

Gift of Languages

Acts 2:1-7; 1 Cor 14:13-19
SS Lesson for 05/24/2015

Devotional Scripture: 1 Cor 13:1-8

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson teaches us about and the **Gift of Languages**. The **study's aim** is to discover the gift of tongues entailed speaking in a language not known by the speaker. The **study's application** is to be a testimony for Jesus Christ in any language we speak. (*Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary*).

Key Verse: Acts 2:4

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

The day of Pentecost was an annual feast that followed the Feast of Firstfruits by a week of weeks (i.e., seven weeks, or 49 days) and therefore also was called the Feast of Weeks (cf. Lev. 23:15-22). The name "Pentecost," of Greek derivation, means 50 because it was the 50th day after the Firstfruits feast (Lev. 23:16). Where the followers of Christ were gathered at this time is not definitely known. Luke simply wrote, **They were all together in one place**. Perhaps they were in the temple precincts. However, the place is called a "house" (Acts 2:2), an unlikely designation for the temple, though it may be referred to as a house (cf. 7:47). If they were not assembled at the temple, they must have been near it (cf. 2:6). The references to "wind" and "fire" are significant. The word for "Spirit" (*pneuma*) is related to *pnoe*, the word translated "wind" here. It also means breath. Both nouns—"spirit" and "wind" or "breath"—are from the verb *pneō*, "to blow, to breathe." The **sound like the blowing of a violent wind... from heaven** points to the power of the Holy Spirit and the fullness of His coming. The **tongues of fire** portray the presence of God. Several times in the Old Testament God displayed Himself in the form of flames (Gen. 15:17; Ex. 3:2-6; 13:21-22; 19:18; 40:38; cf. Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16). No believer there was exempt from this experience, for the flames **separated and came to rest on each of them**. The filling **with the Holy Spirit** is separate from the baptism of the Spirit. The Spirit's baptism occurs once for each believer at the moment of salvation (cf. 11:15-16; Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:12), but the Spirit's filling may occur not only at salvation but also on a number of occasions after salvation (Acts 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 9:17; 13:9, 52). An evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was **other tongues** (*heterais glōssais*; cf. 11:15-16). These were undoubtedly spoken living languages; the word used in 2:6, 8 is *dialektō*, which means "language" and not ecstatic utterance. This gives insight into what is meant by "tongues" in chapters 2; 10; 19; and in 1 Corinthians 12-14. This event marked the beginning of the church. Up to this point the church was anticipated (Matt. 16:18). The church is constituted a body by means of Spirit baptism (1 Cor. 12:13). The first occurrence of the baptism of the Spirit therefore must indicate the inauguration of the church. Of course Acts 2:1-4 does not state that Spirit baptism took place at Pentecost. However, 1:5 anticipates it and 11:15-16 refers back to it as having occurred at Pentecost. The church, therefore, came into existence then. **Jews** of the "diaspora" (dispersion; cf. James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1) **were... in Jerusalem** for the feast. Perhaps they were bilingual, speaking both Greek and their native languages. They were dumbfounded to hear Jews from Galilee speaking the languages of peoples surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. It is a question whether only the Twelve spoke in **tongues** or all 120. Several factors support the idea of only the Twelve being involved in this phenomenon: (1) They are referred to as **Galileans** (Acts 2:7; cf. 1:11-13). (2) Peter stood up with "the Eleven" (2:14). (3) The nearest antecedent of "they" in verse 1 is the "apostles" in 1:26. However, a problem with this view is that the number of languages listed in 2:9-11 is more than 12. But one apostle could have spoken more than one language, in sequence. Still it is possible that all 120 spoke in tongues. Since the majority of them were from Galilee they could have been called Galileans. The references to the Twelve would have indicated they were the leaders of the 120. The topic the people discussed in all these languages was **the wonders of God**. It seems they were praising God. Their message was not one of repentance; it was not the gospel. Unable to explain this miracle away,

the Jewish unbelievers were puzzled, and some resorted to scoffing and asserted, **They have had too much wine.** The word “wine” (*gleukous*) means new sweet wine.

