

1 Corinthians 14 Walkthrough

The Chapter About Languages

Since you hear Charismatics defending their modern version of tongues using parts of 1 Corinthians 14, I want to address the chapter in detail and go through the main portion of it. I think you will see easily that 1 Corinthians 14 does not describe the modern phenomenon of speaking in what sounds like gibberish, but simply is a teaching about using the exact same gift explicitly described in Acts— the miraculous gift of languages, either speaking or comprehending them. The situation has changed from the unique circumstances of Acts 2, but the gift is the same. Not only is the same Greek word used to describe tongues, but the entire chapter is in good harmony with a discussion of real languages, and various verses are in stark contrast to the nonsensical gibberish that comes from the mouths of Charismatics.

I want to cite the clear and defining chapter first, so you can see what the word tongues refers to, which is speaking and understanding foreign languages. That is the great miracle of Pentecost. It's not difficult to grasp when reading it:

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.

And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.

Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans?"

"And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?"

"Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

"Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

"Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." (Acts 2: 2-11)

This passage relates how men from all over the known world were together, and when they were speaking to each other, they understood the other in their own language, despite that they naturally spoke different languages. That is an incredible miracle. The description uses the word *glossa*, which means either a language or the organ of the tongue, and *dialektos*, which refers to languages of individual peoples.¹ The passage describes both speaking and hearing languages. It even lists the large number of nations and language groups among the crowd at Pentecost, emphasizing the greatness of the miracle in allowing these people to communicate God's truth.

Clearly tongues is a miracle of real languages, in which men both speak and understand languages foreign to them. It's not gibberish. Anyone can speak in gibberish and that's not miraculous. Yet everyone at Pentecost understood the speech of the other due to God's Holy Spirit. They were able to communicate "the wonderful works of God" this way. Communicating those works, and the saving acts that Jesus Christ had just done historically, required clear language, clear understanding, and quite a number of details. It involved words and a mental grasp of those words. This miraculous event occurred years before the epistle of 1 Corinthians, it describes real earthly languages, and it should define for us what the gift of tongues is.

In 1 Corinthians 14, the only other long passage about this gift, Paul has just finished a section in which he upbraided the Corinthian church for the prideful and wrong use of spiritual gifts. He has pointed them to recognize that each gift has its place in the Body of Christ, and that we should not only seek out those that carry the most esteem. The less honorable gifts have value too. He has pointed towards the greatest of all – which is love – and taught that while the gift of tongues will cease, and prophecy fail, love will never fail. It will be with us always. We can't elevate any gift above that.

After this discussion, which like others in the book stresses the element of unity, Paul focuses on the use of tongues in the church. Paul begins using the word *glossa* – the same word in Acts 2 -- and he uses it in almost every instance you see the word tongue or language appear in this chapter. Brethren in Corinth had been seeking this gift for its esteem, and are also misusing it, practicing tongues just to show off that they have the gift, rather than for real understanding. Paul corrects their major errors, and puts the focus on the need for tongues to be understood, either for the speaker to explain them, or for an interpreter to explain them. Otherwise, no one will understand. However, if they are explained, they edify the Church, being used to communicate valuable prophecy or teaching. The whole chapter, really, is in stark contrast to the madness of the Pentecostal and Charismatic world, but let's start from verse 1.

Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

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. (vss. 1-2)

Paul continues with his previous talk about love being central and more important than other gifts. He also encourages them to seek the gift of prophecy (as opposed to tongues which they'd viewed more highly), a topic that will appear again later. In verse 2 – perhaps one of a few “gotcha” verses that Charismatics believe prove their case for speaking in nonsense syllables -- Paul says that if one speaks in a tongue, one is only speaking to God, because no one understands him. The Continuationist will assert this clearly shows that biblical tongues are made of the same gibberish that comes from their mouths. It proves tongues was unintelligible just like what they do today. But that is not what the verse says.

Stop for a second and think. Do you really think the Apostle, using the very same Greek word used to describe real earthly languages in Acts 2, is speaking about a totally different kind of tongues, which is made up of nonsense syllables? That would be a radical departure, and very strange, considering he never defines a new gift or explains that the gift has somehow changed. It would completely redefine the term without ever stopping to do so. Is that really what you think happens here?

