
Chapter 12.6

Tongues & the Context of 1 Corinthians 14

Luke & Paul Were United in Their Understanding

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Primary Points

- One of the things that has fueled the debate over tongues is that 1 Corinthians 14 is among the most difficult passages in the entire NT to understand.
- Unfortunately, it would seem the best Bible scholars have neglected the contexts and Greek text of the passage.
- Interpreting biblical passages in isolation without considering what the rest of the Bible says is what cults do, not sincere Christians.
- Two different “tongues” phenomena are being described in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14. One a miraculous sign to unbelievers of real human language, and the other an incoherent, self-edifying, private “prayer” language. Either the Apostle is introducing an additional gift of tongues not described in Acts or he is exposing a counterfeit version.
- Even within 1 Cor 14 itself there are two kinds of tongues being described.
- One of the things that *glossaist* must prove is that Luke and Paul had completely different understandings of what the gift of tongues really was.
- While there are many attributes of the gift of tongues that Luke and the Apostle agree on, *none of them are reflected in the modern version of tongues.*
- Not only did Paul write 1 Cor with the historical understanding of the events in Acts in mind, but *Luke wrote Acts with the problems in Corinth in mind.*
- The Corinthian church was filled with the most worldly, immoral, immature, selfish, independent people we encounter in the NT.
- The Apostle repeatedly denounced the warned the Corinthians because they were so *self-centered* and *egocentric*. Now, convince yourself that when the Apostle says four sentences later, “**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself**” (14:4) that he means this is a *good* thing, something he really wants the puffed up, conceited, self-centered, and ego-centric Corinthians to hotly pursue, as so many interpret this passage today.

A) The Importance & Difficulty of Properly Interpreting 1 Corinthians 14

For some, simply demonstrating that the modern version of the gift of tongues does not comply with the biblical characteristics discussed in the previous chapters is sufficiently convincing. However, some may argue that several suggestions have been made in these arguments without sufficient biblical support. *Were* most of the references the Apostle made to the tongues phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 14 only referring to incoherent utterances that were identical to a pagan form of tongues speaking? *Did* Luke and Paul share the same understanding of what the gift of tongues was?

What did the Apostle mean when he wrote:

Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit (14:2). . . . He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself (v. 4). . . . I would like every one of you to speak in tongues (v. 5). . . . For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays (v. 14). . . . I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you (v. 18). . . . If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God (v. 28). . . . Do not forbid speaking in tongues. (v. 39)

These obviously are the verses that our *glossaist*¹ brothers and sisters have turned to for biblical support of their “private prayer language” version of the gift of speaking in tongues. It is these verses that are used today to legitimize a new and additional gift of speaking in tongues that is entirely different from how it is described in Acts. And it is these verses that we must accurately interpret, and not simply ignore, if we are to make an entirely biblical case for claiming that modern *glossaism* is *not* biblical.

One of the things that has obviously fueled the debate over these verses is the fact that they are among the most difficult in the entire NT to understand.² Accordingly, even the great early Christian teacher Chrysostom admitted around the year 400:

This whole place [1 Cor 12-14] is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place.³

The historical cessation of the biblical gift of tongues that Chrysostom speaks of will be discussed further in a subsequent chapter, but even this great exegete admitted the passage of

Scripture we are discussing here is “very obscure.” It will be argued that even modern expositors of no less stature and ability than Wayne Grudem, D. A. Carson, and Gordon Fee would seem to have erred in their interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12-14.

For example, Dr. Grudem interprets the above statements from 1 Corinthians 14 as follows:

Prayer in tongues in a private setting is another form of prayer to God. . . . Paul [sees] prayer in tongues as an additional means of fellowship directly with God. . . . Speaking in tongues is primarily speech directed toward God. . . . Speaking in tongues is simply another activity that occurs in the unseen spiritual realm, an activity we believe is effective because Scripture tells us it is, not because we can comprehend it with our minds. . . . Paul . . . gives legitimacy to the practice of singing in tongues. . . .

However much Paul warns against using tongues without interpretation *in church*, he certainly views it positively and encourages it in *private*. . . . [Paul’s conclusion] is not (as some would argue) that Christians should decide not to use the gift or decide that it has no value when used privately. . . .

[W]e would certainly expect that edification would follow [tongues speaking], even though the speaker’s mind does not understand what is being said . . . just as prayer and worship in general edify us as we engage in them, so this kind of prayer and worship edifies us too, according to Paul. . . .

