

# Speaking Into The Air 2

1 Corinthians 12-14

Chapter 14:1-19

## **Introduction**

We will continue our “How Come I Never See a Miracle” section by studying 1 Corinthians 14. It seems that Paul’s primary goal in this chapter was that there be order in the church—especially as it related to supernatural, revelatory/prophetic gifts. This is the flagship chapter used by Pentecostals to argue for the continuation of miraculous sign gifts. Since it is not Paul’s goal to argue for the cessation or continuation of miraculous gifts in this chapter, what we learn will be by inference or implication.

We will find that much of what is happening in the church today *a la* sign gifts is in violation of this chapter. We will also find that the very nature of the chapter will militate against the continuation of sign gifts since sign gifts were a sign of a historically unique event that has already taken place—the transfer of the kingdom from Israel to the church (Matthew 21:43).

There is one other major issue we should keep in mind as we study the details of this chapter—that tongues, prophecy, and word of knowledge were “word” gifts which revealed the mind of God. If we believe in the continuation of these gifts we, of necessity, do not believe the Bible to be the sole, infallible and authoritative message of God to mankind. This is an inescapable dilemma for those who believe in continuation but proclaim *Sola Scriptura*.

## **Preview**

When portions of the chapter address the continuation or cessation of sign gifts, we will address them. In the meantime, we will prayerfully seek to observe and apply the clear instruction of the text.

The following are topics addressed in verses 1-19 of this chapter: 1) true spirituality requires understanding. No less than seven times in this chapter Paul will harp on the necessity of understanding. Any worldview or form of religion that seeks to dump the mind is to be avoided. 2) The notion of a private prayer language. 3) Tongues and interpretation. 4) Praying in the Spirit versus praying with understanding. 5) How God is to be approached in worship.

## **Prophecy is Superior—True Spirituality Requires Understanding**

**Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup> For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. <sup>3</sup> But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. <sup>4</sup> He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup> I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification (14:1-5).**

## **The Mind of God**

Common in many religions (including large portions of Christianity) is the pursuit of a relationship with God based upon mysticism, passions, sentiment, and various

forms of anti-rationalism. It is proposed that God is so big that He cannot be known the way we know other things. We, therefore, seek to engage in communion with God in a manner completely foreign to all other relationships.

It is a mistake, however, to think that since God is incomprehensible in a quantitative sense (for example He has infinite knowledge) that He must be incomprehensible in a qualitative sense (His knowledge is of a different kind). I may not know everything about baseball (quantitative), but that doesn't mean I don't know anything about baseball (qualitative). The umpire may know all the rules, but everyone in the stands knows a home run when they see it. Passions and sentiment may have their place—but, as we shall soon see, they must play second fiddle to proper understanding.

With a brief reminder of chapter thirteen (pursue love—verse 1) Paul continues his instruction regarding spiritual gifts. At the top of the list is prophecy. There is nothing more important to the church (to mankind) than to know the mind of God—prophecy. Through prophecy God graciously unveils His fatherliness, His holiness, His righteousness, His mercy, etc. When we know these things we know the mind of God and we know He is worthy of all glory and honor and praise. Knowledge of these things also edifies, exhorts, and comforts His children (verse 3).

As Christians we can grow frustrated when we see the world's lack of understanding the mind of God (a lack of understanding which flows from rebellion—Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18) resulting in things like abortion, homosexuality, pornography, etc. Dispensing with the mind of God regarding these issues has proven to be devastating.

Paul's initial point is that prophecy is superior to tongues. Why is prophecy superior? Because it can be understood. Paul will continually emphasize the value of understanding. He will also expose the folly of thinking there is any value in engaging in so-called spiritual exercises that bypass the human mind.

Before us are the most detailed instructions regarding tongues found in the Bible. A couple of points bear mentioning. Tongues, in terms of what they actually were, are only defined one place in Scripture. At Pentecost the gift of tongues was the supernatural ability to speak a foreign language. There is no good reason to think it is anything but that here. Paul never says, "Now concerning the special, or different, or unique gift of tongues..."

