

## Tongue in Check *I Corinthians 14*

What distracts you from really connecting with God and with his truth? What gets in the way of your worship of God?

This is an issue that Paul has been dealing with from the very beginning in his letter of First Corinthians. He has dealt with several problems in this first-century church, problems that hindered their worship of God and problems that hindered their relationship with each other.

We have seen the Apostle deal with infighting among believers, with an arrogance in the estimation of their own wisdom, with a callousness towards those in their midst living in open, public sin, with a self-centeredness that had no sensitivity or regard for those weaker in faith, with a spirit of superiority that some had within the church.

In chapters 11-14, Paul is addressing issues related to their public worship. He talked about women who were praying and prophesying in church with a disregard for propriety in that culture in not covering their heads. Part of the problem might have been those whose personal appearance was a distraction to others in worship.

Paul took some to task over their conduct during the love feasts which included the observance of communion, the Lord's Table. Then he spends a considerable amount of time dealing with the issue of spiritual gifts and the problem of misusing these gifts.

In fact, there is no other letter of Paul's that spends so much time on this particular subject. Apparently, this was a major problem among the Corinthians. He opens this particular three-chapter segment by teaching about spiritual gifts.

He made this comment back in the beginning of the first section of the letter: "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift." This was a church which had, I guess, all the spiritual gifts represented among its members – a very blessed church.

The Greek word employed by Paul for spiritual gifts is a verbal form of the noun *chárisma*. He uses this word sixteen times in his letters. The word is closely related to *cháris* – "grace." These are "grace-gifts," gifts bestowed by grace.

When Paul comes to chapter twelve, he writes that there are "varieties of gifts." The word *varieties* means "different" or "differing." There are different or differing gifts. These gifts are all *chárisma*. Paul is not just talking about a set of

supernatural, spectacular gifts that people have associated with modern-day Pentecostals and charismatics.

This is a word used also of the more non-spectacular spiritual gifts such as the gift of giving and the gift of helps. It is also used often in the New Testament referring to the gift of salvation. Paul even uses the same word to talk about the gift of celibacy and the gift of marriage in chapter seven.

So, in a real sense, every believer is a charismatic, every church comprised of true believers in Christ is a charismatic church. This is a label that has been unfortunately applied wrongly in our day – an example of the misleading and often errant use of labels in describing a group of people.

In First Corinthians, chapter fourteen, Paul focuses in on two of the more public, extraordinary gifts. In particular, he addresses the church in relation to those who spoke in tongues in the public assembly. It seems that there were some who sought to elevate the importance or significance of their exercise of speaking in tongues as showing spiritual superiority, evidence that they were the super-spiritual.

The result was this had become a distraction in public worship. The church was not being edified, that is, built up, through its use, and non-believers who might be in the service thought those exercising the gift of tongues were mad, out their minds.

And so, Paul speaks to this issue in chapter fourteen. Follow along as I read the chapter and then I want to talk about several things related to it.

### **I Corinthians 14 (Page 1220)**

This is a very confusing subject and chapter. There are different interpretations by Bible students, even Greek scholars. We all have to admit that we come to this passage with our biases, formed through our observations, our own experiences and that of others, and by what we have been taught.

This morning I would like to be emphatic where I believe the text is clear, gracious where differences are held, and honest in what I think are the conclusions we should draw. My hope is that I don't further confuse or muddy the waters.

There seems to be two major points that Paul wants to make to those in the church at Corinth. The first is that, in public worship, they should desire more the exercise of prophesy than that of tongues. The second is a set of instructions that Paul gives on how these two gifts – prophesying and speaking in tongues – were to be exercised in the public worship service.

One of the problems I mentioned earlier was of some believers with the gift of speaking in tongues who held the view that this was the most esteemed spiritual exercise of gifts and indicated a level of spiritual experience that was above that of non-speakers. We see this same issue in many groups today who position this gift as being evidence of a higher level of spiritual experience and something to be sought by everyone.

But let's look at the broader teaching of Paul in this section. In chapter twelve, he makes several points that dispute this interpretation of the gift of tongues. Look what Paul says about *charismata*, these grace-gifts.

### **I Corinthians 12:4-7, 11**

Several things we should note:

1) These gifts are distributed sovereignly and independently by the Holy Spirit. It's not a matter of choosing which gift or gifts you have as a believer in Christ. The view of some today that everyone should speak in tongues and if you don't there is something wrong with you is grossly unbiblical.

Look at the end of chapter twelve – **I Corinthians 12:29-30**. The structure of Greek grammar requires a negative answer to each of these questions. “Are all apostles? No. Do all work miracles? No. Do all speak with tongues? No.”

2) The exercise of these gifts is for the common good. They are intended to build up and benefit the whole church. If the exercise of a gift does not serve that purpose, it should be restrained.

