

Chapters 12-14 of 1 Corinthians deal with the topic of spiritual gifts. In chapter 12 Paul likens these gifts to the variety of functions that the various parts of a physical body have and to their interaction, since Jesus Christ by His Spirit has joined believers together into one spiritual Body (12:12-13). In chapter 13 Paul elaborates on love as the more excellent path to follow. In chapter 14 the focus moves to two spiritual gifts, tongues and prophecy, since the Corinthian abuse of spiritual gifts apparently involved tongues to a large extent. Paul classifies prophecy as a greater gift because it “edifies” the Body, whereas tongues, when not interpreted, are unintelligible and as such cannot foster spiritual growth. A final admonition to mature thinking about tongues is contained in verses 20-25. The potential to perceive the challenge as harsh is softened with the opening word, “brothers.”

I. *An admonition to proper thinking (14:20)*

1. Paul directly rebukes them for thinking like children, using the negative characteristic of children to superficially evaluate things and not see the relation between cause and effect. Paul considered the use of tongues by the Corinthians in the assembly of believers without interpretation as childish and told them to grow up in their thinking.
2. Paul also implies that their actions might even be malicious, although not necessarily intentionally. Infants tend to be the picture of innocence, which should have characterized the Corinthians in regard to evil. But their misuse of tongues may have been having evil effects, which he then explains.
→ Although Paul is dealing with tongues in this verse, in general God calls us to maturity. Continued childishness can have malicious results. We are living childishly when we do not see the effects of our actions or fail to evaluate things further than just a surface level.

II. *An illustrative analogy from the history of Israel (14:21-22)*

Verse 21 is a rough quote from Isaiah 28:11-12 which Paul uses as an analogy to illustrate his teaching. It is probably not a prophecy of the NT phenomena of tongues because of its literal fulfillment, the manner of citation, and the actual mismatch of the two situations. The purpose of the citation is seen in the the historical situation of Isaiah and the correspondence to Corinth.

1. *The historical component of the analogy (v 21):* Rebellious Israel would not listen to the prophets God had sent. Hence, God promised judgment by sending a pagan people against them, who spoke an unknown language. (First the Assyrians came against both Israel and Judah, and then the Babylonians against Judah.) The citation (Isa. 28:11-12, *cf.* Deut. 28:49-57) was chosen not only for its reference to an unintelligible language but especially for the emphasis that the coming of a people with an unknown language would not change the heart of unbelieving Israel, but just reveal it further.
2. *The correspondence for Corinth (v 22):* (Interpretation of this verse needs to follow carefully the context.) A “sign” in general is a mark or an indicator. In Isaiah it was an indicator of God’s judgment on Israel and especially their unresponsive heart. God gave understandable prophecy as long as Israel was responsive, but an unintelligible enemy when they hardened. In Corinth prophecy was given to be understood and received, hence an indicator of God’s work with reference to those who were believing. But tongues would not bring understanding and hence an indicator of God’s work with reference to non-responsive unbelievers. *Cf.* Acts 2:6-13 for an example.

III. *Application to tongues and prophecy in the assembly (14:23-25)*

1. *Tongues:* Verse 23 describes a hypothetical situation which neither could happen (*cf.* 12:30) nor should happen (*cf.* 14:27-28). By purposeful exaggeration (*cf.* 13:1-3) Paul is saying that tongues, even “with full power”, would not bring understanding. God did not intend tongues without interpretation to be understood. With interpretation it becomes like prophecy (*cf.* 14:5). Tongues (like the foreign language of Israel’s invaders) were given with reference to those who would not believe. To use tongues without interpretation in the assembly was wrongly judging unbelievers as confirmed in their hard hearts. That would be malicious.
2. *Prophecy:* Again this is a hypothetical situation (*cf.* 12:29; 14:29) with purposeful exaggeration. Prophecy was expected to be understood. God chose to use prophecy so people could respond. By using intelligible words the Corinthians would be offering the chance to be believe.

These verses also offer insights regarding the character of NT prophecy. It brings conviction of being a sinner, a work of the Holy Spirit using the Word of God (John 16:8; Romans 7). It judges and reveals the heart; these are other ways in which God uses the Word (Hebrews 4:12-13). Hence, NT prophecy appears to have contained primarily things directly related to the Gospel.

→ This is a renewed challenge to us to be clearly presenting the Word of God, which convicts and lays bare our hearts. It is the tool and weapon which God uses and has given to us to use.

God wants us to be mature in our thinking. Mature thinking requires thinking about cause and effect, about consequences to our action or inaction, about purpose, meaning, and value. Superficial, self-centered thinking is immature. But through the mutual ministry of the Word of God, we can mature in our thinking. May God grant that we all grow in this fashion.

A brief overview of Signs, Wonders and Miracles

If tongues were not for edification in the body and all gifts were for the common good, what was the purpose of tongues when they were not interpreted?

The marks of an apostle

I believe that tongues belonged to the class of miraculous gifts which Paul calls the marks of an apostle. (2 Cor 12:12 “The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you.”)

A miracle is a divine intervention of God that cannot be explained by natural causes. In the case of being the mark of a person, it must be identified with that person. Furthermore, to be a mark of something or someone, it must be unique to that thing or person.

Who did miracles in the NT?

Careful reading of the NT and especially the Acts reveals that only two groups of people did miracles. The first group was the apostles themselves. The second group was composed of some to whom the apostles had directly ministered.

By Acts 5 we still find the very exclusive statement, “the apostles performed many miraculous signs.” The first mention of others doing miracles is in chapter 6. Stephen, after that the apostles had laid hands on him, is reported as doing miracles. The next case is chapter 8 where Philip did miracles. But he was also one of those upon whom the apostles had laid hands. It is interesting in chapter 8 that Philip could not pass this on to others, but John and Peter came from Jerusalem to minister in this way to the Samaritan believers.

There are other hints of this in the NT. For example, the list of spiritual gifts in Corinth, where Paul had personally ministered, include the miraculous. The list in the letter to Rome does not. Paul had not yet been there, nor any apostle. He even writes in the beginning of the letter that he longed to see them, so that he might impart to them some spiritual gift. This might be a reference to those special gifts.

The purpose of signs, wonders, and miracles

These miraculous gifts, as marks of the apostles, were God’s testimony to His messengers and their message (Hebrews 2:3-4). I believe that when the last of the apostles and of that second generation died, these sign gifts stopped. Their purpose was fulfilled in the foundation era of the church.