

Does Paul Teach a Private Prayer Language of the Spirit?

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## Introduction

In recent years justification of the continuance of the gift of tongues has taken a somewhat different trajectory, especially among Christians not normally identified as Charismatic or Pentecostal. Specifically, the claim is made that tongues-speaking can be practiced privately, rather than publically, as a kind of personal “prayer language.” For example, in a June 2007 survey of SBC pastors, fifty percent indicated their belief that God provides a “private prayer language to some believers.”<sup>1</sup> Also, in this writer’s personal experience as a missionary trainer with Greater Europe Mission (2001–2009), applicants for missionary service frequently professed the practice of a private prayer language, even though the mission itself officially discouraged the public display of tongues.<sup>2</sup>

More significantly, *biblical* justification for such practice is argued from certain statements made by Paul in his discussion of the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14. The purpose of this paper is to examine these arguments and ascertain whether or not they are exegetically and theologically defensible. As a first step the historical record of tongues in the Book of Acts will be briefly surveyed. Then Paul’s statements about the nature and purpose of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14 will be examined.

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Poirier, “Recent Cessationist Arguments: Has the Storm Center Moved?” *Pneuma Review* 11:1 (Winter 2008): 36. Nevertheless, the trustees of the IMB voted in November 2005 “to exclude new missionary candidates who practice a ‘private prayer language’ from serving on the Southern Baptist mission field” (Edward Watson, “A History of Influence: The Charismatic Movement and the SBC.” *Criswell Theological Review* 4:1 [Fall 2006]: 15).

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, the desire to be sensitive to those in their circles who are not comfortable with the phenomenon of tongues-speaking, such Christians generally restrict their use of tongues to private exercise, though they may also believe that public expressions would be appropriate in the right context.

## The Gift of Tongues in Acts

Historical references to tongues speaking are found exclusively in three passages: Acts 2:1–11, 10:44–47, and 19:1–7.<sup>3</sup> Classical Pentecostals and some Charismatics argue that these texts should be understood as providing a normative pattern for the Church today. However, more recently, doubt has been cast upon this argument, even among Pentecostal scholars.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some find justification in the statement of Mark 16:17 that tongues would be one of the “signs” that would accompany those who believe.<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, it is noteworthy that in each of the Acts passages cited above the manifestation of tongues–speaking was *public* and *intelligible* (2:5–8, 10:45–46; 19:6).<sup>6</sup> In fact, in both Acts 2 and 10 the public and intelligible nature of these occurrences was the decisive factor in changing the hearts and minds of those who observed it with respect to some issue of theological significance. For example, the conversion of Cornelius and his closest associates (Acts 10), the first Gentile converts, is set in the context of whether it is proper to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10:15,

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 8:14-19 and 9:17-19 are also sometimes cited, though they do not make explicit reference to tongues speaking. For example, “Something [Simon] saw was impressive enough to make him offer money for this ability ... this something is conjectured to be speaking in tongues” (Donald A. Johns, “Some New Directions in the Hermeneutics of Classical Pentecostalism’s Doctrine of Initial Evidence,” in *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspective on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*. ed. Gary B. McGee. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], 165, note 4).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Pentecostal scholar Donald Johns acknowledges the inadequacy of the argument of historical precedent and the inconsistency with which Pentecostals have employed it, since there are other “patterns” in Acts to which they do not subscribe (Johns, 147). And Pentecostal Robert Menzies admits: “Traditional attempts to offer biblical support for our doctrine of subsequence [based upon the argument from historical precedent] are no longer viable” (Robert P. Menzies, “Evidential Tongues: An Essay on Theological Method.” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2 [1998]: 113). Menzies argues instead that the *nature* of the gift of the Holy Spirit as a means of enabling powerful witness is an implicit theological argument for its universality as well as its normativeness (ibid, 119–120).

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Johns rejects the use of Mark 16:17 on the basis of both its questionable textual support as well as the lack of a clear of connection between tongues and the baptism in the Holy Spirit, for which tongues is considered the “initial evidence” (165, note 4).

28, 34–35). The manifestation of tongues by the Gentiles served as a visible confirmation to the Jewish Christians that this was indeed the case (10:45–47; cf. 11:18). These accounts are also consistent with descriptions elsewhere that tongues serve as authenticating “signs” (σημεῖον; Mark 16:17; 1 Corinthians 14:22) of the truth of the Gospel.

As Yarnell summarizes:

All three passages treat the gift of speaking in tongues as the public and intelligible communication of truth about God. These passages also treat the gift of speaking in tongues as a verifying sign of the unique coming of the Holy Spirit upon a new group of people, thereby incorporating that group into the church.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the Book of Acts provides no justification for a private prayer language, much less a normative one.

### The Gift of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14

Chapters 12–14 of 1 Corinthians fall within a larger section of the letter (chapters 7–16) that addresses questions apparently put to Paul by the Corinthians (e.g., 7:1, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1).<sup>8</sup> As he answers these questions, along the way he confronts and corrects a number of doctrinal errors and aberrant practices. In chapters 12–14 the focus is upon spiritual gifts (12:1). However, as Turner observes:

It is important at the outset to recognize that 1 Cor 12–14 is not simply pastoral advice in answer to some Corinthian general question about “spiritual gifts” (cf. 12:1). Rather, from start to finish it is intended as a *corrective* to what Paul considers problematic in the Corinthian attitude to

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<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the intelligibility of tongues in Acts 19:6 must be inferred from its pairing with “prophesying.”