[In reference to the possibility of counterfeit tongues] First, it must be said that this is not Paul’s concern, even in the city of Corinth where many had come from pagan temple worship and where Paul had clearly said that “what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God” He gives no warning that they should beware of demonic counterfeit or even think that this would be a possibility when they use this gift. . . . This fear, then, is not one that Paul seemed troubled by. He simply encouraged believers to pray in tongues and said that if they did so they would be edifying themselves.⁴

Likewise, Dr. Carson interprets Paul’s statement that: “**I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all**” (14:18) and says:

There is no stronger defense of the private use of tongues. . . . [T]he only possible conclusion is that Paul exercised his remarkable tongues gift *in private*.⁵

In the same vein, Dr. Fee comments on 14:4, “**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself**” and says, “The edifying of oneself is not self-centeredness, but the personal edifying of the believer that

comes through private prayer and praise.”⁶ Then for verse 5, (“**I would like every one of you to speak in tongues**”), Dr. Fee suggests that the Apostle “could wish all experienced the edification that came from such a gift of the Spirit.”⁷

On the surface, these interpretations seem plausible, and they are made by some of the most conservative, Evangelical, scholarly, and influential Christian men, teaching some of the most influential Christian leaders of tomorrow, at some of the most conservative, Evangelical, scholarly, and influential Christian institutions of our day. In essence, these godly, gifted, and widely recognized scholars claim that God’s word teaches us that we should all wish that we could experience “the edification that [comes] from such a gift of the Spirit.”⁸

How can we convincingly claim to those we teach that such deservedly respected men are wrong, if we do not have a more biblical answer to their claims than the simple fact, “we haven’t experienced it”? And that is precisely why many Christians do not practice the modern version of the gift of tongues. Not because of a conviction on what the Bible says, but because of their experience, or lack of it. And so the *historicist*, who holds to the centuries-long understanding of the gift of tongues, is on no better biblical ground than the *glossaist*. So how do we *biblically* instead of *experientially* answer the claims of *glossaist* theologians and expositors today? It is humbly hoped, that at least in some small measure, the following discussion may provide an adequate answer.

It is suggested here that these gifted expositors, and many others who share their core value of accurately interpreting Scripture, are mistaken on this issue because they have, remarkably and regrettably, not practiced what they preach. It would seem they have, in fact, neglected or misapplied the very things that they are among the foremost experts in, regarding the interpretation of the NT, and more specifically 1 Corinthians 14. These are the biblical context, the religious context, the moral context, and the Greek text of this passage of Scripture.

This chapter of Scripture cannot be understood without an understanding of these four interpretive keys which will enable us to understand the “problem” verses in 1 Corinthians 14 better, without having to conclude that there were (and supposedly is now) two legitimate gifts of tongues speaking operating in Corinth.

On the contrary, we believe that giving proper recognition of these issues will lead the open-minded reader to the conclusion that the Apostle is referring to an illegitimate pagan variety of “tongue prayer” in 1 Corinthians 14, rather than introducing a entirely different and non-miraculous variety from that described in Acts.

Therefore, we would suggest the same regarding the variety of “tongue prayer” popularly practiced in *glossaism* today.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, the real and biblical gift of tongues was the miraculous ability to speak a real although foreign human language, particularly as a sign to the Jews of new divine revelation. The modern idea of a private, self-edifying, incoherent prayer language as supported by Drs. Grudem, Carson, Fee and hundreds of millions of *glossaists* is unbiblical, and here we offer further proof of that.

Pastoral Practices

- The following is a fairly detailed commentary on 1 Corinthians 12-14. We believe it represents the kind of careful study that is sometimes necessary for anyone responsible for teaching God’s word. It is hoped that it will demonstrate several important rules of properly interpreting Scripture. The Apostle motivates us for such difficult study when he writes: **“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth”** (2 Tim 2:15).

B) The Biblical Context: *The book of Acts*

B.1) Interpret Obscure Scripture with Clear

By and large, it would seem most people interpret the tongues phenomena in 1 Corinthians 14 without reconciling it with its descriptions in Acts. This is a violation of a foundational rule of biblical interpretation. Interpreting biblical passages in isolation without considering what the rest of the Bible says is what cults do, not sincere Christians.

