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Tongues are a Sign

14: 20-25

Tongues are a sign DIG: Why should our understanding of the gift of tongues start with what happened in Jerusalem at Shavu'ot, rather than what was happening in Corinth? What did Luke's audience know? What did Paul's audience know? Why are tongues called languages? In what three ways were tongues a sign? To whom was this sign specifically given? Why?

REFLECT: What kinds of experience have you had with people speaking in tongues? Have you ever had someone doubt your salvation because you haven't had a "second" blessing? What would you say to some who said you weren't saved because you didn't speak in tongues? How can you be a part of Paul's declaration that "All Isra'el will be saved?" Who can you talk to?

Tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, specifically unbelieving Jews.

Ironically, there is much confusion about the gift of **tongues** (Greek: *glossai*) today, as there was in the days when **Paul** wrote to the church in **Corinth**. This is in good part due to the extraneous material that is introduced. The subject is one that concerns exegesis (finding out what the biblical author meant when he wrote the text) alone. We need to ask, "What do the Scriptures say about this **gift**?" We can rule out all **ecstatic utterance** (**to see link click Ce - The Pagan Background of Counterfeit Spiritual Gifts**). And especially we don't construct in advance a theory about these **tongues** and then interpret the Scriptures according to it.

Since the promise regarding **tongues** was first fulfilled at **Shavu'ot** in **Jerusalem**, and since this phenomenon didn't appear in **Corinth** for a number of years after the first occurrence, we must ask whether there was a difference between **the tongues** spoken in **Jerusalem** and **the tongues** spoken in **Corinth**. The answer is that **they** were the same. As the promises that **Yeshua** made (**John 15:26** and **16:7-15**) are one, so the fulfillment of those promises are the same, regardless of the place or time where the fulfillment occurs.

The next step is to recognize the fact that Luke's description as given in Acts (see the commentary on **Acts [Al](#) - The Ruach Ha'Kodesh Comes at Shavu'ot**) **is foundational for what Paul writes in Corinthians.** Others, playing theological Houdini, reverse this. They seek to determine what happened in **Corinth** and either square **Luke's** account with what they think occurred at **Corinth**, or come up with two different gifts of **tongues**. This is the wrong way to go about approaching the subject. **For Luke is the one who fully describes what the tongues are, while Paul takes for granted that his readers know what they are, and therefore, offers no description.** Luke writes for a reader (Theophilus) who may never have heard of this gift, at least may never have seen this gift in operation. Paul writes for readers who have often heard members of their own congregation speak in tongues. This is critical as to the Scriptural starting point for understanding tongues.



Luke reports that **there were staying in Yerushalayim religious Jews from every nation under heaven. When the Ruach came each of the 120 believers began to talk in different languages** (Greek: *glossai*), **as the Spirit enabled them to speak. Totally amazed,** those **Jewish pilgrims**, who had come from all over the world, were hearing the impossible. The **Galilean disciples** were **speaking** various known **languages**. **The pilgrims** asked in astonishment: **How is it that we hear them speaking in our native languages?** Then a list of the different countries, and by implication, different **languages** spoken in those countries, is given. **The pilgrims** even stated what **they** heard: **How is it that we hear them speaking in our own native languages about the great things that God has done (Acts 2:1-11).** There can be no doubt that **the languages** spoken by **the Galilean disciples** were unknown to **them** prior to **Shavu'ot**. And this is the decisive factor in understanding how the true gift of **languages** functioned in **Corinth**. **It** functioned in **Corinth** exactly as **it** did in **Jerusalem**. **They** were one and the same.⁴⁶¹

From **Shavu'ot** until today, the prevalent idea of the Church has been that **the gift of tongues** was the power of preaching the Gospel to different peoples to each in its own **language**, without having learned it. This **gift**, it was thought, explained the rapid spread of the gospel. John Chrysostom (died in 407 AD), an early Church father, who served as archbishop of Constantinople, described **the gift**, saying, "Immediately, one made his voice be heard in **the language** of the Persians, another in that of the Romans, another in that of the Indians, another in some other **tongue**." Theodore, bishop of Cyrus (393 to 457 AD), and an influential theologian of the School of Antioch, asked in a positive light, "Is it possible to conceive behavior stranger [to the natural mind] on the part of a Greek **speaking** in Arabic or Chinese to express the gospel which filled his **heart**?"