This verse does not support what Charismatics claim, but is in good harmony with the languages that Acts 2 describes. Paul is only saying that if you speak in the earthly language you have gained by this gift, you are not speaking to men if you're not understood. This is true of earthly languages, because they need to either be spoken to a speaker of the same language, or they need to be interpreted. Otherwise, no one will understand the speech except God. What's happening is that people in the church are just showing off the gift of their miraculous languages, but few or any people around know what they're saying. Therefore, they are speaking “mysteries.” No need to invent claims of angelic languages or private prayer tongues. Rather, it fits the gift of earthly languages as previously described.

The reason why it's a problem now, and not at the first Pentecost of the Church, is that at Pentecost there were many believers from all over the Roman Empire and Greco-Roman world. That means there would be a number of people who would understand the languages you were speaking already. Plus, the gift came at Pentecost to EVERYONE, so each person there either had the gift of speaking or of understanding. There would be no lack of understanding in such a unique setting. But the average local church is definitely NOT the Pentecost experience. There would be a limited number of people with the gift. There would be far fewer languages spoken by the group. That means it was uncalled for to speak in tongues unless you knew there were other same-language speakers there, or you had an interpreter. It just amounted to showing off your gift, or playing with it for your own enjoyment. It was prideful. No one hears you except God. The brethren in the church don't understand. You speak mysteries. You see this is not modern “tongues,” it is languages, just as described in Acts 2.

But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.

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

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.

(vss. 3-5)

Paul contrasts prophecy with tongues – at least the way tongues are being used – pointing to how prophecy edifies the whole church. It should be noted that later on, as makes sense, Paul explains how tongues CAN edify more than just the speaker, if they are explained or interpreted. But when used only to show off, of course they only edify the speaker, and as he states at the beginning, the speaker speaks only to God. Like the previous verses, this fits perfectly with tongues as a gift of real earthly languages being misused. The teaching sounds different from Acts 2, but the circumstances have changed since then, so new concerns need to be addressed. Don't use your gift just to use it, or it's only for yourself. If I show off my French speaking in a room of Americans, I am not edifying them at all, unless one of them knows the language. If I preach in Russian when there are no Russians around, what's going to happen? No gibberish is needed at all to interpret these verses, and it really has to be inserted into the text from without. Tongues has already been defined years before Paul wrote this letter, and we should expect this teaching to fit easily with the meaning of that gift, which it does.

Paul then honors the gift of tongues, which until now it sounded like he was viewing as less valuable, saying he wishes others spoke in tongues as much as he did. Then he sheds light on his earlier statements on the superiority of prophecy, making this conditional on whether tongues are used rightly or not. If tongues are actually interpreted, they now are not only for the individual – they are for the whole church. The misused tongues come off as selfish, and of little good compared to prophecy. The rightly used ones are perfectly valuable. Considering tongues were a big reason for the Gospel being spread, and its ability to enter other people groups and nations, we should see how far reaching they are, and what an affront it is to do it only for your own enjoyment. Things of the highest value are communicated through tongues, but that is in spiritual truth being communicated in real languages, not in modern gibberish spoken in Charismatic churches. The latter seems more of a waste than what the Corinthians were doing.

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?

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?

For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?

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.

There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. (vss. 6-10)

This passage likewise is in good harmony with tongues being earthly languages, and in fact is in contrast to the modern “tongues” used by Continuationists. Tongues need to communicate something of value to the church. Just as instruments need distinction to make their melody known, and a trumpet clearly heard to alert people, tongues must carry meaning and value. It can even include prophesying, a gift it was previously contrasted with. The point is, tongues need to be UNDERSTOOD. Just as speaking uninterpreted tongues was compared at the beginning to speaking with God, here it is compared with speaking to air. It’s meaningless to us.

Verse 9, by itself, refutes modern gibberish speak, since no one understands those syllables, and they do not even bear the characteristics of language communication. The speaking should be “easy to understand” for the sake of the church. If anything, modern gibberish is a satanic mockery of the real gift of tongues, turning the ability to communicate the Gospel, prophecy, biblical teaching, into the kind of babble that babies do. If the gift of tongues at Pentecost reversed the confusion that came from Babel, modern “tongues” reapply the confusion and take us back a step. Tongues are used for communicating real things in real languages. Verse 10 hammers in that these are languages, pointing to the number of tongues on the earth, and that each are different, and each has meaning.

