

During the time the NT was being written, there was a very pervasive changing going on in the religious atmosphere of the Roman world.

To a very large degree, the state religions in the Roman Empire, though given proper outward honor, had lost their grip on most individuals.

The philosophers had pointed out problems with the gods, and as a result the fear of the gods had been removed.

On top of that, as each city fell to the Roman army it became impossible to ignore the the impotency of the gods and their utter inability to do anything.

So into that environment came the influence of the mystery religions – with all their ecstatic speech and frenzied worship, and mind-altering practices.

An the people ate it up. They jumped at it, because the one great thing that had been missing in their religious experience was any kind of personal communion or interaction with the gods.

But the mystery religions offered that. When the people were in their frenzied state, with emotions at a fevered pitch, assisted by chanting and lots of wine and even orgies and wild dancing... all that produced a state of mind that felt like some kind of deep connection with the gods that transcended normal human experience.

People in our culture had the same experience in the 60s with drugs. Many people would say it would bring them close to God.

That same motivation is what draws many people into the excessive charismatic movement today.

Someone will have a spiritual life that seems dry and lifeless and dull and stale, and they think, "There has got to be more than this." And often they find it in charismatic ecstasy.

You are especially susceptible to that if you came out of a background of that kind of worship, which was the case for the Corinthians.

There is a lot of discussion over whether or not what the Corinthians were doing was the true gift – even among Charismatics. Both people who are pro-modern tongues and anti-modern tongues ask that question here, because Paul says some very negative things and some very positive things.

When Paul says the positive things, the Charismatics say, “Amen!” But when they get to the negative things, “Hmmm – a wonder if that was the pagan counterfeit he’s talking about there.”

With the non-Charismatics it’s the other way around.

So did they have the true gift or not?

And as I told you last week, the key is to understand that Paul’s concern is not to give information about the nature of the gift, or even to sort out what was the true gift and what wasn’t.

His concern is to address the manner in which the gifts were being used. Because if they are used in the right manner (to love others by building them up), that will automatically take care of eliminating the counterfeit gift.

Was the Corinthians’ gift true or false? That’s really an easy question to answer. Just think of it like any other gift.

Do you suppose the teachers in that city had the true, God-given spiritual gift of teaching, or a human counterfeit?

Just like in any place, there must have been some of both. Everywhere you go you will find teachers who are truly gifted, and you will find teachers who think they have the gift but do not.

Are there any people who consider themselves gifted musicians who are not?

I’ve met people who think they have the gift of encouragement, and yet half the people they meet end up committing suicide.

So is it any wonder, especially in a place like Corinth, that there would be people there who thought they had the true gift of tongues but didn’t?

But it's not Paul's purpose to sort through and say, "George has the true gift, Bob just babbles, Fred is borderline..."

Instead he says, "True gift or false gift, here is how to evaluate what is going on in your worship services..."

### **Three contrasts**

#### **1. What you are doing communicate nothing to men; prophecy does. (vv.2,3)**

2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

#### **2. What you are doing only builds up self; prophecy builds up the church**

4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

#### **3. Tongues are good; but prophecy is better because it edifies.**

5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

### **Illustrations**

6 Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or

prophecy or word of instruction?

7 Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes?

8 Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?

9 So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.

## **Tongues Alienate**

10 Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world,

The first word is very difficult to translate. The most natural translation would be “Perhaps there are many languages.”

Since it would seem that there should be any uncertainty about that, Fee translates it this way: “There are who-knows-how-many languages in the world...”

yet none of them is without meaning.

Since Paul is using the normal word for “language” in this chapter to refer to tongues, he has to pick another word here to refer to normal foreign languages, so he uses the word “voice” (which can also mean “language”).

Then he uses a play on words. Literally: “There are all kinds of different voices, but none of them is voiceless.”

Every language has some meaning.

11 If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me.

Not only do you do no good, but you do harm. The whole point of spiritual gifts is to build others up. But when you speak or pray out loud in uninterpreted tongues, instead of building everyone up, you alienate them.

That's not consistent with love.

The word **foreigner** is *barbaros* (We get "barbarian" from it).

That's another onomatopoeic word. When the Greeks heard the foreigners come and speak in their own language, to them it just sounded like "bar, bar, bar..."

We have almost the same term, except for us it's "blah blah blah..."

When you speak in tongues you make yourself a blah blah, a barbarian, and you alienate everyone. (Have you ever been in a room where two people suddenly begin speaking in another language? You are completely left out.)

## **12 So it is with you.**

He said that in v.9 and repeats it here.

When you study the first 11 verses, you wonder why Paul devotes so much verbiage to one, simple point. But here we see why.

He paints that long, detailed picture of every different ridiculous example of worthless noise he can think of, and then after all that says – "that's what you are like."

What a contrast to ch.13!

This is devastating. Paul paints the most beautiful picture of love ever penned, says, "that's what the gifts are supposed to accomplish, but here's what your gifts are accomplishing:

- You are not speaking to the people in the church,
- you are unintelligible,
- no one understands,
- you are not edifying, encouraging or comforting anyone – instead you build up yourself.
- You do no good.
- You don't bring knowledge, prophecy or instruction,
- you sound like random notes on a flute,

- you are like a bugler honking out meaningless noise in the middle of a battle,
- no one knows what you are saying,
- you turn everyone into foreigners and outsiders,
- and you are alienating everyone.“

And all that stands side by side with 1 Co.13. What a contrast!

**Since you are eager to have spirits, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.**

**Lit: Since you are zealous for spirits, be zealous for the edification of the church in order to profit.**

The question of what it means to be eager for spirits is very difficult. Most likely it refers to the various manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the human spirits (Fee) so that it becomes obvious there is another person at work.

If you have the gift of giving, and you put a big check in the offering, that doesn't make it real obvious that the Holy Spirit is behind that.

But if you are speaking another language, or prophesying, or something dramatic like that, you can tell there is another Spirit at work – another being besides the speaker.

So it may be that the Corinthians began referring to the various different dramatic manifestations of the Spirit “spirits,”

They fell into the same error of many today, who think miraculous things are greater evidence of the Holy Spirit than the other gifts.

Paul: “If you are desirous of that which is really from the Holy Spirit, the way to achieve that is to be zealous about building up others – so that there is some benefit, some profit, some gain that results.”

You may have heard someone use the phrase “It's a God-thing.” It's a way people point to the direct agency of God in something. The Corinthians were like that – they wanted their worship to be a “God-thing.” They were always looking for that which was most obviously from God.

And Paul is saying, “The measure of how much something is a “God-thing” is not how supernatural it is. The measure of direct involvement of the Holy Spirit is how much love there is, and how much it edifies the Body.”

**13 For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.**

If you are talking to God in tongues, while you're talking to Him, why not ask for something that will be profitable?

In the English this comes out sounding like a suggestion. It is a command. If you are in the church, and something comes to you that is not edifying, you are required to pray and ask God for something that is edifying.

Its seems to be the same would go for anything else. Anytime you are in church, or you are gathered with some believers, and you are not building anyone else up, pray! Ask God to enable you to do what you are supposed to be doing.