Another fundamental rule of understanding the Bible is that passages of Scripture which have a clearer meaning are to be used to interpret those that are more obscure. If this rule were applied to the tongues issue, most would agree the meaning of Acts 2 is much more straightforward than 1 Corinthians 14. Therefore, if we want the whole truth on tongues, rather than a half truth, Acts 2 should strongly influence our interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14.⁹

B.2) 2 Types of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14

The difficulty of reconciling the descriptions of the tongues phenomena in these passages is that they seem to be describing two different things. For example, in Acts, the Apostles spoke in foreign human languages and those who heard them said, “**each of us hears [and understands] them in his own native language**” (2:8). However, in 1 Corinthians 14 the Apostle says, “**anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men . . . Indeed, no one understands him**” (14:2) and “**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself** (v. 4). Luke clearly describes the tongues phenomenon as miraculous, public, and containing meaningful content. But the Apostle, at times, seems to describe it as mysterious, private, and empty of cognitive content.

Even within 1 Corinthians 14 itself there are obviously two kinds of tongues speaking being described. In contrast to the private, meaningless, supposedly self-edifying utterances described above, the Apostle later says, “**Tongues . . . are a** (public, miraculous) **sign . . . for unbelievers**” (v. 22). It would seem impossible to suggest that a private, unintelligible “prayer” in a tongue could be a miraculous “**sign . . . for unbelievers.**” Rather, this description clearly fits how it operated in Acts.

It is clear then that two different tongues phenomena are being described in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14. Ignoring this difference leads many good men to interpret every reference to the phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 14 as the real gift of tongues and thereby greatly confusing an understanding of the gift.¹⁰

How then do we reconcile these two conflicting descriptions of the tongues phenomenon between Acts and 1 Corinthians 14, and within the latter itself?

First, few deny that the description of tongues given in Acts is a description of the authentic biblical gift of speaking in tongues. But what of the descriptions in Corinthians (and of the modern version of tongues, for that matter) of a tongue speaking which is not directed to men at all, is not understood by anyone, and has no cognitive content?

It would seem that there are two options: 1) The descriptions in 1 Corinthians describe an *additional* biblical gift of tongues which differs greatly from the version Luke is describing, or 2) The descriptions in 1 Corinthians describe something that is *not* the biblical gift of speaking in tongues, but rather a counterfeit version of the gift.¹¹

Contemporary “tongue” speakers are obviously interested in proving option 1 because their experience is significantly different than how the gift of tongues operated in Acts. If, in fact, two

legitimate types of the authentic gift of tongues are described in the Scriptures, then our *glossaist* friends can find descriptions in 1 Corinthians to validate their experiences. If, however, it can be demonstrated that the *authentic* gift operated the same in both Acts and Corinth, then the *glossaist* position is indefensible.

B.3) Luke & Paul Were United in Their Understanding of the Gift of Tongues

One of the things that would have to be proven in order for the *glossaist* perspective to have merit is that Luke and Paul had completely different understandings of what the gift of tongues really was. However, this is highly unlikely for several reasons.

First, we have noted in the previous chapters several examples where Luke and Paul perfectly agree on the biblical attributes of the gift. Perhaps the clearest example is the Apostle's most definitive statement on the issue in which he states that the gift of "**tongues . . . are a (miraculous) sign . . . for unbelievers**" (1 Cor 14:22). We have demonstrated that this is generally how the gift operated in Acts as well.¹²

Likewise, both Luke and the Apostle state that the genuine gift involves real human languages (cf. Acts 2:6; 1 Cor 14:9-11, 21), both using the Greek word *glossais* to describe it. In addition, the gift of tongues is portrayed in both Acts and 1 Corinthians as containing meaningful content (cf. Acts 2:11; 1 Cor 14:5), and being a sovereign gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:4; 1 Cor 12:11, 29-30). While Luke and the Apostle agree on these attributes of the gift of tongues, *none of them are reflected in the modern version of tongues*.

Secondly, it would be difficult to believe that the Apostle was completely unaware of how the gift operated in Jerusalem at Pentecost as Luke describes it in Acts 2, or with the Gentile believers in Acts 10. It is highly likely, in fact, that he was at least in Jerusalem when the first tongues manifestation occurred and may have witnessed it personally.

In addition, there is no doubt that when Paul writes the Corinthians concerning tongues, *the occurrence of tongues he personally witnessed in Ephesus is fresh in his mind* (cf. Acts 19:1-7). This is important, as it seems obvious that Luke portrays the tongues in Ephesus as being the same as the tongues that occurred at Pentecost in Acts 2, and with Peter in Acts 10, using the Greek word *glossais* to refer to them.

