

1 CORINTHIANS (PART 24) ▪ CHAPTER 14  
THE STORY AND TONGUES  
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A.D. JANUARY 22, 2012



Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup> 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....<sup>18</sup> I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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 Cor. 14:1-2; 18-22)

## INTRODUCTION

**W**e don't have the option of ignoring anything that God has declared to us in His word. When God speaks we must listen. What God has revealed we must pay attention to. If God says jump the only question is "how high?" We must be eager to put into practice the things that God has revealed and not harden our heart against His voice. I believe that this is a significant part of why many sincere and zealous believers have embraced the modern Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Why would anyone want to be associated with unbelief? But sincerity and zealousness are no substitute for understanding and faith (Rom. 10:2; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). Although ignorance is to be preferred to unbelief, they are close cousins and we should flee both (Ezk. 45:20; 2 Tim. 2:23).

The advocate of tongues has an easy job convincing the sincere Bible believer that they ought to be eagerly pursuing tongues. There appears to be a simple, straightforward, and forceful Biblical argument. After all the apostle Paul explicitly says "do not forbid to speak with tongues" (v. 39). Paul spoke in tongues more than any of the Corinthians and gave thanks for that fact (v. 18), and also declared that "I wish you all spoke with tongues..." (v. 5). There is also an attractive experiential argument. Isn't the God whom we serve living and active? Can't we know and experience God? God isn't dead. And one way that you can know this is that you see and experience the evidence of people speaking in tongues.

## REMEMBER THE STORY

Don't these biblical and experiential arguments alone settle the requirement of our eager obedience? And the answer is "no" they don't. The Bible is not a collection of sayings to be pulled out and read like the slips of paper from a fortune cookie. We are not bound by "verses" quoted in our general direction. The Bible is a story. Every instruction finds its meaning in the story. Scripture can be quoted and Scripture can be misquoted. The questions are: (1) how well we both understand the story that is written? and (2) do we understand our part of the story (Mt. 4:5-7).

When the Holy Spirit was given to the church on the day of Pentecost, the event was a unique fulfillment of the prophecies testifying to the work of the Messiah (Acts 3:24). These tongues didn't just

drop out of a clear blue sky. When they came (along with the other extraordinary gifts) they functioned as authentication of the messenger and the message (Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12). The gifts underlined the fact that this was the time of the Messiah and the establishment of His church. Think back to God's pattern. What happened earlier in our story? What authenticated Moses message and mission to our forefathers? Did God maintain these signs and wonders after His people were established? This was a unique time in the establishment of God's people (Dt. 4:34; Dt. 34:10-12; Neh. 9:10). And Peter and the Scriptures explicitly connect these persons and events. The time of Jesus and the apostles and prophets must be marked out as decisive in the history of this world.

But in distinction from the rest of the miraculous gifts, tongues had a unique function in the story as well. Tongues were given as a warning to unbelievers (v. 22). Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:11 to establish this fact. Isaiah had warned the Jews to repent from their sinful ways. They rejected his plain and simple message delivered as if they were children still getting milk from mama (Is. 28:10) God had warned them: "Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim" (Is.28:11). The people refuse to listen to God: "yet they would not hear" (Is. 28:12). So God caused tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment (Is. 28:11). Judgment and dispersion follows: "that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken [captive] (Is. 28:13). This is the pattern we find over and over. The presence of tongues ultimately warned of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 (Lk. 19:43-44).

The sign gifts that God gave at Pentecost have served their function. And we would expect them to go the way of manna in the wilderness. We can see, both in Scripture and in history a waning and eventual disappearance of these exceptional gifts. No mention of tongues can be found in any of Paul's later epistles, only in 1 Corinthians, one of the earliest letters written. Peter (whose letters were written later in the apostolic era) said people would complain: "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as *they were* from the beginning of creation." No permanent apostolic and prophetic gifts continued. The apostles and prophets laid a new foundation and Jesus Christ is the chief corner stone (Is. 28:16 cf. Mt. 21:42).

## CONCLUSION

What should we do with this then? First, build true to the foundation. The thing with foundations is that they are only laid once. Pursue maturity by building on this foundation (Eph. 2:19-22). You're not looking for a new prophetic word. The message has been delivered. We must pay attention to what we have heard (Heb. 12:25). And this means pursuing love as a top priority.

Think of the miraculous signs and wonders as training wheels for the church. The training wheels have come off the church and it's time to peddle without them. As fun as it would be to see the Red Sea part while Moses held his staff over it, we should be content to paddle hard in faith. Know the story well, it's the one we are living, and the only question is what character are you playing in the story? Play the part of those who live by faith (Heb. 11:6; Gal. 5:6). And this means learning to love like Jesus.

Don't confuse the lack of the signs and wonders with the absence of the Spirit. We know the Spirit came because of Jesus promise and the signs accompanied His coming. But the fruit of the Spirit's ongoing work can't be mistaken for those with eyes to see (Gal. 5:22-26; Eph. 5:8-10; 1 Jn. 3:23-24). His presence produces a distinctive aroma in us (2 Cor. 2:14). His activity is seen in bringing order out of chaos, life out of death, hope out of despair, and light out of darkness. Therefore love one another fervently.