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, “Speaking of ‘Tongues,’ What Does the Bible Teach?” (The Center for Theological Research, September 2006), 5; accessed June 10, 2013 at [baptisttheology.org](http://baptisttheology.org).

<sup>8</sup> D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 16.

and use of tongues. If Paul starts with more general considerations, that is simply to provide the theological backdrop for the issue which emerges explicitly in chapter 14.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, in chapter 12 Paul establishes a broad theology of the purpose of spiritual gifts, with particular emphasis upon the *sovereign placement* of gifted members in the body of Christ (vv. 4–6, 11, 18, 28) for the purpose of *mutual edification* (vv. 7–10, 25–26). He also stresses the fact that while the gifts and its members are diverse, the body is one (vv. 12, 14, 20). In chapter 13 Paul explains that the only correct motivation for the exercise of spiritual gifts is love (vv. 1–3), which he beautifully describes in verses 4–7. Also, though spiritual gifts will one day be “done away,” love abides forever (vv. 8–13).

Then in chapter 14 he hones in upon the Corinthian abuse of the gift of tongues.<sup>10</sup> We should note at the outset that several of Paul’s statements here highlight, as in the Book of Acts, the *public* functioning of tongues. For example, Paul’s instructions are clearly applied to the gathering of the church (vv. 12, 16, 19, 26ff; cf. v. 6). Also, Paul states repeatedly that the primary purpose of *all* spiritual gifts is the edification of the church (vv. 3–6, 12, 17, 26; cf. 12:7). Accordingly, Paul insists upon the presence of an interpreter when tongues are exercised, so that all may be edified (vv. 5, 13, 27).<sup>11</sup> If there is no interpreter, the speaker of tongues is required to remain silent (v. 28).

In light of this repeated emphasis upon the public exercise of tongues for edification of the assembly, the burden is upon those who believe that Paul also has in mind the private use of tongues for personal edification. Nevertheless, the argument is made that in certain statements of Paul allowance is made for the private, devotional use

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<sup>9</sup> Max Turner, “Tongues: An Experience for All in the Pauline Churches?” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2 (1998): 235, emphasis original.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 652.

of the gift of tongues. Indeed, Hurtado suggests that this expression of tongues “was probably the *major* use of tongues speaking in the early church.”<sup>12</sup> Fee, while acknowledging that “Paul’s present concern is not with private devotion but with public worship” alludes to presumed “psychological benefits” of the devotional use of tongues, though he admits “such discussion lies quite beyond what one can say exegetically.”<sup>13</sup> And William and Robert Menzies assert that “in spite of the Corinthians’ misunderstanding and abuse of this gift, Paul holds the private manifestation of tongues in high regard.”<sup>14</sup>

A survey of the literature indicates that specific exegetical justification for the private exercise of tongues is found primarily in statements made by Paul in vv. 2–5, 14–19, and 28b.<sup>15</sup> Each of these texts will now be examined in context as so as to ascertain the validity of these arguments.

### 1 Corinthians 14:2–5

Following Paul’s general exhortation to “desire earnestly spiritual gifts but especially that you may prophesy” (v. 1), he immediately supports this command by noting a deficiency inherent in the exercise of tongues, namely, that the practitioner of

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<sup>11</sup> “Interpreted glossolalia has the same value as prophecy” (F.W. Grosheide, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953], 320).

<sup>12</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, “Normal, but not a Norm: ‘Initial Evidence’ and the New Testament,” in *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspective on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*, ed. Gary B. McGee (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 199, emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Fee, 657, note 25.

<sup>14</sup> William W. and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 133.

<sup>15</sup> Some also appeal to Romans 8:26, which will be dealt with briefly in the course of the discussion of 1 Corinthians 14:2–5. In this regard, Caner asserts that “two principle passages which must be considered regarding a private prayer language” are Romans 8:26 and 1 Corinthians 14 (Emir Caner, “Southern Baptists, Tongues, and Historical Policy” [The Center for Theological Research, October 2006], 5; accessed June 10, 2013 at baptisttheology.org). Also, Yarnell (5) notes that Ephesians 5:18–20, 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:19, and Jude 20 are also used by “Pentecostal and Charismatic theologians to buttress their modern practices.” However, tongues speaking is not mentioned in any of these passages.

tongues “does not speak to men but to God” (v. 2). The verb “speak” (λαλέω) is the common Greek verb used to convey the thought of ordinary conversation. However, in this case, Paul says “no one understands” (lit., “hears;” Gk. ἀκούει).<sup>16</sup>

Presumably, the lack of understanding is due to the fact that the hearers do not know the tongue or language being spoken. However, the idea that the tongues Paul describes here are in fact *known* languages is highly contested. For example, some insist that the unintelligibility of tongues is due to the very nature of tongues—at least in this letter—as non-cognitive utterances. Indeed, studies show and many Pentecostal scholars freely acknowledge that modern tongues have no linguistic value.<sup>17</sup> However, if it is conceded that tongues are not, and never were, human languages, then one plank in the Cessationist argument—namely, that the tongues of today bear no resemblance to the tongues of the NT and are therefore not proof of the continuance of the gift—is vacated.