### **The Role of the Mind**

**14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.**

A little better translation might be “unproductive” instead of unfruitful. The point it, is I pray in a tongue, my mind is not generating anything for the church. The reason I come to church is to bear fruit for all of you, and if I pray in a tongue I will arrive and you will find my branches bear.

**15 So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.**

The obvious difficulty that arises from this is the fact that if the spirit and the mind are contrasted, what is the spirit? Is it totally disconnected from the mind (which would be completely different from the rest of the NT)?

If that were the case, then how could you possibly know whether you are praying with your spirit? If it's not a function of the mind at all, how can you decide to do one thing or another with regard to it?

We read these words, and they go into our mind. So what we are going to do in the area of praying in the spirit is going to be dictated by what the mind decides.

I really don't think Paul is suggesting that praying with my spirit doesn't involve the mind. It has to.

I think Paul is using "mind" here to refer specifically to thoughts that are able to be articulated in an intelligible way. And spirit refers to that which goes on inside you that is not expressed to the outside world.

In v.18 we see that "words spoken in my mind" means "words I speak that are intelligible."

So "in my spirit" = "what benefits me" and "in my mind" = "what benefits others."

So when I pray and sing, I will see to it that I do it in a way that benefits not only myself, but also others (669).

This section has some very important implications for worship in our day. The Lord places a premium on the involvement of the intellect in worship. Our worship is to be cognitive.

This forbids not only uninterpreted tongues, but any kind of mindless worship

Many people have the mistaken belief that the more emotional worship is, the more profound. That isn't necessarily true.

Emotion that is not rational or cognitive is not pleasing to God – especially in corporate worship.

There is a trend in some circles to do this. And I realize some of you have been influenced by it, and it's very difficult to change once it becomes a habit.

One example is what I call chanting – little phrases repeated in worship that have little or no meaning. They communicate no message.

"Oh Lord Jesus, OOOh Lord Jesus...Hallelujah, Oh Lord, praise, praise,



Oh Lord...Thank you Jesus”

All that sounds very spiritual, but what kind of thought goes into that? Is that really loving God with all my *mind*?

Do you praise your spouse that way?

When I give my wife a greeting card, if I write something on there that was just chanting and that required no thought (“Tracy Tracy Tracy Tracy Tracy... Oooooooh Tracy...”) I don’t think she would feel very valued.

This is something that hadn’t really occurred to me until several months ago someone pointed it out to me. He said, “When you say, ‘thank you Lord’ and nothing else, that promotes thoughtless worship. If you want to thank Him, thank Him for something specific.”

What does it mean when I say, “Thank you Jesus.”? Thanks for what? Everything? Does the Lord really want that kind of shorthand in worship? Is that all the effort we can put into worship?

That’s like praying everyday and just saying, “Dear Lord, do everything that’s best. Amen.”

What is the example we see from Scripture regarding worship? Did the Psalmists put any thought into their worship? Have you ever tried to write a Psalm? It takes a tremendous amount of cognitive brainpower.

A lot of the Psalms are alliterated and arraigned with parallelism and other elements of Hebrew poetry. There isn’t a single one of them that could be described as mindless in any way.

This is why we don’t have sessions of chanting, where everyone is saying, “Praise the Lord, Hallelujah, bless the Lord, etc. over and over.”

Some also think the more personal your worship is the better. That definitely isn’t true.

Your worship should be personal, to be sure. If you come and just join in the singing just to be a part of the group, that’s not even worship. You can

sing your heart out and play an instrument, etc., but if in your thoughts, if you aren't paying attention to God, what you are doing is not worship any more than if I brought a little doll that would sing if I pulled the string.

So worship has to be an individual effort for it to even be worship. But don't stop there. There is also the corporate aspect.

Don't think corporate worship is achieved just by a whole bunch of people doing personal worship in the same room. In the church, when something comes out of your mouth, it should be something that edifies.

That's why sometimes in my heart I might be able to worship better by just being quiet and listening, but I rarely do that – that doesn't edify you. It's more edifying to you if I add my weak, shaky, sometimes out of tune voice to the strength of our corporate worship.

It's the same way with prayer. On the one hand, the last thing we want to do is be like the Pharisees who prayed to impress. But on the other hand, there is a reason we pray out loud corporately. It edifies.

**16 Otherwise, If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?**

The phrase **those who do not understand** is a single word (*idiotes*) that means "uninitiated" or "untrained" or "uneducated."

It's a little tricky to pinpoint who these people are. In v.23 they are distinguished from the "whole church" and from unbelievers.

Most likely the NIV has it right – those who don't understand (which is everyone, including the one speaking in tongues).

When you speak in tongues in the church, you make an *idiotes* of everyone.

This is another fascinating thought. Part of what we are trying to do in corporate worship is give you an occasion to say "amen."

Please don't get sidetracked on whether that has to be out loud. That's not

really the point.

The point is, what comes out of our mouths during corporate worship should be that which gives everyone else an occasion to say, “Yes! Yes!”

The problem with private prayer and private worship is you have to think of everything. In corporate prayer and corporate worship and corporate Bible study, so much is provided by the other people, and you can just join in with an “amen!”

That’s one of the wonderful privileges of corporate worship. You have everyone helping you.

Saying “amen” means making that other person’s prayer your own. And it’s a good thing.

And so any time I spend doing something you can’t wholeheartedly say “amen” to, I’m robbing you of your worship time.

Having said that, I should also say that God does expect us to say “amen” in worship. That is not a cultural thing or denominational thing. It should be universal.

In fact there is the definite article in front of “amen” that the NIV doesn’t translate, but literally Paul says “If he doesn’t understand what you are saying, how can he say *the* amen?”

What is the amen? It’s the normal, expected “amen” that ought to be said. In the early church they still had that practice – everyone would say “amen” after the prayers and thanksgiving (Fee).

Maybe we should do that more after prayers and during worship. You know God likes it – the elders and 4 living creatures in that magnificent worship service in heaven in Rev.4,5 are saying “amen.”

You may have been in churches where the amens can get to be a disruption. But when it rises up out of a genuine sense of agreement, it’s very appropriate.

**17 You may be (lit: are) giving thanks well enough, but the other man**

**is not edified.**

Paul: “I will grant that you are putting forth some intentional effort to express gratitude to God. It may be that you are saying something to that effect in your tongue.

But even in the case of the true gift, and even if your intentions are good, if I don’t understand, I can’t say “amen.”

“But can’t you just say it on faith? Can’t you just assume that if this is a tongue from God, surely it’s worth agreeing with?”

No. That’s not how God wants us to worship. He wants us to understand.

**18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.**

Again, Paul will not disparage the true gift. He had the gift, and utilized it heavily. Paul was as Charismatic as they come in that sense.

But uninterpreted not even the Apostle Paul’s gift has any place in corporate worship.

**19 But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible (lit: in my mind) words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.**

Paul understood that the greatest form of teaching is example. If you really want someone to learn a spiritual truth, live it out before them.

That’s what Paul did. Think of it – he had this amazing ability. He could speak in languages he didn’t learn – miraculously empowered to do so by the Holy Spirit, and he did it a lot. It was a big part of his life.

And yet, you can read through the whole NT, in which Paul speaks of his ministry in considerable detail, and outside of this verse you would never even know he had this ability.

He didn’t use it for his own glory, and that’s one lesson he’s trying to teach the Corinthians.