Human communication operated on the same principles as instrumental communication. The word **languages** in verse 1 Cor 14:10 is *phōnōn*, the plural of the same word *phōnēn*, rendered “sounds” of the harp (v. 7) and “call” of the trumpet (v. 8). Human sounds, apart from a shared understanding of their meanings, were worthless. So was the Corinthian preoccupation with uninterpreted tongues. That was why Paul did not discourage their interest in **spiritual gifts** but did encourage them to pursue those gifts that benefited all in **the church** (v. 12; cf. 12:31; 14:1). Interpreted tongues, like prophecy, could benefit the assembly (cf. Acts 19:6). Therefore the gift of interpretation should be requested of God. If no one was present who was able to interpret, the tongues-speaker was to keep silent (1 Cor. 14:28). It was also true that however beneficial the gift of tongues might be to its recipient (cf. v. 4), when coupled with the gift of interpretation it had much more value because it involved not only the feeling aspects of a person, but his mental faculties as well. If it were true that one who possessed the gift of tongues would find his worship enhanced by the possession and use of the gift of interpretation (v. 15), it was certainly true that anyone listening to him who did not have the same gift could not empathize with the tongues-speaker. At least another person with the gift of tongues could identify with the exhilaration experienced in the exercise of the gift. However, a Christian with a different gift required intelligible communication if he were to gain any benefit from what was said and so have a basis for affirming his agreement by saying an **Amen**. But such comprehension did not exist if the tongue were not interpreted and so the brother was **not edified**. Paul’s concern to harness the enthusiasm for the gift of **tongues** in Corinth was not motivated by sour grapes. When it came to the gift of tongues, he could outtalk them **all**. But Paul was not primarily interested in self-fulfillment. Instead he was concerned with ministering to **others** and thereby glorifying God (cf. 10:31-33). For that reason he did not use his gift of tongues with the assembled **church** but he did exercise his gift of prophecy (14:6). That, in fact, was in accord with God’s purpose. Where then did tongues fit into God’s purpose? Paul discussed that next. The Corinthian infatuation with tongues was for Paul another manifestation of their immaturity and worldliness (cf. 3:1-3). This he hoped would change, especially in regard to an enhanced appraisal of prophecy and a recognition of the importance of this gift for the assembled church. His final words, contrasting prophecy and tongues (14:21-25), were intended to conclude the exhortation begun in verse 1.

This summary argument in verses 21-25 began with the citation of a portion of Isaiah’s prophecy against Israel (Isa. 28:11-12). Because Israel refused to **listen** to God’s message proclaimed by His prophets, Isaiah predicted that another message would come. This one would be delivered in a foreign tongue unintelligible to the Israelites, yet unambiguous (cf. 2 Kings 17:23). The foreign tongue symbolized God’s rejection (cf. Deut. 28:49; Isa. 33:19), His disciplinary response to Israel’s stiff-necked rebellion against Him (cf. 2 Kings 17:14; Acts 7:51). Foreigners instead of Israel became the temporary servants of God (cf. Isa. 5:26; Hab. 1:6; Matt. 21:43; Rom. 10:19-21), and their foreign tongue was a punitive **sign** to Israel of what had taken place. That seems to be the significance which Paul attached to tongues. As such, the primary arena for its exercise was **not** the company of **believers but... unbelievers** (cf. Matt. 13:10-15, on parables). Uninterpreted **tongues** had their place but not in the church where **prophecy** benefited **believers** (1 Cor. 14:3). **Tongues** were of benefit in an assembly of believers only if they were interpreted. But this seems not to have been the Corinthians’ practice. Instead they apparently poured forth their gift of tongues in unrestrained fashion. As a result believers with some other gifts were nonplussed by the behavior of the tongues-speakers (v. 16). Furthermore, newcomers (*idiōtai*, those who attended but were not believers) and other **unbelievers** (*apistoi*) who were aware of but as yet unconvinced by the gospel message (unlike those of vv. 21-22 who had forthrightly rejected it) would find their behavior positively ridiculous. **Will they not say that you are out of your mind?** This, Paul suggested, would certainly not advance the cause of Christ in Corinth. But prophecy was desirable because it would not only benefit believers (v. 3) but would also expose unbelievers not to a scene of chaos but to one of conviction (cf. John 16:8) and judgment (1 Cor. 2:15)—which would lead to personal disclosure (**the secrets of his heart will be laid bare**) and the **worship of God**.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

