

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Tongues Are a Sign for Unbelievers**

*1 Corinthians 14:20-25*

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# Tongues Are a Sign for Unbelievers

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of spiritual gifts. Let's learn more about that in a message I am calling, "Tongues Are a Sign for Unbelievers."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25:

**<sup>20</sup> Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. <sup>21</sup> In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." <sup>22</sup> Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. <sup>23</sup> If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? <sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, <sup>25</sup> the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (1 Corinthians 14:20-25)**

## Introduction

Chapter 14 in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* is a very important chapter. The Apostle Paul wrote about the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy. The church at Corinth was very confused about the proper use of the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy, not unlike some churches in our own day.

In the first five verses the apostle compared prophecy and tongues, and concluded that prophecy is superior to tongues. We learned that Paul used the word "tongue" in both the singular form

and the plural form throughout chapter 14.

Paul used the singular form for “tongue” in verses 2, 4, 13, 14, and 19 to indicate false tongues, the kind of tongues similar to pagan ecstatic utterances.

Paul used the plural form for “tongue” in verses 5, 6, 18, 22, 23, and 39 to indicate true tongues, a language that is understandable.

The only exception is found in verse 27, where the singular form of “tongue” is used to refer to a single man speaking a single genuine tongue (or language).

## Lesson

In today’s lesson, we learn that tongues are a sign for unbelievers.

Let’s learn about this as follows:

1. The Exhortation Regarding Thinking (14:20)
2. The Prediction Regarding Tongues (14:21)
3. The Purpose of Tongues (14:22a)
4. The Purpose of Prophecy (14:22b)
5. The Effect of Tongues (14:23)
6. The Effect of Prophecy (14:24-25)

### I. The Exhortation Regarding Thinking (14:20)

First, notice the exhortation regarding thinking.

Paul began his exhortation in verse 20 by addressing the Corinthians as **“brothers.”** It is interesting to me how often he called them **brothers** in this letter. He did so 38 times in this letter, far more than in any other letter. First Corinthians was a very difficult letter for him to write, because the apostle was trying to persuade confused, disobedient, self-centered Christians to obey God’s Word. And so he often appealed to them with this tender word, **“Brothers.”**

So, Paul exhorted them in verse 20: **“Brothers, do not be**

**children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.”**

Paul urged the Corinthians **not to be children in their thinking**. When it came to **evil**, he urged them to **be infants, but in their thinking**, they were to **be mature**.

For Paul, the Corinthians’ preoccupation with tongues was a sign that indicated their spiritual immaturity. They fixated on the temporary supernatural sign gifts—“childish ways” in the grand scheme of things—failing to hold a correct understanding of spiritual gifts.

Of course, the Bible sometimes commends childlike—not childish—attitudes in believers. Jesus presented a child’s trust as a model of faith. Jesus said to his disciples in Mark 10:15, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

In 1 Corinthians 14:20 Paul insisted that believers should be as naïve as **infants in** regard to **evil**. But Paul did not want believers unaware of evil however. He knew that Christians were to be as wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16). The ideal is that Christians should be inexperienced in and separated from **evil**, and that they should not know much about it.

Nevertheless, while Christians should be innocent regarding evil, Paul insisted that believers should still **be mature . . . in their thinking**. In other words, regarding biblical doctrine and practice, Paul wanted the Corinthians to be mature in their perspectives.

Here again, as in previous paragraphs, the apostle urges believers to grow in their faith. Christianity is a religion that requires careful, attentive thinking. I urge you to get involved in some form of Bible study with other believers so that you can grow in your faith. Frankly, you will not grow much as a Christian until you are involved in an accountable Bible study with other Christians.

## **II. The Prediction Regarding Tongues (14:21)**

Second, look at the prediction regarding tongues.

