

The Prophet Is Greater

“Now I would have you all speak with tongues, but rather that ye should prophesy; and greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying ...” (1 Cor. 14:5).

As shown in previous articles, the tongue speakers in the first century were purposed by God to be understood, and if they were not, the only benefit which came from tongue speaking was to the speaker himself; a clear violation of the general purpose for all the gifts: they were “to profit withal” (1 Cor. 12:7). In 1 Corinthians 14:5 Paul informed his readers that the prophet was greater than the tongue speaker if the tongue speaker did not interpret what he had said. Paul’s question which follows in vs. 6 reads: “But now brethren, if I come unto you, speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I speak to you either by way of revelation, or of knowledge, or of prophesying, or of teaching?” The result of tongue speaking at Pentecost was “we hear them speaking in our tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). Such was the result when tongues were spoken in Caesarea at Cornelius’s house: “For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God” (Acts 10:46). This was the intended purpose for tongues that were spoken in Corinth but such was not the case: “He that speaketh in a tongue, speaketh not unto men, but unto God; for no man understandeth ...” (1 Cor. 14:2).

As Paul continued his forceful argument that tongues were designed to be understood, he remarked, “Even things without life, giving a voice, whether pipe or harp, if they give not a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain voice, who shall prepare himself for war?” (1 Cor. 14:7-8). He concluded by saying, “So also ye, unless ye utter by the tongue speech easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For he will be speaking into the air” (1 Cor. 14:9).

The apostle reminded the Corinthians that while there are many different kinds of tongues in the world, the purpose in any tongue was to communicate with another, to be understood, else if one knows not the meaning of the voice, the one speaking would be a barbarian to the one who heard (1 Cor. 14:10-11). Thus the writer enjoins, “So also ye, since ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may abound unto the edifying of the church” — that is, when you speak with a tongue, speak in a language your listeners understand or else interpret for them what you say, otherwise the church will not be edified (1 Cor. 14:12).

As the apostle continues his argument, he remarked, "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful, what is it then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding also ..." (1 Cor. 14:14-15). When the apostle said that if one was praying in a tongue, his understanding was unfruitful, he is not to be understood as saying the speaker did not himself understand what he spoke. He is saying that his understanding was unfruitful — no benefit of it accrued to anyone else because they did not understand. To further strength this point he wrote, "Else, if thou bless with the spirit, how shall he that filleth the place of the unlearned say the Amen at thy giving of thanks (that is, how can he say "so be it" or "Amen") at thy giving of thanks, seeing he knoweth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified" (1 Cor. 14:16-17). Did the speaker understand what he said? Yes, but the hearer did not. Why conclude that the speaker understood; but the hearer did not? Simply because Paul had written that he that spoke in a tongue edified himself (vs. 4), but in vs. 17 the hearer is said not to be edified because he did not understand what was spoken. If the hearer was not edified because he did not understand, how could the speaker be edified if he did not understand either?

So Paul concluded, with good reason: "I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all: howbeit in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that I might instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor. 14:19).

Jim McDonald