In reference to the precise substance of tongues itself, Carson asserts that “this is an extraordinarily difficult question to answer convincingly on either side.”<sup>18</sup> Still, he affirms that “careful word studies have shown” that γλῶσσα never refers to

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<sup>16</sup> In justification of this translation, Thiselton notes that “the issue in these verses clearly turns on intelligible communication or effective communicative action between speakers and listeners” (Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 1084).

<sup>17</sup> Pentecostal scholar Max Turner (249) acknowledges that “the great majority of taped examples of tongues prove to have no genuine linguistic structure.” And according to Carson (84), “modern tongues are lexically uncommunicative and the few instances of reported modern xenoglossia are so poorly attested that no weight can be laid on them.” See also Vern S. Poythress, “Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues–Speaking: Their Contributions and Limitations,” in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia*, ed. Watson E. Mills (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 469–489. Tellingly, “[t]he tongues phenomena have been related to the speaker’s natural language (e.g., a German or French tongues-speaker will not use one of the English ‘th’ sounds; and English tongues-speakers will never include the ‘u’ sound of the French ‘cru’)” (Carson, 84).

<sup>18</sup> Carson, 79.

“noncognitive utterance.”<sup>19</sup> And Lowery states: “Whether it was used literally of the physical organ (e.g., Mark 7:33; James 3:5; Rev. 16:10) or figuratively of human languages (e.g., Acts 2:11; Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15), [γλῶσσα] nowhere referred to ecstatic speech”<sup>20</sup>

In support of this conclusion, most acknowledge that the tongues displayed in Acts 2 were known human languages (2:6, 11).<sup>21</sup> This understanding is strengthened by the hearers’ use of διάλεκτος (vv. 6, 8) to describe what they were hearing. This noun means “language” and clearly refers to such in its other NT occurrences, all in Acts (1:19, 21:40, 22:2, 26:14). Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul appears to use the terms “tongue” (γλῶσσα) and “language” (φωνή) interchangeably (cf. vv. 2, 10, 11, 13), and his reference to “kinds of tongues” (γένη γλωσσῶν; 12:10, 28) makes better sense if, in fact, tongues were various known languages that could be distinguished from one another, rather than unintelligible speech. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, he uses the same term (λόγος) in v. 19 to describe both words spoken with his understanding as well as words spoken in a tongue. Finally, following extensive analysis, MacDonald concludes “there is no cogent exegetical ground for making any differences in the *essential*

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<sup>19</sup> Carson, 80–81. Paul’s statement, “if I speak with the tongues ... of angels” (1 Cor 13:1), could suggest that tongues are not human languages. However, it is clear that Paul is asking this question hypothetically. He also is doing so in a context that employs several hyperbolic examples (vv.2–3). Thus, this text is hardly a conclusive basis for the assertion that the biblical gift of tongues is largely unintelligible speech. Also, in light of Acts 2, is it reasonable to maintain that all expressions of tongues today are tongues of *angels*?

<sup>20</sup> David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 537–538. Carson (78) helpfully distinguishes between “ecstatic speech”—in the sense of being out of control—and unintelligible speech. For this reason, he notes charismatics do not wish to use the label “ecstasy” to describe their tongues-speaking, because they agree with Paul that *glossolalia* is under the control of the speaker.

<sup>21</sup> Carson (80), however, provides one example of a scholar who insists that even the tongues of Acts 2 were not known languages, else why were the disciples accused of being drunk?

*character* of glossolalia in Corinthians from that in Acts. The distinction would lie only in the *purpose* of the Spirit ...”<sup>22</sup>

Despite this data, Thiselton basing himself on 1 Corinthians 14:6–11, argues for “the implausibility of the notion that speaking in tongues takes the form of a foreign language which an ‘interpreter of tongues’ can translate.”<sup>23</sup> In this regard, he argues that the verb “interpret” (διερμηνεύω) can mean “to put into words” rather than “to translate.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Grosheide states: “The expression [glossolalia] does not indicate a foreign language but it points to a language given by the Holy Spirit, whatever its sounds may have been.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, many scholars take this view.<sup>26</sup>

Carson, however, takes issue with Thiselton’s understanding of διερμηνεύω and argues that one can make perfect sense of Paul’s argument in this chapter without resorting to the view that tongues are merely unintelligible sounds.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Yarnell observes: “Pagans believed their idols could express themselves in speech through an oracle, but their speech was unintelligible and a religious poet was required to translate.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, to understand tongues as essentially unintelligible sounds would appear to endorse the reigning pagan view! Indeed, one can legitimately ask how

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<sup>22</sup> William G. MacDonald, “Glossolalia in the New Testament,” in *Speaking in Tongues*, 136, emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> Thiselton, 1109. For example, he asserts that verse six “not only suggests even a lack of potential communicative content, but also the Greek syntax is explicated in terms of the second example (v. 7) in which musical instruments produce *noise* rather than *notes of a given pitch*” (ibid., emphasis original).