This is the primary verse used by those who suggest there is a private tongues prayer language. “Paul spoke a lot of tongues, and yet not in the

church – therefore it had to be in private!”

It may very well have been in private, but I don't see how we can say that for sure just because it wasn't in the church. There is another option – perhaps Paul spoke tongues neither in the church nor in private, but in public before unbelievers (as in Acts).

Next week we will see that the purpose of tongues is to be an indication of judgment to unbelieving Jews. Perhaps Paul, as he traveled from place to place, would use the miraculous gift of tongues in a way similar to how it was used in Acts.

The 5 to 10,000 is obviously not an exact ratio. The word for 10,000 (myriad) was the highest number they had, and often just means “limitless.”

One sentence in English is better than an infinite number of words in an untranslated language. That means uninterpreted tongues are not of little value. They are of no value at all.

Another point of application for all this: it really highlights the importance of clarity in speech. Those of you who are teachers, keep this in mind: “Better to be useful than brilliant.”

It's true in teaching and in general conversation. To talk over the heads of some people just to impress is sin.

There are different reasons why people are unclear. Some are unclear because they are over everyone's head.

Others are unclear because they don't understand the issue clearly in their own minds.

Others are unclear because they are trying to sound profound.

Others because they lack communication skills.

Whatever the reason for our unclarity, we need to strive to be understandable.

We worship a God who is a thinking, speaking God, and we seek to think

His thoughts after Him. That is not accomplished when we do not engage our minds.

**20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. 21In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord. 22Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.**

## **Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing**

**O. Palmer Robertson**

God does not generally startle his people with the novel and the unexpected. The whole purpose of the long preparatory history of the Old Testament was to cushion the potential shock of an incarnated Son of God. Hardly a doctrine or an experience of the New Covenant people of God has failed to have its Old Testament counterpart. The softening shape of the shadow has preceded the luminous entry of the reality. In order to assure proper contextual comprehension, God carefully guarded the entry of his truth into the world.

This "preparation principle" certainly played a prominent role in the charismatic gift of tongues. On the day of Pentecost, Peter could point readily to Joel the prophet as one Old Testament figure who had anticipated quite specifically the outpouring of God's Spirit on all flesh. The connection established by Peter between Pentecost and the Old Testament is well known.

Not so readily recognized is the connection made by Paul. Interestingly, Paul connects the Old Testament specifically with the phenomenon of tongues itself. While Peter applies a general Old Testament prophecy concerning the Spirit to the tongues of Pentecost, Paul penetrates even more deeply and points to a portion of the Old Testament which concerns itself explicitly with tongues.

Paul's passage, often overlooked, is embedded in the very heart of his treatment of the tongues of Corinth. In typical fashion, Paul locates the problem-solving fulcrum for the New Testament people of God in the inspired Scriptures of the Old Testament. If a definitive answer is to be found for trouble among God's New Covenant people, it must be sought in the authoritative documents of God's Old Covenant people. Paul's pertinent

comments are found in 1 Cor 14:20–22, which read as follows:

- 20 Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes; but in your thinking be mature.
- 21 In the Law it is written, *By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me*, says the Lord.
- 22 So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is not to unbelievers, but to those who believe.

First, note that Paul identifies tongues as *a sign of covenant fulfillment*. The quotation which the Apostle applies to the current tongues phenomenon originates in Is 28:11. However, the trail of Old Testament anticipation of tongues cannot stop with Isaiah. When the prophet announces that a foreign nation is to overrun Israel's borders, babbling in a strange tongue, he is simply applying to his day the covenantal curse of Deut 28:49:

The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, *a nation whose language you shall not understand*.

The judgment of God on a disobedient people will come by means of a foreign nation. The sign of God's covenantal judgment on Israel will be the sound of babbling in a foreign tongue.

The context of Isaiah's allusion to the covenantal curse of Deuteronomy makes it quite plain that the prophet understood himself to be announcing the fulfillment of God's covenantal judgment on his people. Look again at Is 28:9ff. The prophet asks, Who is the one to whom God is attempting to teach knowledge? What kind of hearer has Israel been (vs. 9a)?

Isaiah answers his own question out of the frustrating failure he has experienced in attempting to communicate God's message

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to a rebellious people. Their infantile response insults the God who has made them. They act as though they were babies—just weaned from milk, just taken from the breast (vs. 9b). Because they “would not listen” (vs. 12), God must speak to them as though they still were learning through juvenile jingles:

“Order on order  
“sav lasav  
order on order  
sav lasav  
line on line  
kav lakav  
line on line”  
kav lakav” (vss. 10, 13)

What will be the final result of this willful reversion to infancy on Israel's part? What will be the outcome of their childishness?



Isaiah stuns his hearers. If they persist in acting like children, pretending not to hear or to understand, then God will speak to them judgmentally in their childishness. His voice will speak to them as the words of an adult must sound to the infant. Instead of communicating to them clearly in their own native tongue, God “will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue” (vs. 11). He shall bring to pass the curse of the covenant spoken by Moses. A nation whose language is not their own shall swoop down upon them to execute God’s wrath and curse. His favorable relation to them shall be terminated by a people whose language they cannot understand. God will speak in unfamiliar accents, “that they may go and stumble backward, be broken, snared, and taken captive” (vs. 13).

Isaiah’s threat that God soon will heap the covenantal curses of Deuteronomy on Israel by speaking to them in “stammering lips and a foreign tongue” (vs. 11) finds further development in the immediately following verses of the chapter. Is 28:16 declares:

Therefore thus says the Lord God,  
Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone,  
a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed.  
He who believes in it will not be disturbed.

The verse will be recognized immediately as a passage of particular importance for the writers of the New Testament. Paul

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in Romans 9:31–33 explains Israel’s stumbling in the light of this verse from Isaiah. The parable of Christ himself which dramatizes the snatching of the kingdom from Israel grounds itself in the Old Testament context of the cornerstone which also operates as a stumbling-stone for Israel (Matt 21:42–46).

This broader employment of the message of Is 28 by the New Testament in application to the termination of God’s distinctive relation to Israel enforces the significance of Paul’s citation of the curses of the covenant as they relate to the phenomenon of tongues. Tongues occur as no surprise to the people of God. They have an appointed role as covenantal sign. When tongues occur, God’s judgment on Israel has become a realized part of redemptive history. Tongues serve as a sign of covenantal curse.

Since this perspective on the role of tongues is rather new, the starting-point of this discussion must be underlined again. It is Paul the Apostle, dealing with the problematic of tongues in Corinth, who quotes the judgmental words of Isaiah to explain the significance of tongues.

A closer scrutiny of the context of Paul’s quotation may serve to enforce the connection of Paul’s argument with that of Isaiah’s. Paul begins in 1 Cor 14:20 by breaking into his discussion of tongues to admonish his hearers not to be “children” in their thinking. The Corinthians are being childish in their display of the gift of tongues. They are exercising immaturely the gift without restraint and without considering adequately its proper role in the purpose of God.

It is quite striking to note the similarity of contexts in Isaiah and in Paul. Isaiah’s

problem was the childish nation of Israel; Paul's problem is the childish church of Corinth. By setting his remarks in a context comparable to that of Isaiah, Paul reinforces the weight of his words. The Corinthians indirectly are

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admonished not to stumble into the same error as Israel of old.