The agreement between Luke and the Apostle on the issue of tongues may be even more instructive when we remember that

Luke wrote Acts several years *after* the Apostle wrote 1 Corinthians.¹³ Even though Luke describes the first occurrences of the gift of tongues in Acts, the Apostle's letter to the Corinthians was several years prior to Luke writing Acts. It was the Apostle then who first used *glossais* ("tongues" i.e. human languages) to describe this gift, and this is no doubt why Luke used the same word.

Luke was a close acquaintance of the Apostle's, personally accompanying him from Paul's second missionary journey to the end of the Apostle's life (cf. 2 Tim 4:11). Because Luke was such a close, personal companion of the Apostle's *even during the very time that Paul wrote to the Corinthians*, it is more than reasonable to assume Luke was familiar with the tongues situation in Corinth, and even the Apostle's letter to them.¹⁴ Therefore, not only did Paul certainly write 1 Corinthians with the historical understanding of the events in Acts in mind, but *Luke wrote Acts with the problems in Corinth in mind*.

The fact that the Apostle does not go into great detail clearly defining *what* the authentic gift of tongues is, strongly suggests that at least some of the Corinthians also knew of the events recorded in Acts, and how the gift had operated then. Therefore, it is understandable why they needed little additional information about the gift of tongues. Accordingly, *glossais* ("languages") was apparently the widely recognized term for the phenomenon that had occurred in the early Church and this is precisely the term the Apostle uses in 1 Corinthians.

It seems obvious that if the Apostle did, in fact, desire to teach that the nature and purpose of the gift of tongues had significantly changed from that which occurred in the earliest days of the Church, he would have at least used a different term in 1 Corinthians to refer to this "new" or additional version of the phenomenon. Instead of using "*speaking in tongues (glossais: human languages)*," therefore identifying it with the *glossais* known to have occurred in the early days of the Church, he might have used "the gift of secret *prayer*" instead. He does no such thing because he had no intention of redefining the gift of miraculously speaking in foreign human languages, but rather desired to preserve it from being confused with its pagan counterfeit operating in Corinth.

Again, for our *glossaist* friends to find biblical support for the "private prayer language" version of speaking in tongues, they need to prove that the genuine gift in Corinth operated differently from the miraculous public speaking gift that is described in Acts. This is precisely what the *glossaist* theologian Wayne Grudem attempts to do when he writes:

[W]e must realize that I Corinthians 14 is Paul's general instruction based on a wide experience of tongues-speaking in many different churches, whereas Acts 2 simply describes one unique event at a significant turning point in the history of redemption (Acts 2 is historical narrative while I Cor 14 is doctrinal instruction). Therefore it would seem appropriate to take I Corinthians 14 as the passage that most closely describes the ordinary experience of New Testament churches, and to take Paul's instructions there as the standard by which God intends churches to regulate the use of this gift.¹⁵

First, Dr. Grudem is wrong to assume that there was "a wide experience of tongues-speaking in many different churches," as if to further suggest that the real gift operated differently among those churches. Secondly, he is right to warn us about carelessly using "historical narrative" concerning unique events as found in Acts to form our doctrinal conclusions. As we discuss elsewhere, the *charismaticism* that Dr. Grudem defends is almost wholly founded on this very error.¹⁶

Thirdly, if Dr. Grudem wishes to "take 1 Corinthians 14 as the passage that most closely describes" the biblical gift of tongues, what does he do with Paul's clearest doctrinal statement on the gift that "**tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers**" (14:22), which is completely incompatible with the private prayer practice he seeks to support.

Finally, while Dr. Grudem certainly has the freedom to claim that Acts 2 does not "closely" describe the gift of tongues, most people without a personal agenda will agree that Luke's description of the phenomena is the best place to start in order to truly understand this issue.¹⁷

For these reasons, and those given above, *glossaist* are wrong to set aside so easily the biblical descriptions of the first occurrences of the gift of tongues in Church history, apparently only because they contradict their modern practice of them. We believe Dr. Carson, who is quite supportive of *glossaist* doctrine, is more accurate and honest on this point when he writes:

I register my conviction that what Luke describes at Pentecost are real, known, human languages. . . . On balance, then, the evidence favors the view that Paul thought the gift of tongues was a gift of real languages, that is, languages that were cognitive. Moreover, if he knew of the details of Pentecost (a currently unpopular opinion in the scholarly world, but in my view eminently defensible), his understanding of tongues must have been shaped to some extent by that event.¹⁸

Not to mention the fact, as we have argued above, that Luke undoubtedly knew about the situation in Corinth when he wrote Acts. For all of these reasons, it is ill-advised to set Paul against his long time ministry partner Luke on the issue of the gift of tongues, suggesting they had completely different understandings of the gift. On the contrary, both believed it to be the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign human language as a sign to unbelieving Jews of new divine revelation, and if we are going to interpret 1 Corinthians 14 correctly, this fact must be fully respected instead of conveniently ignored.