We should notice that verse 10 is the only verse in the section I discuss that uses another Greek word than *glossa*. In speaking of different languages it uses *phone*. This word can mean language, and can also refer to sounds and voices. Perhaps Paul uses it here to emphasize the significance of the sounds of each language, and how each is distinct from the other. As he’s just compared language to music and trumpet calls, he may be emphasizing the clear meaning we need behind each sound. Perhaps he emphasizes the many different voices present in a room of people speaking different languages. Either way, each tongue is different and needs to be understood.

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.

Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.

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

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. (vss. 11-14)

This short passage and teaching, like the rest, easily fits into an explanation of how to correctly use the gift of real earthly languages. There are people in the church who will seem like

foreigners if they cannot understand the LANGUAGES you speak. We will be foreigners to each other. What a contrast to the brotherhood and sisterhood we are to have in Christ. We are speaking about real communication and understanding between people in the church, who don't understand the real tongues spoken. That is the problem going on which Paul is addressing.

For the gift of tongues to be edifying to the church, which is what we should desire, we ought to interpret them. This church has the rightful desire for spiritual gifts, but needs to learn their purpose, which is for others beyond themselves. Without understanding there may be some personal communication spiritually -- "my spirit prays" -- but no real grasp through the mental faculties. Even the speaker may not have the gift to interpret, so he or others would be unfruitful in gaining understanding. Not so if tongues are interpreted, as is normal to do with real languages on earth. This agrees fully with tongues as defined in Acts 2, but does not mirror what is practiced in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches.

Interestingly, there are some Continuationists who realize that Acts 2 describes a gift of earthly languages, but they will nevertheless teach that there is a SECOND kind of gift described in 1 Corinthians 14. This splitting of the gift allows them to avoid the absurdity of denying the clear language of Acts 2, while still holding on to their doctrine of nonsensical tongues. However, even with this simple admission, their belief about spiritual gifts is easily seen to be false. There still is no basis in Corinthians for a spiritual gift of babble that no one understands, plus they have just acknowledged the truth of Cessationsim – they have admitted that one of these two gifts ceased in the ancient past. That latter admission alone demands they reassess their entire understanding of the gifts continuing, and change their interpretation of various texts, which they previously had interpreted in a Continuationist sense. If tongues number one has ceased, then you can no longer teach or believe that gifts inherently continue to the present. You can no longer brush off 1 Corinthians 13 which states that tongues shall cease and prophecy fail. The moment the Charismatic acknowledges an ordinary reading of Acts 2, they step into the Cessationist camp, because the miraculous gift of languages clearly is not going on in the churches today. You have admitted your error in teaching that gifts must continue to the present.

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.

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?

For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;

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.

(vss. 15-19)

Here Paul emphasizes what he has already stated – the essential nature of understanding. He speaks broadly of understanding in prayer, singing, blessing, and giving thanks. All of these things we could do through the gift of tongues, but they all should be done with understanding. This importance placed on mental grasp is starkly in contrast with the emphasis present in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. That emphasis is on having emotional experiences, alleged ecstasies, subjective spiritual experiences, and even out of control physical contortions.

It is almost as if the bulk of that movement intentionally did the exact opposite of what Paul is teaching in 1 Corinthians 14, and began to treat mental understanding as the red-headed step child who gets in the way of our spiritual experience. The movement also elevates emotion and experience over reason and the clear Word of Scripture. Paul, through the Holy Spirit, teaches mental understanding must go along with the spiritual motivation. It is not to be laid aside. It should permeate the church. What chutzpa Charismatics have to claim this chapter as nearly their foundation, while ignoring the majority of what the chapter teaches. According to Paul, five words spoken with our mental grasp is worth more than a thousand words in a tongue, no matter how spiritually inspired. Charismatics take note. That speaks to almost your entire movement.

