

1 Corinthians 14v21-25 Tongues & Prophesying

“In the law it is written, with men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this 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 that believe.

“If therefore the whole church (ecclesia) be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, ad there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they noy say that you are mad?

“But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not or one 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.”

This passage is understood by some to be a negation of the apparent position by using the artifice of appealing to the citing of inverted comments, not indicated as being present in the text, to change the meaning. This dangerous practise is brought into play by those who wish to avoid the direct and explicit teaching of scripture. The basic idea is to explain away the argument by saying that the Apostle is quoting the wrong teaching of other believers which he is correcting. The problem with this is once it is employed in some passages, there is little regulation of when this should be done, what is and what is not to be negated, is all in the mind of the individual. The reader thereby becomes the subjective decision maker, who can rewrite scripture in any direction that is required to fit any agenda. Plastic or mouldable words are so convenient to the sceptical critic!

Thus, in this passage, the way it is redrafted is to say that this whole section, including the use of the Old Testament quotation from Isaiah 28v11,12 is the way others within the church who were forming their argument, and is cited by the Apostle not because he agrees with it or has been directed under inspiration to teach this, but the reverse, to expose it as wrong. Would any understand this requirement by reading these verses by themselves?

The context is seen as being the need to have understanding and to be edified. *“Brethren be not children in understanding.....in understanding be men”*, and *“Let everything be done unto edifying”*. The middle section between these two phrases, which is the section of our class; brings out the advantage of prophesying to the visitor, who confused by the manifestation of tongues, or speaking in foreign languages, which he cannot understand, is instead impressed with the exposition of scripture which prophesying brings to the fore. The gift of tongues once manifested, might demonstrate an unnatural miraculous phenomenon, but it does not advance the understanding unless what is said is both understood and is relevant in educating the uninitiated.

The passage in Isaiah is cited to demonstrate that even though God would in future witness to His people by foreign preachers who spoke another language (another tongue) they still would be unable to construct a proper understanding of those teachings of the Truth which thus far they had failed to do up to the time of that prophet. This construction in understanding was always to be done precept by precept: line by line. This gradual revealing of truth, the very mechanism of the dissemination of the Truth God always employs, would instead be their downfall *“that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared and taken”*.

Why this dramatic turn around and stumbling at the way God has chosen to reveal Himself? Had God set them a trap, from which there was no escape, and to prove His superiority? No this would be vain

and leads to the concept of a mischievous and deceitful god which is so often found in other religions!

Rather the Eternal was warning Israel that even when other people, not of Israel, speaking a foreign language, embraced the truth and represented that same truth back to His wayward people in fulfilment of this Bible prophecy, they would still resist it and not accept the divine aspect of what had occurred. This anticipated failure to embrace the sum total of what God had said, was their problem and would lead to their continued estrangement. They preferred to argue about the exact meaning of one line here, another precept there, rather than allow the power of the whole weight of evidence to convince them otherwise.

This foretelling of the acceptance of others of the Hope of Israel, was the particular power that resonated with unbelievers and the unlearned. This was not limited to the first century and the age of spirit gifts. The relative worth in preaching of the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy is not the determining factor in the difference in response as presented here, although this differentiation is spoken of elsewhere. Yes, the reference to all speaking with tongues was only possible in a first century setting, but this was expressly banned by the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 14v27 as the Apostle goes on to teach. He had also placed the gift of prophesying as being “greater” than the gift of tongues in verse 5, in the absence of an interpreter.