What makes you feel like you really belong with a group of people? We appreciate a warm welcome, the offer of a place to sit, etc. But what we need most is to understand what is going on around us. We want to listen to conversation that we can understand, and we want to be understood when we speak. Without such understanding, we easily feel that we do not belong. We can make an effort to relate with gestures or facial expressions, but words are our best means of making a connection. Today's text is about an extraordinary way that God enabled some followers of Christ in the first century to make a connection with language. But that enabling was a double-edged sword, and Paul needed to issue special instructions to the believers in Corinth in that regard.

The issue of language in human relationships has deep roots in the Bible. It tells of the tower of Babel, where people of one language banded together to build a tower "that reaches to the heavens" so that they could "make a name" for themselves (Genesis 11:4). In response to their unholy ambitions, God caused their language to be confused as he scattered them across the earth (11:6-9). In doing so, God restrained peoples' ability to work together for evil. The story of Babel becomes foundational to the rest of the biblical worldview. The division and resulting conflict between tribes and nations, epitomized in the multiplying of languages, is rooted in human pride and rebellion against God. But God promised to bring blessings to the plurality of nations that resulted from his judgment on human pride. He promised a blessing on Abram, to make his descendants a great nation so that "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3) through him. As the nation of Israel grew, God sent prophets who repeated that promise. Sometimes those prophets delivered the promise with an image of people of many languages coming to know the true God (Isaiah 66:18; Zechariah 8:23; etc.). With Christ's death and resurrection, God brought to the point of fulfillment his promise to bless the nations. The risen Christ commanded his followers to wait for power from on high, the Holy Spirit, who would enable them to be witnesses to the entire earth (Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:4-8). The Spirit would enable the worldwide triumph of God, the fulfillment of his promise to Abram and a reversal of the judgment of Babel. That enabling began on the Day of Pentecost, about seven weeks after Christ's crucifixion. Pentecost is known in the Old Testament variously as the Festival of Weeks, day of firstfruits, and Festival of Harvest (Exodus 23:16a; 34:22a; Leviticus 23:15-21; Numbers 28:26-31; Deuteronomy 16:9-12, 16). Meaning "50 days," Pentecost came seven weeks after Passover to celebrate and dedicate the grain harvest of spring (Deuteronomy 16:9, 10). By the first century AD, Jewish tradition had come to associate Pentecost with God's giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai 50 days after the exodus, although there is no trace of such a time line in the Bible.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Languages on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-7)

- 1 When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
- 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.
- 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them.
- 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.
- 5 And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.
- 6 And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.
- 7 Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans?"

Provided unity of purpose (1)

Unity to follow the word of God (2 Chr 30:12)

12 Also in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD.

Unity to always fear God (Jer 32:38-39)

38 They will be my people, and I will be their God. 39 I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them.

Unity to follow Jesus and glorify God (Rom 15:5-6)

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Unity to show others the love of God (John 17:23)

23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Available through being filled with the Holy Spirit (2-4)

Filled with the Holy Spirit so that the word of God can be spoken boldly (Acts 4:31)

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Filled with the Holy Spirit as part of living wisely (Eph 5:15-18)

15 Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Filled with the Holy Spirit to serve (Acts 6:2-6)

2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." 5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Used through the power of being devout (5)

Power of hope (Rom 15:13)

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Power to rest faith on (1 Cor 2:5)

5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Power to strengthen the inner being (Eph 3:16)

16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

Power to do worldly work (Exodus 31:3)

3 and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts--

Manifested through the use of God's gifts (6-7)

Gifts that are irrevocable (Rom 11:29)

29 for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.

Gifts that are different (Rom 12:6-8)

6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Gifts that are from the same Spirit (1 Cor 12:4)

4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.

Gifts that are for the common good (1 Cor 12:7)

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Gifts that are to serve others (1 Pet 4:10)

10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

Languages in the Church (1 Cor 14:13-19)

13 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.

