

## **Tongues and Community Building in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12—14)**

Peter Claver Ajer, Ph.D.  
University of San Francisco

### **Introduction**

A study of the frequency of the phrase “speaking in tongues” in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians suggests that the phenomenon was significant in the Corinthian churches. The New Testament (NT) has thirty-five references to “speaking in tongues.” Twenty-eight of these cases are found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Twenty-three of the twenty-eight cases in First Corinthians are in the fourteenth chapter alone.<sup>1</sup> Conversations on tongues and other spiritual gifts are still common in scholarship and Churches today. Among the many questions are: What is the gift of tongues? Does it refer to speaking a language foreign to the speaker? Are the utterances comprehensible to the speaker or not? In First Corinthians, does Paul intend to declare tongues a better or lesser gift?

This essay shall explore the above questions by studying references to speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. It will demonstrate that speaking in tongues was considered prestigious in the Corinthian Church, raising issues of status in the community. This further created exclusionary groups and fractured the community as speakers in tongues looked down on non-speakers in tongues. Paul’s extensive teaching on spiritual gifts in general, and the gift of tongues in particular, aimed at addressing the problem. Paul indicates preferences of prophecy to tongues, not intended to raise a polemic against tongues but rather to bestow order, emphasize what is more advantageous in building the Church, and essentially to resolve an issue that divided the Church.

Paul instructs the Corinthians in three stages: First, the significance of the body and its parts as applied to the Church. Secondly, he explains the spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ. Thirdly, he explains the role of tongues in building the community of believers. We will address the initial question of what speaking in tongues denotes, then explore Paul’s instructions in the stages outlined above.

### **The Nature of Tongues**

The term “tongues” is used in a figurative way, not implying the bodily “tongue” of a human being. Some scholars have proposed that in Paul’s community, “speaking in tongues” refers to speaking foreign languages with which one is unfamiliar (*xenoglossia*), like in the Pentecost experience of the Apostles (Acts 2:4-13). However, Acts of the Apostles also has incidents of “tongues” not easily identifiable as foreign languages or unintelligible utterings (Acts 10:46, 19:6). J. W. MacGorman substitutes “foreign language” in every reference to “speaking in tongues” in First Corinthians in order to demonstrate that speaking in tongues in the

---

<sup>1</sup> For details on the occurrence of “tongues” in First Corinthians, see R. A. Harrisville, “Speaking in Tongues: A Lexicographical Study,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 35.

epistle is not equivalent to speaking foreign languages.<sup>2</sup> Other readers have proposed that speaking in tongues denotes speaking unknown languages during worship (Greek *glossolalia*). *Glossolalia* is an unintelligible utterance in an imaginary language, sometimes occurring in a trance state, in an episode of spiritual ecstasy.<sup>3</sup> It is the ability to utter words or sounds in a language unknown to the speaker. In Paul's letters, tongues refer to "vocal utterances of unusual nature, not understood by others,"<sup>4</sup> commonly referred to as *glossolalia*. Such speech is incomprehensible to the speakers themselves, therefore Paul urges them to "pray for the power to interpret" (1 Cor 14:13). What then is the nature of *glossolalia*?

First, Paul mentions speaking in tongues as one of the nine charismatic gifts.<sup>5</sup> The nature of gifts (*charisma*) is that not everyone can have them (1 Cor 12:30). *Charisma* is not a human gift but a divine endowment (1 Cor 7:7; 12:28 and Rom 11:29) that enables believers to acknowledge Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3). The test of the Holy Spirit's inspiration is the content of what is said. The Holy Spirit cannot inspire imprecation, "Jesus be cursed," but the confession "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3). The Lordship of Jesus is the criterion for judging and discerning the genuineness of spiritual utterances. "Each individual is given the manifestation of the spirit for some good" (1 Cor 12:7). G. D. Fee argues that "each" here denotes "diversity but also individuality," for Paul thinks that every "last person in the community" is endowed with a gift.<sup>6</sup> The implication is that no one in the community has a monopoly of the Spirit, the Spirit works in all people but in diverse ways.

