

# The Purpose of Tongues: A Sign of Judgment – 1 Cor 14:13-25

**Introduction** – Paul continues his teaching on speaking in tongues in the worship service and so we will continue studying this. In his day, he needed to correct the Corinthians on their misunderstanding and misuse of the gift. In our day, we need to correct a similar misunderstanding and misuse of something that is a modern counterfeit of the gift. That is *not to say* that the people and churches who practice this aberration are counterfeit Christians; many are your friends and ours and many love our Lord with us with great faith. It is *to say* that on the larger scale a great disservice and, in many cases, a twisted manipulation is taking place along with this misplaced gift that produces an immature and impotent church. The gift of tongues in the New Testament, while a sign of the giving of the Holy Spirit, was primarily a declaration of judgment, even impending military judgment, upon unbelieving Israel. As Paul will say in this passage, “*Brethren, do not be children in understanding.*”

**God Speaks with the Spirit and Understanding** (vv13-16) – Paul continues the theme of v12, that our zeal for spiritual things should be for the edification of the church. Praying or singing “*in the spirit*” but not with understanding, is unfruitful for the body and therefore he wants those who speak in a tongue to pray that they may interpret (v13). In the gathered assembly, we are to desire a prophetic utterance that satisfies both the spirit and the mind. Communication in church is to go from the speaker with a message to the hearer. The uninformed should become informed and then, from their spirit and understanding, be able to give a hearty “*Amen*” to any giving of thanks (v16).

Our “*Amen*”s are not supposed to be simply an emotional response (as they sometimes are used in certain traditions). They are to be a declaration, with emotion, of agreement with a sense of an oath. This is why we place them liturgically in our service, to be declared in such a way as to bind us all together to the truth spoken, prayed, or sung. Your personal “*Amen*” and our corporate “*Amen*” should sound like it.

**The Superiority of Speaking with Understanding** (vv18-19) – Paul is so concerned for the ability to teach others with the Word, that he’d rather speak just five words with understanding than a gazillion words in a tongue. Taking all of this together, Paul wants prophecy or tongues+interpretation so that, in both situations, the body is built up.

**A Personal Prayer Language?** – Some want to assume that v18 gives evidence of Paul having a personal prayer language (in tongues). They might also use v15 to argue that sometimes Paul just prays in the spirit and other times prays with understanding. From this, modern charismatics argue that there is something called a personal prayer language of tongues. First, from the text, this is nothing other than sheer speculation. Second, the whole context of chapter 14 is about the corporate gathering. Third, there is no biblical example of private praying in tongues. Finally, the next verses give a completely different purpose of tongues.

**But Because They Would Not Listen** (vv20-22a) – We must not be childish in our thinking. We are to be mature. We need to think this through. We need to let the scriptures inform us. And so, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11f to make things clear. In that passage, Isaiah is declaring impending judgment upon Ephraim, with their crown of pride (Isaiah 28:1), and to Jerusalem (28:14) while promising vindication to a remnant of the faithful (28:5). The leaders have rejected God in their pride, their intoxication, and their filth (28:7) and have made a covenant with death (28:15). They think the Word of the Lord is boring, childish babbling “*sav lasav sav lasav, kav lakav kav lakav*” (28:10, 13). They are too enlightened to follow the Lord, “*For we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood we have hidden ourselves*” (28:15). Isaiah declares that since they would not listen to God’s offer of rest, He will speak to them with “*stammering lips*” (28:11), a foreign language by whom they will “*be broken and snared and caught*” (28:13). The foreign tongues of Babylon would be the sign of God’s judgment upon unbelieving Jerusalem.

**Corinth** – Be mature! Tongues were a sign that the Good News was going out to all the nations (Acts 2), to the Gentiles and not only the Jews (Acts 10), and to the uninformed (Acts 19). This corresponds to the promise of the Holy Spirit to Jerusalem, Judea/Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). When the Holy Spirit fell at Pentecost, it was outside of the Temple, a sign of coming judgment on that temple. When Paul preached in the synagogue in Corinth and was then kicked out and set up a new covenant assembly right next door, teaching there for 18 months, this was a sign of judgment on unbelieving Jews (Acts 18:1-11). In Romans 9-11, Paul says that he longs for his Jewish brethren to come to Christ and would even give his body

for them. But he also explains that they have been cut out of the covenant because of unbelief while the gospel is thriving among the Gentiles. “*Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers*” (1 Cor 14:22a). Not unbelievers generally, but specifically to the nation that had crucified the Son of God. The Latin-speaking Roman soldiers would soon be upon Jerusalem and the temple within a generation. Tongues was an ominous sign of impending military judgment and therefore was not to be emphasized inside the Christian worship service.

**God is Among Us** (vv22b-25) – In Corinth, if unbelievers were to come in and see a service of ecstatic utterances, lots of frenzy, but no understanding, they would think the Christians were out of their minds (or like one of the mystery cults). But if the uninformed or the unbeliever comes into a service of worship in the spirit and with understanding (Spirit-wrought preaching), God will use that to convince the visitor that God is truly among us. That last phrase in v25 is an allusion to Isaiah 45:14 which describes how foreign unbelievers will come to faith in the Lord, recognizing He is present with them, just as Jewish unbelievers (like those who were just next door in the synagogue) will recognize God is present among the Christians. The worship service is not put together for unbelievers, but when we worship God the way He commands, the Lord’s Day worship and proclamation of the gospel is wonderful and powerful – because God is truly among us.

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