

The Gift of Tongues - The Unknown Tongue

1 Corinthians 14

Introduction:

1. As we have been studying the gift of tongues, we have learned what the gift of tongues was. It was the supernatural ability to speak for God in a language unknown to the speaker.
2. We have also learned the purpose of the gift of tongues. It was a sign gift for unbelieving Israel that would demonstrate to them that God had left them and was among the Gentiles.
3. When did they cease? They ceased when their purpose was fulfilled. When God set Israel's national program aside, the sign gift of tongues was no longer needed.
4. All three times tongues were spoken in the Bible; it was a sign to Jews.
5. Tonight we look a little closer into 1 Corinthians 14 and answer some questions about what Paul refers to as "*the unknown tongue*."

What was the unknown tongue?

1. Paul mentions the unknown tongue six times in this chapter. vs. 2, 4, 13-14, 19, 27
2. Some preachers will point out that the word "unknown" is in italics, that it was inserted by the King James translators and that it doesn't belong in the text. This is wrong.
 - The italics are there to simply tell you that there is not a free standing Greek word in the Greek text that is translated as that word. Those words are there simply because it takes more than one English word to convey the sense of that original Greek word or concept.
 - This is very common when you translate from one language to another, and it is very dangerous to omit those italicized words. The context of this passage clearly teaches that there was an issue at Corinth with the unknown tongue.
 - The verses make no sense without the word "unknown" and the King James translators were brilliant men that knew and understood this, but were also honest enough to italicize it to let you know what they did.
3. The unknown tongue was not ecstatic babbling. It was a language that nobody in the local assembly understood (vs. 2). This was apparently a big issue in Corinth.
 - It could be there were carnal believers seeking to counterfeit the gift of tongues in order to build themselves up.
 - It could be that there was a person in the assembly visiting from another country. Someone in the congregation stood up and began speaking in that person's language (supernaturally), but nobody else in the congregation knew the language. This would obviously create chaos and confusion in the local church so Paul is dealing in a practical way with this issue.
4. Nowhere in this chapter does Paul **commend** them for getting up and speaking in "unknown tongues." Here is what Paul says about the man who speaks in an unknown language.
 - If it is unknown to everybody else, and only **he** understands it, he is building himself up at the local church's expense (vs. 2-4). This is **wrong** (vs. 12).

- ❖ Prophecy (vs. 3) was the straight-forward declaration of God's truth in the native tongue of that area that everybody understood.
 - If it is an unknown tongue that even **he** doesn't understand, and if he or someone else is unable to interpret the tongue or language he is speaking, he is to keep his mouth shut (vs. 13, 27). This could not be any clearer.
 - ❖ For somebody to get up and speak in an unknown tongue or some kind of ecstatic babbling is **wrong!** How do I know? My Bible tells me.
 - Five words with understanding are better than 10,000 words in a language that nobody understands (vs. 19). Five words - "Christ died for our sins." This is better than 10,000 words that bring no edification to anybody.
5. Remember, the issue in this chapter is not **experience**, but **edification**. Tongue-talking today is nothing more than "worked-up" sensationalism. Leaders work people up into an emotional frenzy and before you know it, people left and right are speaking forth ecstatic babbling that brings no profit to anybody.
 6. Paul is dealing with this issue to bring order back into the church (vs. 40), and make sure that all things are being done in a way to edify the body. If there's no edifying, then it is a complete waste of time.
 7. What brings edification? It is the understanding of sound doctrine. This is why Paul says what he says in verse 19. If a person is speaking in a tongue that nobody understands, who is he helping?

Can the unknown tongue be used as a heavenly prayer language?

1. I've heard people say, "I don't speak in tongues publicly, I just use it as a heavenly prayer language when I am alone in prayer."
2. There is only one verse in the entire Bible they can use to try and substantiate this kind of idea (vs. 14). There are several things to note about this:
 - First, there is no example in the Bible of somebody praying in an ecstatic babbling.
 - Second, Paul presents this as a hypothetical situation.
 - ❖ Paul says, "For **if** I pray..." He didn't say, "For **when** I pray..." Praying in a language that he didn't understand was not something that Paul did or recommended.
 - Third, the context is public assembly life, not a person's personal private life.
 - ❖ The context is clearly praying in the public assembly. vs. 16-17
 - Fourth, if a person were to pray in a language that he did not understand; the result is **unfruitful**.
 - ❖ When is unfruitfulness ever a good thing in your Bible? Paul says there is no understanding, therefore there is no edification.
 - ❖ If someone in the assembly is speaking in a tongue that nobody understands, but he **does** understand what he is saying, then he **can** commune with God privately. Notice in verse 28, it doesn't say, "...let him speak to God." It says, "...let him speak to **himself** and to God."
 - Fifth, Paul makes it clear in the next verse, that when a person prays or sings unto the Lord, it should always be with complete understanding. vs. 15

Is the unknown tongue some type of mysterious angelic or Holy Spirit language?

1. People will use **1 Corinthians 13:1** to try and prove that there is a mysterious, mystical language that only angels know. They want us to believe that they are so close to God that God has given them this secret language.
2. Again, I would hate to base my entire doctrine on a verse that starts, "*Though I speak...*" Paul is clearly giving several hypothetical situations to make a point about charity.
 - If there was an unknown angelic language that we could attain, would not Paul have admonished us to do this and written and explained it clearly?
 - Would there not be at least one example of it in the Bible?
3. Angels always spoke in the language of those they addressed. They know all languages, both modern day and past, dead languages that nobody knows anymore.
4. Paul is saying that though I could speak every known language to man and every past language ever spoken (like the angels), if I don't have charity, there is no profit.
5. Some will use **Romans 8:26** as proof of a mystical, Spirit led language. If you try and read this idea into the text (and it's not there), these are still groanings of the Spirit which **cannot** be uttered.

Let's summarize:

1. Remember, Corinth was a metropolitan city that was a melting pot of different nationalities, people groups, and languages.
2. There were two types of unknown tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:
 - First type: A language that the speaker understood, but the rest of the assembly did not understand. It was an unknown tongue to everybody. vs. 4
 - ❖ Bottom line: if the speaker or another person was not able to interpret so that everybody else in the congregation could gain edification, he was to sit down, keep silent, and commune with himself and with God privately. vs. 28
 - Second type: A language that neither the speaker nor the people in the local assembly understood. vs. 14
 - ❖ Bottom line: if there was nobody there who had the supernatural gift of interpretation so that the church could be edified, the speaker was to sit down, keep silent and disregard it. He was to pray in a way that would bring understanding and edification to himself and the body. vs. 15-16