Paul is not denouncing the use of tongues for the first century church, but he clearly places prophecy as a greater gift—unless the tongue is interpreted—indicating that tongues is uninterpreted prophecy. We will learn that if tongues (even when they were still extant) are not interpreted, they are useless.

### **Private Prayer Language?**

Some use this passage as an argument for yet another kind of tongue—the private prayer language. This is inconsistent with what we have already learned—that gifts are for the mutual edification of the body (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:12). The Apostle Paul is known to use sarcasm as an instructive tool—especially with the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:10). I believe he is doing that here. I don't believe Paul is condoning some private prayer language, but is rather ridiculing those aiming for personal exaltation and using God's gift for themselves rather than for others, which is its expressed design. Calvin states,

**But whatever is done in the Church, ought to be for the common benefit. Away, then, with that misdirected ambition, which gives occasion for the advantage of the people generally being hindered! Besides, Paul speaks by way of concession: for when ambition makes**

**use of such empty vauntings, there is inwardly no desire of doing good; but Paul does, in effect, order away from the common society of believers those men of mere show, who look only to themselves.<sup>1</sup>**

When Paul speaks of mysteries then says, **“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself,”** he is speaking by way of chastisement. He is not giving the prescription for some new sub- or supra-intellectual form of prayer. Nor, I would argue, is he actually encouraging tongue-speakers to go speak in tongues at home or privately. Suppose someone was improperly utilizing the gift of hospitality and Paul said, **“Go home and be hospitable to yourself,”** the sarcasm would be much more easily seen. Insert other gifts such as exhorting, showing mercy, etc. and you come up with the same result.

When I was about seven years old I, apparently, kept asking my dad for money. One day, in order to teach me a lesson, he handed me a \$10 bill (a lot of money in those days) and said, **“Go ahead. Spend it.”** He hoped that I would get the picture, be ashamed and hand him back the cash. I didn’t. I spent it all! Again, we are to quit thinking like children.

### **An Uncertain Sound**

**But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?<sup>7</sup> Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?<sup>8</sup> For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle (14:6-8)?**

If there was ever an argument against the modern view of tongues (that being incoherent gibberish<sup>2</sup>) it is found in these words. Paul’s point is that if you can’t understand what is being said, it is of no profit. The bugler must play a discernable tune in order for the troops to have direction. Even when the gift of tongues existed they were without profit unless there was something revealed, known, prophesied, or taught.

### **Speaking Into the Air**

**So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.<sup>10</sup> There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me.<sup>12</sup> Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel (14:9-12).**

Not merely understandable, but easy to understand, is the exhortation of Paul. If people don’t understand what you’re saying you are speaking into the air and your words have no value.

There is no language that is without significance (verse 10). Arguably, the ability to discern the meaning of uttered sounds is what makes it a language. In this chapter Paul

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Vol. XX* (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 436.

<sup>2</sup> The more scholarly Pentecostals believe that gibberish is proper (where we would hold that tongues is not gibberish but a foreign language) but that it must be interpreted along Paul’s guidelines given in this chapter.

seems to be addressing what amounted to be mass confusion generated by Christians improperly speaking, not gibberish, but numerous discernible languages at the same time.

### **Pandemonium at Church**

So what was actually going on at the church of Corinth with its tongues speakers and interpreters? It is not uncommon today to see preaching in a church communicated to the deaf through someone up front doing sign language. Since it is silent it is not very distracting.

Corinth was a multi-cultural port where many languages were spoken. At the church in Corinth there might have been a dozen members with the gift of tongues speaking the various languages all at the same time. If such was the case, there would have been others with the gift of interpretation seeking to interpret whatever languages were being spoken into the language of their particular audience seated in various places in the congregation. This would result in pandemonium.

Paul's instruction would be to limit the number of tongues speakers and interpreters to facilitate order. So you might have three people speaking in tongues to a congregation that had six different languages represented. Then you might have three interpreters translating the tongues for the benefit of all. For example (using language we're familiar with), the three tongues speakers might be speaking Greek, French, and Spanish. But the congregation also had people who only spoke German, Italian, and English. The interpreters would interpret the Greek into German, the French into Italian, and the Spanish into English. Then everyone would understand (which was Paul's major concern).