15 What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.

16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?

17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;

19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Importance for interpretation (13-14)

Interpretation that comes through the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14)

14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Interpretation that should be prayed for (Col 1:9)

9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Interpretation that comes through the teaching of sound doctrine (1 Tim 6:3-5)

3 If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, 4 he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions 5 and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

Importance of understanding (15-16)

Understanding that draws people to God (Deut. 4:6)

6 Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."

Understanding that comes through the reading of God's word (Ephes. 3:2-4)

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,

Understanding that comes from living wisely (Ephes. 5:15-17)

15 Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

Understanding that comes from reflecting on God's word (2 Tim. 2:7)

7 Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

Importance of edification (17-19)

Edification for one another at every opportunity (Rom 14:19)

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Edification for one another by seeking the good of others (1 Cor 10:23-24)

23 "Everything is permissible"-but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"-but not everything is constructive. 24 Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Edification for one another is one of the Church's duties (Eph 4:10-13)

10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Edification for one another by controlling my speech (Eph 4:29)

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

For those who come with a charismatic theology and practice, I am going to challenge you to be willing to set this aside, even to reject it, if the text clearly says otherwise. For those who are strongly anti-charismatic, I will ask you to be willing to admit that the charismatics are right if this text teaches that they are. I am enough of a realist to know that few will allow this text (or any combination of passages) to totally reverse their thinking—though it has happened, and hopefully it will continue to do so where needed. I would hope, however, that the gap between charismatics and anti-charismatics (many non-charismatics I know of are also anti-charismatic) would somehow narrow, and that we would be willing to give some ground where it is required, even if we would not take the implications as far as our brother or sister might. There is another related danger here which we must first recognize and then deal with. There is the danger of “reading back” into Acts from the Epistles, rather than “reading forward” from Acts to the Epistles. Let me illustrate what I mean. We are all waiting for the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” to occur here at Pentecost. But when we look for it, we look for a “baptism” that is defined in the Epistles, rather than to read the Epistles in the light of Acts. We therefore look for a “baptism of the Spirit” by the church at Pentecost, but we will run headlong into several difficulties.

First, we do not find a description of the “church” being baptized here, but only the apostles, and perhaps a few others. The “baptism” which is described here is not of those saved, but the occasion for those who are saved. It is the cause, not the result of the salvation of the 3,000. The message which Peter preached was very Jewish, and the promise was that the kingdom of God might come. **Second, we think of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” as being very distinct from the “filling of the Holy Spirit,”** but in our text they are not carefully distinguished. In this text, which describes the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” (anticipated in Acts 1:4-5 and looked back on in Acts 11:15-16) the term “baptized” is not found. Instead, the text tells us that they were all “filled with the Holy Spirit” (2:4). **Third, we think of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” in terms of John the Baptist’s baptism and of believer’s baptism, and thus we come to this text thinking in terms of immersion.** This is not based upon the origin of the expression “baptized” as John the Baptist used it, but upon later references to “baptism” in the New Testament. Being an immersionist, it troubled me greatly to discover that the term baptism is not found in the Old Testament (in the NIV and NASB concordances at least). Would you like to know the Old Testament term which John speaks of in terms of baptism? It is the expression found several times in our text—“pour out.” It is difficult for an immersionist (I think I still am one, incidentally) to admit that the Old Testament terminology for baptism has a strong kinship to sprinkling or pouring. This danger of “reading back” into Acts from the Epistles must be acknowledged. Instead of “reading back,” let us look at Acts as giving us a foundation, a historical context for that which will be more formally stated in terms of definitions and doctrines. And let us beware of those definitions or doctrines which ignore or contradict the content of Acts.