<sup>24</sup> Thiselton, 1098–1100.

<sup>25</sup> Grosheide, 317.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Fitzmyer avers: “The phenomenon cannot mean speaking in foreign languages” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, The Anchor Yale Bible vol. 32 [New Haven: Yale University, 2008], 510). And Morris asserts: “*No man understandeth* makes it plain that the gift spoken of here is different from that in Acts ii, where all men understood” (Leon Morris, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958], 191, emphasis original).

<sup>27</sup> Carson, 81. Carson notes that while Thiselton does establish that διερμηνεύω can sometimes mean “to put into words,” “that such is the obvious meaning in 1 Cor. 12–14 is less likely” (ibid.)

nonsensical vocalization could serve as an authenticating “sign” (v. 22) of the truth of the Christian gospel to unbelievers, especially if non-Christian religions in that day—and our own!<sup>29</sup>—were also practicing such glossolalia? Rather, as Yarnell concludes: “Paul was therefore forced to put the idea of *glossolalia* in its proper Christian context as intelligible and significant speech, in opposition to the pagan context where *glossolalia* was unintelligible and insignificant speech.”<sup>30</sup>

As a result of the unintelligibility of tongues, Paul states that the tongues speaker “in his spirit ... speaks mysteries.”<sup>31</sup> For Paul the term mystery (μυστήριον) often refers to a divine revelation previously hidden.<sup>32</sup> In fact, in the previous chapter (13:2), Paul appears to use the term in exactly this sense, coupling it with the term “knowledge” (γνῶσις). So based upon Paul’s general usage, it would be reasonable to interpret mysteries here in the sense of a divine revelation having cognitive content, but otherwise not understood because of the language barrier between the speaker and the hearers.

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<sup>28</sup> Yarnell, 5. As examples, he cites the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi and the cults of Dionysius and Cybele. Carson (81) notes: “The ecstatic utterances of the pagan religions prove less suitable a set of parallels than was once thought.”

<sup>29</sup> See L. Carlyle May, “A Survey of Glossolalia and Related Phenomena in Non-Christian Religions,” in *Speaking in Tongues*, 53–75. May notes that even Mormons claim to speak in tongues.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. He also observes: “The pre-Christian background of the Corinthians indicates that ecstatic religious experiences involving unintelligible speech conferred special status upon those who practiced such. Unfortunately, the Corinthian believers brought their pagan religious practices, its attendant elitism, and the resulting social divisions into the Christian church” (ibid.).

<sup>31</sup> Some, mostly older, commentators understand “spirit” (πνεῦμα) to refer to the human spirit, especially in light of Paul’s subsequent contrast between his spirit and his mind (vv. 14–16; cf. v. 32). Garland, who is uncertain himself, lists three (David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003], 633). However, more recent commentators tend to see a reference to the Holy Spirit. For example, Thiselton (1086) states that “πνεῦμα as human spirit plays a very minor role in Paul. Almost always it denotes the Holy Spirit.” And Fee (656, note 22) insists: “It is clear from 12:7–11 that tongues is the manifestation of the Spirit of God through the human speaker.” Finally, Blomberg contends that “Spirit” is more likely since “there is no word in Greek corresponding to ‘his’” (Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 269). However, regardless of the proper referent of πνεῦμα, Paul’s primary point remains the same: God alone is able to understand tongues, because they constitute “mysteries.”

<sup>32</sup> Thiselton, 1085. Also, “in many instances μυστήριον is translated by a phrase meaning ‘that which was not known before,’ with the implication of its being revealed at least to some persons” (Louw–Nida 28.77).

Thiselton, however, insists that “Paul’s usual meaning cannot make sense here without undermining his own argument.”<sup>33</sup> In support, he cites Fee, who takes issue with his Pentecostal brethren who seek a “message in tongues.” Rather, Fee asserts that the tongues speaker is not addressing fellow believers but God alone through prayer and praise—especially since a revelation of previously hidden truth “would scarcely need to be spoken back to God”—and that the term “mysteries” probably conveys “the sense of that which lies outside the understanding, both for the speaker and the hearer.”<sup>34</sup>

However, even if Fee is right, none of what he says would justify the *normative* practice of tongues-speaking in private. On the contrary, far from endorsing such a solo exercise, Paul’s fundamental argument underscores the *futility* of such an exercise. As Blomberg states, “all of verses 2–5a must be understood as Paul’s criticisms of tongues *when they are not interpreted*. When they *are* interpreted, they, like prophecy, contain a fundamentally instructional and exhortational component (vv. 3, 4b, 5b).”<sup>35</sup>

Further justification for a normative private prayer language is deduced from v. 4, where Paul states that the one “who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.” Baker suggests Paul is describing here “an intimate kind of communication to God, perhaps a vocalization of the deep groaning aided by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26).”<sup>36</sup> However, Paul states explicitly in Romans 8:26 that the groanings he describes cannot be uttered!<sup>37</sup> As Caner observes: “[I]t takes hermeneutical gymnastics to get to the point where that which

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<sup>33</sup> Thiselton, 1085.