Now that we have some background to the relationship between Acts and 1 Corinthians regarding the gift of tongues, it is important to understand the situation in Corinth when the Apostle wrote his letter. There are three things in particular about the Corinthians that shape his letter to them, including chapters 12-14. We will briefly cover two of these contexts here and the third in the next chapter.

C) The Moral Context: *Sinfulness and selfishness*

No doubt, even a cursory reading of this letter reveals a church filled with the most worldly, immoral, immature, selfish, independent people we encounter in the NT. Because they were so *worldly* and *immature* the Apostle says:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. . . . You are still worldly (3:1-3).

I do not want you to be ignorant (12:1) [but you are].

Brothers, stop acting like children (14:20).

Because they were so *immoral* and *depraved* the Corinthians had told the Apostle, "**Everything is permissible**" (10:23), but the Apostle told them:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? (5:1-2)

The body is not meant for sexual immorality (6:13).

Shall [you] then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! (6:15)

Flee from sexual immorality (6:18).

[L]ove . . . does not delight in evil (13:6).

Because of the sinful behavior in the Corinthian church, the Apostle would seem to have even doubted that many of them were saved, exhorting them in the conclusion of his second letter:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Cor 13:5)

Because the Corinthians were so *puffed up* and *conceited* the Apostle writes them:

For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? (4:7).

Some of you have become arrogant [*physioo*] (4:18).

You are proud! (5:2).

Your boasting is not good (5:6).

Knowledge puffs up [the self], but love builds [others] (8:1).

Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God [instead of their own glory]. (10:31)

Love . . . does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud (13:4).

Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" (14:36).

Accordingly, NT scholar Leon Morris points out regarding the Greek word *physioo* "to be puffed up:"

occurs six times in this letter, once in Colossians, and nowhere else in the New Testament. Evidently Paul regarded it as particularly appropriate in the case of the Corinthians. They, more than others, were addicted to the sin of pride.¹⁹

Because the Corinthians were so *self-centered* and *egocentric* the Apostle warned and exhorted them:

Knowledge puffs up [the self], **but love builds** [others] (8:1).

Be careful . . . that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak (8:9).

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone (9:19).

Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others (10:23-24).

I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many. . . . Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ (10:33-11:1).

When you come together . . . [to] eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. . . . Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! (11:20-22).

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit [i.e. spiritual gift] **is given for the common good** [not your own edification] (12:7).

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5), [because you certainly are not acting like you are saved].

Now I will show you the most excellent way. . . . Love is [2 things]. . . . **Love . . . does not** [2 more things]. . . . **Love . . . is not** [4 more things, including self-seeking]. . . . **Love does not** [2 more things]. . . . Love does [1 more thing]. . . . **Love . . . always** [does 5 more things]. . . . **[T]he greatest of** [everything] **is love** (12:31- 13:4-7, 13).

Follow the way of love [as you] **eagerly desire spiritual gifts** (14:1).

Now, convince yourself that when the Apostle says four sentences later, "**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself**" (14:4) that he means this is a *good* thing, something he really wants the puffed up, conceited, self-centered, and ego-centric Corinthians to hotly pursue, religiously practice, and universally exalt as "a wonderful gift from God" as so many interpret this passage today.

If our *glossaist* friends wish to claim that *God* has bestowed their self-edifying spiritual gift of "private prayer language," it would seem they need to find biblical (not merely experiential) support elsewhere. In any other context the Apostle's statement concerning self edification could *possibly* be interpreted as a spiritual habit that he not only constantly practiced himself, but wished others would too. But this surely is not what the Apostle means in this letter of tactful rebuke, to this intensely self-centered people, in a passage about spiritual gifts intended solely "**for the common good**," not your own good (12:7).