Brothers, don't be children in your thinking. As **Paul** begins to explain the true purpose of **tongues**, **he** appeals to **the Corinthians** to be **mature in their thinking (14:20a)**. It was **their** loveless immaturity and worldliness that caused **their** theological, spiritual, and moral problems, including **their** misuse of **tongues**. Before **they** could comprehend what **the apostle** was trying to say, **they** would have to stop being **children in their thinking**.

In evil, however, **the Corinthians** were anything but **babes (14:20b)**. **They** were highly advanced in every sort of **sin**. **They** had virtually all the manifestations of the flesh and almost none of **the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-23)**. **They** were **children, tossed about by the waves and blown along by every wind of teaching, at the mercy of people clever in devising ways to deceive (Ephesians 4:14)**. By **their** selfish, ego-building abuse of **the gift of tongues** **they** were, among other things, ignoring the rest of the family of **God**.

They could not be taught because **they** were not interested in learning. **They** were only interested in using spiritual means and fellow believers in whatever ways would serve **their** own needs. **They** were not interested in truth, but experience; not in right doctrine or right living, but only in good feelings. Experience always won out over truth, emotions always won out over reason, and self-will always won out over **God's** will. Unlike **the Bereans (Acts 17:11)**, **the Corinthians** did not bother to check what **they** heard against Scripture. **They** did not take the time to **test the spirits to see whether they were from God (First John 4:1)**. If something sounded good, **they** believed it; if it felt good, **they** did it. Like **the Israelites** in the time of **the judges, everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25)**.

As **Paul** explains the true purpose of **tongues**, **he** begins with a freely rendered passage

from **Isaiah 28:11-12**. **In the TaNaKh it is written** (Greek: from *grapho*, in the perfect tense, meaning *a past completed action with continuing results*), **“By other tongues, by the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people. But even then they will not listen to me,** says

ADONAI.” Those other tongues, Paul said, are what you now know and experience as the gift of languages. And God has given this gift as a sign not for believers but for unbelievers (14:21-22a). Here is the heart of **Chapter 14** and the most important truth about this gift. It was given as a sign, and as a sign to unbelievers, specifically unbelieving Jews, just like it was in **Isaiah 28:11**.

It was a sign of judgment, a sign of blessing, and a sign of authority.

A sign of judgment: Some fifteen years or so before **Isaiah** prophesied about the other tongues by the lips of foreigners, the northern kingdom of **Isra’el** had been conquered and taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 BC because of unbelief and apostasy. **The prophet** then warned the southern kingdom of **Judah**, that the same judgment awaited **her** at the hands of the Babylonians. However, the proud religious leaders of **Judah** would not listen to **Isaiah**. **His** teaching was too simple. **He** talked to them, they claimed, as if they were babies. Those barely weaned toddlers and babies just taken from the breast. They said **he** taught them as if they were infants, **“Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there (Isaiah 28:9-10 NASB)**. **Ha’Shem** had indeed spoken to **them** simply, in order that the least mature among **them** could understand and so that no one living in the Southern Kingdom would have an excuse for not knowing **the LORD’s** will and promise. The essence of **His** promise was that if **the nation** would submit to Babylon, **they could rest, the exhausted could rest, and then they could relax . . . but Judah wouldn’t listen (Isaiah 28:12)**.

About 800 years before **Isaiah**, **YHVH** had warned **the Jews** that **ADONAI [would] raise up a nation against [them] from far away, from the end of the earth, just as the eagle swoops down, A nation whose language [they would] not understand** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Fj - Military Siege**). **The strange language of their conquerors would be a sign of God’s judgment**. About 100 years after **Isaiah**, **Ha’Shem** warned through **Jeremiah**, **“I will bring on you a distant nation, an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Bb - Judah’s Invasion from a Distant Nation**). The sign of judgment would be a language they did not know.

