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## Chapter 12.12

# Answering More Questions About Tongues

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### **Primary Points**

- In what would seem to be the unlikelihood that such a gift would be granted and miraculously confirmed in this primarily Greek congregation, the Apostle does not want it banished.
- As for the general notion that the Apostle is describing the practice of "praying in a tongue" in Romans 8, there are several problems.
- it is again a case of un-Christian arrogance to suggest that *glossaists* praying in an incoherent tongue are the only ones who, "**pray in the Holy Spirit.**"
- The Apostle's admonition that we need to "**be alert**" while we "**pray in the Spirit**" teaches us that to pray in a mindless tongue is actually the *opposite* of "praying in the Spirit." Accordingly, with all the tongue praying that *glossaists* do, have we seen proof that they are significantly more effective in "engaging the enemy" in spiritual warfare than other Christians as Dr. Fee claims? On the contrary, we believe the devil merely laughs at such prayer.

## A) Are We All Supposed to Pray in Tongues?:

1 Cor 14:5

In 1 Corinthians 14:5 the Apostle says, "**I wish** [*thelō*] **that you all spoke in tongues** [*glossais*], **but I would rather have you prophesy.**" Again, it would seem to us that the Apostle has intentionally switched to the Greek plural *glossais* referring to the authentic gift. His words cannot be interpreted as an encouragement for the Corinthians to practice the pagan variety of praying in an obscure, meaningless, self-centered tongue practiced then and today. The authentic gift was the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign language as a supernatural and authenticating sign of new divine revelation to the Jews, as it operated in Acts. The Apostle will soon remind them that this is actually what the gift is in verses 21-23 where he states that "**Tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers.**" And it is important to be reminded that this is the specific nature and purpose of the gift here.

Accordingly, it would seem that the Apostle cannot be taken so literally here. First of all, he has not forgotten that all will not, and *should* not, possess the gift of tongues. A few verses earlier he had asked the repeated rhetorical question to make this point: "**Are all Apostles? Are all Prophets? Are all Teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?**" (1 Cor 12:29-30). The obvious answer is "no" because God wants diversity in the Body.

Secondly, the force of the Apostle's "**wish**" is not nearly as strong as many want to make it. The Greek word here (*thelō*) is used by the Apostle earlier in 7:7 when he says, "**I wish** [*thelō*] **that all men were as I am**" expressing his desire, not command, that all would be unmarried.

Accordingly, J. Hering catches the sense here at 14:5 that "*thelō* does not express an order, but a concession in the form of a wish unlikely to be fulfilled (cf. 7:7).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, NT scholar F. F. Bruce commented: "He goes as far as he can with those whom he criticizes before interposing a caveat." He then endorses Henry Chadwick's comment, "The entire drift of the argument . . . is such as to pour a bucket of ice cold water over the whole practice."<sup>2</sup> Also, any positive force intended in *thelō* here must be counterbalanced by the Apostle's clear statement that he "**would rather have** [them] **prophesy.**"

So *does* the Apostle really wish that all the Greek Corinthians had the gift of miraculously speaking in a foreign language as an authenticating sign to Jewish unbelievers of new divine revelation? Maybe, but probably not.

We would suggest again that this is where the relational context of this letter, as discussed in a previous chapter, may be helpful.<sup>3</sup> Remember that some of the Corinthians despise the Apostle's authority, but love speaking in incoherent utterances like their pagan peers. The Apostle desires to correct these rebellious, arrogant, "teenage" Christians and encourage them to curb their pagan practices. On the other hand, however, he will not say anything here that will ridicule or depreciate the authentic *sign gift* of speaking miraculously in foreign languages. His statement here would seem to accomplish both.

The similar statement by the Apostle in verse 18 that, "**I thank God I speak in tongues** [*glossais*, the real gift] **more than you all**" would also seem best interpreted as a figurative statement meant primarily to gently put the Corinthian tongues advocates in their place. It should be noticed too that again, the Apostle has switched to the plural Greek *glossais* here and is specifically speaking of the authentic Christian gift, not the generic or pagan speaking in an unknown "tongue" (*glosse*). No doubt, He *did* in fact exercise the real thing more than all of them combined, because few, if any of them really had the gift.<sup>4</sup>

## **B) Why Did the Apostle Command that Tongues Not Be Forbidden?: 1 Cor 14:39**

Finally, the Apostle says in verse 39: "**Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues** [*glossais*]" Again, because the Apostle is making a statement that clearly applies to the real gift and not the pagan or unknown utterances, he uses the Greek plural.

