

SPEAKING IN TONGUES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

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The assembly of believers in Corinth was a large one as indicated in Acts 18.10.

It had within it some every unsatisfactory elements including habits and doctrines of a sort common in the Corinthian world but which were absolutely foreign to the nature and spirit of Christianity. Paul had to deal with these issues in vigorous language because their errors were grievous both in behaviour and doctrine. There was division, false wisdom, law suits, sexual immorality, fornication, idol worship, pagan feasts, worldliness and they were carnal rather than spiritual.

When it comes to spiritual gifts chapter 12. 13 teaches that all believers have come into the baptism in the Holy Spirit when they were saved and also come into the Body of Christ.

The gifts of the Spirit were granted to some members and the order of them must be noted. Apostles come first and tongues come last. The Corinthians, who were carnal, set great store on the more spectacular gifts as do carnal believers today. To speak in an unknown tongue was to them evidently the most desirable thing of all. This estimate was however a mistaken one. The gifts are divided according to the sovereign will of the Spirit. No one gift was given to everybody. Tongues was the last mentioned.

Seven questions are found in chapter 12 verses 29 and 30. They are asked but not answered because the answers are obvious. Uniformly the answer is No. Notice the sixth question since there were those who insist that no one has properly received the Holy Spirit if they do not speak in tongues. Paul asks Do all speak in tongues? The answer is No yet they have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

At the time the attitude should have been to desire the greater gifts that is prophesying, that is to say teaching as shown in the opening verse because they are for wider and more general profit and the gifts are given for the profit of all.

Chapter 13 stresses the surpassing excellence of charity the love that gives. The first three verses contemplates gifts which may be possessed and exercised without love. That being the case they will affect nothing.

Gifts without love are nothing. Speaking in tongues is mentioned first as that was the gift that was a snare to the Corinthians.

Prophecies will fail having served their purpose. Knowledge shall vanish away for all that we need to know will be in the Scriptures. Tongues shall cease and vanish and will not be needed in a coming day. What this vanishing away means is shown in the next few verses. Prophecy and knowledge is in part; perfection will be reached with the completion of Scripture and when that which is partial it will vanish away. The apostle illustrates this from his own childhood. When manhood was reached, the childhood went away. At the time of this epistle the Corinthian church was in its infancy and childhood. It was not mature.

Chapter 14 follows the previous chapter where the message is that love is to be pursued as the thing of greatest importance. Where love reigns spiritual gifts will not be desired for personal advancement or distinction but for the profit and blessing of all.

Despite what some Pentecostals say the speaking in tongues must be under the control of the speaker as did Paul in a controlled and restrained way. Nonetheless tongues at their best is of less profit that

the gift of prophecy the declaration of God's will and purpose. Anyone who takes part must do so in the Will of God and in subjection to what the Word says here. Spiritual activities in any church can be Godward or manward. But the speaking in tongues in this chapter are clearly manward and not for the benefit of others.

Prophecy is not just foretelling, which ceased with the completion of Scripture, but the forth telling of God's mind and message.

Contrary to what Pentecostals and charismatics assert what is uttered by the voice must be intelligible and understood by the speaker. He is to utter words, whether in speaking to others, or in prayer or in song which he understands and is understood by others (1 Corinthians 14.19). Paul was prolific in speaking in tongues yet he admits that it is much better that he speaks five words that he understands and would profit others who would also understand. Such few words are vastly more important than 10,000 words in an unknown tongue.

When someone speaks in the church or assembly everyone should be able to add Amen which means So be it and to do that they must understand what is said.

Speaking in tongues was not forbidden but it had to be strictly regulated as set out in verses 27 and 28 and any unbeliever present, or anyone else present, must not have the slightest reason to think that this is madness. (verse 23).

In such Pentecostal and charismatic churches there is noise, confusion, disorder and commotion and tongue speaking is often self-promotion, contrary to verse 33. God is not the author of confusion but of peace which must be in all churches. And God is not deaf.

The lack of regulation in the Corinthian church did not uphold the teaching that women are to be silent in the churches. The word speak does not mean chatter as some assert, but, again, in this wayward church, Scripture and Apostolic teaching was ignored.

The chapter ends with Paul saying that everything should be done decently and in order and that must include reverence and dignity.

The speaking in tongues ceased even before the end of the Apostolic age.

The prophecy of Joel was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost as the apostle Peter said.

However, there is much teaching in this epistle which is of great purpose today as, for example, discipline, the Lord's Supper and the role of women as well as the triumphant truths of the resurrection and God's victory in Christ over death.

Editor: These notes have been very slightly edited without taking away from it original meaning and representation.

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