

Lessons from Corinth

“So, Paul, You Want Me To Do *What!?*”

Part 8b:1 Corinthians 14

Take time to read the chapter carefully and intentionally – with a goal to understand what Paul is saying *to the Corinthians*; not *our* opinion of what he is saying. The difficulties for us as American Christians in understanding this chapter are several.

First, we think we already know what Paul is talking about, but more than likely we are wrong! Whether you embrace the very supernatural of this chapter or poo-poo it (an important theological term), we have a tendency to come to all of this with preconceived ideas. If one is inclined to see these practices as not for today or perhaps one is unfamiliar with them having never seen or experienced them, there is a tendency to read the passage through those lenses – namely, your *lack* of experience. If you are familiar with these practices, as Charismatics and Pentecostals tend to be, you will try to read Paul through your *present* experience. Thus, why we must begin with the situation at Corinth and what Paul says about *that*.

Second, there are some difficult passages, especially the “women be silent” verses (14:34-36) and the somewhat confusing section in 14:20-25. Because of their difficulty (and controversy), they can tend to become the focus of our attention and distract us from Paul’s primary purpose.

Finally, there is the problem of defining the key terms here – what exactly are the “tongues” he is describing and what is “prophecy?”

Remember, chapter 14 belongs with chapters 12-14 as a unit. Our goal is to think Paul’s thoughts after him; to put ourselves in the living room of a house church at Corinth when Paul’s letter was read out loud to those early believers.¹ Remember as well, that Paul’s introductory statement in 14:1 defines his purpose in writing and goes with the flow of thought that begins in 12:1.

“Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual *gifts* (“the things of the Spirit”²), but especially that you may prophesy” (14:1 NAU).

They should not shy away or back away from cooperating fully with the Spirit’s work among them, says Paul. In fact, the opposite - they should make their cooperation with the Spirit in these supernatural things, an “earnest desire.” The word used here that is translated “earnest desire” is “be zealous for” and is a *command*. There is to be intentionality, a passion and intensity. Do we believe that this must apply to us as well?

Why “prophecy?” Because, as we shall see, Paul’s concern is that they do those things that are intelligible and understandable when they gather; these being the things that edify the Body. Paul will contrast the use of tongues and of prophesy *when the Body gathers*. He does so not to elevate prophesy over tongues in value, but because prophesy is understandable and thus edifies the church when it gathers.³ Both prophesy and tongues are activities of the Spirit; this means that any attempt to define them as human activities *alone* falls short of what they are. Paul would not understand our attempt to do so.

So, prophesy is not preaching, though certainly every preacher seeks the Spirit’s power. Tongues are not simply human languages in need of a human interpreter who knows that language (like a foreign languages today). To read this passage in this way is typical for those who see these gifts as no longer for today. However, this fails to take seriously what the text actually says.⁴ Given the fact tongues are not understood even by the speaker (14:2) and that the interpretation of

tongues is as much a Spirit thing (supernatural) as the tongues themselves (12:10, 30), intelligible human foreign languages must be ruled out.

So, here are some working definitions and explanations that I suggest emerge from the chapter.

So, what are “tongues?” They are given by the Spirit, but not intelligible or understandable to the one speaking or to others who hear (14:2, 14, 16); they are not “ecstatic” or out of control, but under the speaker’s control (14:7-28).⁵ It is in effect a “prayer language” – spoken *to God* that edifies or builds up the one who prays in it (14:2-4).⁶ It is Paul’s regular practice to pray in tongues and he wants everyone to do so (14:5, 18).⁷ So, in sum, tongues is a Spirit-given prayer language that builds up the believer.⁸

So, what is “prophecy?” In keeping with the whole of chapters 12-14, prophecy must be a Spirit activity, meaning that is more than of simply human origin. Like tongues, it is Spirit inspired speech; but unlike tongues, it is intelligible and understandable to the speaker and the hearers. It differs from say, Spirit anointed preaching in that it is more spontaneous.⁹ In chapter 14 it is a God given word for God’s people.¹⁰ Like tongues, the speaker has control (14:32) and all can do it (14:31). Prophetic words are to be evaluated by the rest of the Body that is present (14:29).¹¹ It is important to note that it involves supernatural wisdom or insight – what here Paul calls “revelation” (14:30).

For Paul, order and propriety is paramount (14:20, 33, 40). There is to be no “swinging from the chandeliers” outbreak of confusion and craziness. It is best understood as “supernaturally natural,” i.e., clearly God and inexplicable without Him, but also very much natural in that it is not weird or irrational. In defining “supernaturally natural” I like to talk about the God human interaction as “Beyond human ability, but through human agency.” We are part, but it cannot be explained by human effort or action alone.

God-stuff can be quite “trans-rational,” defying our ability to get our minds fully around it, but not “irrational,” meaning against reason or outside of reason. I like Jack Hayford’s insightful saying, “*God has not ordained that our experiences in the supernatural are an exit pass from the realm of the natural, the mundane or the sensibly practical.*”

For Paul, when the church gathers, the Holy Spirit is eager to edify, encourage and enable His people *through* the agency of His people. Because this is so, there is a need for all to know and understand what the Spirit is saying; thus the emphasis on prophecy (14:4-5, 19-20, 26).