<sup>34</sup> Fee, 656. Blomberg (269) states that mysteries “simply refer to that which ‘no one understands.’”

<sup>35</sup> Blomberg, 268–269, emphasis original. Morris (192) also observes: “The criterion is simply that of edification. If ‘tongues’ are interpreted, the hearers are edified, and there is then no great difference from prophecy.”

<sup>36</sup> William Baker, “1 Corinthians,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2009), 15:197.

<sup>37</sup> Greek ἀλάλητος; “pertaining to what cannot be uttered or expressed” (Louw–Nida 33.96).

is unutterable—‘words cannot express’—means ‘articulated through the Holy Spirit and His language.’”<sup>38</sup> What’s more, what Paul describes in Romans 8:26 is true for *all* believers, whereas speaking in tongues, like other spiritual gifts, is limited in its distribution (12:10, 29–30; cf. 14:5), though some attempt to argue otherwise.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Caner notes that the intercession of the Spirit is described as being “on our behalf” or “for” us, not “through” us.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere in this chapter “edify” clearly signifies the communication of something of *cognitive* spiritual value (vv. 3–4, 6, 17, 19). Nevertheless, Fee asserts that “[c]ontrary to the opinion of many, spiritual edification can take place in ways other than through the cortex of the brain” and that “Paul believed in an immediate communing with God by means of the S/spirit that sometimes bypassed the mind.”<sup>41</sup> Baker argues that the value of the private exercise of tongues “is not about communicating knowledge or meaning but more involved in confirming deeply the reality of one’s relationship with God.”<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, Grosheide states that the edification consists “in the fact that the person who speaks in tongues may be assured that he possesses the Spirit who enables him to do so.”<sup>43</sup> And Lowery suggests that uninterpreted tongues provided edification through the knowledge that “the user of the gift experienced the confirmation

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<sup>38</sup> Caner, 6.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Menzies and Menzies argue that “Paul’s words here [i.e., his rhetorical questions in 1 Corinthians 12:29–30] have nothing to do with limiting the scope of those who manifest tongues to a select few” (*Spirit and Power*, 139; see 136–139 for their complete argument).

<sup>40</sup> Caner, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Fee, 657.

<sup>42</sup> Baker, 197.

<sup>43</sup> Grosheide, 319. He bases his conclusion in part on the record in Acts where “the Spirit revealed His presence by giving charismata (Acts 10:46; 19:6).” Yet, how many times would a believer need to be so assured?

that he was the individual object of God's grace."<sup>44</sup> Finally, Garland cites Thiessen, whom he says "speculates how" the speaker of tongues might edify only himself, namely, by affording "access to the unconscious dimensions of the soul" which "allows repressed impulses access to the consciousness ... it may result in a feeling of peace and even euphoria."<sup>45</sup>

The truth is Paul does not define what he means by "edify" in this statement. As Grosheide admits: "The manner of this edifying is not disclosed."<sup>46</sup> So all attempts to explain the phenomenon are, as Garland terms it above, no more than "speculations." But *even if* Paul is conceding some sort of non-cognitive value in the exercise of tongues, how does this acknowledgement translate into a confirmation or encouragement to pursue a private prayer language? Such a conclusion runs contrary to the overwhelming emphasis of Paul elsewhere in this chapter upon the need for cognitive communication in order to provide genuine edification. What's more, such a conclusion runs contrary to the repeated emphasis of Paul throughout his letters upon the *communal* nature of the Christian faith, rather than the private or individualistic version that so commonly characterizes the contemporary church.<sup>47</sup> As Carson notes: "True, the tongues-speaker may be edifying himself (14:4); but that is too small a horizon for those who have meditated on 1 Corinthians 13."<sup>48</sup> Thus, if Paul is teaching a private prayer language

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<sup>44</sup> Lowery, 538. Yet, doesn't every believer already enjoy the confirmation of the reality of his or her relationship with God through the "witness" or testimony of the Spirit (Romans 8:16)?

<sup>45</sup> Garland, 634. In other words, the value of private tongues seems to be that speaker can experience an emotional or psychological "high"!

<sup>46</sup> Grosheide, 318–319. MacArthur understands Paul to be speaking sarcastically (John F. MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1984], 372). However, this seems unlikely, since Paul states the phenomenon of "self-edification" in the same straightforward manner with which he describes edification of the church through prophecy in the second half of the verse.

<sup>47</sup> Baker, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Carson, 102.

here, then it must be “singled out as the only spiritual gift listed that has a personal use outside the body of Christ.”<sup>49</sup>

Finally, much is made of Paul’s statement in verse 5 that he wishes (θέλω) that they all spoke in tongues. Some see in Paul’s “wish” an affirmation that “the private manifestation of tongues [is] ... available to every believer.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, both the ESV and NIV translations of this portion of the Greek text favor this interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

