

1 Corinthians 14:21–25

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe. If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.

Tongues — Languages with Content

Verse 21 draws on Isaiah 28:11–12: *With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people.* This is a reference to the Assyrian invader — a foreign language, a real language, bearing God's word of chastening to an unbelieving people who would not hear Him when He spoke through His own prophets. The apostle's citation itself confirms that tongues are languages with intelligible content, not ecstatic utterances. God was not prophesying that He would speak to His people through persons giving forth gibberish.

There is a distinction in the original between tongue and lips. The tongue refers to the language itself — the intelligible content. The lips, which Darby renders *strange lips*, refer more to the organs of communication and to the strangeness of

the thing being said — something they had not heard before. If one speaks in English but stammers, it is still English, still the same tongue, but the lips are hindered. So perhaps tongue speaks to the language in which content is conveyed, while lips speak to the manner and strangeness of the communication.

Wherefore — Tongues for the Unbeliever

The connection the apostle draws is exact. Why were tongues a sign for those who believe not? Because the analogy with Israel makes it clear. Israel was in the position of the unbeliever — not hearkening to God's word — and so God spoke to them in the tongue of an invader. The invader's language was itself a sign of divine chastening upon those who would not hear. And yet, the apostle adds with remarkable faithfulness to the original: *for all that, they will not hear me, saith the Lord*. God does not withhold His discipline because its recipients will refuse it. Man is laid under responsibility by the word that comes to him. If he refuses, the guiltiness only increases. Even Jeremiah was told to go with a message they would not receive. The word comes, and the responsibility falls upon those who hear.

For the Corinthians who were exercising tongues in the assembly, this is pointed. What was a sign for unbelievers was being used among believers for self-display. Tongues exercised without interpretation in the assembly of God's people served not for their edification but only for the satisfaction of those who could produce the sign. And a sign, apart from interpretation, speaks nothing to the conscience of the believer.

The Two Contrasting Scenarios

Verses 23 and 24 set two vivid pictures side by side. In the first, the whole church has come together in one place — not for the sake of unbelievers, for that is not the purpose of the assembly gathering. And all are speaking in tongues.

When those that are unlearned or unbelievers come in upon this, their verdict is: *ye are mad*. The gift intended as a sign for unbelievers has instead become a stumbling block. Its exercise without order has undone its own stated purpose.

In the second picture, all prophesy — God's mind is spoken in the language of those present. And when the unbeliever or the unlearned enters, he is convinced of all, judged of all. The secrets of his heart are made manifest. He falls on his face and worships God, and reports that God is truly in the midst of this people. That is the power of prophesying — it speaks to conscience and brings the soul into the presence of God.

It is important to note that even in the second scenario, the purpose of the assembly gathering was not this unbeliever. He came in. What he found was the word of God reaching men's consciences in his own language — and it reached his. The proper meeting of the saints for ministry, ordered as God has set it, is the most powerful thing for any soul that enters.

The Secrets of the Heart Made Manifest

There are two kinds of secrets of the heart. There are those we harbour consciously — like Joseph's brothers, who went down to Egypt carrying a secret they had never made right, and found themselves in a place where the secrets of their hearts were drawn out and made manifest. That was not a comfortable occasion for them, but after it was dealt with, the relief was immense.

And there are secrets of the heart that are more unconscious — hidden springs, deep-seated tendencies and motivations, things we are not fully aware of ourselves. We may go along acting on some motive that has never been brought to the surface of conscious thought. The word of God is quick and powerful — it enters into these regions. A ministry that speaks to the conscience, that is the mouthpiece of God, can suddenly alert a person to something working within them that they had never fully reckoned with. That is what is meant by the secrets

of the heart being made manifest — likely to the person himself, not broadcast to the assembly. God has spoken to him, and he knows it.

The result is worship. He falls on his face and worships God. Not the gifted speaker — God. And he reports to others that God is truly in the midst of that people. This is the ideal outcome of prophesying in the assembly — that the sovereign presence of God is felt by all, and souls are brought into His presence through the ministry of His word.

Three Things That Inhibit the Secrets of the Heart Being Made Manifest

There are things that tend to block this channel of blessing. The first is the substitution of something else for the ministry God has appointed — replacing prophesying with something that does not speak to conscience. The second is the pretension that every man has the gift: this blocks the channels of ministry by removing the recognition that these are gifts, not general capacities. The third is when those who do have a prophetic gift are afraid to speak what God has given them, for fear of the flesh's reaction.

These are the ways in which the flesh thwarts the channel of blessing that God has appointed. The tendency is always there. And a mark of ministry worth receiving is precisely that it smites the conscience — if ministry is consistently of a kind that never disturbs, never addresses the actual state, there is occasion to question whether the channel has been stopped up. Progressive sanctification requires the light of God's word to expose what needs to be dealt with, and the assembly gathered to the Lord's name is one of the appointed means for that.

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