Paul said in verse 21: **“In the Law it is written, ‘By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.’”**

Verse 21 is a somewhat loose quotation of Isaiah 28:11-12. Centuries before the birth of Christ, God told his people that one day **by people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners** he would **speak to this people**. Amazingly, **even then they will not listen** to the Lord.

About 15 years or so before Isaiah made his prophetic statement in Isaiah 28:11-12 about people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners, the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered and taken captive by the Assyrians (in 722 BC) because of their unbelief and apostasy.

Isaiah then warned the southern kingdom of Judah that the same judgment awaited them at the hands of the Babylonians. The proud religious leaders of Judah would not listen to Isaiah. His teaching was too simple. He talked to them, they claimed, as if they were babies, “Those who are weaned from the milk” and “those taken from the breast.” He taught them as if they were kindergartners: “Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little” (Isaiah 28:9-10).

God had indeed spoken to them simply, in order that the least mature among them could understand and so that no Jew would have an excuse for not knowing God’s will and promise.

About 800 years before Isaiah, God had warned Israel that “The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand” (Deuteronomy 28:49). The strange language of their conquerors would be a sign of God’s judgment.

About 100 years after Isaiah, the Lord warned through Jeremiah, “Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, . . . a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say” (Jeremiah 5:15). The sign of

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judgment would be a language they could not understand.

When the apostles spoke in tongues on the Day of Pentecost, they were heard by Jews from many countries in their own languages.

You remember the story in Luke. Luke said in Acts 2:1-11:

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

Notice again that Luke said in Acts 2:7-11 that the Jews from many countries were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

When the Jews heard the apostles speaking in foreign languages on the Day of Pentecost they should have known that

God's judgment was imminent. His judgment had fallen on rebellious Israel and then on rebellious Judah. How much more would it fall on those who had crucified the Son of God?

In 70 AD that great judgment fell, when Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Roman general Titus (who later became emperor). Over one million Jews were killed; thousands more were taken captive; the Temple was plundered, desecrated, and then totally destroyed; and the rest of the city was burned to the ground.

One historian comments that Jerusalem had no history for 60 years because of the total destruction.

Just as Jesus had predicted when he wept over the city of Jerusalem, "For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:43-44; cf. 21:20-24).

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the reason for tongues ceased to exist. The judgment of which it was a sign had come. After the Pentecost manifestation of tongues (as foreign languages), Peter, by implication, reminded his hearers of that judgment in Acts 2:36, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

### III. The Purpose of Tongues (14:22a)

Third, notice the purpose of tongues.

Paul said in verse 22a: "**Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers.**"

Remember that **tongues** in the plural form is Paul's word for an understandable language, that is, a foreign language. Paul was saying that Isaiah's prophecy had come true in what the people now heard as the gift of languages.

**Thus**, Paul said, God has given **tongues** as a **sign not for be-**

**lievers but for unbelievers.** This is the heart of chapter 14, and the most important truth about the spiritual gift of tongues: it was given as **a sign**, and it was given as **a sign . . . for unbelievers**, specifically the unbelieving Jews, the unbelievers among “this people.”

Those who preached the judgment of God and also promised the blessing of God were the apostles and prophets, whose authority was validated by “signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Corinthians 12:12; cf. Romans 15:19). Among the authenticating signs was the gift of tongues (or, languages), in which Paul spoke “more than all of you” (1 Corinthians 14:18).

As a sign the purpose of tongues ended when that to which it pointed ended. Let’s say that you are driving to Daytona Beach from Tampa. You get on the interstate. As you approach Orlando, you see a sign that reads “50 miles to Orlando,” and then “20 miles to Orlando,” and then “10 miles to Orlando.” Then you reach Orlando and pass through it on your way to Daytona Beach. Now you no longer see signs pointing to Orlando. It is no longer necessary to tell you how far it is to Orlando because you have reached and passed through Orlando. In just the same way, the gift of tongues was attached to one point in history, and that point in history has long since been reached and passed.