And the Apostle is not done. The very last instruction he gives them in this letter is, "**Do everything in love**" (16:13-14) and he is not talking about love for yourself. In addition, we would note other Pauline Scriptures that would make it difficult to believe that the Apostle of love could ever advocate a self-centered edification that did nothing for others, as is the case with the modern version of tongues. For example, he told the Philippian Christians, "**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit**" (2:3), and to the Romans he had written:

We [should not] please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please Himself. (Rom 15:1-3)

How could some of the best scholars of the land claim that the Apostle "could wish all experienced the [self] edification that came from such a gift of the Spirit,"²⁰ and "the only possible conclusion is that Paul exercised his remarkable tongues gift *in private* [to build up himself],"²¹ and "however much Paul warns against using tongues without interpretation *in church*, he certainly views it positively and encourages it in *private* [for himself] . . . Paul . . . encouraged believers to pray in tongues and said that if they did so they would be edifying themselves."²²

The idea of self-edification may be interpreted as a positive thing in the modern American Church, but it is absolutely clear that the Apostle did not view it as a positive thing in the Corinthian church. So why are we so fearful of telling *glossaist* that some of their beliefs and practices are more Corinthian than Christian? Why are some of our best Bible scholars laboring so hard to find biblical

support for such a self-centered practice as modern tongues? Is it because it is so popular?

Nonetheless, it is simply sin (unintentional sin most likely, but sin nonetheless) against the Author of the truth to misrepresent His words in order to justify something *we just want to do*. It is not merely a “cultural” difference, or just another way to worship God. It is something that in this very verse used to validate it, God condemns it, and just as surely as He does any other act of selfishness.

Accordingly, the words of the eminent theologian and Bible scholar Charles Hodge (1797 – 1878) regarding any authentic spiritual gift needs to be seriously considered by all sincere Christians:

They are not designed exclusively or mainly for the benefit, much less for the gratification of their recipients; but for the good of the church. Just as the power of vision is not for the benefit of the eye, but for the man. When, therefore, the gifts of God, natural or supernatural, are perverted as means of self-exaltation or aggrandizement, it is a sin against their giver, as well as against those for whose benefit they were intended.²³

We register our conviction here before God that the modern self-centered practice of praying in a tongue is sinful, and as we will argue in a subsequent chapter, Jesus Christ Himself condemned it when He commanded, “**when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans**” (Matt 6:7) do in obscure, meaningless utterances in their temples.²⁴

D) The Relational Context: A deteriorating relationship

Commentators agree that the relationship between the Apostle and the Corinthians was strained and confrontational. 1 Corinthians, in fact, is written in the midst of the decaying relationship between them. The interaction between the Apostle and this church “stretched over several years [and] was a very complex affair.”²⁵ Accordingly, Dr. Fee describes the strained relationship as follows:

The *historical situation* in Corinth was *one of conflict between the church and its founder*. This is not to deny that the church was experiencing internal strife, but it is to argue that the greater problem of “division” was between Paul and

some in the community who were leading the church as a whole into an anti-Pauline view of things. . . .

[A couple years after founding the church Paul writes] “the Previous Letter” . . . It is clear from 1 Corinthians 5 that the Corinthians themselves have misunderstood the letter; it seems more than likely that they have in fact disregarded it (see 5:9-11). That leads then to our 1 Corinthians. . . .

Given the combative nature of so much of his response, it seems highly likely that in their letter they have taken considerable exception to several of his positions and/or prohibitions. Paul’s difficulties in writing this letter are twofold: On the one hand, he must reassert his authority in a situation where it has severely eroded. . . . On the other hand, he must convince them to change both their theology and their behavior to conform to his. . . . The situation is not good; the relationship between Paul and the church is visibly deteriorating.²⁶

In this letter, then, it becomes clear that that many of the Corinthians despise the Apostle’s authority, but love audibly speaking in spontaneous, obscure utterances in the public assembly as was practiced in the pagan temples in the city. It is only shortly after they receive this letter that the Apostle will make his “painful” visit in which he is publicly and rudely rejected by some in this church. When he writes 1 Corinthians he knows this is where things may be headed.

So it should not surprise us that the Apostle words things carefully in order not to unnecessarily offend the “tongues hungry” Corinthians. Especially when he knows he has probably already offended them in rebuking them for the numerous and much more sinful matters he has already addressed. Which do you think the Apostle was more concerned about: their fornication with *pagan temple prostitutes*, or their useless practice of directing *pagan tongue prayer* to God?