At the same time, the similarity of context between Is 28 and 1 Cor 14 strongly suggests that Paul knew what he was doing when he quoted Isaiah 28:11 about God's speaking judgmentally to Israel "through stammering lips and a foreign tongue." It is not that Paul simply snatches up an isolated aphorism to apply to his circumstance. He knew full well that tongues in Isaiah appeared as a sign of covenantal curse. He understood that judgment on Israel was the subject at hand. In short, Paul quoted Is 28:11 precisely because he understood the New Testament phenomenon of tongues to be the climactic fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy.

Israel did receive in the days of the Old Testament the judgment to which Moses and Isaiah alluded. Both had prophesied that as a result of covenantal disobedience, the sign of babbling languages would be heard in the land. Their prophecies were joined by a further word of confirmation by a third prophet standing as contemporary to the accomplished fact. Moses spoke in the fifteenth century B.C. about people of a foreign tongue coming to judge Israel (Deut 28:49). Isaiah spoke in the eighth century B.C. with the same perspective. In the century of Israel's captivity, Jeremiah reiterated the same message:

Behold, I am bringing a nation against you from afar,  
O house of Israel, declares the Lord.  
It is an enduring nation,  
It is an ancient nation,  
A nation whose language you do not know,  
Nor can you understand what they say (Jer 5:15).

This triple prophecy of the fifteenth, eighth, and sixth centuries B.C. found its initial fulfillment at the time that the "babbling Babylonians" overran Israel. But Paul says this sign of covenantal curse on Israel found its climactic fulfillment by the manifestation of the gift of tongues in the New Testament era. The judgment of God on Israel in 586 B.C. was only a foretaste of that severest of judgments pronounced by Christ himself: "Your house is left to you desolate" (Luke 13:35).

How did tongues serve as a sign of covenantal judgment for Israel? In a very literal sense, the "tongues" of Pentecost represented the taking of the kingdom away from Israel and the giving of the kingdom to men of all nations. Indeed, all those

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who witnessed the phenomenon at Pentecost originally were Israelite in origin. The superabounding character of God's grace is nowhere more apparent than in the salvation of Israelites. Yet the significance of tongues is quite apparent. No longer will God confine himself to one people, speaking a single language. No longer will

God funnel his gracious work of salvation through a single nation. Instead, God now shall speak all languages to all the peoples of the earth. To all the nations of the world he shall address himself directly. Tongues thus serve as a covenantal sign. Tongues indicate the realization of God's curse on Israel for their covenantal unfaithfulness.

Indeed, the magnitude of God's grace is seen clearly in the broadened accomplishments of salvation represented by the gift of tongues. No doubt tongues serve simultaneously as a sign of covenantal blessing as well as covenantal curse. As God turns from Israel, he turns toward all nations. Peter's sermon at Pentecost emphasizes that by the gift of tongues it has become evident that God has poured out his spirit on all flesh. But the full significance of tongues must be kept in view. As Paul has indicated by his Old Testament quotation, tongues are a sign of covenantal curse as well as covenantal blessing. It is this balanced perspective that must be remembered.

If it is appropriate to note the covenantal role of tongues, it is equally significant to note the sign-character of tongues. After quoting Is 28:11, Paul offers his own interpretive remarks. "Tongues," says Paul, "are for a sign." Both the essential nature of tongues and the context of Paul's Old Testament quotation as earlier discussed help to define the precise "sign-character" of tongues. Tongues serve as a sign to indicate that God's redemptive program has shifted from a Jewish-centered activity to an activity involving all the nations of the world.

God's New Testament prophets suddenly burst out spontaneously in declaring the wonderful works of God in all the languages of mankind. The sign is unmistakable. The transition has occurred. God no longer speaks singularly to a single people. He speaks in the many tongues of the many peoples of the earth. The sign of tongues is a sign of transition. A new day has dawned for the people of God.

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It has been indicated already that the context of Paul's quotation from Is 28 has to do with God's judgment on Israel for their hardness of heart. The reference to the "costly cornerstone" of Is 28:16 as it is employed in the New Testament supports the suggestion that the context of Paul's quotation has to do with the removal of the kingdom from Israel. "Tongues" function in this context as a "sign." It is a sign that this judgment on Israel has been accomplished. It is a sign of the covenantal curse on Israel, a sign that God addresses himself no longer in a special way to a special nation in their special language. Instead, the sign of tongues indicates that he addresses himself manifestly to men of all nations.

Perhaps this perspective may aid in the understanding of the subsequent comments of the Apostle. Paul says tongues are for a sign, "not to those who believe, but to unbelievers" (1 Cor 14:22). What do these words mean? Notice that Paul connects this remark immediately with his quotation from Isaiah. "So, *then*," because of the judgmental character of tongues as manifested in Old Testament covenantal contexts, "tongues are for a sign...to unbelievers." Because of their particular role as sealing God's judgment on unbelieving Israel, tongues communicate a special message to current unbelievers. Whether Jews or Gentiles,

unbelievers ought to take special note of tongues. They testify to God's fidelity to the word of his covenantal cures. Israel persisted in unbelief, and God brought the threatened judgment. Tongues give witness to God's judgment on Israel. Clearly God no longer deals particularly with a single people. By tongues he testifies to his turning to men of all nations. At the same time, tongues testify to the unbeliever of the worldwide dimensions of the grace of God. A transition has been accomplished. The gracious intention of God has been manifested. God has displayed his determination to speak the language of men of all nations.

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So, tongues are for unbelievers. They serve primarily as an evangelical tool. When understood properly with the background of the Old Testament in view, tongues offer their sign-testimony to the unbeliever. However, this sign of transition has a role of minor significance to someone who has entered the fellowship of believers. "Tongues are for a sign...to unbelievers; but *prophecy* is to those who *believe*" (1 Cor 14:22). God has not assigned the gift of tongues for the consistent upbuilding of the believer. By their very nature, tongues have a concrete role in redemptive history to play. Like most "signs," tongues give direction along the way. But once the sign-post has been passed, it has no further active function.

At this point, it is necessary to make some further comparison of the gifts of prophecy and of tongues as they functioned in the New Testament era. The gifts had significant points of similarity, while at the same time manifesting unique distinctives. Both prophecy and tongues represented gifts of a verbal nature. Gifts such as "giving" and "showing mercy" (Rom 12:8) were not gifts by which words were communicated. But prophecy and tongues had in common this verbal quality.

Furthermore, both prophecy and tongues appear to represent gifts of inspired utterance. In the case of tongues, the correctness of this evaluation seems apparent. Since God was making the mouth move, the utterance in a tongue had to be a directly God-inspired statement conveying infallible and inerrant material. The interpretable quality of tongues-utterances (1 Cor 14:5) would appear to rule out the possibility that tongues were nonsense syllables. They did communicate divinely inspired truth.

The gift of prophecy also appears to have been an utterance derived directly from God's inspiration. The gift is discussed in terms of its "revelational" quality in 1 Cor 14:29–31. Although the case is not as clear as tongues, prophecy does appear to manifest the character of revelation.

