

1 Corinthians 14:21 -25 Tongues and Prophecy

Beloved Brothers and Sisters

This first letter to the Corinthians was written by Paul as a result of certain information given to him by faithful brethren who had noticed among the members of the congregation ideas which were incompatible with the truth that the apostle Paul had taught them. Some of these deviations had to do with doctrine, some had to do with the toleration of sinful behaviour, others to do with support for their own poorer brothers and sisters, and support for other ecclesias. In addition there were problems relating to ecclesial order, the roles of brothers and sisters, the question of going to law to settle difficulties among believers, others to do with the breaking of bread, and the proper application of the gifts of the Spirit.

Our class has to do with certain of these gifts, namely speaking in tongues and prophecy. These particular gifts and others beside are not available today, whereas certain churches of the Pentecostal and evangelical order claim that they are. Paul is insistent that these gifts were of a temporary nature for he states: *Charity (love) never fails: but whether there are prophecies, **they shall fail**; whether there are tongues, **they shall cease**; whether there be knowledge, **it shall vanish away**. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.* (1Co 13:8-10) That which is perfect, refers to the canon or collection of the sixty six books of the Bible, the canon was completed when the apostle John received the Book of Revelation near the close of the first century in which the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ occurred. Since the Bible was completed, in every generation since there have been people who falsely claim to possess “the gifts of the Spirit”, This has more to do with the glorification of themselves than it has with the Glory of God.

In chapter 14 of this first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul advises the brethren on the use of the gift of tongues and the benefit that it provides. Basically he queries the benefit available to the listeners if they cannot understand a word of what is being said. The solution to this difficulty, he proposes, is to have an interpreter. Also instead of everybody speaking all at once in foreign languages, he recommends only three at any one time and these to speak one after another, again with an interpreter. If there is no interpreter, all should keep quiet.

Paul emphasizes the importance of understanding what is being spoken, conveying the meaning of the message received. Paul himself was able to speak in tongues, more so than anyone in the Corinthian ecclesia, but he says he thanks God for the gift, but he would rather speak five words in his understanding than ten thousand words in a foreign language.

There was an underlying factor in the misuse of this gift of tongues, namely that the gift was being used wrongfully, more to draw attention to themselves and their ability, than to assist in the building up of all the members of the Ecclesia. Paul pleads with them saying :- (14:20) *Brethren do not be children in understanding, but in malice* (a number of words illustrate his meaning: - hatred, spite, meanness, nastiness, cruelty, wickedness). Young children have none of these, for they are learned behaviors, from the example of adults more often than not. Paul illustrates this by referring to the Law, where the word Law is a synonym for the Old Testament, in fact he quotes from Isaiah 28 where we find the quotation:- *"Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? Those that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts". For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, "This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear".* (Isa 28:9-12) These words were originally addressed to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, verse 14, *"Wherefore hear the word of the LORD, you scornful men that **rule this people which is in Jerusalem.*** (Isa 28:14). In the passage where this occurs in Isaiah 28, the prophet had been addressing Ephraim, the leading tribe of the ten settled in Israel, but turning from Ephraim to Judah, he states, *"But they also have erred through wine."* At any rate, in verse 14, we find him speaking to the rulers of Jerusalem. They also "erred in vision and stumbled in judgment." They had the law, but despised the word, corrupting it with traditions like a later generation that resisted the Lord Jesus. In such a state of affairs the Spirit said: "Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? And the answer given is: "Them that are weaned from the milk and drawn from the breasts." It is this passage which Paul uses to make an enlightening allusion to the letter to the Hebrews (ch. 5), where he rebukes some who, by reason of their long connection with the truth, ought to have been teachers; adding that they themselves had need to be taught again the first principles of the oracles of God. *"Ye are become," says he, "such as have need of*

milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who, by reason of use, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." And he goes on to exhort them to progress from first principles and strive for perfection.