It is interesting to note that no record is given of a single word spoken in tongues. No interpretation is given of a message in tongues. Every reference to tongues is general. They are always mentioned in relation to their purpose and significance, never in relation to their specific content. The messages given in tongues were not new revelations or new insights, but, as at Pentecost, simply glorious expressions of old truths, “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). Though tongues could edify when interpreted, their purpose was not so much to teach or reveal new truth, but to validate the truth of God’s appointed spokesmen.

Since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD there has been no purpose for the sign gift of tongues, because that to which it pointed has been reached and passed.

#### IV. The Purpose of Prophecy (14:22b)

Fourth, observe the purpose of prophecy.

Paul said in verse 22b: “. . . **while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.**”

The Greek text lacks the words for “**a sign,**” so that the text actually reads as follows: “. . . **while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.**”

Because prophecy is never spoken of as a sign, I don’t think that Paul meant that **prophecy is a sign**. Rather, as the actual translation reads, prophecy is **for believers**, and is not a sign pointing to something else but is edifying in itself (vv. 4, 31).

The purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the church, and that is what prophecy does. Remember, that prophecy is not so much the narrow “fore-telling,” but rather it is “forth-telling.” In other words, prophecy is the proclamation of God’s truth with clarity and conviction.

#### V. The Effect of Tongues (14:23)

Fifth, notice the effect of tongues.

Paul said in verse 23: “**If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?**”

Paul now used an example to help his readers understanding the effect of tongues. He pictures **the whole church** coming **together**, presumably for a worship service. At some point during the meeting **all** the believers **speak in tongues** (that is, in foreign languages). I believe that Paul meant that everyone would speak consecutively, based on what he said in the next verse. He then pictures **outsiders or unbelievers** entering into the meeting, and they hear the multitude of foreign languages. Paul then asked, “**Will they not say that you are out of your minds?**”

Paul’s point was that a multitude of foreign languages would

make no sense whatsoever to outsiders or unbelievers. And rightly so!

Though they were not given for edification, tongues were nevertheless to be understood, not to cause bewilderment. The amazement of the Jewish visitors in Jerusalem at Pentecost was in the fact that they understood what was spoken in their “own tongues” (Acts 2:11).

## VI. The Effect of Prophecy (14:24-25)

And sixth, look at the effect of prophecy.

Paul said in verse 24: **“But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all.”**

Paul now imagines **an unbeliever or outsider** entering the meeting, and he hears prophecy, that is, the powerful, pointed preaching of God’s Word. The response is very different this time. This time the **unbeliever or outsider . . . is convicted by all, and he is called to account by all**. These judicial verbs indicate that preaching the Word of God brings people to the conviction that the preaching is true, and that they will be judged on the basis of their response to the Word of God.

Paul continued to contrast prophecy and tongues, again showing the superiority of prophecy. As I said before, **prophecy** is used in its most general sense of speaking forth God’s Word. When the Word is proclaimed, it speaks to peoples’ hearts and brings conviction of sin, the first step in coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The convicted person sees himself as he really is, because **the secrets of his heart are disclosed**. His sinful intentions and acts are revealed to him. Consequently, he will fall **on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you** (14:25).

The church’s most powerful testimony is not in ecstatic utterances, but it is in its clear proclamation of the powerful Word of God (Hebrews 4:12).

## **Conclusion**

When tongues were misused, there was only confusion, frustration, and bewilderment. Unbelievers were repelled and believers were not edified.

But prophecy edifies believers and evangelizes unbelievers. God is honored and people are blessed when his Word is clearly declared.

Our desire should be that every service, every activity, everything that we do or say in the Lord's name will cause people to say, "God is really among you."



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for your truth. Thank you for your Word which teaches us and helps us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Help us to understand your teaching on tongues, especially that it is no longer operative today. And help us to embrace the truth that prophecy is what you now use to build up your church.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and use the spiritual gifts that God has given you for the common good!