

"In the law it is written, with men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto these people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe. If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not or is unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God and report that God is in you of a truth".

In the English, the way that reads is not immediately clear. The KJV appears to compound the issue of the target audience of these two spirit gifts. The earlier point seems to be that tongues are for the benefit of unbelievers whereas prophesying is for the benefit of believers. Later this is reversed.

The context needs to be examined carefully, as is always the necessary course. Are these statements absolute or relative? Is it a general rule that these two gifts serve different purposes, or is there another way of looking at this subject?

The context is that of the nation of Israel. There is a citation from Isaiah 28v11 which is interpretative not verbatim, as the term stammering has been dropped. Are both the believers and the unbelievers here in Corinthians, Jewish? Is it belief specifically in the gospel or just a general belief in God Himself in contrast to atheism?

That tongues are a sign to them that believe not, is to be understood that such people are not looking for any signs, because they do not believe. Hence to them it is a sign because they are a fulfilment of prophecy – *"In the Law* (the prophet Isaiah actually) *it is written"*. Those who were Jews would be aware that the prophets spoke about many things even if they did not believe in them, because they were Jews and had been brought up under the influence of the Word of God – the Law. They could be reminded of what they once knew but had chosen not to believe. That the Bible was to be translated into other tongues, indeed all tongues, would allow Deuteronomy 29v24-25 to be possible, without such translation, all nations, men, could not so comment.

Other gentile non-believers would not be convinced just because somebody spoke their language, they would dismiss the incident as a trick saying that they already knew their tongue and had not miraculously been given the power to communicate using it. The notion of incoherent babbling of the popular but wrong belief of "glossolalia" being the cause of conversion to belief in the gospel has never been true, nor is there an example of it in the New Testament records. The example of Act 2v8-11 is addressed to sympathetic Jewish believers, who just needed to be shown that Jesus of Nazareth was the one they had been waiting for and were not strictly either unlearned nor those that believed not.

Being able to communicate in other languages is useful in preaching the gospel to strangers and alien people. However, the mere use of words in the tongue of the other person will never convert them if the substance of the gospel is not the substance of the communication. Fancy abilities are just that, fancy abilities and God has never chosen

to use miracles as the primary means of conversion because it never lasts, even if there is a preliminary effect. This is the emphasis of 2 Peter 1v18,19 where miracles are contrasted with prophecy, that “*more sure word*”.

What then of prophesying? It is stated to be something that “serveth.....them which believe”. So how does prophesying do that? First it should be understood that prophesying should not be understood as being restricted to foretelling the future, but rather as any speaking on behalf of the Eternal. To prophesy for God is to speak for God. A prophet is essentially therefore one who speaks for God, not someone who speaks only of things to come.

Those that already believe benefit particularly from what God has said. It is because they believe that they value and appreciate it and it is primarily directed to them, not at unbelievers. The vast majority of the scripture is directed to those who believe, not at unbelievers. A small quantity of God’s communication has been written for unbelievers, but God knows what He is doing and does not spend large amounts of energy on such people who are not really interested in what He has to say anyway!

The Greek word usually translated as prophecy means to publicly expound. Matthew 26v68 illustrates this “*Prophecy who it is that smote thee*”. Jesus would not be predicting the future to identify his assailants, but he would be publicly expounding that fact if he identified them whilst blindfolded.

There is an example given by the holy spirit set in the context of the whole Ecclesia coming together. The strange awkwardness of a public display of the voicing of numerous tongues to the unlearned or unbelieving is cited. Notice that it does not say, the unlearned **and** unbelieving. Any unlearned believers would be unimpressed by someone speaking in Russian or Cantonese if they were ignorant of those languages, it would be meaningless to them. The Greek for unlearned is “idiotes”, not meaning idiot as in the modern English but more ignorant, through circumstance or choice. Such people when confronted with such an exhibition would – say *that ye are mad!*

In contrast with this, those same people, unlearned or unbelievers would be convinced by the use of prophesying. Again, it is important to understand that this is not speaking of foretelling the future, anyone who heard a prophecy of the future would not believe unless they saw that prophecy come to pass, which usually took many years if not centuries as the Bible record illustrates. Most future prophecies were not fulfilled in a short time span. God usually reserved such revelation for greater and grander schemes over long time spans.

So prophesying, that is publicly expounding, in the ears of the unlearned and unbelievers gives the opportunity to convince the gainsayer, something all those seeking to serve in positions of responsibility in the truth should pursue, as well as being “*apt to teach*”, see 1 Timothy 3v2 and Titus 1v9. “*Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayer*”. What are the unlearned and unbelievers if not gainsayers?

All are expected to do this prophesying. It should not be left to the domain of a select few, yes certain brethren are appointed public speakers to serve the Ecclesia in this way, but the truth-holders are to be particularly identified because “*he is convinced of*

all, he is judged of all". This approach of appreciation and exposition of the Word should stand out as a spirit designated mark to spotlight such people, as those who serve God by loving and living the word. This must be us. Our sisters are thereby encouraged to commit themselves likewise to the study and exposition of the Word, it is not the sole domain of the brethren.

The nation of Israel should have been that people who exemplified such behaviour but as more and more of them turned away from the Word, so God publicly punished them as poor witnesses to His Truth. The aspect of the use of the spirit gifts was reserved to the end of the time of the Jewish commonwealth and was withdrawn when the times of the gentiles finally arrived.

The verse before those selected for the class this evening, are also germane. Verse 20 has "*Brethren be not children in understanding; howbeit in malice be ye children but in understanding be ye men*". The essential importance of understanding is stressed.

The gift of prophesying is not available today, however we can and should speak for God by publicly expounding His Word because we want to be the people of the book. We have nothing new to add today because the work of inspiration has been concluded in Apostolic times.