Those in Isaiah's day, whom he regarded as "unweaned", were not without a professional zeal for the law, like the Pharisees in Jesus day, but they played with it and nullified it by their doctrines and commandments of men and their traditions "Jewish fables and endless genealogies," such as Paul referred to Titus 1:4 & 14

Paul quotes the eleventh verse of the 28th chapter Isaiah as a rebuke to the Corinthians as we have said because of their abuse of the gift of tongues. The solemn lesson of the passage is that men may be in close and familiar contact with the word of the Lord, and yet find it only to their destruction if they will not hear (or obey) it. "We are," said Paul, "unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are being saved, and in them that perish. To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life." There were men in his day *"ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth"*—men *"desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding not what they say, nor whereof they affirm."* They were an affliction to him till the day of his death. To a man like Paul, nothing could be more distressing than an unfaithful handling of the Word of God.

The "scornful men" who ruled Jerusalem were represented by Isaiah as declaring that they had made a covenant with death and an agreement with the grave, and that they would escape the "overflowing scourge" threatened by God, by means of their "refuge of lies." *"Therefore thus says Yahweh Elohim, Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation; he that believes shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet; and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place."*

The stone is Christ (Psa. 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; etc.) In a sense the stone has been laid in Zion, and in a sense it has not. "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). The name of Jesus Christ was revealed in Zion in the first century as the only name of salvation; and judgment and an overflowing scourge followed Zion's rejection of it. But though he rose from the dead, he did not advance his claim to Jewish and universal sovereignty, but

ascended into heaven, from which, as from “a far country,” he is to return to be enthroned in Zion and to make his foes his footstool. The tried and precious stone has, therefore, yet to be laid in Zion, with judgment to the line and righteousness to the plummet; and the refuge of lies which even today exists in Jerusalem in the form of numerous denominations of “Christianity” from Roman Catholics and Greek, Russian and Arminian Orthodox to every species of Protestant and evangelical and all these and all the denominations on earth are to be swept away, and the “spiritual house” of which Peter and Paul speak (1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 2:20) is to be manifested in Zion to the glory of God.

It is apparent from references in the New Testament that the early ecclesias had unbaptized people present amongst them when they met together. 1 Corinthians 14:23, for example, says: *“If therefore the whole church be come together into one place . . . and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers . . .”* Some of us may not be comfortable with this aspect of non-believers attending meetings of the ecclesia, in view of the fact that many have been used to meetings specially prepared for interested non-believers to attend, but things were somewhat different in apostolic times. For example many of the early believers were slaves and not free to attend an assembly at the time of their choosing, but permission had to be obtained from their master. This was probably one reason why meetings were held at night (Acts 20:9) Paul was insistent that the brethren and sisters should behave in ways that would encourage these visitors to learn about the salvation made available through Christ, and not that barriers should be erected against them. Hearing the exercise of many believers all practising their gift of tongues at the same time would hardly generate an interest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But this is what Paul was endeavouring to adjust. So in verse 22 of our chapter Paul, basing his reasoning on the words of Isaiah, shows that the gift of tongues was not intended as a sign for the benefit of believers, but for the benefit of those who did not believe. This is illustrated in Paul and Barnabus’s experience in Lycaonia where the people had their own language other than the ‘Koine Greek’ and in view of the situation that was developing where the two apostles were about to be honoured as gods, their gift of tongues proved very useful. The point Paul makes to the Corinthians is that if unbelievers attended their meetings and all they could hear was an indecipherable babble of different languages, they could only conclude that these “Christians” were mad. In fact the Corinthians possessed the knowledge that