In what would seem to be the unlikelihood that such a gift would be granted and miraculously confirmed in this primarily Greek congregation, the Apostle does not want it banished. Which, as discussed in a previous chapter, is what some of the Corinthians may have been likely to do in order to rid the assembly of the pagan counterfeit. The Apostle's idea was better. Make the counterfeiters mumble silently to themselves, and let the real thing *miraculously* happen if God ordains it so.

Along these lines, Calvin points out that when the Apostle addresses the rules for tongues speaking he prefaces his instruction with "**If anyone speaks in a tongue . . .**" (14:27), whereas there is no "if" regarding prophecy which implies that the Apostle expected and encouraged the latter, but not necessarily the former. Calvin further comments:

It is to be observed, however, that he does not command [tongues speaking], but merely permits; for the Church can, without any inconvenience, dispense with tongues, except in so far as they are helps to prophecy . . . . Paul makes this concession that he may not seem to deprive the assembly of believers of any gift of the Spirit. <sup>5</sup>

We too would not forbid the manifestation of the authentic sign gift of miraculously speaking in a foreign human language. However, it simply does not seem to exist, as the modern phenomenon differs greatly from the authentic and biblical version, but mimics the pagan variety. And *that* can and should be forbidden.

### **C) Is the Spirit's Intercession the Gift of Tongues?**

*Romans 8:26*

Some have claimed that there is a reference to a mindless praying in a tongue in Romans 8 when the Apostle writes:

**We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies . . .**

**In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Rom 8:22-27)**

It is understandable that a prayer by the Holy Spirit which we do not understand may resemble the modern idea of praying in a mindless, incoherent tongue. <sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Dr. Fee writes:

The present sentences [Rom 8:23-7], in fact, correspond remarkably with what Paul elsewhere calls "praying with/in the Spirit" (I Cor 14:14-15; Eph 6:18). These correspondences occur at two crucial points: (a) the Spirit is the subject of the verb "interceding," that is, the Spirit himself is seen as praying from within us and (b) the persons involved do not understand what the Spirit is saying-or not saying, as the case may be. <sup>7</sup>

As discussed elsewhere, Dr. Fee is mistakenly ignoring the Apostle Paul's explicit and repeated statement in 1 Corinthians 14 (cf. vs. 2, 14, 15, 16, 32) that "praying in a tongue" is merely done with the *human* spirit (i.e. emotions) and not by the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> While Dr. Fee wishes to continually insert a mention of the *Holy* Spirit in 1 Corinthians 14, the Apostle never does, always intentionally speaking of the human seat of emotion in regards to speaking in an unknown tongue.

As for the general notion that the Apostle is describing the practice of "praying in a tongue" in Romans 8, there are several problems. First of all, it is clear that not all Christians were to have the gift of tongues, even in the early church (cf. 1 Cor 12:14-20, 28-31). If the Apostle were speaking of the gift of tongues in this passage then multitudes of believers would be excluded from the Spirit's intercession which the Apostle promises here. On the contrary, the promise of the Spirit's intercession is true for every Christian without condition, especially the requirement for a gift of tongues. Shame again on *glossaists* for claiming such a thing. And it would appear that *glossaist* exegetes themselves are rather ashamed of such a claim, as well, because to our knowledge, they never address the ramifications of their elitist claim that the blessing of the Spirit's intercession that the Apostle promised all Christians here, *is only for them*.

Secondly, there is no mention of the gift of tongues in this verse, even though it would have been very likely that the Apostle would have used the term if he thought the promise was applicable for the gift.