The highly participatory environment of these gatherings is evident throughout this chapter and section (12-14). The *expectation* is that each and every believer will participate in response to the Spirit in such a way that the Spirit is able to accomplish what is in His mind and heart for the moment. Especially is this seen in 14:26 (NAU).

“What is the *outcome* then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

Implications

In the end, the issue is not speaking in tongues or functioning in prophecy, but our willingness to walk into deeper and more substantive experiences with God. A life of faith must be a life of experience. Perhaps, we should start with a simple premise: *If we can crank it up on our own, then we are living short of what God intends for us as His people.* I have often liked to say, “If

the Holy Spirit died today, would it make any difference at all to the way we do things as God's people? Or would the show go on just like usual?"

This is no game. We run the risk of grieving the Spirit with our pride and our self-imposed and religiously-imposed restrictions and limitations. We run the risk of grieving the Spirit as well if we think we have these things all figured out and attempt to control Him accordingly. The danger for the more Charismatic-Pentecostal of us is that we too have limited Him by in effect making Him the dispenser of "Holy Spirit goose-bumps" as though He lives to entertain and to serve us.

Some Questions for Prayer and Application

- How have chapters 12-14 challenged you? Has your understanding of the "things of the Spirit" changed?
- What will you do *now*? What is the most obvious obstacle standing in the way of your embracing a more dynamic, experiential relationship with the Spirit?
- What actual adjustments must you make to align yourself with GOD the Holy Spirit? What must be repented of?

Reading

Craig Keener, *Gift and Giver, The Holy Spirit for Today* (Baker, 2001). Excellent, balanced overview of what it means to live a life in relationship with the Spirit.

Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Baker, 1996). He covers all of the passages on the Spirit in Paul's writings in a very readable, clear presentation.

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¹ As it surely was – literacy was far from universal. Paul's letter would have been read out loud to those at Corinth.

² See discussion in Part 8a.

³ He *is* correcting the overuse of tongues in the *public* gathering, but not devaluing its use in *private*.

⁴ Even if one is convinced that tongues are no longer for today, it is disingenuous to read that idea back into the 1st century; that these passages deal with supernatural Spirit stuff is beyond dispute. Cessationism (view that the gifts ended with the early church) has neither Biblical nor historical support in my opinion. Also, what will one do with the nearly 700 million Pentecostal-Charismatics world-wide? Are they deceived? Demonized? Seems quite a stretch.

⁵ It couldn't be clearer that the tongues-speaker has control – to speak or not to speak. Yet there is much misinformation and misunderstanding about the nature of the experience.

⁶ Which is why when a tongue is interpreted, the content of the interpretation should be something directed toward God – that is the "direction" Paul says the tongues go – spoken to God. In some Pentecostal-Charismatic circles, tongues might be given in a group setting and then the interpretation directed as a word *to the congregation*. While that might be legitimate, it is not what Paul is talking about here.

⁷ It is likely that 14:14-15 is Paul's own experience, he does say "I".

⁸ Several questions often come up.

- Q. "Are tongues ever *known* languages?" A. While Paul talks about the "tongues of angels" (13:1) as though tongues are in some way a "heavenly" dialect, it seems anecdotally true that for some people their prayer language is a known human language (though not known to them). This seems to have been the case for some of the languages spoken by those early believers at Pentecost (Acts 2).
- Q. "Is Paul talking about the same tongues as we read about in Acts?" A. While we cannot know for sure, it only seems reasonable that they are the same. Luke and Paul are friends and Luke seems to think it is important (by the Spirit!) to record other instances where tongues were part of what it meant to receive the Spirit. It is unlikely that they are two different kinds of things.
- Q. "Do I have to speak in tongues?" A. Is it Biblical? Does it seem to be a desirable experience, Biblically speaking? If it is good and from God, should we not embrace it?
- Q. "Will I lose control?" A. Both this Biblical passage and the experience of people throughout the ages say, "Of course not." You choose whether to pray in this way or not and when you choose.
- Q. "Why is this needed or necessary? What good is it, exactly?" A. While we cannot fully address this in such limited space, a thought or two. 1. It is the language of intimacy. Does this mean one cannot be intimate without it? Not saying this, but that it is a co-joined God Spirit/human spirit experience that allows us to fully express our hearts without formulating human language in order to express. 2. It clearly states that it builds us up. Paul

seemed to think it a highly desired value for himself and others. 3. It challenges our need to control everything. In yielding our tongue in this way to God's control, we are in effect yielding ourselves in a concrete and tangible way.

⁹ One of the more difficult questions is how prophecy in the NT relates to that of prophecy in the OT. For some help see Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Crossway, revised edition, 2000).

¹⁰ I would suggest that this doesn't rule out what we today might call "personal prophecy," where someone gets a word for another person. Again, any and all craziness that might accompany this in some circles must be put aside.

¹¹ See also 1 Thess. 5:19-22.