But the two gifts also manifest marked distinctives. While they both fit into the same basic category, they display significant differences. Most important for the present discussion is the distinctive characterization which Paul assigns to each of the gifts in the life of the church. "Prophecy" is for the edification, exhortation and consolation of men. "Tongues" have the effect of edifying only the speaker, unless they are interpreted

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(1 Cor 14:3–5). This relative value of the two gifts finds permanent confirmation in

the fact that chosen words of “prophecy” have been preserved in the Scriptures for the continual edification of the church. We still possess a “more sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet 1:19) which is adequate to make the man of God “perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work” (2 Tim 3:16). Because of their continual value in edifying the church, inspired words of prophecy have been preserved in Scripture. The gift of tongues, however, did not possess inherently this value for the edification of God’s people. Therefore tongues-utterances would have had no such lasting value in preservation. “Tongues” served as a “sign” which communicated to unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22). Prophecy ministered instead for the edification of the believer.

A “difference of species” therefore separated the gifts of “tongues” and of “prophecy” despite their similarities. One partook of drastic limitations in form and function. The other did not possess these limitations. It is this radical “difference of species” that serves to resolve the interpretive problem associated with Paul’s next remark (vss. 23–25).

Paul had just assigned tongues for unbelievers, and prophecy for believers. Then in verses 23–25, he seems to reverse himself entirely, so much so that the following comment is found in a footnote of J. B. Phillips’ translation of the New Testament: This is the sole instance of the translator’s departing from the accepted text. He felt bound to conclude, from the sense of the next three verses, that we have here either a slip of the pen on the part of Paul, or, more probably, a copyist’s errors.

In verse 23, Paul says that the effect of tongues on the unbeliever will be to lead him to conclude that those in the Christian assembly are “mad.” He will not be able to comprehend the significance of the phenomenon. But, continues the Apostle in verses 24 and 25, if all are engaged in prophesying in the assembly when an unbeliever visits, he will be convicted

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and converted. While tongues lead the unbeliever to the conclusion that Christians are mad, prophecy leads him to salvation.

How is this apparent contradiction in the Apostle to be resolved? In verse 22, he commends tongues for the unbeliever; in verses 24 and 25 it is prophecy that he commends. The answer to this question lies in the distinction made earlier between the basic nature of tongues and of prophecy. Tongues are a “sign”; prophecy is not. “Tongues” possess a character which inherently limits their function to a narrower scope than the ministry enjoyed by “prophecy.” “Tongues” serve as an indicator; “prophecy” serves as a communicator. “Tongues” call attention to the mighty acts of God; “prophecy” calls to repentance and faith in response to the mighty acts of God.

If Paul’s line of thinking in 1 Cor 14:20–25 is considered in the light of Acts 2, it will become apparent that Paul is recommending for the unbelievers of Corinth nothing more than the procedure followed at Pentecost. First, tongues serve as a sign to the unbeliever. Then prophecy elicits repentance and faith from the unbeliever. First, the apostles manifested the gift of tongues, which converted no one. As a matter of fact, it only led the crowd to attribute drunkenness to the

Apostles (Acts 2:13). Paul says in like manner the Corinthians may expect unbelievers to conclude madness from the gift of tongues (1 Cor 14:23). But by the gift of prophecy, the phenomenon of tongues may be explained, the declaration of the word may proceed, and the lost may be won.

The history of redemption makes plain the truth. Tongues, while significant as a sign, have a most limited usefulness for deepening the understanding of the church. According to Paul, tongues marked unmistakably the point of judgment on Israel, and the point of transition to the nations. As such, they served as a sign of covenantal curse and blessing. It is in this context that the temporally circumscribed character of the gift of tongues becomes most apparent. Tongues are a sign which are attached vitally—but irretrievably—to a particular juncture in the history of redemption. As such, the gift of tongues cannot be expected to fulfill actively its assigned role indefinitely. By the very nature of the case, the gift of tongues could fulfill its God-appointed function only in the historical context divinely designed for such a sign.

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At a crucial point in history, necessity required that God's judgment on Israel be sealed by a sign. God's intention to minister his gospel equally to men of all nations needed to be made manifest by a sign. Tongues were that sign.

Tongues served well to show that Christianity, though begun in the cradle of Judaism, was not to be distinctively Jewish. Tongues aided significantly the transition from a Jewish to a world-wide gospel. Tongues provided signal support to the foundational structure of Christianity. Now that the foundation has been laid, the continuation of the sign of tongues would serve no significant function. Now that the transition has been made, the sign of transition has no abiding value in the life of the church.

Today there is no need for a sign to show that God is moving from the single nation of Israel to all the nations. That movement has become an accomplished fact. As in the case of the founding office of apostle, so the particularly transitional gift of tongues has fulfilled its function as covenantal sign for the Old and New Covenant people of God. Once having fulfilled that role, it has no further function among the people of God.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Corinthians 14:20-25: Prophecy And Tongues As Signs Of God's Attitude

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<sup>1</sup>Multiple, *Westminster Theological Journal*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary) 1999.

## Wayne Grudem

Paul's instructions in 1 Cor. 14:20–25 have often seemed perplexing, primarily because he calls tongues a sign for unbelievers (vs. 22), but then seems to discourage the use of tongues when unbelievers are present (vs. 23). Similarly, he says that prophecy is for believers (vs. 22), but then encourages the use of prophecy when unbelievers are present (vss. 24–25). The entire section is further complicated by the fact that in vs. 21 Paul quotes Is. 28:11, which is itself part of a very difficult passage in the Old Testament.

The commentaries on 1 Corinthians provide a wide variety of suggested resolutions to the problem, but there is certainly no common consensus. Some commentators suggest that Paul is talking about two kinds of unbelievers, those who have heard the word of God and rejected it (vs. 22), and those who are first-time hearers or who are about to become believers (vss. 23–25). F. F. Bruce says that prophecy is for believers “in the sense that it produces believers,” thus making the entire passage in effect speak about unbelievers. H. Conzelmann adds to Paul's explicit statement about tongues as a sign to unbelievers his own conviction that tongues are a sign also for believers. C. K. Barrett, on the other hand, sees both tongues and (the Corinthian misuse of) prophecy as signs of judgment, while R. Lenski says,

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“So we see God using two signs; one of judgment for unbelievers and one of grace for believers.”

Perhaps some help in understanding the passage can be given if we attempt to answer these three questions: (1) What was the meaning of the “other tongues” in Is. 28:11 ? (2) How does Paul's use of this OT passage relate to that original meaning? (3) In what sense are prophecies and tongues “signs”?

### 1. “Other tongues” in Is. 28:11

Is. 28:9–13, the passage in which this verse is found, is notoriously difficult, but if we begin by taking the Masoretic Text as it stands we can make several observations, beginning with the conclusion in vs. 13 and working backwards. The term /v⊥μ⊥λ=

, “in order that,” in vs. 13, makes it clear that when the word of the Lord comes to the Samaritans in the form “s£aw las£aw ... qaw laqaw,” it will be a word of judgment. “The word of the Lord will be to them s£aw las£aw, s£aw las£aw, qaw laqaw, qaw laqaw (ωθ\*λ\* ωθ⊥ ωθ\*λ\* ωθ⊥ ωξ\*λ\* ωξ⊥ ωξ\*λ\* ωξ⊥

) a little there, a little there *in order that* (/v⊥μ⊥λ=

) they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken” (Is. 28:13). That word of the Lord to them will lead to a certain result: they will start to go (ΩκλE≅

) somewhere, but like a confused animal pursued by hunters they will fall and be taken. The word of the Lord thus functions as a word of judgment simply because it

provides no clear guidance. With no one saying to them, "This is the way, walk in it" (Is. 30:21), the people will become easy prey for their adversaries.

