

## DISSECTING THE GIFT

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*1 Corinthians 14:1-4. "...he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries. But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church."*

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I am bilingual. If I were to address in Spanish a congregation that only speaks English, who would understand me? God and myself.

An older Spanish-speaking lady came to visit me and I left the living room for a moment. Upon returning, I heard my youngest son, then four years old, speaking to her in English. I told him to speak to our visitor in Spanish because she did not know English and when he had just spoken to her, the only ones who had understood were God and himself. In other words, I addressed my child reasoning such that his young mind would understand, just like in the manner Paul addressed the childish church of Corinth when he said to them that whoever speaks in an unknown tongue (a foreign language) to a person who does not understand that tongue, is merely speaking to God and edifying himself (vs. 2, 4).

There is no halo of mystery over the term "speaking in tongues" as though it means utterance of meaningless words involuntarily expressed. Biblically, speaking in tongues, when referring to the *true* gift, is plainly speaking in a real foreign language. Perhaps the reason for giving a sense of mystery to this subject arises from the fact that Paul was such a deep theologian that we actually look for a profound, complicated, abstract or supernatural explanation of 1 Corinthians 14. But the fact that Paul does not feed meat, but milk, to the Corinthians, should clarify the chapter when we study it realizing that Paul's words were simple and plain. For example, you, the reader, do not have to be told that if a German speaks in his own language to a Frenchman who only speaks French, he will not be understood. Rather, the German should speak (prophecy; deliver his message) in French. And if he does not speak French, then he should follow Paul's advice and either get an interpreter or remain silent. It is that simple.

However, since this is what Paul actually said, we must conclude that indeed the Corinthians were children in their mentality. They had to be fed only milk as nourishment for their thoughts, for their minds were ruled by Satan. No wonder Paul cried when he wrote to them! Wouldn't you also cry over having to explain trivial details such as these to an adult that you love because he does not realize that reason itself calls him to avoid speaking in German if his listener only speaks and understands French? But "rather... ye may prophecy... [because] he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification and exhortation and comfort" (vs. 1 and 3). That is, talk to your listeners in their own tongue so that they may be enlightened, that is, edified, by your words. Otherwise, they will be left perplexed, for all you have done is talk such that only yourself and God understood. That is what Paul meant.

**1 Corinthians 14:5.** *"I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying."*

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Why is the prophet greater than he who speaks in tongues? Since people of a common tongue remain together geographically, and preachers, unlike missionaries, reach more people within their own borders, in their own tongue, the extent of their work is greater. The purpose for prophesying (preaching) is building the church spiritually, and if it is done in a foreign language, it must be interpreted. Paul repeats this fact so many times, that there is no room for the interpretation that it does not matter if nothing said is understood.

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**1 Corinthians 14:6-8.** *"Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?"*

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Suppose the back of a church catches fire near a gas tank where there could be a possible explosion, and a passerby, seeing it, runs to alert the congregation, who still has not noticed the fire. Furthermore, suppose the passerby is a foreigner who does not speak the language

of the church. How would the worshipers know their lives are in danger if they do not understand the warning? "For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" What would be the logical reaction of the worshipers? Seek an interpreter or praise God that this visitor speaks in tongues? Of course that reason itself demands that an interpreter be sought.

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*1 Corinthians 14:14-15. "For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also."*

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Consider this statement: "For if I jump in the ocean the sharks will eat me." Does it mean that I will jump in the ocean? No. It means that I will *not* do it because then sharks would eat me. Now look again at verse 14: "For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful." Does it mean Paul prayed in unknown tongues? No. It means he did *not* because, were he to do it, then he would not understand what he was saying. Notice that Paul does *not* affirm: "I pray in an unknown tongue." This verse starts with the words "for if," and we must not overlook that.

Furthermore, suppose I say to you: "For if I build a swimming pool in my back yard, next year I am going to have a party on the first day of summer. You are invited. Come with your swimming suit and towel." Then further suppose that the day for the party arrives and you have not communicated with me since the invitation. What would you do? Would you just come over ready for the swimming party, or would you call me first to find out if in fact I built the pool? If you were as excited about the party as the Corinthians were about speaking in tongues, you would probably just come over. However,

since my invitation started with the words "for if," it is only logical that you call me first to find out if I, in fact, had the pool built. In like manner, seeing that Paul's statement begins with the words "for if," we should confirm the veracity of it. Were we to do that, we would find that Paul's response follows immediately after his statement: "What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also" (vs. 15). In other words, what some think Paul did, that is, speak in tongues without knowing what he was saying, is exactly what Paul did *not* do. Paul plainly states throughout 1 Corinthians 14 that at all times, whether he spoke, sang or prayed, he always knew what he was saying.

