

Tongues are a “Sign” – the most difficult passage in Paul

INTRODUCTION

The Pentecostal debate has made 1 Corinthians 14 a battle ground for interpreters. The apex of difficulty is 1 Corinthians 14:21-23. Paul says that tongues are a sign for the unbeliever (14:22). But, when he applies his statement, he says the opposite – when an unbeliever enters church, don’t speak in tongues. Are tongues a sign for unbelievers or not? D.A. Carson summarizes seven different interpretations of this difficult passage (Carson, 109-117). He chooses the seventh which is also reflected in this paper. Those who hold a similar understanding include J.P.M Sweet, F.F. Bruce, Fredrick Dale Bruner, Jack MacGorman, Turner, Krister Stendal, Wayne A. Grudem, B. Dominy (Carson, 113, fn 16).

1 Corin 14: 21-23

[21] In the Law it is written: “Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then, they will not listen to me.” Says the Lord. [22] Tongues, then are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. [23] So, if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? [24] But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, [25] and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

Summary of 1 Corinthians 12-14

A summary of Paul’s argument concerning spiritual gifts will put this passage in context.

The Spirit has given the Church a variety of gifts as He willed (12:1-11). All of the gifts are necessary in the one united body (12:12-27). Every gift edifies the body, but some in a “greater” way (12:28-31) The greatest gift is love and without it, the gifts are useless (13:1-13).

Prophecy is greater than speaking in tongues unless tongues are interpreted. (14:1-5).

Uninterpreted tongues do not edify believers because they are not understood.(14:6-19)

Examples: musical instrument (7), military bugle (8), foreign language (9-11) speaking, praying, singing, giving thanks (12-18), speaking in church (18-19)

Foreign tongues do not help unbelievers because they are not understood. (14:20-25). The orderly use of the gifts (14:26-40).

Tongues (26-28), prophecy (29-33), women (34-40).

First Look: Meaning of 1 Corinthians 14:22

“Tongues are a sign . . . for the unbeliever”. At first look, it seems to be saying,

“The purpose of the gift of tongues is for a sign/proof for unbelievers.”

If this understanding is a correct, then we expect Paul to urge tongues when you are with an unbeliever. But, instead, he says that if you are all speaking in tongues, the unbeliever will think you are crazy.

Second Look Overview: Meaning of 1 Cor. 14:22

Our “second look” gives a second different paraphrase of Paul. This second paraphrase will be shown to be accurate in this paper.

“Foreign tongues are a sign of judgment to hardened rejectors”.

Isaiah 28

Paul quotes from Isaiah 28 to add one more argument against uninterpreted tongues.

The context of 28:11 must be understood. Isaiah 28 is the first of five woes against Israel.

1. The “drunkards” of Israel are condemned (1-8)
2. The drunkards mock the speech of God’s prophet (9-10)
3. God will mock them by the foreign speech of Assyrians (11-14)

This passage is the key to 1 Corinthians 14:21-22. Isaiah determines what the quote means (Isa. 28:11-12). Isaiah determines what Paul’s summary means, namely, that tongues are a sign to unbelievers. What does Isaiah mean by “tongues”, “sign” and “unbelievers”?

Isaiah’s View of “Tongues”

Isaiah said, “He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue (11)” He then skips a sentence and concludes, “even so they will not listen to me.”

The flow of the argument is clear. The drunkards of Israel mock the speech of God’s prophet. “They scoff at him and mimic his words in the senseless fashion of drunks.” (Buksbazen, 249) In turn, God will mock them with the foreign tongue of an oppressor. “The drunkards accuse the prophets of the simple, repetitive instruction used in teaching

children.” (Oswalt, Isaiah, 512). Young describes the “mockery of the despisers . . . seeking to imitate and caricature the message of Isaiah” (Young, 275). Since they refuse to listen, “They will indeed hear the harsh repetitive words, but from the lips of Assyrian taskmasters.” (Oswalt, 512) The foreign tongue is the language of the oppressor (Deut. 28:49; Jer. 5:15), that of the “coming of the Assyrians ” (Young, 277).

Moses was the first to use the “foreign tongue” as a sign of Israel’s oppressor. “The LORD will bring a nation against you . . . a nation whose language you will not understand.” (Deut. 28:49). It is a fit sign of captivity by a foreign power. Jeremiah also used the foreign tongue to describe the attack of an oppressor (Jer. 5:15). When God brings future blessing to Israel, Isaiah predicts that they will no longer hear such a foreign language from oppressors (Isa. 33:19).

