, have meaning. They possess the power to produce understanding in the hearer. When we manifest the Spirit in the

---

<sup>1</sup> The English Standard Version

church the words we speak should comfort, inspire and edify us. This means that our words need to be understood. Therefore if we manifest speaking in tongues we should also believe God to interpret what we have just spoken in tongues. When you speak in tongues and interpret you bring forth a message from or for God to the people present. If the message is from God, meaning that it is in the first person grammatically, it will sound something like this "I am God your Father. I will be with you and strengthen you." If the message is for God, grammatically in the third person, then it we would say "The Lord is your Father and He will be with you always." This is the same with the manifestation of prophecy. The message of prophecy, like the interpretation of tongues, will be in the language of the believers present. The message will edify, comfort and encourage those who hear it.

Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.  
14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is  
Unfruitful  
(1 Corinthians 12:13, 14)

Whenever believers are gathered together if someone desires to speak in tongues he or she should also believe God to interpret what was spoken. When the tongues are interpreted other believers can understand what you have just spoken in tongues.

What is *the conclusion* then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. 16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? 17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. 18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; 19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.  
(1 Corinthians 14:15-19)

Praying, singing, blessing God and giving Him thanks while speaking in tongues is wonderful. You should do it often in your private prayer time. It will build you up and make you a stronger, faithful Christian. But when we are gathered together our words must be spoken in our common language so that all may understand what is being said and benefit from it. Therefore if we speak in tongues we must interpret what we have spoken or we must bring forth a message in prophesy.

Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.  
21 In the law it is written:  
"With men of other tongues and other lips

*I will speak to this people;  
And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,"* says the Lord.  
(1 Corinthians 14:20, 21)

The quotation from the law is from Isaiah 28:11-12. The reference is to a time when God was calling the nation of Israel to repent and obey His Word. God had sent prophets to warn His people, in their own Hebrew language, that if they did not repent their nation would be destroyed and the people taken captive. Tragically Israel refused to obey God. So God declared that His judgment against them would be confirmed through hearing the language of a foreign people. When the Assyrian army came and destroyed Jerusalem their foreign language confirmed God's warning. It wasn't that the words of the Assyrians actually carried a message from God. The foreign tongue or language was a "sign" of God's righteous judgment.

Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.  
(1 Corinthians 14:22)

In a similar way, speaking in tongues acts as a "sign" showing unbelievers that the power of God is at work. The speaking in tongues attracts the attention of the unbeliever in the same way that the Assyrian language finally got the attention of the Israelites. An example of this was when the apostles all spoke in tongues on the Day of Pentecost.<sup>2</sup> When the crowds heard the apostles speaking in tongues "they were all amazed and marveled." When just believers are together there is no need to convince one another that the power of God is present so we should simply prophesy.

Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those who are* uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? <sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. <sup>25</sup> And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.  
(1 Corinthians 14:23-25)

When we gather together as the church everyone should not speak in tongues at the same time.<sup>3</sup> This will look chaotic and people will think that you are out of control. As we will later see just two or three people should speak in tongues and interpret one at a time. And those who prophesy should do so one person at a time. And finally here is the third principle.

---

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:1-12

<sup>3</sup> Unless all of the believers are in a practice session learning how to speak in tongues.

- **the church service must flow with godly order and divine design.**

As we gather together to worship God and to encourage one another everyone should come ready to contribute. But we cannot all serve at the same time. The trouble at Corinth was that people were acting out of order. But God's Word tells us that there is a time for singing, a time for praying, a time for manifestations of the Spirit and a time for teaching or giving a testimony.

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, *let there be* two or at the most three, *each* in turn, and let one interpret.

28 But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. 29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. 30 But if *anything* is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. 32 And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. 33 For God is not *the author* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

(1 Corinthians 14:26-33)

In verse 23 the Greek word translated "let one interpret" mean the same person. If you speak in tongues in a public meeting then you are responsible to interpret. The phrase "if there is no interpreter" is more accurately translated "if that one lacks the will to interpret."<sup>4</sup> If you speak in tongues in a church service you should interpret what you have said or stay quiet. The prophets in verses 29-33 may be those who have the leadership gift of a prophet or it may be speaking about those who simply manifest a word or message of prophecy.

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says. 35 And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.

(1 Corinthians 14:34, 35)

The "women" spoken of here may be the women of those holding the leadership office of a prophet. These verses<sup>5</sup> do not mean that all women must be silent in the church, because earlier in 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul wrote about how women should pray and prophesy in the church. The problem in Corinth was a social and cultural problem. The women were speaking out of turn and perhaps wanting to have authority over their husbands.

---

<sup>4</sup> This phrase is in the third person singular, subjunctive mood in Greek grammar. And when used with "if" it makes a conditional clause. This "if that one does not want to interpret (or lacks the will to interpret) he should be silent."

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:5, 6

Or [what?] did the word of God come *originally* from you?  
Or *was it* you only that it reached? 37 If anyone thinks himself  
to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things  
which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.  
38 But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant. 39 Therefore,  
brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak  
with tongues. 40 Let all things be done decently and in order.  
(1 Corinthians 14:36-40)

In summation the apostle wrote that what he has just written concerning speaking in  
tongues, interpretation of tongues and prophesy are all the commandments of the Lord. Let all  
things be done in an orderly manner and with divine design. And let us get busy edifying  
ourselves and one another.