But if /v⊥μ⊥λ=

requires this sense in vs. 13, then the strange "s£aw las£aw ... qaw laqaw" must be a set of sounds which give no coherent meaning to the hearers. Instead of being guided, they are confused by it. Now it might be a collection

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of nonsense syllables, but it is more probable that ωξ⊥

and ωθ⊥

are older names for the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, 9

and θ

. In that case "a little there, a little there" refers to the step by step learning process undertaken by someone who begins to learn a new language, or to a schoolmaster teaching young children to read. In either case it is a slow process, and meaningful messages certainly cannot be communicated to those who have not learned the first day's lesson, the letters of the alphabet. The word of the Lord will come to the Samaritans as sounds without meaning, as alphabet letters in a language in which they yet understand no words.

The translation "precept upon precept ... line upon line" (RSV, KJV; cf. NASB) is very unlikely because (i) a clear and simple repetition of God's precepts assuredly would *not* cause the people to "fall backward ... and be taken" (vs. 13) ; (ii) ωξ⊥

is simply an unknown word, and is never elsewhere used of God's command (in Hos. 5:11, its only other occurrence, following the ωξ⊥

brings judgment) ; (iii) while ωθ⊥

which normally means a carpenter's measuring line, is used metaphorically to speak of God's building a kingdom according to righteousness and justice (Is. 28:17), it is never used to speak specifically of a standard by which men should guide their conduct; thus, it would also require an unprecedented sense here.

Further evidence that ωξ⊥

and ωθ⊥

are not meaningful words is the fact that nowhere in Jewish written tradition has anyone hit on a correct interpretation of the terms. The LXX translators

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thought ωξ⊥

was ωθ⊥

"tribulation, distress," and translated qli'yi", and thought ωθ⊥

was related to ηω\*θ=T

"hope," and so translated ejlpiv". The Isaiah Targum takes ωξ≡

as "commandment," but then launches out into a discourse about the people who



walk after the desire of their own soul and think that God's sanctuary is a small (cf.  $\rho\psi\upsilon\cong\zeta=$

) thing. The Syriac Peshitta translates "filth upon filth, and filth upon filth (cf. Heb.  $\alpha\omega\xi$

, "filth"), vomit upon vomit, and vomit upon vomit." Symmachus translates  $\epsilon\jntolhV\ oujk\ \epsilon\jntolhv$  as if the text read  $\omega\xi\perp\ \alpha!O\ \omega\xi$

, and Theodotion follows the Peshitta with  $\text{devsaliva\ ejj" deisialian ... ejmetoV" ejj" ejmetovn}$ , "filth to filth, vomit to vomit." The Isaiah Scroll from Qumran (1 Q Is<sup>a</sup>) has  $\psi\xi\lambda\ \psi\xi\ \psi\xi\lambda\ \psi\xi$

(changing  $\omega$

to  $\psi$

) in both vs. 10 and vs. 13, indicating that the scribe apparently had no idea what the phrase meant.

So taking Is. 28:13 alone, we find two possible interpretations of "s£aw" and "qaw." They might be old names for alphabet letters or they might possibly be meaningless syllables repeated in a mocking, singsong manner. It does not really matter which

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they are, for in either case they function for the hearers as sounds which carry no meaning and thereby lead to judgment and destruction.

Now we can examine vss. 11–12 more closely: "For with stammering lips and with other tongues he will speak to this people, to whom he said, 'This is rest, give rest to the weary, and this is repose,' but they were not willing to hear." Isaiah must be the speaker here, for "the people" are referred to in the third person. Thus, the unspecified subject of "he will speak" and "he said" must be the Lord. In the past (note the perfects  $\rho\mu\perp\alpha^*$

and  $\alpha\omega\beta\alpha^*$

) the Lord had spoken clear and comforting words to the people. But they had stubbornly resisted his word. So as a result Isaiah says that in the future the Lord will speak unclear words "with stammering lips and other tongues," as a punishment for their hardness of heart. This future speech of punishment is thus the same as the word of the Lord in vs. 13, "s£aw las£aw ...," which brings the hearers to destruction. So the words "s£aw las£aw ... qaw laqaw" are intended by Isaiah to represent the speech of foreigners whom Isaiah's Samaritan hearers cannot understand. This still does not tell us whether the words represent nonsense syllables or alphabet letters (the Samaritan hearers, like children, would only distinguish occasional letters, not meaningful words), but the intention to represent foreign speech is clear enough. The "stammering lips" and "other tongues" are the lips and tongues of foreign (Assyrian) invaders, whom the Samaritans will not understand.

Verses 9 and 10 remain difficult. Do they represent the words of Isaiah's hearers, who scoff (cf. vs. 22) and mimic his messages as if they were lessons for young children? Or are they the rhetorical question asked and answered by Isaiah himself:

“To whom will the Lord teach knowledge, and to whom will he interpret the message? To young children in the next generation, who must learn a foreign language from the beginning. For it will be *s£aw las£aw* ... “? The former interpretation requires less to be read into the text, and is preferable. Such a view allows Derek Kidner to paraphrase 9–13, “Make nonsense

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of God’s sense, and you will get your fill of it from Assyria.” But on either view, vss. 9–10 simply serve as a prologue to introduce vss. 11–13, whose meaning remains the same.

So the “other tongues” in Is. 28–11 are Isaiah’s prediction of the foreign speech which the Lord would bring to the Samaritans by way of Punishment for their stubborn refusal to hear and obey his words.

## 2. Paul’s use of Is. 28:11

Paul’s quotation of this verse is quite free, but not foreign to the context. He writes, *ejn tw’ / novmw / gevgraptai o{ti ejn eJteroglwvssoi" kaiV ejn ceivlesin eJgevrwn lalhvs w tw’ / law’ / touvtw /, kaiV oujd j ou{tw" eijsakouvson tai mou, levgei kuvrio". w{ste aiJ glw'ssai eij" shmei'ovn eijsin ouj toi'" pisteuvousin ajllaV toi'" ajpivstoi", hJ deV profhteiva ouj toi'" ajpivstoi" ajllaV toi'" pisteuvousin.* (1 Cor. 14:21–22). His *lalhvs w tw’ / law’ / touvtw /*, “I will speak to this people,” aligns him with the MT (where the Lord is clearly the speaker), but not with the LXX (which has *o{ti lalhvsousi tw’ / law’ / touvtw /*, “for they shall speak to this people”). He omits, “To whom he said, ‘This is rest ‘ give rest to the weary, and this is repose,’” and therefore changes the perfect “they would not hear” to a future, “they will not hear.” Thus it has reference not to past stubbornness but to a future refusal to hear the speech in foreign tongues. Paul further departs from the LXX, which used *ajkouvein* for  $\upsilon\lambda\omicron\mu\omega\text{=}$

, and uses *eijsakouvson tai* instead. The nuance is different, for *eijsakouv w* means “hear and respond; obey; heed.” *Oujd j ou{tw* here means “not even so,” “not even in that

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case,” or “not even then” (cf. Mk. 14:59; Bl.-D., §455, 2): not even when they hear foreign speech coming as punishment will they obey the Lord. We can translate, “‘With other tongues and with other lips I will speak to this people, and not even then will they obey me,’ says the Lord.” Paul understands very well that when God speaks to people in a language they cannot understand, it is a form of punishment for unbelief. Incomprehensible speech will not guide but confuse and lead to destruction. And it is one of the last in a series of divine rebukes, none of which have produced the desired repentance and obedience (“and not even then will they obey me”). So Derek Kidner, commenting on Is. 28, can say, “Paul’s quotation of v. 11 in 1 Cor. 14:21 is thus a reminder, true to this context, that unknown tongues are not God’s greeting to a believing congregation but His rebuke to an unbelieving one.”