The immensely popular pagan tongue habit is not really the issue that the Apostle wants to expend whatever clout he may have, in order to impress upon them what a serious mistake it may be. He just gives rules that will exclude it from effecting the church’s meetings and that could be expected to help them recognize what a meaningless exercise it is, all in the hope that they would decide to abandon the practice themselves. Have you ever had to persuade a drifting, rebellious teenager to stop several different, bad, and even sinful habits all in one meeting? The Apostle is nearing the end of just such a “meeting,” and he wants to be as winsome as possible.

So when he says, “**I wish that you all spoke in tongues**” (14:5), he is not so much expressing an ardent desire for a Jewish sign gift in this Greek church. And he certainly is not speaking of the pagan variety of “tongue prayer” that was practiced then in Corinth and copied in *glossaist* churches today. Rather, as Dr. Packer reasonably suggests “he wanted leverage for making his point about necessary restraint in the next verse.”²⁷ and throughout the letter. Some of the Corinthians were likely to be greatly offended by the Apostle’s devaluation of, and strict guidelines for, tongue speaking. No doubt, all of 1 Corinthians, and especially this section, is a model of persuasive communication.

Extras & Endnotes

A Devotion to Dad

Our Father, we confess that interpreting Your Word is difficult at times. But we know we honor You when we put forth the hard work and thinking that is necessary to properly understand a passage like 1 Corinthians 14. Thank you that you intend for it to be understood. And as we endeavor to do our best to present ourselves to You as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), let us remember that the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that You will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2 Tim 2:24-26).

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What are some reasons that 1 Corinthians 14 requires special study?
- 2) What are some things that are at stake in properly interpreting 1 Corinthians 14?

- 3) What are the two different “tongues” phenomena we suggest are being described in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14? Note differences and verse references.
- 4) What is your conclusion as to these two different phenomena?
- 5) Why do we claim that Luke in Acts and Paul in 1 Cor had the identical understanding of what the real gift of tongues was? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 6) What attributes of the gift of tongues did Luke and Paul obviously agree on? Why is it significant that none of these attributes are reflected in the modern version of tongues?
- 7) Why do we claim that Paul’s statement: “**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself**” (14:4), is a rebuke to stop something rather than an encouragement to pursue something? Do you agree or disagree and why?

Recommended Reading

- H. Wayne House, “Tongues and the Mystery Religions at Corinth,” *BSac* 140, [1983]
- *Encyclopedia of Religion*, “Glossolalia,” Mircea Eliade ed., 16 vols. (Macmillan, 1987), Vol. V, p. 562-565.
- John MacArthur, *First Corinthians*, (Moody Press, 1984).
- Spiros Zodhiates, *Speaking in Tongues and Public Worship: An Exegetical Commentary on First Corinthians Fourteen* (AMG, 1998).

Publications & Particulars

¹ *Glossaists* and *glossaism* are the terms we use to refer to the modern tongues movement, based on the Greek word for “tongue” (*glossa*) and “languages” (*glossais*).

² Accordingly, Anthony Thiselton remarks in his commentary, “Hardly any statement about chs. 12 and 14 remains uncontroversial” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 2000], 902).

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- ³ Chrysostom, *Homily on 1 Corinthians*, 29.1; online at www.ccel.org.
- ⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 1070-1078.
- ⁵ D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Baker, 1987), 105 (italics in the original).
- ⁶ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)* (Eerdmans, 1987), 657.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 658.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Contra Max Turner who writes, “[It] is wrong [to give] exclusive place, or even primary place, to the function of tongues stated in the long ending of Mark and implied in Acts 2. In doing this [a person] almost certainly misrepresents Paul.” (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* [Hendrickson, 1998], 303.233). Dr. Turner dismisses the Apostle’s clear statement that **“Tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers”** (1 Cor 14:22)
- ¹⁰ The failure to recognize the two distinct phenomenon being described in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14 flaws many even non-*glossaists* commentaries, including those by the usual astute Charles Hodge (*Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Findex.Com, 2003]) and D. A. Carson (*Showing the Spirit*).
- ¹¹ Dr. Thiselton erroneously makes the matter even more complex by suggesting the Apostle believed there were a multitude of legitimate forms of the gift of tongues. He writes, “Too much literature seeks to identify *glossolalia* as “one thing” when Paul specifically takes pains to refer to *different species*” (970).
 He bases this on the Apostle’s reference to the gift as **“speaking in different kinds [*genē*] of tongues [*glossais*”** (1 Cor 12:10). He misleadingly translates this as “species of tongues,” conveniently leaving *glossais* untranslated, which invariably means human languages. Therefore, this gives the impression that the Apostle is speaking of different forms of the gift of tongues, and obscuring the point that he is speaking of different kinds of human languages as demonstrated in Acts 2, and the common understanding of the meaning of *glossais*.
 In fact, it would seem the Apostle makes reference to the multiple kinds of human languages later in the text when he remarks, **“Undoubtedly there are all sorts of [human] languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning”** (1 Cor 14:10).
 In the end, we do not believe that Dr. Thiselton’s incomplete translation and novel interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12:10 provides any support to pit Luke and Paul (and the Bible!) against one another, and claim that there were conflicting, contradictory, and yet equally legitimate views of the gift in the early Church.
- ¹² Regarding the evidence in Acts that the gift of tongues operated as a miraculous sign gift as Paul himself described it in 1 Corinthians 14:22 see section 12.3.B