Second, Paul mentions tongues along with the gifts of prophecy and knowledge. He emphasizes the impermanent nature of all charismatic gifts observing that only "love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8). Third, tongues are addressed to God, not to people. The glossalists utter "mysteries in the spirit," unintelligible to other believers (1 Cor 14:2). Not even speakers in tongues understand their own words utterances, so they should "pray for the power to interpret" (1 Cor 14:13). When speaking in tongues, the rational process and the statements are not coordinated, unlike what is expected in ordinary speech: "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful" (1 Cor 14:14). Lastly, *glossolalia* is a means for expressing praise and thanksgiving to God (1 Cor 16-17). It is within the glossalist's capacity to control the exercise of this gift; hence, Paul recommends that they remain silent in church in the absence of an

---

<sup>2</sup> "For one who speaks in a *foreign language* speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the spirit" (v. 2). It is clear that anyone who spoke that foreign language would understand it. "Therefore, he who speaks a *foreign language* should pray for the power to interpret," (v. 13) and I add that he would rather pray for a power to translate it, otherwise he does not know the meaning of his own utterance." "For if I pray in a *foreign language*, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful" (v. 14). There is no coordination between rational process and verbalization. "I thank God that I speak in *foreign language* more than you all" (v. 18). Yet the contrast was between praying and singing with the spirit apart from the mind and praying and singing with both spirit and mind. Certainly, Paul was not boasting about linguistic abilities, a shortage for which he was criticised in later Christian correspondence (2 Cor 10:10; 11:6). "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a *foreign language*, or an interpretation" (v. 26). MacGorman concludes that "the context disallows the sense of foreign language." See J. W. MacGorman, "Glossolalic Error and Its Correction: 1 Corinthians 12-14," *Review and Expositor* 80 (1983): 390-391.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: History, Literature, and Social Context*, Fourth Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 203.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Testament with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 468.

<sup>5</sup> Paul's list of nine gifts is representative of gifts rather than complete. See Paul's list of other spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 7:7, Rom 12:6-8, Eph 4:11-14, and 1 Peter 4:10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon D. Fee, "Tongues—Least of the Gifts? Some exegetical observations on 1 Corinthians 12-14," *Pneuma* 2 (1980): 4.

interpreter (1 Cor 14:28). In Summary, “tongues” is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a valid charismatic gift, intelligible only to those with the gift of interpretation, and useful in individual thanks and praises to God. Next, we shall ask, how did the tongues function in Corinth?

### **Discord Occasioned by Tongues**

Paul discusses the spiritual gifts highlighting the fact that all the gifts have the same origin, the Holy Spirit. He points out that acknowledging the real source and unique character of the spiritual gifts leads to appreciating the diverse gifts in a way that edifies and builds the community (1 Cor 12:4-11).<sup>7</sup> Yet, spiritual gifts had been used in a divisive way in the community due to ignorance about the gifts (1 Cor 12:1-3). Instead, spiritual gifts must be used in a way that benefits the community and maintains its unity, because Christ is not divided (1 Cor 1:13). Vices like jealousy, boasting, divisions, congregational discord, envy, arrogance, associated with the gift of tongues pervaded the Corinthian community (1 Cor 3:1-3, 1 Cor 12:15-24). Glossalists considered their giftedness as the criterion of appraising spirituality and a distinguishing characteristic of spiritual elitism. These abuses led to disharmony among the Christians in Corinth (1 Cor 12:25). The non-glossalists’ overreaction worsened the division.

Convinced that ignorance about spiritual gifts caused the problem, Paul responded with a teaching about spiritual gifts. If the people of Corinth were to have proper knowledge rather than be ignorant (1 Cor 12:1), their exercise of the spiritual gifts would not be a source of pride but a means of building up the Church. Paul begins the instruction with the theme of “the church as the Body of Christ” (1 Cor 12), then appeals to love as the indispensable medium for the exercise of charismatic gifts (1 Cor 13). Finally, he confronts speakers in tongues (1 Cor 14).

Primarily, Paul instructs the Corinthians that “the church is the body of Christ” and individually they are “members of it.” (1 Cor 12:27). Paul borrowed the idea of a “body” from the Greek idea of a state or civil society conceived as “body politic” and from the Jewish wisdom concerning “a corporate personality.”<sup>8</sup> In either case, lack of co-operation from one person makes the whole body suffer just as co-operation builds the whole body. From this understanding, Paul constructed the Christian idea of the Church as the Body of Christ (See also Rom 12:5). The various gifts of the members of the Church must profit the whole body. In Christ, “unity dominates diversity making diversity genuinely meaningful and constructive.”<sup>9</sup> Believers who have built a fellowship around a particular gift, are guilty of denying the fundamental nature of the church as the body of Christ. The church is a body, not just an association of feet, hands, ears, noses etc. Using “the body” as an analogy, he demonstrates the interdependence that characterized all members of a congregation (1 Cor 12:12-31). The church is not simply a group of baptized believers; rather it is the body of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit. “Though individually endowed” the spiritual gifts are “congregationally intended.”<sup>10</sup> Never were they assigned as “personal rewards or trophies for achieving certain levels of piety.”<sup>11</sup> Nor were they provided as “adornment for our private benefit but as equipment for our

