

“In The Law It Is Written ...”

“... by the lips of strangers will I speak unto this people and not even thus will they hear me saith the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:21).

The scriptural citation given in this passage is found in Isaiah 28:11-12. The incident dates during the reign of Hezekiah. He was gravely threatened by the Assyrians and although Judah survived their threat perhaps another 100 years; Israel, the northern kingdom was swept into captivity. Moses had warned that if Israel did not remain faithful to God, that He would “bring a nation against thee from far, from the ends of the earth, as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; a nation of fierce countenance, that shall not regard the person of the old, nor show favor to the young” (Deut. 28:49-50). Israel’s unfaithfulness was proverbial and at length Jehovah brought against her men of “strange tongues” as he had warned. Because they had not listened to His voice, they would have to listen to the strange voices of their captors.

The day of Pentecost WAS NOT the fulfillment of Moses’ prophecies to Israel; but men with strange tongues did speak to Israel, whose voices were designed to convince unbelievers the speakers were spokesmen for God. The passage in 1 Corinthians 14:22-23 continued “wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to the unbelieving: but prophesying is for a sign not to the unbelieving, but to them that believe.” Here Paul uses a familiar figure of speech: the so called “not-but” construction in which a speaker denies one part of his statement (which actually is true) to emphasize the particular point he has in mind. Paul emphasized the primary benefit of tongue speaking was to unbelievers; although he did not really exclude believers, for signs would further establish their faith. And signs there were on Pentecost! The multitude who heard them were “confounded,” “amazed,” “marveled,” and “perplexed” (Acts 2:6, 7, 12). And signs they were to unbelieving Jews in Caesarea for the six Jewish brethren who came with Peter were “unbelievers” in the sense they did believe uncircumcised Gentiles, in that uncircumcised state, could be admitted to the church. The tongues spoken by Gentiles stilled any objections Peter’s companions had to receiving Gentiles for when Peter asked, “Can any man forbid the water that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?” not one of them protested (Acts 10:47)! Later, when Peter was challenged by brethren in Jerusalem for his actions, he silenced their criticism by rehearsing how first he had preached to the Gentiles; then how the Holy Spirit had fallen on them just as on Pentecost. He then asked, “If then God gave unto them the like gift as he did also unto us, when we believed on the Lord, who was I that I could withstand the Lord?” (Acts

11:17). No further protest could be aired! God had spoken by pouring out the Holy Spirit upon Gentiles and giving them the new tongues to magnify God (Acts 10:15-17, 46). The unbelieving brethren were convinced and "they held their peace and glorified God saying, then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

How strange it is, appearing even to be contradictory, that after the writer has just said tongues were for a sign to the unbeliever, he should add "if therefore the whole church be assembled together and all speak with tongues and there come in men unlearned or unbelieving, will they not say that ye are mad?" (1 Cor. 14:23). How are we to understand the apostle's words?

Yet, rather than being contradictory, this is the apostle's grand climax to his argument developed from the very first verse of this chapter. He had begun by showing that the Corinthians were speaking in tongues contrary to their purpose and, as such, were counterproductive. Rather than profiting the whole body (as gifts were supposed to do), the speaker was edifying only himself! And, rather than being a sign to the unbeliever, their misuse produced the opposite result.

Earlier the apostle had written, "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?" (1 Cor. 14:6). When an obviously unlearned man began to speak to another in that person's own tongue (when clearly the speaker had not learned it by natural means), it arrested the listener's attention and caused him to recognize this was a sign from God. And when that tongue-speaker, having captured the listener's attention; proceeded to speak God's message to him, revealing the gospel of Christ, the listener was, if he was sincere and honest, cut to the heart by the words and moved to obey God. Thus we read, "But if one prophesy, and there come in one unbelieving and unlearned, he is reproved by all, he is judged by all; the secrets of his heart are made manifest; and so he will fall down on his face and worship God, declaring that God is among you indeed" (1 Cor. 14:24).

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