### **Re-Gifting**

We see again in verse twelve that gifts are for the edification of the church. God grants gifts to be used for the benefit of others. When little children go to a birthday party and mom gives them a gift to give to their friend, it is a difficult lesson for them to learn that the gift is not for them. The headlong pursuit of using gifts for oneself rather than for others is the childish notion Paul is seeking to correct.

### **Praying in the Spirit? How Can I Say Amen?**

**Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.**

**<sup>14</sup>For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup>What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. <sup>16</sup>Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?**

**<sup>17</sup>For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified (14:13-17).**

Is Paul making an argument for two kinds of prayer—with the spirit and with the understanding? Not at all! He is asserting just the opposite.

In the present passage the person who is praying (likely public prayer) in the spirit is exercising the supernatural gift of tongues (verse 14). If he is Greek and speaking Spanish, he may not even understand what he is saying and it is, therefore, unfruitful to him (verse 14). He should, therefore, pray that he may interpret so he can pray with his understanding also. Paul is not arguing for two kinds of praying here. He is pointing out the incomplete nature of seeking to utilize a spiritual gift (whether prayer, singing, instruction, etc.) apart from understanding.

You may walk into a religious service that appears to be very Christian. But Paul's point here is that if you can't understand what is being said, you cannot give a genuine "Amen." For all you know you may have walked into a cult.

### **Five Against Ten Thousand**

**I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;<sup>19</sup> yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue (14:18, 19).**

Paul now drives the point home. He is not forbidding speaking in tongues (at least not for this first century church). He speaks in tongues himself (no doubt submitting himself to the same guidelines he lays down for others).<sup>3</sup> But, again, if there is no understanding it is worthless. When Paul says he would rather speak five words with understanding versus ten thousand words in a tongue, he is not saying tongues are 1/2000 as valuable as words of understanding. He is saying that words you can't understand have no value at all. The spirit of Paul's instruction should inform all who seek to speak in gibberish in any age of the church.

An old '60's love song said, "We tried to talk it over but the words got in the way." This is how tongues are viewed by many in the church today. God gave us tongues, it is postulated, because of our limitations of intellect, vocabulary, or the ability to express concerns and feelings. There is no biblical warrant for holding that view. There are times when I can't think of the next line to write in a sermon. Occasionally I will just pound the keys...ajklsdaljk;kldfjas (like that). It feels good. It may be psychologically purging. But there is nothing spiritual about it. Paul's entire point is that a lack of understanding renders tongues useless. You will be speaking into the air.

### **Church Service**

And finally, since the context of Paul's letter is the worship service, we must learn that God desires we approach Him in an orderly manner. We will pursue this further next week. For now we will merely set forth that the maxim, "It's not how you worship but who you worship" is at odds with biblical Christianity.

The gospel is news—good news. News is information about events. God has done good things. He has made us and redeemed us. Creation was an actual event, the fall was an actual event and the cross of Christ was an actual event where real things took place. He has informed us of these glorious things and we are to praise Him for it. We are to be wary of any form of Christianity which seeks to muddy these propositions in the name of spirituality.

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<sup>3</sup> Some argue that Paul is referring to his own use of a private prayer language here. As if he were saying "I pray my private prayer language at home but at church I would rather teach." But home and church aren't the only options. Paul may have spoken in tongues evangelistically in his missionary journeys.

## Questions for Study

1. Why is there a dilemma for those who believe in sola scriptura yet also believe in modern-day prophecy (page 1)?
2. Explain God's incomprehensibility (page 2)?
3. Why is it important to know the mind of God (page 2)?
4. How do we know the mind of God (page 4)?
5. What are tongues (page 2)?
6. Discuss whether or not Paul is giving a prescription for a private prayer language (page 3).
7. Why must language be discernible (pages 3, 4)?
8. Discuss the use of tongues and interpreters at the church in Corinth (page 4)?
9. Discuss praying in the spirit versus praying with understanding (pages 5, 6).
10. Why is gibberish an inappropriate way to conduct worship (page 6)?
11. What's the good news (page 6)?