It bears looking a little at the next section, although he begins to get into new topics, and deals with the related issue of order in the use of the gifts, and the submissive role of women. Some of that we'll leave alone. But let's look at one more point. After encouraging them to become mature in understanding, Paul makes an important comparison to Scripture that, like all else in this chapter, confirms that tongues are languages, just as we see explicitly in Acts. He speaks of the use of unknown languages as a fulfillment of scriptural prophecy, citing Isaiah 28, which teaches:

*“With men of other tongues and other lips
I will speak to this people;
And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,”
says the Lord.”*

Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. (vss. 21-22)

Paul's teaching also references Deuteronomy 28, in which God's curses “shall be upon you for a sign,” and in which Israel will be judged by a foreign people “whose language you will not understand.” The word Paul cites in Isaiah for “other tongues” is simply *heteroglossos*, a compound word including the same word used elsewhere for tongues. There is no reason to believe it has a radically different meaning.

Paul's teaching related to this Scripture has two significances. First, by speaking in uninterpreted languages, the Corinthian church actually mimics the judgement of God, in which God judges his people by bringing upon them a foreign people speaking in a foreign tongue. The Corinthians fulfill, if anything, the curses promised in the Torah and the prophets; they speak to their people the same way the foreign judging nation does. Second, the gift of languages when used rightly is

a sign for unbelievers, due to its miraculous ability to allow them to hear the Word of God. They can receive instruction, preaching, prophesy in the language they understand. Then they can come to believe.

Paul goes on to expand on how they function both for unbeliever and believer:

Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all.

And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you. (vss. 23-25)

So while Paul is making a complex point here, we can see there are two possible ways language can function in the church. If tongues are uninterpreted, the unbeliever whom they seek to win to the Lord will think they are mad, everyone babbling in a different language. In contrast, if prophesy is given (and that includes preaching the Word) in a language they CAN understand, they will come to believe, and they will worship God. They will even see the presence of God in the power there, through the gift of languages and of preaching the Word.

This teaching makes little sense if tongues are what modern Pentecostals practice. Tongues that no one on earth understand are nothing more than a sign of God's curse on His disobedient people. That is not what a spiritual gift is meant to accomplish. They do not convince anyone of the Word of God, preach, or give prophetic guidance. They are simply oddball. In fact, they are the exact opposite of what Paul desires, since languages would sound like babble without an interpreter, as he has instructed they use several times. That's not what Paul desires. Rather, nonsense talk fulfills God's curse. Unlike languages, Pentecostal mutterings cannot be interpreted at all, and no one receives teaching or prophecy through it.

One further mention on tongues as a fulfillment of prophecy: There are actually a small number of Continuationists who recognize that tongues were given for a limited period of time. They recognize that they were a sign of God's judgment on a hardened Israel, and that they would cease soon after, with the destruction of national Israel and the temple. So they maintain a Cessationism when it comes to tongues, and a Continuationism with other miracle gifts. I find that inconsistent, but it still shows a right understanding of at least part of what tongues accomplished. Their purpose is clearly in the past.

As many of you know, Charismatic churches will often claim to be able to give an interpretation to the babble they speak, which clearly is not any known earthly language. Most of the time members will practice modern "tongues" by themselves without understanding, or in a group without understanding, but once in a while they will bring out an alleged interpreter. One member will speak in babble and the interpreter will claim to say the meaning of the babble. This they call fulfilling Paul's instructions. However, it is not. Firstly, it hardly ever happens. Paul said it should be the norm. Secondly, it is not a real interpretation, since what is spoken is not a

real language. It is more on par with reading tea leaves, or something mystical and subjective like it. That's why you can never have a Charismatic speak in "tongues" and have three different interpreters explain the meaning, coming to the same results. If it were a real language, you could do that. Three interpreters of Chinese would have no difficulty coming to very close or the same translation of a long and detailed communication. But because it is the same babble that pagans spoke, interpreters in Charismatic churches are not interpreting a language. They are mystically divining meaning from something irrational, as the occult always does. Both false tongues and false interpretation are an occult practice.