---

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus indicates that “high status” was attributed to the gift of tongues (*Against the Heresies* 5. 6. 1). Though he writes at a later time than Paul, this gives a hint about how important tongues were in early Christianity.

<sup>8</sup> On “the rhetoric of the body politic,” see Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 38-39. On “corporate body” in Jewish wisdom, see Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 263.

<sup>9</sup> Soards, *1 Corinthians*, 263.

<sup>10</sup> MacGorman, “Glossolalic Error and Its Corrections,” 393.

<sup>11</sup> MacGorman, “Glossolalic Error and Its Corrections,” 393.

joint service.”<sup>12</sup> In the spirit, we have a new corporeity in Christ: “Jew or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). In the body of Christ, all differences of racial identity and social status should lose their power to divide (see also Gal 3:27-28; Col 3:11). The proper use of these gifts entails acting in love.

Paul appeals to love as the necessary medium for the operation of all charismatic gifts (1 Cor 13). Without love, God will not be glorified nor will his people be edified in the operation of the gifts. Love guides the proper use of every spiritual gift and the criterion for assessing the spiritual realities is its capacity to build and edify the church (1 Cor 14:4-5, 12).

### **Building the Community**

The building motif recalls the theme of the church as God’s building (1 Cor 3:9-17; See also Eph 2:21; 4:12, 16, 29). As an apostle, Paul laid the foundation of the church and wants the entire community of believers to be built upon this foundation (1 Cor 12:28 and 1 Cor 3:10). Prophecy and tongues are important gifts, yet Paul highlights intelligibility because it profits fellow church members (1 Cor 14:6-9).

Paul teaches by contrasting three elements. Firstly, the gift of tongues is “God-directed speech” (1 Cor 14:2), the gift prophecy is “human-directed speech.”<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the person who speaks in tongues “utters mysteries,” the person who prophesies speaks words of “up-building, encouragement, and consolation” (1 Cor 14:2-3). Thirdly, speaking in tongues builds up the personal ego, prophecies instead edify the church (1 Cor 14:4-5). Prophecy, which entails speaking on behalf of God, is characterized by exhortation and encouragement (consolation), which are tools of community building (1 Cor 14:3).<sup>14</sup> Paul does not invalidate self-edification but underscores the greater contribution of prophecy, by which each member and the whole church are edified.

The glossolalists utter mysteries that lack intelligibility. Speaking in tongues contributes to the uplifting of the church only if it is accompanied by the gift of interpretation. Intelligibility is a pre-requisite to edification and, from this perspective, intelligible gifts like prophecy are better (1 Cor 14:5). The gift of tongues is exercised in the power of the Spirit and no one should disregard the Spirit of God (1 Cor 14:2; See also 1 Thess 4:8). The recommendation demonstrates Paul’s positive attitude toward the gift of tongues while underlining the advantages of prophecy over tongues. Rendering these utterances intelligible, making them able to be apprehended by the intellect, also registers a deeper participation in the reality of the working of spirit than does a mere muttering of unknowable sounds.

Paul demonstrates the importance of intelligibility using the analogy with musical instruments. Lifeless musical instruments must have “clarity of tone and distinctness” to achieve their purpose, so must human speech (1 Cor 14:6-11).<sup>15</sup> Reference to musical instruments recalls Paul’s mention that speaking in tongues without love is equivalent to a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Cor 13:1-2). Unintelligible language makes the listener a “foreigner” (*barbaros*) to the speaker and vice-versa (1 Cor 14:11).<sup>16</sup> If a speaker in tongues is not understood by the listeners,

---

<sup>12</sup> MacGorman, “Glossolalic Error and Its Corrections,” 393.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina 7 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 491.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, *First Corinthians*, 491. The expression “building the church” may be used metaphorically, yet Paul commonly uses the image of the church as a building (1 Cor 3:9-15 and elsewhere in Eph 2:21; 4:12, 16, 29).

