

# Abiding Fruit

*Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart*

---

Vol. 2 No. 22

February 18, 2007

---

## **Tongues Are A Sign 1 Corinthians 14:22**

The definitive answer to the title of this article is found precisely in 1 Cor. 14:22, *“Tongues are a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign, not for unbelievers, but for believers.”* This verse is the summation of all the arguments that the Apostle Paul has put forward in his description of tongues, what they are and what they are to be used for. We discover that tongues are first mentioned in 1 Cor. 12:10 as a spiritual gift. In fact, there are two gifts; the first is various kinds of tongues, and the second is, the interpretation of tongues. Paul will not allow under any circumstances the usage of the gift of tongues apart from the usage of the gift of interpretation (cf. 14:9 – 11, 13, 23 - 25, esp. 27, 28). It is the interpretation of tongues that is the greater gift, for it reveals to the unbeliever what he does not understand (vs. 23). It seems clear therefore, that the believer has no need for an interpretation for the simple reason that tongues are not for his benefit, although since not all possess the gift of interpretation, he would benefit only in understanding what was said. It is only the gift of prophecy that proves fruitful to the believer because he can understand it and it is designed for his edification and benefit (vs. 22).

There has been much confusion over the gift of tongues and this continues to be the case at present. It should be patently obvious to anyone reading the Bible that not all believers have all the spiritual gifts, and therefore, not all believers have the gift of tongues, nor do all have the gift of interpretation (see 12:7 – 10; esp. 12:27 - 30). 1 Corinthians 14 cannot be understood apart from chapter 13. It is chapter 13 that sets the background for understanding the whole issue of speaking in tongues. It should be noted that speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues is not mentioned in any other book apart from its early usage in the book of Acts (Acts 2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6). Speaking in new tongues is mentioned in the disputed section of Mark’s Gospel (16:9 - 20), but it neither affects any discussion on the subject whether the passage is original or not. This lack of mention in the rest of the New Testament is very significant, and the question should be asked, that if tongues and their interpretation are so relevant, then why in every epistle of Paul (apart from 1 Corinthians) does he not mention such an important gift? Secondly, why in every passage on spiritual gifts is tongues relegated only to 1 Corinthians 12 (see Rom. 12:3 -8; Eph. 4:4 – 16; 1 Pet. 4:8 – 11)? The answer is, first of all, because the Corinthians were abusing the gift of tongues, and needed correction as to its use (12:29, 30; 14:13 – 19), secondly, because as far as 1 Cor. 13 is concerned tongues were going to cease (13:8). It should also be remembered that Paul’s work in Corinth occurred in the early 50’s AD with 1 Corinthians being written from Ephesus in the mid 50’s. The ceasing of tongues as indicated in chapter 13 makes perfect sense in terms of time, if 1 Corinthians was an epistle written prior to many others.

It is clear from the Acts’ passages that speaking in tongues was simply the ability to speak in a foreign language and to be understood by the hearers. The reason why tongues are understood is because they are human languages, and their purpose is the same as described in 1 Cor. 14:22 – for the benefit of the hearer as a sign. Moreover, in every case in Acts, the sign is intended it would seem, as a means to provoke unbelieving Israel. In 1 Cor. 14:23, it causes a response from an outsider who has come into the church.

It is clear from 1 Cor. 14:1, 3 – 5, 22 (see esp. vs. 5) that prophecy constitutes a more important place in the church in terms of edification. Tongues seem to be for use in terms of evangelism (14:22, 23), with the interpretation of them helping both unbeliever primarily and believer secondarily to understand. If

tongues are a foreign language, then not all who would visit might speak the same language, hence the necessity for interpretation.

It is very important to note in 1 Cor. 13:8 that prophecies and knowledge will pass away and that tongues shall cease. Firstly, the same word is used for both prophecies and knowledge passing away, and a different word is used in connection with tongues. Secondly, all three of these verbs are in the future tense, meaning that the passing away and ceasing shall be sometime in the future. Thirdly, both prophecies and knowledge passing away are in the passive voice, but tongues ceasing is in the middle voice. The significance of this means that as far as tongues are concerned they will of themselves stop. No outside influence is necessary to make tongues stop. They stop by themselves – this is what the middle voice indicates. The passive voice used with the verb for passing away associated with prophecies and knowledge means that something has to act on prophecy and knowledge for them to pass away. In 13:9 we see that Paul only mentions “knowing in part” and “prophesying in part”, and that tongues is absent. This is because he knows that something must act on prophecy and knowledge to make them pass away and he has to indicate what that is, which is why in verse 10, he says that “*when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.*” The *partial* obviously refers to knowing and prophesying. Tongues do not require *the perfect (thing)* for them to stop – they just stop. I do believe that tongues are not necessary today (the true gift has ceased), because we have Scripture complete and available in many languages, but I think *the perfect thing* is the presence of God, because only then will I see *face to face* (vs. 12) and only then will I *know fully* (vs. 12). It is also possible that *the perfect thing* is the Word of God (not yet complete when Paul was writing). Knowledge certainly did not pass away with the coming of Scripture – rather it is enhanced by it. If God’s presence is what is meant as *the perfect thing*, then this does tie in with the fact that only knowledge is mentioned in that state (vs. 12), and prophecy is not, because prophecy will not be necessary in heaven. Don’t neglect chapter 13.

It is my view, that what we have in 1 Corinthians 14, is the true gift of tongues, and the abuse of that gift. The common evangelical interpretation is that when Paul refers to tongues in 14:2, 4, 13, 14, and 19, he is referring to gibberish because he uses the singular. In other words you cannot have plural gibberishes. This is not my view. You can have language spoken of as single, so why does it have to be gibberish? I do think that there is a demonic use of tongues which is ecstatic gibberish (see 12:2, 3), and this is what I think is prevalent today. Certainly if it is not demonic, as practiced by some churches, it is complete and utter gibberish, for it is totally unintelligible and there seem to be no interpreters around either. Of what value is such display? It is of no value, rather it detracts from the glory of God (see 14:23). I am not troubled by the use of single or plural tongues for language can be either. It also seems to me that if Paul was facing demonic ecstatic gibberish, then he would have been very clear about the differences, but Paul seems to deal with speaking in tongues as being a problem in terms of abuse rather than use. He goes to great lengths to say that he does not object to speaking in tongues (14:5, 18, 39), except that speaking in tongues has limitations. Not everyone understands (vs. 2, 4, 13, 19, 27, and 28). Without interpretation, tongues have no beneficial effect (vs. 13, 27, and 28). Paul is concerned that the Corinthians not abuse their spiritual gifts. They were a greatly gifted church, but they were self-centered and worldly. Paul desires, that until tongues cease, they be used correctly for the communication of the truth that brings salvation to unbelievers, and that prophecy (which they also abused), be used for the mutual edification of the church. We need a fresh examination of this great chapter, so that we can confidently approach the confusion so prevalent in the Church at large today. May God cause it to be so!