In this lesson, I will first explore what happened at Pentecost, as described by Luke in verses 1-4. We will consider also who those were who experienced the “outpouring of the Spirit” and who those were who witnessed it. Then we will turn our attention to the meaning of Pentecost as Peter explained it in his first sermon. The meaning of this event and sermon to that generation of Israelites will be summarized along with the response to Peter’s sermon. Finally, we will very briefly consider the broader meaning of this event to Luke’s first readers, as well as to those in our present age. This will be done by emphasizing the placement of this passage in the overall content and context of the Book of Acts. **First, the context is clearly “Jewish” in Acts chapter 2.** The events take place in Jerusalem. The apostles are all Jews (Galileans, too). Peter’s message is rooted in Old Testament prophecy, prophecies given to Israel. Peter speaks of God’s coming judgment on Israel, and calls on the “men of Israel” to repent, offering not only forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but the kingdom as well (clearly implied). **Second, Luke’s emphasis is not on the spectacular phenomenon of the sound of a rushing wind, or of tongues, but on the meaning of the phenomenon.** We cannot deny the phenomenon which are described here, but these are not the focus or the emphasis. A simple observation of the amount of space (the law of proportion) devoted to these spectacular events shows this to be true. There are but four verses in this long chapter which deal with the phenomenon. There are nearly twice as many verses devoted to the places from which the men witnessing the events have been born. And there is by far the most attention given to the meaning of the event, as explained by Peter in his sermon. **Third, even**

when the text deals with the spectacular, the focus is not on the individual on whom the Spirit has fallen, but on those who witness it. So often the subject of tongues, for example, is dealt with largely in terms of the tongues-speaker, but here the emphasis is only on the tongues-hearer. The gifts of the Spirit are not primarily for our benefit, but for the edification of others. Self-centeredness can quickly arise in this area, as elsewhere. Was this, in fact, not the problem of the disciples? When they thought of power, they thought of their position and prestige, and of their ranking with others. Jesus talked of power in terms of service. The strong are to minister to the weak, not to themselves. **Fourth, the “Pentecost” of Acts chapter 2 is but the first of four “pentecosts.”** There are four “pentecosts” in Acts: Acts 2:1-4; Acts 8:14-25; Acts 10:44-48 (cf. 11:15-18); Acts 19:1-7. It is my conviction that we cannot understand the first “Pentecost” of Acts 2 apart from a study of all of the “pentecosts” of Acts. Thus, our study is but an introduction, and our conclusions must be subject to further information, which Luke will supply. **Fifth, Peter’s explanation of Pentecost here is given to a specific audience, telling them all that they needed to know, but not all that there was to know.** Peter has not given a full explanation of the meaning of Pentecost in chapter 2. It is Luke, in this Book of Acts, who will supply much more of an explanation of its long-term meaning. Peter told this group of Jews what they most needed to know. Peter himself does not yet seem to understand the full implications of Pentecost, as can be seen from chapters 10 and 11, and beyond.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/4-putting-pentecost-perspective-part-3-peter%E2%80%99s-interpretation-pentecost-acts-21-40>)

I know there are those who refuse to accept any private use of tongues, but these verses very evidently show that while the gift of tongues may edify the speaker in private, they will not edify in public unless they are interpreted. There are at least three indications in chapter 14 that there is a private use of tongues. *First*, in verses 13-15 the use is largely private, as we will note later. *Second*, in verses 18-19 Paul said that he spoke in tongues more than the Corinthians, yet there is no record of him ever speaking in tongues in public. In fact, he contrasts his private use of tongues with the public use (“**however, in the church ...**,” verse 19). Finally, in verse 28 Paul instructs the tongues speaker to “**speak to himself and to God**” if there is not an interpreter present. Just because one purpose of tongues may be public does not mean that there cannot be other purposes, although perhaps secondary. Verses 13-15 seem to focus primarily (though not exclusively, cf. verses 16-19) on the private use of tongues. Paul’s premise, developed in the preceding verses, is that one can hardly be edified without the use of the mind. Some Christians seem to think of our faith as though it were mindless. That is not only tragic, it is untrue. The reason tongues speaking was not edifying to the church was that it was uninterpreted, and thus the saints could not understand what was said. When a prophet spoke, others were to judge what was said (14:29). How could this happen with the message spoken in tongues? It was even possible that the message might be blasphemous (12:2-3). If the gift of tongues were to be used in private, the one thus gifted would profit most if he could interpret what he said; otherwise he could not benefit except in knowing he had spoken words of praise to God. How much better to know what the Holy Spirit has inspired one to say.