¹³ Most NT scholars date 1 Corinthians in the early to mid 50's and Acts in the early 60's. For a succinct discussion of the matter see D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1992), 190-94.

¹⁴ Irenaeus (c. 180) writes in a chapter of *Against Heresies* entitled, "If Paul Had Known Any Mysteries Unrevealed to the Other Apostles, Luke, His Constant Companion and Fellow-Traveller, Could Not Have Been Ignorant of Them; Neither Could the Truth Have Possibly Lain Hid from Him, Through Whom Alone We Learn Many and Most Important Particulars of the Gospel History," the following:

But that this Luke was inseparable from Paul, and his fellow-labourer in the Gospel, he himself clearly evinces [in Acts], not as a matter of boasting, but as bound to do so by the truth itself. . . . As Luke was present at all these occurrences, he carefully noted them down in writing, so that he cannot be convicted of falsehood or boastfulness.

That he was not merely a follower, but also a fellow-labourer of the apostles, but especially of Paul, Paul has himself declared also in the Epistles, saying: "Demas hath forsaken me, . . . and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me." From this he shows that he was always attached to and inseparable from him. (III. 14.1; online at www.ccel.org).

¹⁵ Grudem, 1072

¹⁶ For further discussion of the fact that *charismaticism* improperly assumes that everything the Apostles experienced is for our time as well see section 11.3.B.

¹⁷ Dr. Turner is similarly wrong on this issue, claiming that the tongues phenomenon at "Pentecost was rather the exception than the rule in the New Testament." Nonetheless, he seems to both admit his desire to conform Scripture to modern experience and contradict himself when he writes:

On the whole Paul considers 'tongues speech' a gift mainly for private worship - and what Luke has to say elsewhere in Acts is also tolerant of this view. Here the New Testament understanding matches the present-day phenomenon. . . . But there are still problems involved in identifying the New Testament phenomenon with today's 'tongues speech.' Paul's language more naturally suggests he was thinking of xenolalia (miraculously speaking in foreign human languages). (313)

First, we would object to the claim that Luke's descriptions of tongues reflects an obscure, meaningless utterance offered in prayer. Secondly, we sense a desire here to ensure that "the New Testament . . . matches the present-day phenomenon" instead of requiring present day practices to conform to the clear teaching of Scripture. Thirdly, at least Dr. Turner admits the "more natural" understanding of the Apostle, particularly at 1 Corinthians 14:22, contradicts that of Dr. Turner and modern *glossaism*.

¹⁸ Carson, 80-81, 83

¹⁹ Fee, *First Corinthians*, 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 658.

²¹ Carson, 105 (italics in the original).

²² Grudem, 1078.

²³ Charles Hodge, *First Corinthians*, 1 Cor 12:7.

²⁴ For further discussion of what we see as Christ's condemnation of the modern tongues practice see section 12.11.C.

²⁵ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, TNTC, (Intervarsity, 1987), 18. Kruse provides a general outline of Paul's interaction with the Corinthians that is in agreement with most commentators (18-25). See also Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1985), 25; and Carson, Moo, Morris, *Introduction*, 264-267.

The *New Bible Dictionary* (NBD) would seem to be understating things when it summarizes the above by saying, "1 Corinthians is the longest pastoral document in the NT and gives clues as to how difficult pastoral issues should be handled." (J. I. Packer, *et al.* eds., 3rd ed., [Intervarsity, 1996], 1162).

²⁶ Fee, *First Corinthians*, 6-10, (Italics in the original).

²⁷ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit* (Revell, 1984), 208.