Thirdly, the prayer being described here is *inaudible* to even the person being prayed for. Certainly "**the whole creation . . . groaning**" is silent, for we do not audibly hear it making any such noises.<sup>9</sup> Also, the Apostle does not say these groans or prayers are coming from us, but rather, both of them belong to, and come from, the Holy Spirit, something that could obviously be accomplished silently and without our knowing it. According to the Apostle here, we are not only unaware of *what* the Spirit is praying, but *we are not even aware that He is praying at all*. We are completely oblivious to this constant interaction between and within the Godhead on our behalf. There is no doubt that the fact that the Spirit keeps the Godhead abreast of our spiritual condition and "**intercedes for the saints**" is a spiritual blessing. But whatever benefits we receive from this ministry are unknown to us.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, this is precisely what the Greek means. Accordingly, NT scholar Douglas Moo points out that the Greek word *alalētois* translated in the NIV as "**that words cannot express**":

means, as its etymology implies, “unspoken,” “wordless” . . . and this makes it almost impossible to identify the “groans” with glossolalia, for tongues, of course, are verbalized. . . . [I]t is preferable to understand these “groans” as the Spirit’s own “language of prayer,” a ministry of intercession that takes place in our hearts (cf. v. 27) in a manner imperceptible to us.

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Finally, notice that the Apostle is implying our point that humans cannot meaningfully pray without knowing what they are praying. When “**we do not know what we ought to pray for**” (8:26), we cannot pray because any meaningful prayer by Christians must contain cognitive, rational content. In such instances in which we cannot rationally and meaningfully pray, the Holy Spirit has to pray for us, because “**the mind of the Spirit**” knows God’s will and what to pray for, even if our mind does not. And let us notice that even the Spirit prays with His mind!

## D) Is “Praying in the Spirit” the Gift of Tongues? *Jude 1:20 & Eph 6:18*

*Glossaists* suggest that biblical references to “praying in the Spirit” especially refer to praying in an incoherent tongue. For example, we read in Jude: “**But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit**” (1:20). The *glossaist* theologian J. Rodman Williams claims in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* that, “The focus here is also on personal edification through tongues.”<sup>12</sup>

It is obvious that if *glossaists* wish to insist that this verse has any reference at all to a supposed gift of praying in a tongue for self edification, they have several difficult questions to answer. First of all, they are again implying that *only* those with their “gift” could obey this verse. The gift of tongues was a spiritual gift, not an ability shared by everyone (cf. 1 Cor 12:30) and it would be absurd to suggest that Jude is commanding its use here. Additionally, it is again a case of un-Christian arrogance to suggest that *glossaists* praying in an incoherent tongue are the only ones who, “**pray in the Holy Spirit.**”

Along these lines, it is instructive to look at another reference to “praying in the Spirit.” In Ephesians 6:18 we read: “**And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.**” Not surprisingly, Dr. Fee writes:

There is every good reason to think that Paul intends this phrase precisely as he has used it elsewhere especially in 1 Cor 14:14-15 (cf. Rom 8:26-27)-to refer specifically to that form of prayer in which the Spirit assumes a special role in the praying, especially, though probably not exclusively, praying in tongues. . . . If this more specific "praying in the Spirit" is in view, then one must also be prepared to enlarge one's understanding of the nature of such praying; it is not only speaking mysteries to God, or praise and blessing God, or "inarticulate groanings" in times of present weakness, but a way of engaging the enemy in the ongoing conflict.<sup>13</sup>

If this is also referring to praying in a tongue than we should all be doing it constantly, "**on all occasions.**" However, it is clear that to "**pray in the Spirit**" here has nothing to do with a mindless prayer in a meaningless tongue. This is a prayer in which we make "**requests,**" and pray "**for all the saints,**" both of which require that we understand what we are praying. In addition, the Apostle's admonition that we need to "**be alert**" while we "**pray in the Spirit**" teaches us that to pray in a mindless tongue is actually the *opposite* of "praying in the Spirit." Accordingly, with all the tongue praying that *glossaists* do, have we seen proof that they are significantly more effective in "engaging the enemy" in spiritual warfare than other Christians as Dr. Fee claims? On the contrary, we believe the devil merely laughs at such prayers.