When **the disciples** spoke at **Shavu’ot** and were heard in **their own language** by **Jews**

from many different countries (**Acts 2:7-11**), those **Jews** should have known that **God's** judgment was imminent. **His** judgment had fallen on rebellious **Isra'el**, and then on rebellious **Judah**. How much more would it fall on those of **His people** who now had crucified **the Son of God**? In 70 AD that great judgment fell, when **Jerusalem** was utterly destroyed by the Roman general Titus. Over one million **Jews** were slaughtered; hundreds of thousands more were taken captive; **the Temple** was plundered, desecrated, and then utterly destroyed; and the rest of the city was burned to the ground (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Mt - The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple Remembered on Tisha B'Av in 70 AD**). Just as **Yeshua** had predicted when **He wept** over the city: **For the days are coming upon you when your enemies will set up a barricade around you, encircle you, hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within your walls, leaving not one stone standing on another - and all because you did not recognize your opportunity when God offered it (Luke 19:43-44)!**

After the destruction of **Jerusalem**, and especially the destruction of **the Temple**, the reason for **tongues ceased** to exist for **the nation**. The judgment of which **it** was a **sign** had come. After the **Shavu'ot** manifestation of **tongues**, **Peter**, by implication, reminded **the Jews** of that judgment: **Therefore, let the whole house of Isra'el know beyond doubt that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah - this Yeshua whom you have executed on a stake (Acts 2:36)!⁴⁶²**

A sign of blessing: The second **sign** was a residual benefit of the first. **The gift of tongues** was a **sign** that **God** would no longer work through **one nation**, and **one favored people**. The universal Church, founded on **the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20)**, **Yeshua Messiah**, was for **all peoples** of **all nations**. It is a Church of many **languages**, but no barriers. **There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor freeman, neither male or female; for in union with Messiah Yeshua, you are all one (Galatians 3:28).**

*Dear Loving Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for **Your** deep love for **all nations**. How awesome that in heaven there will be people from **all nations**, as **John** saw in his vision. **After these things I looked, and behold, a vast multitude that no one could count - from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues - was standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands (Revelation 7:9). Your love is so amazing - wide and deep high and long (Ephesians 3:18)! You open the gates of Your glorious Kingdom to all who love and follow You (Romans 10:9-10), no matter their nationality, age, rich or poor, etc., and You so graciously cloth them with Yourself. For you are all sons of God through***

trusting in Messiah Yeshua. For all of you who were immersed in Messiah have clothed yourselves with Messiah. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female - for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua (Galatians 3:26-28). Praise Your power that joins those who love You to Yourself not only in Your death, but also in Your resurrection. For if we have become joined together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also will be joined together in His resurrection (Romans 6:5). I will thank You for Your love by loving You back with my thoughts, finances and actions. In Yeshua's holy name and power of His resurrection. Amen

With great compassion and sorrow for **his** fellow **Jews**, Paul wrote: **It is by means of their stumbling that salvation has come to the Gentiles, in order to provoke them to jealousy.** But with a note of great hope, he continued: **Moreover, if their stumbling is bringing riches to the world - that is, if Isra'el's being placed temporarily in a condition less favored than that of the Gentiles is bringing riches to the latter - how much greater riches will Isra'el in its fullness bring them (Romans 11:11-12)!** A few verses later he explains more fully: **For, brothers, I want you to understand this truth which God formerly concealed but has now revealed, so that you won't imagine you know more than you actually do. It is that stoniness, to a degree, has come upon Isra'el, until the Gentile world enters in its fullness; and that it is in this way that all Isra'el will be saved. As the TaNaKh says, "Out of Tziyon will come the Redeemer; he will turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (see the commentary on [Romans Da - The Redemption of Isra'el](#)). The way would always be open for individual **Jews** to come into the Kingdom, for the hardening of their **hearts** was only partial, and on the last **three days** of the Great Tribulation, **all** those surviving **Jews** that are hold up in Bozrah **will be saved** (see the commentary on [Revelation Ey - The Basis of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ](#)).⁴⁶³**

A sign of authority: Those who preached the judgment and the promised blessing were the apostles, whose authority was validated by **signs, wonders and miracles (Second Corinthians 12:12; Romans 15:19)**. In the Dispensation of the Torah, humanity was divided into two groups, **Jews** and **Gentiles**. But in the Dispensation of Grace, because of what went on in the intertestamental period, there were three groups of people in the world at that time, **Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans (Matthew 10:5-6)**. Peter would be the **key** person (pun intended) in bringing in **the Jews (Acts 2)**, **the Samaritans (Acts 8)**, and **the Gentiles (Acts 10)** into **the Church** by receiving the Ruach Ha'Kodesh. Once he opened the door it stayed open.