<sup>15</sup> Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 513.

<sup>16</sup> The Roman poet Ovid recorded a thought similar to that of Paul: *Barbarus hic ego sum, quia non intelligorulli*, “Here I am a barbarian because I am not understood by anyone” (*Tristia* 5.10.37). Cf. Rom 1:14 and Col 3:11.

the listeners become outsiders to the community in which he should be recognized as a member. Tongues utilized this way destroy the unity of a community. Differences of languages make people foreigners to each other, just like unintelligible speech “creates barriers to comprehension and foment disunity.”<sup>17</sup>

In their eagerness to obtain spiritual gifts, the Corinthians should strive to excel in building up the church (1 Cor 14:12). Tongues are unintelligible and, during the prayer in tongues, the mind is unengaged and unproductive (1 Cor 14:14). The unengaged mind does not reap spiritual benefits for the speaker and for the community. The ideal prayer involves all human faculties working together. For Paul, praying with the spirit has some value, but praying with one’s mind along with the spirit is much better (1 Cor 14:15). In worship, praying intelligibly profits the community for it enables community participation and response with an “Amen” (1 Cor 14:16). No worshipper should be deprived of the opportunity to participate in someone else’s prayer in this simple yet meaningful way (1 Cor 14:17).

Paul then provides a remarkable personal testimony and assesses the relative values of speaking in tongues and prophecy: “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Cor 14: 18-19). Paul’s words “I thank God” seem to be sarcastic. He had used the same expression in 1 Cor 1:14 where he showed the absurdity of those who sided with him because he baptized some of them. He seeks to admonish the Corinthians. He does not invalidate tongues but warns against exaggerating its value.

In 1 Cor 14:20-25 Paul emphasizes that Corinthians should conduct themselves in a way that maintains order during public worship. Every worshipping community has an opportunity to bear witness to its faith and nothing should take place that discredits the faith in the eyes of the unbelievers. He portrays two worship scenes: First, he describes an occasion in which all were speaking in tongues. Unbelievers or outsiders who entered would be perturbed by the confusion and assume that the Christians are insane (1 Cor 14:23). In the utterances, there is the “possibility of confusion since the observer might not have the capacity to determine whether the utterances are lunatic or mantic, frenzied or oracular.”<sup>18</sup> Paul describes a worship in which all were prophesying (1 Cor 14:24-25). Unbelievers who enter join in the worship and declare that God is really among the worshippers. Worship of the church “should be designed as to move humans to faith, not to derision” by that meaning “long on prophecy and short on tongues.”<sup>19</sup>

Paul’s free rendering of Isa 28:11-12 in verse 21: “By men 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,” and his interpretative comment in verse 22: “Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers,” are problematic. MacGorman writes that the citation was originally delivered as a word of warning to rebellious Jews. God had sought to speak to them through the intelligible words of the prophets, but they had refused to hear. Thus, he would speak his message of judgment to them through the words of Assyrian invaders, whose language was unintelligible to them. Even then they would not understand, and so would be confirmed in their rebellion.<sup>20</sup> This explains Paul’s point in v. 22

---

<sup>17</sup> Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 514-515.

<sup>18</sup> S. D. Currie, “Speaking in Tongues: Early Evidence Outside the New Testament Bearing on *Glössais Lalein*,” *Interpretation* 19 (1965): 275.

<sup>19</sup> William Baird, *The Corinthian Church: A Biblical Approach to Urban Culture* (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 151.

<sup>20</sup> MacGorman, “Glossolalic Error and Its Corrections,” 398.

that God's message to his wayward people through the unintelligible language of the enemy soldiers serves only to confirm them in their unbelief. In the same fashion, glossolalia tends to confirm unbelievers in their unbelief.<sup>21</sup>