In verses 13-15, tongues seem to have been spoken in private, rather than in the church meeting. Why would Paul encourage the tongues speaker to pray for the gift of interpretation of tongues if he were speaking of the church meeting? If one gifted to interpret tongues was present, he could interpret. But in the solitude of one’s prayer closet it is the tongues speaker who must have the gift of interpretation. While Paul in no way underestimates the benefit of this private use of tongues, he teaches that edification occurs when the mind is participating in the process. Two inferences can be drawn from what Paul has said in verse 13. *First*, Paul assumes it is possible for the Christian to possess more than one gift. Otherwise why would he encourage the tongues speaker to seek the additional gift of interpretation? *Second*, it is implied that the Christian can pray and request certain gifts from God and that they may be granted. This tends to contradict the commonly held view that gifts are somewhat statistically given at the time of one’s salvation, never to change. If tongues fail to significantly benefit the individual who speaks in tongues privately without being interpreted (verses 13-15), neither do they profit the group assembled in the church meeting without being interpreted (verses 16-19). Apart from interpretation, those who hear a man speaking in tongues have no way of responding to it since they don’t know what has been said. Praise and thanksgiving may very well have been offered to God, but who else knows it? It is extremely difficult to say “Amen” to what one has not understood. That is like signing a

contract written in another language. For two years we had a French student, Gerard Chalvet, attending our ministry group. He sang and played the guitar. Occasionally we would ask him to sing a song in French. As long as it was a tune that we recognized, we could recall the words as he sang. But when he sang an unfamiliar tune we had no clue as to what the words might be. We could not worship with him because we did not understand him. This was what seemed to be happening regularly in the church meetings in Corinth. Tongues were spoken, frequently and with fervor, but only God knew what was said. What a shock it must have been for the Corinthians to learn that Paul himself spoke in tongues, and perhaps more than they (verse 18). Paul did not flaunt his gift as they did. Consequently, they might have thought he did not possess this gift. How could Paul know anything about tongues? He knew much if he spoke in tongues more than they. But he did so privately, preferring to speak in intelligible words when in the corporate gathering of the saints. Let tongues be reserved for the prayer closet unless an interpreter was present. Paul may have chosen not to speak in tongues even when there was an interpreter because of the exaggerated importance attached to the exercise of this particular gift.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/spiritual-gifts-part-4-measure-gift-1-cor-141-25>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to do something amazing: speak in languages understood by an international multitude. God declared by that act that his promise to bless the nations was coming to fulfillment. The doors of his sanctuary were thus opened to those who had been previously excluded. Understanding was the first step to belonging. How tragic it was, then, when the Corinthians used a gift that should signal the inclusion of all in a way that excluded! By using their gifts inappropriately, seeking their own prestige rather than others' benefit, they sent a bitter, haughty message to those around them. In effect they said, "You do not belong; you are not important." Lack of understanding meant exclusion. Clearly, we all need to consider how we use the abilities that God's Spirit has given us. We need to look past the controversy about speaking in tongues in our day and instead give careful thought to whether we act in the name of Christ in ways that make others feel second-rate or left out altogether. What do we say or do in the church that is hard for others to understand? Do we ever speak or act in ways that put others in the position of outsiders? What should we do to assure that everyone is fully welcomed, fully engaged, fully a part of the life of Christ's church? How do we tell every person for whom Christ died that he or she is at home among Christ's people? Is our church more like the Day of Pentecost or the tower of Babel? Is our church more like the church at Corinth as corrected or as uncorrected?

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. God's work calls for unity among believers (Acts 2:1)
2. Believers must submit in prayer for the Holy Spirit to empower them for His work (vss. 2-4)
3. Some will be confused by the power of God, while others will be amazed (vss. 5-7,12)
4. Spiritual gifts are used as intended when the entire body benefits (I Cor, 14:13-14)
5. A gift exercised merely for its own sake will edify few (vss. 15-17)
6. Christians must be mature enough to discern what is appropriate for corporate worship versus personal worship (vss. 18-19)