## 3. Prophecy and tongues as signs

Paul interprets his quotation of Is. 28:11, “Therefore (w{ste) tongues are a sign not for believers” (vs. 22). There is no need to translate ai] glw'ssai eij" shmei'ovn eijsin as “tongues are for a sign” (KJV, NASB), or even “tongues are *intended as a sign*”

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(NEB), because eij" + accusative often can replace a predicate imply says, nominative with no real change in meaning. Paul simply says, “Tongues *are* a sign.”

The second half of vs. 22 should be translated, “but prophecy is a sign, not to unbelievers but to believers,” because of the following reasons: (i) The clear parallelism in the verse makes this the most natural reading, so that the reader automatically supplies eij" shmei'on ejstivn: w{ste ai] glw'ssai eij" shmei'ovn eijsin ouj toi"" pisteuvssin ajllaV toi"" ajpivstoi" hJ deV profhteiva ouj toi"" ajpivstoi" ajllaV toi"" pisteuvousin.

(ii) On this view the deV has a very clear adversative function, and the two clauses form a symmetrical balance of equal but

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contrasting ideas. With the major alternative view, understanding the datives as simple datives of advantage without an elliptical eij" shmei'on, the sentence deals with two quite distinct topics: in part one, Paul discusses signs, but in part two, he discusses the proper beneficiaries of a particular gift. (So the KJV reads, “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,” and the NEB has, “Clearly then these strange tongues are not intended as a sign for believers, but for unbelievers, whereas prophecy is *designed* not for unbelievers but for those who hold the faith.”) It is necessary to import some idea into the second half of the verse on any reading, but the most natural one, and the one which provides the most clear contrast, is the idea of “sign” which lies so close at hand in the first half of the verse.

(iii) To say (with the KJV and NEB) that prophecy is designed for believers but not for unbelievers does not adequately explain the “therefore,” with which Paul introduces vss. 23–25. In those verses Paul argues specifically that prophecy *does* have a positive function for unbelievers. But this reading would make Paul’s argument become:

(a) Prophecy is designed not for unbelievers but for believers;

(b) therefore, you should prophesy to unbelievers. Such reasoning simply does not make sense, and a better solution is required.

(iv) The LXX meaning of shmei'on fits exactly the idea that tongues are a sign to unbelievers but prophecy is a sign to believers, and such a view is confirmed by the meaning of vs. 25. In order to demonstrate that this is so, we now turn to an examination of the term shmei'on in the LXX.

In the LXX, shmei'on can often mean “an indication of God’s attitude.” These indications are either positive or negative: positive toward those who believe and

obey God, but negative toward those who disbelieve and disobey him. Many signs are entirely positive: the rainbow (Gen. 9:12, 13, 14), the blood on the doorpost (Ex. 12:13), the invitation of the Philistines (I Kgs. [1 Sam.] 14:10), the mark on the forehead (Ezk. 9:4, 6), or any other signs sought by people who feel forsaken by God (Ps. 73 [74]:9, 85 [86]:17) (cf. also Gen. 17:11, LXX Est. 10:3, 2 Macc. 6:13). Other signs are entirely negative, since

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they show God's disapproval and warn of judgment unless repentance is quickly forthcoming: Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Num. 26:10), the bronze censers of these men (Num. 16:38 (17:3) ; cf. vs. 40), Aaron's rod (Num. 17:10 [25]), the fulfilled curses (Dt. 28:46), the defeat of Pharaoh Hophra (Jer. 51 [44]:29), and Ezekiel's iron wall (Ezk. 4:3) (cf. also Ps. 64 [65]:8, Is. 20:3 B, 2 Macc. 15:35). But sometimes the term can be used of signs which are both positive and negative, indicating God's approval and blessing on his people and his disapproval and warning of judgment toward those who are disobeying him. This is especially true of the events of the Exodus: when God sent a plague of flies on the Egyptians but kept the flies out of the land of Goshen, it was a sign (shmei'on, Ex. 5:23 A; Heb. [vs. 19]: τὸ α ) of blessing to Israel but disapproval and warning to the Egyptians. The same signs and wonders can be negative signs to Pharaoh (Ex. 10:1–2, 11:9–10; Dt. 6:22, 11:3, Neh. 9:10) but positive signs to Israel (Dt. 4:34–35, 6:22, 7:19, 26:8; cf. also Num. 14:11, Dt. 29:3; [2] on the refusal of Israel to believe these positive signs) (cf. Ex. 7:3, Dt. 34:11, Josh. 24:5A, Ps. 77 (78):43, 104 (105):27, 134 (135):9, Jer. 39 (32):20–21, Wisd. 10:16, Sir. 45:3, Bar. 2:11). So shmei'on, when used to mean "an indication of God's attitude," can take either a positive or negative sense.

Also in the NT, (shmei'on can mean "an indication of God's approval and blessing" (Ac. 2:22, 43, 4:30, 5:12, 6:8, 8:6 [cf. vs. 8], 15:12, Lk. 2:34, Jn. 2:11, 4:54, 9:16; cf. Barn. 4:14, 1 Cl. 51:5) or "an indication of God's disapproval and a warning of judgment" (Lk. 11:30, 21:11, 25, Ac. 2:19; perhaps Mt. 12:39 [cf. vs. 41], 16:4; cf. 1 Cl. 11:2).

So when Paul says "tongues are a sign not to believers but to unbelievers" he is using shmei'on in a familiar and well-established sense. Toward those who disbelieve, signs as indications of God's attitude in the OT are always negative. They indicate God's disapproval and carry a warning of judgment. This was precisely the function of the "other tongues" in Is. 28:11 and Paul quite naturally applies the term (shmei'on to them.

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But signs for those who believe and obey God in the OT are generally positive. They indicate God's presence and power among his people to bless them. Thus Paul can quite easily apply the term to prophecy in a positive sense: prophecy is an indication of God's approval and blessing on the congregation because it shows that God is actively present in the assembled church.