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*1 Corinthians 14:18. "I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all."*

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Being acquainted with the original disciples, Paul probably spoke Aramaic; having been educated in the temple, he spoke Hebrew, Being a witness in Rome and a Roman citizen, he was fluent in Latin. Paul also preached to the Greeks and wrote his epistles in that language. Finally, having been chosen of God to go far and near preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, Paul probably was fluent in many languages. How could he then not thank God that he knew how to speak many tongues, more so than the average person?

As zealous as Paul had been to destroy Christianity before his conversion, in like manner was he zealous to see it triumph when he converted. A willing missionary, eager to accomplish the will of God entrusted to him, with a heart burdened to relay to others the message of salvation, and being blessed with the ability to dominate many languages in order to quench his unquenchable desire to talk about

Christ, Paul rightly exclaims: "I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all."

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*1 Corinthians 14:27. "If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret."*

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At any gathering, whether religious or secular, if foreigners take an active part in the discussion, they should speak by course (taking turn) while someone interprets for them. We usually see this when leaders of an organization attend meetings in areas which have been opened to their work and where a different language is spoken. However, the limit of foreigners speaking should be two, three at most, so that the trend of thought does not get interrupted excessively by having to listen first to the speaker and then to the interpreter. Otherwise the attention span of the listeners can be totally lost. However, by having only a limit of two or three persons speak in a foreign language, the audience can bear the speakers without suffering mental fatigue. Thus everyone present is benefitted and edified. And this should be done while the foreigners take turn to speak, so that the meeting is carried out in a decently and orderly fashion (vs. 40).

By the Corinthians needing instruction in simple formalities, we discern that another spirit had affected their thinking process and was the reason for Paul stating that they still needed to be fed with milk.

***1 Corinthians 14:29.*** "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted."

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Even those who do speak the language of the church, when they address the congregation, should be limited to two or three persons as the rest listen. But it is understood that this should also be done while taking turn, and, if a listener wishes to add to the discussion, he should wait until he is recognized, and until the person speaking sits. These instructions for conduct and order are directed to those who speak in the language of the church and point to God as not being the author of confusion. Therefore, if the very ones who *do* speak the language of the church are to speak in turn so that no confusion results, then certainly it is expected that foreigners do the same via an interpreter. Today we raise a hand at a meeting to be recognized to speak; we learned this as children. Thus these directions again point out the fact of the Corinthians' lack of maturity and we can understand why Paul states there was another spirit among them.

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***1 Corinthians 14:34-35.*** "Let the women keep silence..."

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Women in religion is a topic in and of itself that I would rather not deal with here. However, since Paul touches on it within the subject of tongues, these two verses are discussed in chapter 14.

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**1 Corinthians 14:39.** *"Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues."*

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To forbid not to speak with tongues simply means to allow preaching in a foreign language by a person who does not speak the language of the church, but, of course, only if her/his sermon is translated, so the listeners are edified. This happens all the time in Spanish-speaking churches in the United States when they are visited by leaders from the denominations' headquarters who only speak English. They are not prohibited from speaking, but as they preach their sermon is translated. However, what if there is no interpreter? "If there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God" (vs. 28). Obviously, the visiting pastor has to remain silent and pray. Mature adults do not need to be told this, and we again note why Paul felt sad for the Corinthians' mental immaturity to the point that he cried while writing to them.

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**1 Corinthians 13:1.** *"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels..."*

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"Though I speak" equals to "if I speak." Paul does not affirm that he spoke the languages of angels. In 1 Corinthians 13 the subject being addressed is *love*. Love is the reason to live a life for God. If a man even suffers death for the cause of righteousness, but he does not possess God's love, his death is in vain (vs. 3). If our words are not an expression of God's love in us, we are only making noise when we speak; and if our works express not God's love, we labor in vain.



Suppose Paul had said: "For if I fly like an angel to and fro preaching salvation, and I have not love, I am nothing." Would that mean that Paul could fly? Certainly not. By the same token, the allusion to speaking the tongues of angels is made to make us realize that love is greater, more important than the gift of speaking the tongues of angels, but not because Paul spoke the language of angels or expected to be granted the gift of speaking angelic tongues. The phrase is only a figure of speech, and it should be understood only as a figure of speech, which acts as an aid in helping us better understand the theme being discussed: the sovereignty of love.