But though it is true that θέλω sometimes indicates more than a mere wish or desire, especially as an expression of the intention of the will (e.g., Matt 5:40, 17:12, 20:14, 21:29, etc.),<sup>52</sup> contextual factors are often determinative as to what translation is most appropriate. In this case, Paul immediately contrasts his “desire” with an even greater desire that that all prophesy (μᾶλλον δὲ ἵνα προφητεύητε). Turner notes that the grammatical construction here mimics that found in 1 Corinthians 7:7, where Paul expresses his “desire” (θέλω) that “all of you were as I am,” namely, celibate and therefore freer to serve the Lord.<sup>53</sup> But (ἀλλὰ) he notes immediately that each has their own gift and calling in this regard. In other words, though he *wishes* this would happen, yet he knows that it *cannot* and therefore *will not* happen. In fact, in almost every one of the other sixteen uses of θέλω in this letter<sup>54</sup> it expresses a strong desire for a certain state of affairs to be realized. Yet, in no instance can it be argued that that state of affairs

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<sup>49</sup> Caner, 8. Poirier (41–42) responds “that it is something inherent in the nature of tongues–speech, rather than some sort of exceptional allowance on the part of Paul, that makes its use in private sensible, and which therefore makes Paul’s approving discussion of its private use not at all strange.” But it is precisely the nature of tongues–speech that is being debated!

<sup>50</sup> Menzies and Menzies, 133.

<sup>51</sup> The ESV translates “Now I want you all to speak in tongues” and the NIV “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues.”

<sup>52</sup> Often it expresses the intention of the *divine* will (e.g., 1 Cor 12:18, 15:38; Col 1:27; 1 Pet 3:17; cf. Matt 8:2–3, 15:32, 27:34; John 1:43).

<sup>53</sup> Turner, 244.

expresses a divine intention, except where God is the one doing the desiring (12:18 and 15:38). As Turner summarizes: “Even if 14:5a expresses a real wish, it is by no means clear he thinks it a divinely willed state of affairs, whether actual or merely potential.”<sup>55</sup>

Also, hermeneutical consistency demands that if Paul is expressing the divine will that all speak in tongues, then the gift of prophecy must also be understood to be available to every believer. But such an affirmation flies in the face of the testimony of the New Testament regarding the *limited* distribution of gift of prophecy (e.g., Eph 2:20; cf. Acts 11:27–28, 13:1). In fact, both assertions would contradict Paul’s explicit teaching two chapters earlier that not every believer enjoys every gift (1 Cor 12:29–30).

For this reason, some distinguish the tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians 12:30 from those referred to in 1 Corinthians 14:5. That is, Paul’s reference in the former passage is understood to refer to *congregational worship* and his later reference to the *private devotional use* of tongues. Thus, while not all will speak with tongues in the gathering of the local church, all can and should speak in tongues privately.<sup>56</sup>

However, following the same reasoning, the exercise of the apostolic, prophetic and healing gifts would also be restricted to the gathering of the church, since they occur in the same list of rhetorical questions (1 Cor 12:29–30). That this is patently false is seen in a simple reading of Acts (e.g., 8:36–41, 21:4, 11). Second, Paul is clearly referring to the *universal* church and not the local church in verse 28 when he states: “God has

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<sup>54</sup> 4:19, 21, 7:31, 32, 35, 39, 10:1, 20, 27, 11:3, 12:1, 14:19, 35, 16:7. In the remaining two occurrences God is the subject (12:18 and 15:38).

<sup>55</sup> Turner, 247. MacArthur (373) observes: “Paul was wishing the impossible for the sake of emphasis ... [he] simply was making it clear that he did not despise the genuine gift of tongues.”

<sup>56</sup> Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 203–204. And Turner (238) observes: “Historically, Pentecostals have at times tended to think of “congregational” glossolalia as “a message in tongues,” equivalent (when interpreted) to prophecy (on the basis of a misunderstanding of 14:5?), while private tongues has been understood as prayer/doxology expressed to God (cf. 14:2, 15-16).”

appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets ...” To see a reference here to the local gathering of the church would be absurd in the extreme, implying as it would a plurality of apostles in the local Corinthian assembly.<sup>57</sup> Third, while Paul evidently distinguishes two possible spheres for the use of tongues, he uses the same terminology to refer to all manifestations of the gift.

In summary, while 1 Corinthians 14:2–5 may *allow* for the private exercise of tongues, in the overall context of chapters 12–14 such an exercise must be regarded as *exceptional* rather than normative. Far from being *prescriptive*, Paul’s statements with respect to a private manifestation of tongues are at best *descriptive* and even *incidental* within in his general discussion of the purpose and right exercise of tongues.

#### 1 Corinthians 14:14–19

Paul’s references to praying (vv.14–15), singing praises (v.15)<sup>58</sup> and giving of thanks to God (vv.16–17) in tongues, as well as his claim to “speak in tongues more than you all” (v. 18), are also cited as evidence of a normative, private use of tongues.

In vv. 14–15 Paul discusses the act of praying (or singing) in tongues “with the spirit” and “with the mind.” The argument is made that Paul is describing two venues for tongues speaking here: “with the spirit” alone (private) and with the spirit and “the mind” (public).<sup>59</sup> However, that Paul has in mind the use of tongues in the assembly *exclusively* is seen by his immediate reference to the futility of such exercise in that context (vv. 16–17), because the listener “does not know what you are saying” (v. 16b). Even the tongues-speaker himself receives no cognitive edification from such an exercise, because

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<sup>57</sup> Turner, 239.

