

Studies in First Corinthians

*Lesson 40

TEXT: *1 Cor. 14:1-9*

1 Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. **2** For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. **3** But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. **4** One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. **5** Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.

6 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching? **7** Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? **8** For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? **9** So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

Background

“At the time of the Corinthian church, the Greco-Roman world had a multitude of gods. In their worship of these gods, it was very common for a person to go into ecstasy, which literally means ‘to go out of oneself.’ They would go into an unconscious state where all kinds of psychic phenomena would occur. They believed that when they were in an ecstatic trance, they actually left their body, ascended into space, connected up to whatever deity they were worshiping, and would begin to commune with that deity. Once they began to commune with that deity, they would begin to speak the language of the gods. This was a very common practice in their culture. In fact, the term used in 1 Corinthians to refer to speaking in tongues (*glossais lalein*) was not invented by Bible writers. It was a term used commonly in the Greco-Roman culture to speak of the pagan language of the gods which occurred while the speaker was in an ecstatic trance.

“...Plato, who lived from 429-347 B.C., wrote page after page in his Dialogues describing pagan ecstasies of speech. This was not anything that belonged to Christianity. The true gift of languages in Christianity was only used when somebody who spoke the language was present in order that it might be a sign that God was there and that God's people were speaking God's truth. Never was it intended to be confused with paganism.”

(J. MacArthur, *The Truth About Tongues*, pt. 1)

Discussion Questions

1. Based on the reading above, is it likely that pagan worship rites were influencing the worship of the Corinthian church?
2. What was the problem in the way tongues were being used in the church?
3. Paul compares tongues to prophecy—which does he seem to favor? Why?