This means that the οὐ\ν, "therefore," in vs. 23 is quite natural. We can paraphrase Paul's thought as follows: "When God speaks to people in a language

they cannot understand, it signifies his anger and results in their turning farther away from him. *Therefore* (ou\̄n, vs. 23), if outsiders or unbelievers come in and you speak in a language they cannot understand, you will simply drive them away. This is the inevitable result of incomprehensible speech. Furthermore, in your childish way of acting (vs. 20) you will be giving a “sign” to the unbelievers which

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is entirely wrong, because their hardness of heart has not reached the point where they deserve that severe sign of judgment. So when you come together (vs. 26), if anyone speaks in a tongue, be sure someone interprets (vs. 27) ; otherwise, the tongue-speaker should be quiet in the church (vs. 29).”

Similarly with prophecy, vss. 24–25 follow quite easily from the statement in vs. 22 that prophecy is a sign to believers. Once again we paraphrase: “Prophecy is an indication of God’s presence among the congregation to bless it (vs. 22). *Therefore* (ou\̄n, vs. 23), if an outsider comes in and everyone prophesies (vs. 24), you will be speaking about the secrets of the outsider’s heart which he thought no one knew. He will realize that these prophecies must be the result of God’s working, and he will fall on his face and declare, ‘Truly God is among you’ (vs. 25). In this way prophecy will be a sure sign to you that God really is at work in your midst.”

It might be objected that this interpretation makes a[̄pisto" means “hardened unbeliever” in vs. 22 but “interested unbeliever” in vss. 23–24. This objection is not really accurate, because a[̄pisto" must mean simply “unbeliever” (of whatever type) in both places. In fact, if it did not refer to all unbelievers in vs. 22, Paul’s argument would not hold together. In vss. 21–22 Paul argues that when tongues have been used against unbelievers they have been a very severe and perhaps final indication of God’s displeasure, and they have resulted in further turning from God. On the basis of that historical example, Paul then cautions the Corinthians not to use tongues in the presence of unbelievers, lest the same thing happen (vs. 23). So Paul is saying that against even *interested* unbelievers, tongues would function as an indication of God’s disapproval and would bring punishment. Tongues, according to vs. 23, would be a shmei'on

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toi" a[̄pisto" not only for hardened unbelievers but also for visitors to the Corinthian church, and as such, it would be so wrong to use it that Paul must carefully caution against it. *Therefore*, a[̄pisto" in vs. 22 must refer to unbelievers generally, even though the specific example in vs. 21 deals with hardened unbelievers in particular.

It should also be noted here that Paul’s reaction to this recognition of the sign function of tongues is not to forbid tongues in public worship, but to regulate the use of tongues so that they will always be interpreted when spoken in public (vss. 27–28). This seems to be a very appropriate response, for it is only *incomprehensible* tongues which have this negative function both in Is. 28:11 and in 1 Cor. 14:23. But toward unbelievers, when a speech in tongues is interpreted, it is no longer incomprehensible and it no longer retains this ominous sign function.

Therefore, it is important to realize that in 1 Cor. 14:20–23 Paul is not talking

about the function of tongues in general but only about the negative result of one particular abuse of tongues, namely the abuse of speaking in public without an interpreter (and probably speaking more than one at a time [cf. vss. 23, 27] ) so that it all became a scene of unedifying confusion. Concerning the proper public function of the use of tongues plus interpretation, or the proper private function of speaking in tongues, Paul is elsewhere quite positive (12–10-11, 21–22, 14:4, 5, 18, 26–28, 39). So to use Paul’s discussion of an *abuse* of tongues in 14:20–23 as the basis for a general polemic against all other (acceptable) uses of tongues is quite contrary to the entire context in 1 Cor. 12–14.

Returning now to a consideration of prophecy, we are in a position to understand vss. 24–25 more clearly. “If you all prophesy” in vs. 24 is probably to be understood as a hypothetical situation which Paul need not have thought would ever actually occur (mhV pavnte” profh\tai;, 12:29). Nevertheless, if

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several people prophesy the outsider is “convicted” (ejlevgcetai) of sin and “called to account” (ajnakrivnetai) by several different people (vs. 24), presumably in different ways or with respect to different matters. In this way the secret sins of his heart are “disclosed” (faneraV givnetai, vs. 25). Although vs. 24 might simply mean that the outsider hears some general prophecy or preaching and is inwardly convicted of his sin, vs. 25 must mean that specific mention of one or more of his particular, individual sins is made in the prophecies (although the prophets and the congregation may or may not know to whom their words apply; cf. 1 Pet. 1:11, Ac. 2:30, 21:11 ?). This is true because (i) fanerov” (18 times) and (fanerovw) (49 times) in the NT always refer to a public, external manifestation, and are never used of private or secret communication of information or of the internal working of God in a person’s mind or heart, and (ii) the reaction of the outsider —“falling on his face he will worship God, declaring, ‘Truly God is among you’”—is not normally one that accompanies even good preaching, but Paul seems quite sure that it will happen. Now Paul might have thought this would happen occasionally with a mention of general

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kinds of sins, but his statement (if it applies to every situation like this) is more understandable if he thought the prophecies would contain something very striking and unusual, such as specific mention of the visitor’s sins. The visitor will think that these Christians know things that could only have been revealed to them by God: they know the secrets of his heart. It seems to be the fact of knowledge acquired by “supernatural” means, not merely the conviction of sin, which effectively convinces the outsider of God’s presence.

That is why it is prophecy (rather than some other gift) which Paul calls a “sign to believers.” The distinctiveness of prophecy is that it must be based on a revelation (1 Cor. 14:29), and a revelation (ajpokavluyi”) as it functions in prophecy is always something which, according to Paul, comes spontaneously (as in 1 Cor. 14:29) and comes only from God. Where there is prophecy, then, it is an unmistakable sign or

indication of God's presence and blessing on the congregation—it is a “sign for believers”—and even an outsider who visits will be able to recognize this.

If the preceding analysis is correct, 1 Cor. 14:20–25 can be understood as a reasonable and consistent statement by Paul: Uninterpreted tongues are a sign to unbelievers of God's displeasure and impending judgment (vss. 21–22a), and Paul, not wanting the Corinthians to give unbelievers this sign, discourages the childish (vs. 20) use of uninterpreted tongues in the Corinthian church meeting (vs. 23). Prophecy, however, is a

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clear sign of God's presence with and blessing on believers (vs. 22b), and so Paul naturally encourages its use when unbelievers are present, in order that they may see this sign and thereby come to Christian faith (vss. 24–25).

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Tongues were not a warning that if you don't repent, you may face judgment. Tongues were a sign that judgment is now in progress. It's here. The foreign army is already at your house. Your army is already defeated, your wall breached...

So it's not a call to repentance as much as an announcement that you failed to repent.

**23**So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? **24**But 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, **25**and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

**26**What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. **27**If anyone speaks in a tongue, two-or at the most three-should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. **28**If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church

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<sup>2</sup>Multiple, *Westminster Theological Journal*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary) 1999.

**and speak to himself and God.**

Keep quiet does not mean “whisper” or “mumble.” It means not to make any sound at all.

Some people think they are following this verse by mumbling in tongues so that 4 or 5 people sitting around them can hear. That is clear disobedience to this verse.

**29Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. 30And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. 31For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. 32The Spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. 33For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.**

**As in all the congregations of the saints, 34women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.**

**36Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? 37If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. 38If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.**

**39Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.**