3) Because God has determined who should receive which gift, all are to be valued by the church and desired for the church's benefit. Paul admonishes believers who see themselves as superior to others by virtue of the gift or gifts one has received. There is to be unity within the body, a unity that benefits from diversity.

4) The unity of the body is achieved through the baptism of the Spirit.

### **I Corinthians 12:12-13**

Paul uses the indicative mood in the Greek language – a simple statement of fact – rather than the imperative mood, which is a command. Nowhere in Scripture is a believer told to seek the baptism of the Spirit. It is a sovereign work of God through the Holy Spirit.

Paul indicates that this is the universal experience of all believers. “All,” he says, “have been placed into the body of Christ.” Remember that though in this church there was every spiritual gift present, it was one of the most carnal churches in the first century!

Paul calls them childish, fleshly, babies as to spiritual maturity. The Christians in Corinth were much like those to whom the author of the letter of Hebrews wrote:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. – *Hebrews 5:12-13*

The baptism of the Spirit is not some second blessing, some experience that comes to those who have moved to a level of extra outpouring of the Spirit. And speaking in tongues is not evidence of a second blessing.

Now this doesn't mean that we don't have experiences of a closer, a fresher sense of God's presence in the Holy Spirit at various times in our lives. When we really seek God in his Word, and really entrust our lives to him, there might well be a deep sense of his presence. This may well have a strong emotional aspect to it.

There certainly are some Christians who have a greater vibrancy, a deeper emotional connection with the Lord than do others. I have seen that often new Christians experience a very emotional connection with Christ that seems related to the newness of their faith. But as time goes on and they grow in their relationship with the Lord, their walk is much more by faith and not by sight. This enables them to deal with tough circumstances when there is no emotion that is buoying them along.

As I talked about two weeks ago, it is no mistake that Paul inserts his teaching on love between chapters twelve and fourteen. The exercise of spiritual gifts was causing friction within the body and was a distraction in public worship. Paul says that without love – love which is selfless, sacrificial and deferential to others, the exercise of gifts, especially the more public gifts, was of no value.

All of these spiritual gifts would eventually pass away when the perfect comes. As we noted, Paul was talking about the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ. But love would abide forever.

Now as to the exercise of these two gifts – prophesying and speaking in tongues, Paul says that the church should desire most of all that of prophecy. Robertson and

Plummer, in their commentary on Corinthians published almost one hundred years ago, write:

Prophecy was the power of seeing and making known the nature and will of God, a gift of insight into the truth and of power in imparting it, and hence a capacity for building up men's characters, quickening their wills, and encouraging their spirits.

D.A. Carson notes that there is a "sustained tradition that identifies New Testament prophecy with what we today call preaching or expounding Scripture." Think about how important this was in the first century churches. They would have access to the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, but maybe nothing of what we now possess as the New Testament, or perhaps just a letter or two either written to them or circulated among the churches.

Though all the books of the New Testament were written by the end of the first century, it was not until the middle of the fourth century when Athanasius of Alexandria (A.D. 367) put forth the earliest list of New Testament books that is identical to the one we hold in our hands this morning.

So believers in the first century are not sitting down with a New Testament in hand to hear the word of God for their time, particularly as it related to God's redemptive and transformative work through Jesus Messiah. Prophets, men and women to whom God had given insight into divine truth, spoke these words to the people.

Their prophecies were not on par with the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, Paul instructs the church in their responsibility to weigh and evaluate what the prophets said. This reception and transmission of divine truth was so essential before we have the collection of letters and gospel accounts that comprise our New Testament.

Thus we might say the need for such prophesying in our time with the completed canon of Scripture is not the same as it was in Paul's day. There certainly is still the need – a critical need – for clear teaching of God's truth, but his truth as revealed in Holy Scripture.

This declaration of God's wisdom was that which benefits the whole church, rather than just the individual who speaks in tongues. That's why Paul declares prophecy to be more beneficial to the church as a whole than tongues in the public assembly.

**I Corinthians 14:4-5, 19**

What were these tongues that Paul discusses in chapter fourteen? There is no way for a full treatment of that subject this morning. I will share some conclusions from my study. I have particularly benefitted from the writings of D.A. Carson, David Garland and Leon Morris.

We encounter tongues in the experience of New Testament believers first at Pentecost. Acts, chapter two, records the establishment of the church, Christ's body, on the Day of Pentecost when God fulfills the promise of Jesus prior to his ascension that the Father would send the Helper, the Holy Spirit.

On that day, Luke records that as those first believers were gathered together, God poured out his Holy Spirit upon them and he says, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance."

These were known human languages, but languages that these men and women did not know and had not learned. But those Jews from all over the world who had gathered in Jerusalem for the feast recognized their languages, their dialects, as they heard the wonders of God being described. So these were known languages; they were intelligible and understandable.

Are the tongues of First Corinthians the same tongues as those in Acts? The answer is probably "yes and no." How's that for confusing?

