

## Lesson Plan for Paul's Letters to the Church in Corinth

### ***Chapter 14: Gifts of Prophecy and Tongues***

Lesson Text: 1 Corinthians Chapter 14

Background Texts: Acts 2:1-18

This chapter continues the theme of the previous two as Paul explains to the congregation the value of coming together as a church family while worshipping God. It seems to this reader that Paul's vision of the church in Corinth (and elsewhere) is actually more like that of a commune with no member having any status that is elevated above another. As mentioned in the introduction to Chapter 12, to Paul the church is the body of Christ. The members of that body must work together to form a more perfect union. And that leads us to the practice of speaking in foreign or unintelligible tongues.

Speaking in tongues is first mentioned in Acts 2:1-18, when the apostles who were gathered during the day of Pentecost were filled with the Holy Spirit. They subsequently gained the ability to be understood in all of the diverse native languages of the attendees. "*God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven!*" expressed confusion when trying to understand why each of them heard the words of the apostles in their own native tongue. Some onlookers even accused the apostles of being drunk at nine in the morning! Frankly, I tend to side with Paul on this one since I am always a bit bewildered by the value of speaking in tongues, especially in today's Pentecostal services. It seems that it would separate the speaker from the congregation rather than to draw people closer together in God. Barclay's commentary, however, tells us that in the early church the practice was much admired. It was, in fact, a highly coveted gift. "*People became worked up into a state of ecstasy and poured out torrents of sound in no known language.*" The New English Bible offers a translation of the term 'tongues' that helped me to better grasp the concept that Barclay makes. In that version the writers refer to it as the "*language of ecstasy*" and when one is speaking in the language of ecstasy "*he is no doubt inspired but he speaks mysteries.*"

Now let us be clear: Paul does not deny that this 'language of ecstasy' is a gift and one that is welcome in the church. He simply wants to ensure that the use of it is kept under control so that no single 'tongue-wagger' takes control of the entire congregation with a babbling soliloquy that no one can understand and no one can interpret. To Paul, a far better gift is 'prophecy'. So what does that term really mean? Does Paul say it is better to be a soothsayer or one who can predict the future? No, not at all. The gift of prophecy in this sense is to 'foretell' the truth of God's love. Think of it, if you like, as Paul telling the church members "*I'd rather that you spread the Good News in your native language so that all can understand it rather than speak in tongues that only you and God can hear.*" In short, unless the gift of tongues can be translated, it is useless to the congregation. "*You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.* And we can end this portion with Paul, always the humble apostle (sarcasm noted), telling them that "*I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.*"

In conclusion, the coward in me will leave it to the distaff part of our group to deal with Paul's comments on females in the church services. Mother raised no fools and I'm not touching that one.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Evidently, the Corinthians placed great value on the gift of tongues. Why does Paul prefer prophecy to tongues that cannot be understood (vv. 1-5)?
2. What illustrations does Paul use to show why those uninterpreted tongues do not build up the church (vv. 6-12)?
3. What remedy does Paul suggest (vv. 13-19)?
4. What does Paul say about the *purpose* of tongues and of prophecy (vv. 20-25)?
5. What guidelines does Paul give for when someone should speak in tongues and when he should remain silent (vv. 27-28)?

*"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Matthew 28:20