Based on the idea of tongues as a "sign," Wayne Grudem holds that charismatic utterances confirm unbelievers in their unbelief. In the Septuagint (LXX) and the NT, "signs" designate the "various aspects of God's attitude."<sup>22</sup> In the LXX, "signs" are indications of God's attitude, either positive or negative: positive towards those who believe and obey God, and negative towards those who disbelieve and disobey God. The positive signs include the rainbow (Gen 9:12, 13, 14), the blood on the doorposts (Ex 12:13), the mark on the forehead (Ezek 9:4, 6). The negative signs show God's disapproval and warn of judgment: Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num 26:10), the fulfilled curses (Deut 28:46), Ezekiel's iron wall (Ezek 4:3). Sometimes the term can be used in relation to the signs which are both positive and negative, indicating God's approval of and blessing on his people and simultaneously his disapproval of and warning of judgment toward those who disobey him. For example, in Ex 5:23 God's sending a plague of flies on the Egyptians but keeping the flies out of the land of Goshen, is a "sign" (See also Ex 10:1-2; 11:9-10; Deut 6:22; 11:3; Neh 9:10; Num 14:11; Deut 29:3).

In the NT, "sign" designates "God's approval or blessing" (Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; Luke 2:34; John 2:11; 4:54; 9:16) or could be a warning of judgment (Luke 11:30; 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19). When Paul says, "tongues are a sign not to believers but to unbelievers," he uses signs in a familiar and well-established manner as found in Isa 28:11-12. By referring to tongues as a sign, Paul indicates that through tongues unbelievers would be confirmed in their unbelief.

### **Prophecy as a Sign**

Paul refers to prophecy as a sign for believers (1 Cor 14:24-25). Signs for those who believe and obey God in the OT are generally positive.<sup>23</sup> They signify God's presence among his people and God's power to bless them (1 Cor 14:22). Therefore, if an outsider comes in and sees everyone prophesying s/he will realize that God is at work in the prophecies and declare, "Truly God is among you" (1 Cor 14:23-25). Paul's goal 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 (1 Cor 14:27-28). We can conclude that in 1 Cor 14:20-23 Paul is not talking about the function of tongues in general but only about the negative results of abuse of tongues,<sup>24</sup> namely the abuse of speaking in public without an interpreter. Order at worship is essential for the edification of the community.

In 1 Cor 14: 26-33 Paul gives practical instructions for the observance at worship. Paul begins with a strong appeal: "Let all things be done for edification" of the Church (1 Cor 14: 26). The primary motivation for gifts is the edification of the church. He does not forbid the use of tongues but insists on due order and its capacity to edify the Church. It should be uttered when

---

<sup>21</sup> C. Johnson regards v. 22 as a rhetorical question that Paul puts into the mouth of the glossalists opponents. They were arguing that Glossolalia had greater apologetic value than prophecy but Paul rebutted their claim in vv. 23-25. See also C. Johnson, "Tongues, a Sign for Unbelievers? A Structural and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians XIV. 20-25," *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979): 180-203.

<sup>22</sup> W. A. Grudem, "1 Corinthians 14:20-25: Prophecy and Tongues as a sign of God's Attitude," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1979): 389.

<sup>23</sup> In the OT when prophecy is taken away, it is a sign of God's judgment of the people (Ps 74:9, Is 29:10; Lam 2:9, Mic 3:6).

<sup>24</sup> Palmer Robertson overlooks this position. Palmer O. Robertson, "Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975-76): 43-53.

there is an interpreter, one person at a time (1 Cor 14:27). At most two or three glossalists could exercise their gift at any one service (1 Cor 14:27). Orderliness in the use of spiritual gifts preserves peace and unity in the community. The fundamental reason for which order must prevail is that God who is the source of inspired preaching is “not a God of confusion but of harmony and peace” (1 Cor 14:33). Paul’s focus is promoting the idea that intelligibility and order must prevail at worship. Through intelligible speech and order at worship, the community is edified (1 Cor 14: 40).

### **Conclusion**

Paul’s instructions on the gift of tongues demonstrate the importance of proper use of gifts in communal worship. The Corinthian problem was occasioned by lack of understanding of spiritual gifts, particularly, the gift of tongues. The Corinthians maintained that gifts signified spiritual elitism for holders of the gifts. Paul taught that spiritual endowments are gifts from God that should not be the source of pride. He emphasizes intelligibility and orderliness, as requisites for the edification of the Church through community worship. The Corinthian use of gifts did not take into account the significance of building up the Church. Paul’s discussion of tongues is therefore not a blanket polemic against tongues; it is a teaching and an appeal to correct the misuse of the gift. The various endowments of the Spirit should contribute to the common good of the community and love must be the motivation for the use of spiritual gifts. At community worship intelligibility and order are indispensable, thus, Paul concludes: “All things should be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40).