So, are tongues **a sign** to them which believe not, and prophesying a sign to them that believe as verse 22 indicates? Or are the revisionists correct and this is Paul’s denial of these issues? First let it be remembered that the Jews require a sign whereas the Gentiles seek after wisdom 1 Co 1v22. These unbelievers are often Jews as so many Jews refused to accept Jesus as their messiah, still true today. The “sign” of tongues was to unbelievers, as the Isaiah passage was given for that purpose. Notwithstanding that tongues are a prophetic sign, if every member gabbles on regardless, speaking in different tongues

at the same time, then unbelievers witnessing this will be put off, thinking the Ecclesia is not mentally stable by exhibiting such behaviour! However, if all prophesy neither will he be able to hear anything under a similar cacophony! Does it really matter if all prophesy, if no one can hear them because they are all speaking at the same time? The advantage of all prophesying rather than all speaking in tongues, is that the benefit of speaking in tongues is to find that one language that can be understood by the hearer. You cannot profitably speak in many tongues to only one person unless he understands all those languages spoken. This then provides the explanation that speaking in tongues is not to speak in one celestial language as some maintain, but to speak in the languages of the world, although never having to learn them.

Ordinary unbelieving gentiles do not have the speaking of tongues as a particular sign to them. They are not impressed in the same way with any such sign, but they would value the purpose of the believers using the gift of tongues to ensure communication between them. Verses 22 and 23 are not contrasting points about whether it is believers or unbelievers who value the gift of tongues, but rather understanding the use of the gift of tongues in their relevance to unbelievers in different ways.

Likewise with prophesying, this can be superficially limited to only speaking about the future but the meaning of the Greek “*propheteuo*” Young’s has as “to publically expound”. To prophesy is to be able to witness to Bible truth by speaking on behalf of God, in an absolute sense; rather than merely foretelling the future with accuracy, which is also part of the gift of prophesy but by no means all that prophesying is. This is seen here, because to predict the future in the present when the prophecy is first given, can never be verified at that time. Any unbeliever will not be convinced merely by someone saying that thus and so will happen at some future point while as yet being unfulfilled! However, if they prophesy by speaking for God by

expounding the meaning of that passage quoted in Isaiah 28, and another then expounds Isaiah 53, and another say, Genesis 3v15, then the multitude of evidence taken together, that these various members can expound adds weight to the whole; then such will become convinced that *“God is IN YOU OF A TRUTH”*. Seeing the collective ability of the entire membership to speak for God, will be appealing to the earnest seeker after truth, as all are speaking for God, or prophesying, and this will be something he will want to be able to engage in.

The over speaking of any, to just one visitor, will only hinder the work of witnessing, whether they have a Psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation or even an interpretation, unless all things are done decently and in order. To introduce such would be counterproductive but similar things do happen, even today in the age when there are no gifts of the spirit manifested in the same way as the first century. Have you never seen an older Brother holding back, unable to make his valued point because the over enthusiastic youngster just cannot stop himself talking! Perhaps we have been that energetic young man, who looking back can now see that he missed another opportunity to hear someone wiser than he, make their contribution to expounding the point at hand.

The notion that this gift of prophesying is restricted to telling the future is just so limiting it must be rejected. After all what secrets of the heart are revealed by prophesying of the far future in a way that Isaiah, Jeremiah Daniel and Ezekiel did? Scriptural exposition though, speaks of profound matters which explain the very nature of man, and the state of heart that we all wrestle with and find so awkward. Such prophesying would reveal that!

Take verse 37 of the same chapter. *“If any man think himself to be a prophet or spiritual let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”* True spirituality is to give credit where credit is due and to be the living embodiment of

those principles. True prophesying is to expound scripture properly and thereby speak on God's behalf. You cannot be spiritual and deny the Apostolic influence upon the commandments of the Lord. You cannot be a true prophet, in the sense of speaking for God, and misunderstand the place of the Apostles in establishing the plenary teaching of scripture. But you could speak about the future and misconstrue that point. You could be one who speaks in tongues and gets it wrong regarding the commandments! The Holy Spirit has chosen exactly which type of believer is most affected by this and addresses such accordingly.

Regardless of whether the believers had miraculous gifts or otherwise, any gifts we do receive from the Eternal should be employed with a good dose of understanding, if we are not able to do so, perhaps it would be wiser to defer to others more able to expound the scriptures or convince the gainsayer than we can.

"Wherefore brethren, covet to prophesy and forbid not to speak in tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order".

A Voice from the Altar

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