Remember, the first Pentecostals, at the turn of the 20th century, tried treating their babble speak as real languages.² They read Acts 2 correctly, in a normal way anyone would read it, and believed that they had the ability to speak in other tongues of the world. They figured, since tongues are languages, they were speaking French, or Chinese, or Swahili. That's why they didn't understand it too. Then they actually sent members abroad to other countries to preach to the people, and found out sadly, that they could not be understood. No one understood a word they were saying because it was not a real language. They had to change their interpretation of the Bible for this reason, and came up with doctrines about tongues being a heavenly language, and this is their primary explanation for why no one on earth -- no language speaker of any country -- understands what is coming from their mouth. What a stretch they do in order to defend a baseless doctrine. Speaking in unintelligible heavenly languages is nowhere in the Bible. What is in the Bible is an explicit description in Acts 2 that shows tongues are earthly languages, and an application of that in 1 Corinthians 14, with an emphasis on mental understanding for the entire church. Charismatics read into Scripture what is not there, and do so wildly.

While we could go through the rest of the chapter, I believe verses one to twenty-five suffice to show that this chapter does nothing to prove the claims of Continuationism. It does not instruct people to speak in non-linguistic syllables, nor even demonstrates the practice. Rather, it teaches the opposite. It teaches the correct use of the actual gift of tongues, which is a gift of languages. It teaches that tongues should be understood, so someone must translate them, either the speaker or an interpreter. Understanding should be present in all that tongues are used for. It is a valuable gift that can impart prophecy and teaching, and be use for singing and prayer. But when not understood, it only benefits the speaker. Tongues are a fulfillment of prophetic judgment on Israel, so the brethren should not put themselves in her place by having no idea what they say. Claims by Continuationists that phrases like "speak . . . to God" or "speaks mysteries" prove the modern gift is authentic are shallow and go nowhere in this chapter. These phrases like the rest fit with tongues being real earthly languages. That is because when there is no interpreter, the only one who hears the speaker is God, and his uninterpreted language is a mystery to the whole church. The differences between this passage and Acts 2 are present because of the differences of the circumstances between the day of Pentecost and the local church. The languages were understood by everyone on Pentecost, but they are not understood by everyone in a small church many years later. The teaching that tongues are to be understood, easy to understand, and for the edification of the whole church are as close to the opposite of modern "tongues" as you could ask for. The modern practice is in fact refuted in this chapter. The real gift described in Acts 2 is taught and applied.

I believe this overview of chapter 14 is clear in providing evidence that modern “tongues” have no basis in Scripture, but I encourage you to remember that the lack of a miracle gift does not mean the lack of a miracle. God still works miracles according to His will. He simply does not do so regularly through gifted people in the Church. Just as God can still heal a man despite that miracle gift ending, God can still work a language miracle despite tongues ending, as Paul himself predicted it would in the previous chapter. The ending of the first century gift of tongues is not the ending of any possible language miracle. If God desired to provide a saint with a new language overnight, He certainly could, because He is God. He would use that miracle to fulfill His purposes. The difference is, as with other gifts which have already passed, that He is not gifting many people in every church to do miracles as a matter of course. Rather, the Almighty does it on unique occasions according to His own will, and not through a gifted individual. The ending of the miracle gifts is not the ending of the wonderful works of God.

¹ The Greek *glossa*, seen in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 is also used to clearly refer to real languages in many passages in the NT, such as Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, 17:15. In its other uses it obviously refers to the organ of the tongue.

The Greek *dialektos* seen in Acts 2 is also used to clearly refer to real languages in Acts 1:19, 21:40, 22:2, 26:14. It never refers to anything else.

² According to *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Finding the Way to Christ in a Complicated Religious Landscape*, “Parham claimed an ecstatic experience of speaking Swedish, while Agnes Ozman both spoke and wrote in Chinese and other languages after Parham laid hands on her. Stanley wrote that he saw “cloven tongues as of fire (*sic*)” come into the meeting room, descending and enabling him to speak another language, something he saw others doing, as well. Those assembled all sang “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” in at least six different languages while surrounded by a miraculous glow of white light.”

It elsewhere describes the Pentecostal missionary experience: “Missionaries were soon sent, dispatched to places such as Japan, China, and India. At the time, the more mainstream Bible Missionary Society investigated eighteen Pentecostal missionaries to see how they were faring. Not one of them reported being able to communicate successfully with those to whom they were sent. Tongue-speaking evangelism wasn’t working.”

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