

*little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

Paul next cites the Old Testament to show they were not properly using their gifts of tongues for their intended purpose.

*Isaiah 28:9 Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. 10 For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: 11 For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. 12 To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. 13 But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.*

Interestingly, this passage also refers to babes and knowledge. And it warns that if Israelites did not grow up and seek knowledge, line upon line, precept upon precept, they would fall into the hands of men speaking in foreign tongues, invaders and captors. Spiritual knowledge, true knowledge of God, is acquired through regular, systematic, applied study of His word. If we neglect the word we will begin to hear things spoken that might as well be foreign languages, for we will not understand what is said. And we are carried captive by human reasoning and ideas.

*2Timothy 2:23 But foolish and senseless questionings avoid, knowing that they beget contentions. 24 And a bondman of the Lord ought not to contend, but be gentle towards all; apt to teach; forbearing; 25 in meekness setting right those who oppose, if God perhaps may sometime give them repentance to acknowledgment of the truth, 26 and that they may awake up out of the snare of the devil, who are taken by him, for \*his\* will.(JND)*

[Note that quotes of scripture given in scripture often are meant to turn us to the context of the quote, which often contains much more on the topic at hand than stated in the quote. The quote is a “bookmark” to more light. Make a practice of looking up the quotes.]

Our in-depth study of short portions of this full and important chapter provides many practical insights on assembly conduct. But we must watch that are seeing the forest not just the trees. Much of what Paul is saying here is irony or sarcasm. Those who are blinded by their own preconceived notions and desires tend to apply his statements in a way to justify the use of tongues in assembly. And indeed, Paul forbids us from forbidding the speaking in tongues, verse 39. But he presents every reason to discourage the use of tongues short of forbidding them. Why didn't he just forbid their use? That would quickly do away with the problem if misuse. Or would it? But that would be returning them to bondage and destroying the liberty Christ had died to bestow upon them, and us. The same is true of the three chapters (8-10) he takes to instruct about things sacrificed to idols. The attitudes are more important than the acts. So in chapters 11 through 14 he takes a considerable space instructing us about the **assembly order**, rather than merely issuing decrees.

When he states he spoke in tongues more than they all he is not bragging. Nor is he endorsing the use of tongues in assembly. He is simply removing any basis for a possible accusation that he was just envious of their gifts and therefore was putting them down. No. He states the preferred activity in assembly. *I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.* Look how many times he tells us in these chapters that spiritual edification is the objective, not fleshly excitement. They were acting like children with fun toys, showing off, entertaining and being entertained. They were behaving with immature, childish understanding, rather than mature wisdom and knowledge imparted by spiritual ministry that touched the heart. How ironic! Here they were priding themselves in their deep knowledge based upon the wisdom of men and yet they were neglecting the very source of real wisdom and knowledge among them, prophesying in the Spirit.

He makes a neat aside here reminding them that they should be childlike in their feelings and actions toward one another. Little children are characterized by a sweet simplicity of heart that quickly forgives and forgets and rarely picks up a grudge. They needed that gentle reminder to reinforce what he had said earlier in the epistle about their incipient divisions. The Lord calls us to become as little children.

*Matthew 18:1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? 2 And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, 3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this*

Paul's point here by quoting Isaiah is that the foreign languages heard by Israel were a sign to them of God's displeasure and resulting judgement upon their untrue hearts and persistent wandering from Him. Tongues were a sign for God's wandering people. Did the Corinthians wish to count themselves among those who had wandered from God? Weren't they misusing valid sign gifts in assembly for personal excitement rather than for outreach? They were to show Jews in the community that they were astray from God. He was indeed now

speaking a different way than their Old Testament laid down. This is how tongues were used on the Day of Pentecost. They were given to speak to **unbelievers, not to believers!** Perhaps the Corinthians were given the gift of tongues to be properly used in this bustling seaport to reach foreign speaking Jews and Gentiles with the gospel of Christ. They would also show the power of God working in these despised Christians. But outreach was neglected. The means for it were redirected toward entertainment inside. We must beware of similar disuse, misuse or abuse of spiritual gifts and inborn natural gifts found in individuals in our midst. **Performances instead of edification and outreach?!** That's what the Corinthians were into. They forgot why they were here. Heartfelt joyful (or sorrowful, if appropriate) singing, and preaching and comforting.. That's what we are here for.

Prophesying is again presented as the means of blessing in assembly. The use of unknown foreign languages there is but gross confusion. Such confusion is not of God. Paul later states the God is not the author of confusion but of peace (verse 33). This made the believers appear to be **mad** <3105> to a visitor.

**3105 mainomai**, mah'-ee-nom-ahee

(AV-be mad 4, be beside (one's) self 1; 5,  
1) to be mad, to rave

1a) of one who so speaks that he seems not to  
be in his right mind

Not only that, I understand pagan religious services feature speaking in tongues driven by demonic beings. Remember the warning about idolatry in chapters

8-10, and about trying the spirits chapter12:1-3?

Underlying all of this was the false premise they held that the assembly was a place for gifted individuals to use their gift **as they pleased**. Paul is refuting that idea in principle. Tongues were just one example of this practice. It effectively shuts down the liberty of the Holy Spirit to use anyone He pleased, gifted or not, to minister to the assembly as a whole or to speak for the assembly as a whole. Indeed spiritual gifts play an important, essential part in edification to the believers and reaching unbelievers. But Paul tells us here they were not to dominate when in assembly. There the Spirit works in the midst of those gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus. It is one body, and any of the members may prophesy, whether gifted or not.

I recall someone once mentioning there seemed to be no gift for teaching in their assembly, so it was extremely difficult to conduct a bible study. The response of a wise older brother was that the “open meeting for ministry” didn’t depend upon gift for edification. All can prophesy there. Loving faith predominates rather than gift, although gift is to be used in faith and love too. What a gracious provision for even small assemblies in this day of ruin and divisions that separate gifted believers from one another locally. But God is sufficient, if we recognize the failed state of things and the path He has called all believer’s to in these last days.

By Ron Canner, November 19, 2003.