There are some who want to see that the tongues in Corinthians are simply a prayer language. After all, Paul says that the one who speaks in a tongue speaks to God not men. But Carson, in his book *Showing the Spirit, A Theological Exposition of I Corinthians 12-14*, concludes after examining various views:

On balance, then, the evidence favors the view that Paul thought the gift of tongues was a gift of real languages, that is, languages that were cognitive.... Certainly tongues in Acts exercise some different *functions* from those in I Corinthians; but there is no substantial evidence that suggests Paul thought the two were *essentially* different.

This means that what was spoken had cognitive information, even if not a recognized known language. This is quite different than gibberish or nonsensical repetition of syllables. Otherwise, what would be the point of interpreting what was spoken? Though there might not be intelligibility to what was said on the part of the speaker, the interpretation would "issue in intelligible speech, cognitive content (Carson)."

Within the boundaries, then, of this description, the tongue speaking referred to in First Corinthians was a valid spiritual gift. But this makes suspect much of what we see today by those claiming to have the gift of speaking in tongues. It does not, in most cases, appear to be the spiritual gift that Paul describes in First Corinthians, chapter 14.

Now, Paul's concern is with the exercise of tongues in the public worship service. And so, he does not forbid speaking in tongues, but its exercise is only permissible if there is someone with the gift of interpretation present who, by providing meaning to what was said, would benefit all those in attendance.

If there wasn't an interpreter present, Paul says that the one who desires to speak should remain silent. If there is someone to interpret, then he restricts the exercise of this gift to two or at most three, each in turn with interpretation. Obviously, those with this gift were in control of their minds because they could restrain themselves from speaking if others had spoken before them or if no interpreters were present. Paul does allow for the private practice of speaking in tongues with the description of such as I mentioned above. It seems apparent from what he says to the Corinthians that his tongue-speaking was done in private, not in public.

Before moving on, let me share two summary statements from Carson's book that I think provides a balanced, biblical perspective on Paul's teaching in chapter fourteen.

Whatever the place for profound, personal experience and corporate emotional experience, the assembled church is a place for intelligibility. Our God is a thinking, speaking God; and if we will know him, we must learn to think his thoughts after him. I am not surreptitiously invalidating what Paul has refused to invalidate. I am merely trying to reflect his conviction that edification in the church depends utterly on intelligibility, understanding, coherence.

In another place, he makes this statement:

We must agree that tongues do not constitute essential evidence of Spirit baptism; they are not intended for every believer; in public they must edify the church, and follow the two or three rules Paul laid down to achieve this end; and in private they are of little concern to the church, provided the individual Christian who is thus exercising his or her gift of tongue is not blowing it out of proportion, using it as a substitute for other forms of piety, or proselytizing fellow believers with it.

To maintain order in the public service, Paul also puts restrictions on the prophets who prophesied. With each prophecy, there was to be a weighing, an evaluation, of what was said.

What a difference from most today who claim to have this gift! Flip around the cable stations and you will see many examples of this. Unfortunately, in most cases, there is no submission of what is said for the purpose of evaluating whether or not it is truly from the Lord. Watch out for any who say, "The Lord told me," and then go on to speak with what they claim is the authority of God. Often, tragically, this is just used as a fund-raising device.

Every prophecy is subject to evaluation and verification. Today, the chief way to do that is to compare with the Scriptures, God's revealed Word.

Now, it is in the context of evaluating prophecies shared in the worship service that we come to a very difficult passage. It has to do with Paul's command that women be silent.

### **I Corinthians 14:33b-35**

Interpretations have run the gamut from declaring this an absolute prohibition of women to speak in a church service to dismissing Paul's comments as those of a male chauvinist at worst or someone under the influence of a male-dominated culture at best. Others think that the situation was one of women disrupting the service by being chatty and carrying on conversations that were distracting to those in the service. But, what about chatty men?

My conclusion is this. First of all, Paul is not issuing a blanket prohibition on women speaking in the public service. Otherwise, he would be contradicting himself when, in chapter eleven, he did not restrict women from praying and prophesying. I think it has to do with the oral weighing of the prophecies given in the service.

Paul prohibits women from exercising teaching authority over men, and he sees this weighing of prophecies as falling within that restriction. This is in keeping with his teaching elsewhere that differentiates roles in the church for men and women according to the creation order in Genesis two.

Whew! That's a lot to think about. Bottom line, by way of application: we should take care in the public worship service to do things in an orderly manner with a focus on worshipping God. Individually, we should come to church each Sunday

with that in mind and be concerned about anything which would distract us from connecting with God.

Whether or not the service is just what we would like it to be, it is our responsibility to be a true and sincere worshipper of God. That we come with a mindset and heart's desire to really connect with God. And corporately, we want to strive to create an atmosphere that is conducive to worship.

Whatever we do, and however we do it, our aim is to build up Christ's body, his church at Knollwood. If that is our goal, then we place ourselves at the disposal of the Holy Spirit to encourage others to grow in grace and truth.