## E) Did the King Invite Us to Ask for the Gift of Tongues? *Luke 11:13*

In His teaching about prayer in Luke 11, the King said:

**So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (9-13)**

Unfortunately, some have argued using this passage that if a Christian asks God for the gift of tongues and they begin to speak in a tongue, then surely it has come from God. How dare modern

*glossaists* reduce such an amazing promise to the pathetic idea of obtaining the learned ability to pray in meaningless gibberish. And once again, they are at odds with at least 1900 years of Christian history when they read their relatively recent phenomenon into Christ's promise. Why wouldn't we think of much better things that come with the Holy Spirit which are clearly taught in Scripture instead of something meaningless and not clearly taught in Scripture at all. Accordingly, we suggest Christ's promise concerns such things as salvation (cf. John 3:3-8), preservation (cf. Eph 1:13-14), empowerment (cf. Acts 1:8), and legitimate spiritual gifts for edifying others (cf. 1 Cor 12:7).

## **F) A Paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 14:1-40**

Based on all that has been discussed in the previous chapters and this one, it may be helpful again to summarize our conclusions by offering the following paraphrase of certain sections of 1 Corinthians 14:

**[vs. 1-5] Pursue the kind of others-edifying love that I have been describing along with eagerly desiring supernatural spiritual manifestations, especially prophecy which provides revelation from God. The reason you should desire prophecy is because when someone utters something in an unknown tongue, it does not benefit others in a loving way, only God knows what it is, and it resembles the "mysteries" spoken in pagan temples.**

**But everyone who prophesies edifies the church in a way that demonstrates love, and therefore, a legitimate manifestation of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, anyone who speaks in meaningless gibberish only serves to selfishly puff up themselves, like the pagans do in their worship, and which, as I have already told you, is not how an authentic Christian spiritual gift works. It would be great if all of you miraculously spoke in human foreign languages you did not know, but it would be better if you prophesied because it is more edifying to others.**

**[vs. 6-12] And even if I miraculously spoke in a human foreign language, what good would it be if it did not contain some helpful content? You know that even musical instruments that make meaningless sounds are**

**useless. So it is with meaningless sounds in your assembly. If you utter something meaningless in the assembly, at best, you are merely speaking to the air, and you create an environment that makes people feel like they are in a foreign country where they do not belong. This is not good, and so because you are eager to experience spiritual things in your church, try to excel in those things which build up others, like meaningful speech, instead of meaningless utterances that don't build up others.**

**[vs. 13-17] Because the meaningless type of tongues you are practicing does not help others, anyone wanting to do it should pray that God will also provide an interpretation so that others will benefit as well. Because if I simply pray, sing, or praise in a mindless, meaningless tongue, it is useless both for myself and others because neither I nor they understand what is being said. And again, this does not edify others.**

**I thank God that I use the authentic sign gift of miraculously speaking in human foreign languages more than all of you Corinthians combined. This is because my ministry is preaching the new revelation of the Gospel and this gift is a miraculous sign to unbelievers. But in the assembly of believers, I would rather speak five meaningful and understandable words that instruct others than ten thousand "words" in a meaningless tongue like that practiced in the pagan temples. Brothers, grow up, and abandon this idea that this tongues manifestation somehow makes you superior to others. It may in fact be evil. Understand that God said in the Old Testament that such a manifestation would actually be a sign of judgement, not blessing.**

**[vs. 22-23] The bottom line is that the authentic Christian gift of tongues is intended to be a miraculous sign to unbelievers of new divine revelation, not a sign of spirituality to believers as you are using it. Even still, it will not work in your congregation because its supernatural character is only revealed if there are people present who speak a number of different foreign languages as was the case at its first occurrence in Jerusalem on Pentecost. In fact, even if you used the authentic gift in your congregation, visiting unbelievers**

**are just going to think it is the same thing they can hear at the pagan temple just down the street.**

**[vs. 26-38] Everything that occurs in the church service should be done in order to strengthen everyone. That is why if some people claim to have the gift of tongues, only a few, at the most three, should speak, one at time, and someone must then interpret. If it is not certain that someone with the gift of interpretation is present, then the person who thinks their utterance is from God should make no sound at all.**

**Women are not to publicly speak in tongues, or otherwise, in the church assembly. All of this is because an assembly worshipping God will exhibit God-like characteristics such as order and peace, not the random and noisy chaos that is deemed to be spiritual in the pagan temples.**