leads to eternal life, but by their unreasonable use of the gift of tongues they had lost the opportunity of talking to these visitors who wanted to know what Christianity was all about. It is a lesson for those appointed to explain the truth of God's word in our times. An unenthusiastic drone of disconnected verses is not likely to stir the attention of visitors, rather it might have the result of sending them to sleep. It ill becomes those who have learned the way of truth to stand in the path of others who have yet to come to a knowledge of its benefits. Paul then draws attention to the gift of prophecy. This gift was in operation at the time and was very useful on several occasions. One example is found in Acts 11:27 – 30 *"In these days prophets came from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: which they did, sending it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul"*. Another incident is found in Acts 21:8-12 where Paul and his company came to Caesarea: and *"we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him. And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus. And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, 'Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owns this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'* And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem". Prophecy of this nature would have been very impressive to unbelievers who having heard the prediction could themselves look for the fulfilment. Brothers and Sisters of Christ do not have the gift of prophecy as some believers in the first century. But we can have an understanding of the prophetic writings in the scripture, the fulfilment of which in our own day can strengthen our confidence that the Bible is indeed the Word of God, and moreover that our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, is indeed actively intervening in human affairs to bring about the conclusion of human history by the destruction of human governments and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Such fulfilments of prophecy as the rebirth of the nation of Israel, the formation of alliances between identifiable nations such as Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Libya and the opposition of other alliances such as Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and several other maritime traders strengthen our faith in the understanding of God's

word. Whereas we have the book of Revelation and the fulfilment of its prophecies in recorded history, the first century Christians had a more direct and active experience of the fulfilment of prophecy, and the non-fulfilment of false predictions. We of course have ample evidence of false predictions hammered out by evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses particularly, who provided a whole string of dates in the 20th century for the return of Christ, all of which failed to come to pass. So returning to Paul's instruction to the Corinthians, we see how he emphasizes the fulfilment of prophesy as a means of convincing the unbelievers, who might attend their meetings from time to time. So Paul points out (V.24) that if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all. (V25) In this way the secrets of his heart are made manifest; and **so falling down on his face** he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.

Now Paul is not supplying his own opinion or wisdom in this conclusion, rather he is drawing on the effect the power of the word has actually had on prominent men who were not content with religious and philosophical answers of his so-called wise men. In Paul's words "thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest" we find their counterpart in Daniel's prayer: Dan 2:22 *He reveals the deep and secret things: he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.* Again in verse 28 Daniel says to the **unlearned king** Nebuchadnezzar, "*there is a God in heaven that **reveals secrets**, and makes known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days* (Dan 2:28). When Daniel revealed to the king not only the details of the dream but the meaning and significance of the dream we read:- *Then the king Nebuchadnezzar **fell upon his face**, and worshipped Daniel, and commanded that they should offer an oblation and sweet odours unto him. The king answered Daniel, and said, **It is true**, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, **seeing you could reveal this secret.*** (Dan 2:46-47) This is the conviction that Paul is talking about and which can be brought about if the 'sure word of prophecy' is explained carefully. We may not be able of ourselves to convince another person, but the Word of God read and understood can achieve it.

So Paul asks the Corinthians to consider what they are doing and why; this is constructive criticism. "*How is it then, brethren? When you come together, every one of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying*".

If brothers are all attempting to speak at the same time this only creates confusion. So Paul introduces a few rules to ensure that all the members of the ecclesia actually benefit. If brothers desire to speak in tongues, limit the number of those who do to three at the most, and then only if there is an interpreter. No interpreter, no speaking in tongues. Regarding those who prophesy, again limited to three brothers, and if another should signal that he has a message to make, let the first be quiet. The object being that all can prophesy who have the gift, but in an orderly fashion that all may learn and all be comforted, an object that will not be realized if certain brothers take up the time and others are prevented from addressing the meeting in time appointed.

So in conclusion, the New Testament gives but little attention to the question of speaking in tongues. The reason seems clear, for the Apostle Paul is concerned not with use but abuse of the gift. His intention is to direct the minds of the brothers and sisters away from this temporary provision of speaking in tongues to the development of the enduring qualities of faith, hope and love. Incidentally, the word *glossolalia*, often used today in connection with an elated expression, is never used in the New Testament. Attention is drawn to the fact that the Apostle says that the gift was “*kinds of tongues*” (1 Cor.12:10); that is the ability to speak in more than one language without actually learning them. We may then understand that the “interpretation of tongues” is the gift of understanding other languages, and both gifts might be possessed by the same person. Indeed, the Apostle sets that out as the ideal: “*Wherefore let him that speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret*”

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