The Jews at Shavu'ot: At Caesarea Philippi Peter declared that Yeshua was, "The Messiah, the Son of the living God." In response, Jesus said: **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Fx - On This Rock I Will Build My Church](#)). Whenever the words **key** or **keys** is used symbolically in the Bible, it always symbolizes the authority to open or close doors (**Judges 3:25; First Chronicles 9:27; Isaiah 22:20-24; Matthew 16:19a; Revelation 1:18, 3:7, 9:1 and 20:1**). As a result, **Peter** was responsible to open the doors of **the Church** to three different ethnic groups. First, at **Shavu'ot** Jews were saved after the disciples spoke in **tongues**, this confirmed **Peter's** authority (see the commentary on [Acts An - Peter Speaks to the Shavu'ot Crowd](#)).

The Samaritans in Samaria: Philip proclaimed the Good News about the kingdom of God and the name of Messiah Yeshua to the Samaritans, and both men and women were immersed. Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the message of God, they sent Peter and John to check it out. The two apostles were sent to authenticate Samaritan salvation because Peter had **the keys to the kingdom of heaven**, and to pray that the Samaritans would receive the Ruach Ha'Kodesh. When Peter and John arrived, they began laying their hands on the Samaritan believers and it became obvious that they were receiving the Ruach Ha'Kodesh as evidenced by the speaking in tongues, which, for the second time, was the confirmation of Peter's authority (**Acts 8:13-17**).

The Gentiles at the house of Cornelius: After God instructed Peter that what He has made clean, Peter must not consider unholy (see the commentary on [Acts Bf - Peter's Vision](#)), the apostle received an invitation to go to the house of a Roman centurion. Normally, it would have been strictly forbidden for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile. But his heart and mind had changed since he had learned the lesson of his vision, saying: **I truly understand that God is not one to show favoritism, however, in every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.** When Peter preached the gospel, Cornelius and his whole household were saved and spoke in tongues, confirming, for the third time, that Peter held **the keys to the Kingdom** (see [Acts Bg - Peter Goes to the House of Cornelius](#)).

But prophecy, Paul goes on to say, **is for believers (14:22b)**. As indicated by *italics* in some Bibles, *is for a sign* is not in the Greek text and was supplied by the Bible translators who wrote their own theology into their translation. According to Greek grammar such a

meaning is possible, but not required. Because prophesying is nowhere else spoken of as *a sign*, I do not believe that is **Paul's** meaning here. **He** was *not* saying that **prophecy** is *a sign* to believers as **tongues** was **a sign to unbelievers**.⁴⁶⁴

The limited function of the genuine **gift of tongues** can be seen in the fact that even during its proper time in history, **it** could be misused and become a hindrance to worship and to evangelism. **Paul's** description is concrete and vivid. **The Corinthians** loved and admired **ecstatic utterance** above all other **gifts**. So, **Paul** grants **them their** wish in an imaginary scene. **He** pictures a worship service in which **they all speak** in a **pagan gibberish**. But interpretation is, of course, disregarded. The imaginary scene continues. **So**, suppose **the whole congregation comes together with everybody speaking in ecstatic utterance, and uninstructed people or unbelievers come in. They** know nothing of **counterfeit tongues**. **They** just sit down and take it all in, listening to the unintelligible torrent of sounds. **Won't they say you're crazy (14:23)?** Was this the effect **the Corinthians** wanted to produce? This, **Paul** suggested, would certainly not advance the cause of **Messiah** in **Corinth**, but only conveyed weirdness.⁴⁶⁵

On the other hand, **if all prophesy, and some unbeliever or uninstructed person enters, he is convicted of sin by all, he is brought under judgment by all.** **Paul** continues to contrast **tongues** with **prophecy**, showing **prophecy's** superiority. **Prophecy** is used here in its most general sense of speaking forth **God's Word** (see [Dl - The Word that Builds Up](#)). When **the Word** is proclaimed it speaks to **the heart** of people and brings conviction of **sin**, the first step in coming to faith. The convicted person comes to see **himself** as **he** really is, because **the secrets of his heart are laid bare. His sinful intentions and acts are revealed to him.** Consequently, **he will fall on his face and worship God, saying, "God is really here among you" (14:24-25)!** The Church's most powerful testimony is not in ecstatic speech, but in its clear proclamation of the powerful **Word of God, which is alive! It is at work and is sharper than any double-edged sword - it cuts right through to where soul meets spirit and joints meet marrow, and it is quick to judge the inner reflections and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).**⁴⁶⁶