**If anybody thinks they are spiritually gifted but they do not follow these rules which are God's command, they should be ignored by the assembly so that they feel ashamed and will stop their pagan practices.**

**[vs. 39-40] Therefore brothers, be eager to excel in gifts that edify others, like prophecy which consists of meaningful, others-edifying speech. And if the real gift of tongues is demonstrated to be present through supernatural interpretation then do not forbid its operation. But no matter what, the chaotic, noisy, and offensive environment observed in the pagan temples where everyone seems self-absorbed in uttering their meaningless gibberish has nothing to do with a church service God is leading.**

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## ***Extras & Endnotes***

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### ***Gauging Your Grasp***

- What is a *glossaist* interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:5? What is our interpretation and why? Which one do you agree with and why?
- Why did Paul command "**do not forbid speaking in tongues**"?

- What are several problems with the general notion that the Apostle is describing the practice of “praying in a tongue” in Romans 8:26?
- We claim it is a case of un-Christian arrogance to suggest that *glossaists* praying in an incoherent tongue are the only ones who, “**pray in the Holy Spirit.**” Do you agree or disagree and why?
- The Apostle’s admonition that we need to “**be alert**” while we “**pray in the Spirit**” teaches us that to pray in a mindless tongue is actually the *opposite* of “praying in the Spirit.” Accordingly, with all the tongue praying that *glossaists* do, have we seen proof that they are significantly more effective in “engaging the enemy” in spiritual warfare than other Christians as Dr. Fee claims? On the contrary, we believe the devil merely laughs at such prayer.

### **Publications & Particulars**

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- <sup>1</sup> Jean Héring, *The First Epistle of St. The Apostle to the Corinthians* (London, 1962), 93.
- <sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Oliphants, 1971), *in loc.*
- <sup>3</sup> For further discussion on the relationship between the Apostle and the Corinthians and its impact on properly interpreting 1 Corinthians 14 see section 12.6.D.
- <sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the extreme rarity of the real gift of tongues in the early Church see section 12.4.B.
- <sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, in loc;* [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).
- <sup>6</sup> Anthony Thiselton supports the idea that the Apostle is referring to the gift of tongues in Romans 8:22-27 (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 2000], 985), as does Max Turner (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* [Hendrickson, 1998], 233-4), and R. P. Spittler in his entry to the *ISBE* on “Tongues,” although he gives no evidence for it (4:603).
- <sup>7</sup> Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Hendrickson, 1994), 584.
- <sup>8</sup> Regarding the mistake of ignoring that the Apostle Paul’s explicit and repeated statement in 1 Corinthians 14 (cf. vs. 2, 14, 15, 16, 32) that “praying in a tongue” is merely done with the *human* spirit (i.e. emotions) and not by the Holy Spirit, see section 12.9.A.

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- <sup>9</sup> Dr. Fee attempts to get around this by claiming that the inaudible groans of Creation described in v. 22 have nothing to do with the groans of the Spirit in v. 23 and that rather we should go to 2 Corinthians 5:2-3 where the Apostle speaks of what may be audible groans (*Presence*, 579, n. 320). Once again, a great biblical exegete is breaking the rules that he has taught to others for decades, merely to find support for his position.
- <sup>10</sup> It is the very imperceptibility of the Spirit's intercession that makes the following from Dr. Fee rather meaningless:  
 [T]here is no other known phenomenon, either in Paul or the early church, apart from the prayer in the Spirit described in I Corinthians 14, that even remotely resembles what the Apostle now describes in such a matter-of-fact way. (*Presence*, 584)  
 And we should expect no description of this phenomena occurring in the life of the Church because it happens continuously without our knowing it.
- <sup>11</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT)* (Eerdmans, 1996), 524-526. See also T. McComiskey, "Lament," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)*, Colin Brown ed., 4 vols., (Zondervan, 1986), II.424; and C. E. B. Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans, ICC* (T & T Clark, 1982), 1:418.
- <sup>12</sup> J. Rodman Williams, "The Greater Gifts," in *Charismatic Experiences in History*, Cecil M. Robeck ed. (Hendrickson, 1985), 60.
- <sup>13</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 730-31.