<sup>58</sup> The verb ψαλῶ means “to sing praises” (Louw–Nida 33.111).

<sup>59</sup> Poirier, 40.

the mind is “unfruitful” (ἄκαρπός; v. 14b).<sup>60</sup> Also, the command in v. 13 to “pray that he may interpret” *presupposes* a public venue for the exercise of tongues (v. 12). In other words, the verses both before (vv. 12–13) and after (vv. 16–17) Paul’s statements in vv. 14–15 concern tongues exercised *publically*. Therefore, they should be understood in this context.

Of course, the question arises as to what Paul means by the phrase “my spirit” as distinct from “my mind.” Citing Barrett, Garland states there are three options: “the nonrational part of the person’s psychological makeup that serves as the counterpart of the mind,” the spiritual gift itself, or the Holy Spirit.<sup>61</sup> As Garland notes, the fact that Paul uses the possessive “my” would seem to exclude the last option from consideration. Citing several Pauline texts (Rom 1:9; 1 Cor 16:18; 2 Cor 2:13), Garland opts for the first option in the sense of Paul’s “innermost deepest depths” such that “the spirit may be in prayerful communication with God without the reason formulating the thoughts and feelings into comprehensible language.”<sup>62</sup> Blomberg more simply offers: “Praying with one’s spirit versus praying with one’s mind (v. 15a) is probably equivalent to the distinction in verses 13–14 of speaking in tongues versus interpretation.”<sup>63</sup> This

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<sup>60</sup> Thiselton argues that Paul’s point is “*not* that the tongues-speaker misses out, but that the *church community* misses out” (1111; emphasis original). However, since the tongues-speaker is part of that community, Paul’s point is not an either/or but a both/and.

<sup>61</sup> Garland, 639. Citing Conzelmann, Garland notes that “[m]any assume that Paul reflects a common view about inspiration in his time,” found for example in Plato (“To be filled by God entails relinquishing one’s own thoughts to make room for God”) and Philo (“The mind is evicted at the arrival of the divine Spirit”). However, he also cites D. B. Martin (“Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 [1991]:547–89), who concluded, according to Garland, that “the mind/Spirit dichotomy has nothing to do with the rational/irrational dichotomy” (Garland, 639). And Thiselton (1112) avers: “Platonic or Idealist notions of the human spirit as a point of ‘divine contact’ are alien to Paul.”

<sup>62</sup> Garland, 639–640.

<sup>63</sup> Blomberg, 270.

understanding is also seen in vv. 16–17 where Paul equates giving a blessing “in the spirit” alone with uninterpreted tongues.

But, once again, regardless of how one explains the terms “spirit” and “mind” in this passage, Paul’s overriding point is that praying in a tongue without understanding is not a desirable option (v. 14b). In this regard, Morris asserts: “The man whose mind is unfruitful is not being true to his Christian calling.”<sup>64</sup> Rather Paul concludes:<sup>65</sup> “I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also” (v. 15).

Verses 16–17, though clearly concerned with the impact of tongues–speaking upon the gathered assembly, are nevertheless understood by some to speak of the possibility of a private use of tongues: “if you bless in the spirit ... you are giving thanks well enough.” In other words, Paul is understood to recognize the occasion of someone giving thanks to God apart from the participation of the assembled church. But that Paul acknowledges this *could* happen can be readily conceded without also acknowledging that it *should* happen, something which Paul clearly discourages both here and throughout this chapter. As Baker puts it: “[E]ngaging in worship with one’s mind inhibited shuts out the rest of the believers from enriching the spiritual experience even further by shattering it. To retreat inside oneself in the midst of celebration of God’s goodness is selfish, arrogant, and in the end self-defeating.”<sup>66</sup>

Finally, Paul’s affirmation in v. 18 that he speaks in tongues more than all of the Corinthian congregation is widely interpreted as an acknowledgement that he regularly practiced a private prayer language. At least two reasons are given. First, this statement is

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<sup>64</sup> Morris, 194.

<sup>65</sup> “The phrase τί οὖν ἐστὶν is similar to ‘What, then, shall we say?’” (Garland, 640).

immediately contrasted in v. 19 with his desire for what should happen “in the church” (ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ; moved forward in the sentence). Thus, “the contrast between 1 Cor. 14:18 ... and 14:19 ... indicates that Paul’s autobiographical comments in 14:18 refer to the private exercise of tongues.”<sup>67</sup> Second, “where could Paul possibly be speaking in tongues more than “all” the Corinthians if not in private? ... the only way for Paul to speak in tongues even more and to do it all *in a congregational context* would be to imagine that Paul spoke in tongues during the church service almost nonstop.<sup>68</sup> Thus, Paul’s contrasting statement in v. 19 of what he does “in the church” is a powerful argument in favor of understanding v. 18 as an expression of private tongues-speaking. As Carson affirms: “There is no stronger defense of the private use of tongues, and attempts to avoid this conclusion turn out on inspection to be remarkably flimsy.”<sup>69</sup>

Still, this cryptic statement does not permit us to know precisely *where* or *how frequently* he spoke in tongues. He may merely be stating that his experience of tongues has been and continues to be a more extensive one in general than any of the Corinthian believers. Perhaps this is something the Corinthians themselves observed when he was with them for eighteen months (Acts 18:11), which would imply, of course, that he is referring to a public manifestation of the gift. It is also possible he is speaking hyperbolically to underscore his appreciation for this gift, lest any should misconstrue his criticism (cf. 14:39b). Otherwise, to imagine he is speaking in strict quantitative terms is to assume he has detailed knowledge of the practices of individual Christians, both public

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<sup>66</sup> Baker, 200.

<sup>67</sup> Menzies and Menzies, 144, note 7. Poirier (40) also asserts: “[T]he ‘nevertheless’ in this verse [v.19] marks a change in venue, so what could the original venue in these verses possibly be if not a private one?”

<sup>68</sup> Poirier, 40–41, emphasis original.

<sup>69</sup> Carson, 105.

and private. Finally, as MacArthur suggests, the reference in v. 18 to speaking in tongues in apparent contrast with speaking “in the church” may also be a public display of tongues outside the gathering of the church to unbelievers, as seen in Acts 2 and suggested by v. 22.<sup>70</sup>

But even if it is conceded that Paul is describing a private practice of tongues in v.18, does it necessarily follow that such a practice involved unintelligible speech, as modern practitioners readily admit to? Rather, in light of Paul’s repeated emphasis upon the importance of intelligibility, would it not be necessary to understand Paul’s practice, whether private or public, as also involving a gift of interpretation, even as he himself exhorts (14:13)? Therefore, it cannot be concluded that v.18–19 give credence to a normative practice of private tongues in the absence of corresponding comprehension.

Once again, the arguments based upon Paul’s statements in this portion of the overall presentation rely more upon conjecture than unequivocal instruction. While v. 18 may suggest that Paul practiced a private prayer language, the paucity of details renders such a suggestion a poor basis upon which to confidently exhort the practice today.

#### 1 Corinthians 14:28b

The final text to be considered occurs in the section of Paul’s teaching in which he provides guidelines for the right exercise of the gifts of tongues and prophecy (14:26–40). The emphasis of this pericope is upon propriety and orderliness in the assembly (v. 40; cf. vv. 26, 27, 30, 33, 35). In this way, the previously emphasized desired outcome of edification can be achieved (vv. 26, 31). Accordingly, Paul insists that any manifestation

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<sup>70</sup> MacArthur, 378.

of tongues be interpreted (v. 27; cf. v. 13). But if no one is present who able to interpret, then the tongues-speaker should remain silent (σιγάω; v. 28a).<sup>71</sup>

Then Paul adds “And let him speak to himself and to God” (ἑαυτῷ δὲ λαλεῖτω καὶ τῷ θεῷ; v. 28b). To those advocating a private prayer language, this exhortation is understood as yet another affirmation of this practice. As Fee states: “Speaking ‘to himself’ stands in contrast to ‘in the assembly’ in v. 27, meaning that he or she should pray ‘to God’ in this way in private.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, many commentators seem to be in accord with Baker when he states: “The instruction for these to exercise their gift privately most likely means to do this at home (which will match the later instruction for women to unlock their silence at home) and not in the assembly.”<sup>73</sup> He further remarks that Paul cannot be telling them to speak silently, because “prayer and worship in the ancient world were always vocal, silent prayer being a relatively modern human invention.”<sup>74</sup> Likewise, Thiselton approvingly quotes Robertson and Plummer, who interpret ἑαυτῷ to mean “in private, not in the congregation. It cannot mean that he is to ‘commune with his own heart’ in *public*.”<sup>75</sup>

Once more Paul seems to allow for a private exercise of the gift, if the tongues-speaker so chooses. Yet his brevity in this regard speaks volumes. He has already made clear how tongues edifies: only with interpretation. Therefore, to read into his words an

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<sup>71</sup> Baker (202) notes that σιγάω “generally occurs where people who have been talking have become quiet or are asked to stop talking.”

<sup>72</sup> Fee, 693.

<sup>73</sup> Baker, 204–205. So also Grosheide, 336–337.

<sup>74</sup> Baker, 205. Blomberg (278), however, understands Paul’s instruction to mean inaudible prayer to God, though he provides no justification. And Garland (659) ambiguously paraphrases: “Keep it to yourself; it is to remain private between you and God.”

<sup>75</sup> A. T. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 321, emphasis original (Thiselton, 1140).

endorsement of the regular practice of private, unintelligible speech is to wholly ignore his repeated emphasis in this chapter.

### Conclusion

In answer to the question as to whether Paul teaches a normative practice of the private exercise of tongues, we have seen that the Book of Acts, which describes the only historical instances of tongues, provides no support for such a teaching. Furthermore, in a detailed examination of the relevant passages in 1 Corinthians 14, we have noted Paul's consistent emphasis upon the priority of the edification of the church in all that transpires in the assembly. While Paul may recognize the possibility of a private expression of tongues, such a practice is at best clearly incidental to his overall discussion in this chapter. Therefore, apart from the greater question of whether the gift of tongues continues today in any form, to promote the practice of private tongues-speaking as a normative feature of the Christian life would in fact be a significant distortion of not only the spirit but also the letter of Paul's teaching.

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