Isaiah is not talking about the gift of speaking in tongues. “Tongues” in the phrase, “Tongues are a sign . . .” is referring to a foreign tongue, namely the Assyrians (Kaiser, 246; Wolf, 149). “When the simple intelligibility of the word of God is refused, his judgment falls . . . in the shape of the unintelligible” (Motyer, 210) “Imagine the fear of a conquered people trying to obey Assyrian orders when they didn’t understand the language” (Beyer, 123). If the gift of tongues is an actual human language (Acts 2; 1 Cor. 14:10-11), this argument is even stronger. Robertson argues, “It would seem rather strange indeed if before and after Corinth as described in Acts one kind of ‘tongue’ manifested itself while at Corinth a totally different phenomenon appeared — and that without any elaboration in Acts of a supposed difference.” (Robertson, “Tongues”)

Isaiah is not trying to develop a theology of the gift of tongues in the New Testament. He is giving Paul an example showing how a foreign tongue is so unhelpful, that it is an apt divine sign of judgment.

According to Isaiah, the tongue is a **foreign tongue**.

Isaiah on “Sign”

In Isaiah 28, what does Isaiah mean by a “sign”. A miracle? No. A sign of blessing? No. Clearly it is a sign of God judgment against an evil Israel. God’s response to the unbelieving mockers is to no longer speak to them through a prophet, but through an oppressor and captivity. Israel would hear the “invaders” with a “barbarian language” that is, the “unintelligible sounds of Assyrian soldiery.” (Buksbazen, 249). “Isaiah’s contemporaries would understand . . . the Assyrians” (Kaiser, 246, Young, 277). “The people mock the words of the prophet . . . God will as it were mock the people.” (Young, 277)

The "sign" God gave was the sign of a judgment. The foreign tongue pointed to a foreign oppressor and captor. "The 'sign' of unintelligible speech is a prophetic sign of judgment" (Hays, 240). Isaiah means "A foreign tongue is a sign of judgment."

Isaiah on "Unbelievers"

Isaiah does not use the term "unbelievers". He uses stronger language for these unbelievers. Isaiah calls them "drunkards" (28:1, 7), "scoffers" (28:14, 22), boasters (28:15). They trust "falsehood" (15), and are so hardened that they will not listen even after judgment (28:12).

They heard the word of God, rejected it, mocked the prophet and would not turn even after discipline. There are different kinds of unbelievers. Isaiah is describing "hardened rejectors"! Isaiah is saying, "A foreign tongue is a sign of judgment for hardened rejectors." Paul gave the summary, "Tongues are a sign for unbelievers" (1 Cor. 14:22), but Isaiah gives Paul's summary its meaning. "A foreign tongue is a sign of judgment for hardened rejectors."

If this is Isaiah's meaning, then there is no contradiction with Paul. Tongues without interpretation is a foreign tongue and should not be used with unbelievers who come to the church seeking to understand.

Paul and "Tongues"

Paul's summary of Isaiah is easily misunderstood as a contradiction to Paul's application. Paul's defense might be that when he quoted and summarized Isaiah, he assumed that the reader knew the context of Isaiah 28. He might quote Jesus, "Have you not read?" But, in 1 Corinthians 14:21-23, Paul also gives hints at what Isaiah meant.

Paul had high regard for each of the gifts. His evaluation of the gift of tongues properly used is higher than most Pentecostals and charismatics. Paul argues that tongues plus interpretation is equal in value and maybe identical with prophecy (14:5). Tongues is not simply a private prayer language. The gift of tongues builds up the church like all the gifts. Paul after the high praise of 14:5 then argues strongly that tongues without interpretation is useless. Tongues without interpretation is in essence an unintelligible foreign language. He does not allow it in the church (14:28).

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul used many illustrations to show that an unknown or foreign tongue was useless (musical instrument 14:7 military bugle 14:8, foreign language 14:9-11).

Paul's examples in 1 Corinthians 14:7-19 are illustrating one misuse of tongues, namely, speaking in tongues without understanding or without interpretation. The result is useless for the listener. He gave the examples of music without distinct notes (14:7), a military

bugle which does give a clear signal (14:8) and a foreign language that one does not know (14:9-11). Finally, a thanksgiving given in a tongue elicits no “Amen” since the listener does not understand it (14:16). This use of “tongues” in context clearly means “uninterpreted tongues”. So, “tongues” does not mean the purpose of tongues when used properly. It means one misuse of tongues, namely, speaking without interpretation so there is no understanding. The King James version reminded the reader of this. It repeatedly says, “an *unknown* tongue”. “Unknown” is in italics, because the translation “tongue” is accurate, but the context implies “unknown”. *Bibiliya Yera* does the same translating it “ururimi rutamenyekana” reminding the reader this is an unknown foreign language.

Storms says, “Therefore, Paul is *not* talking about the function of the gift of tongues in general, but only about the *negative* result of one particular abuse of tongues (namely, its use without interpretation in the public assembly).” (Grudem, *Miraculous*, 220).

Paul’s final illustration is from Isaiah. This example adds divine emphasis. He says that such an unknown or foreign tongue was used by God as a fitting sign of judgment. His illustration is very similar to the earlier one just given. Two people who have different languages are like foreigners to each other. Israel and Assyria were foreigners with different languages. But, the sting of this illustration was that in Isaiah this went beyond frustrating. God Himself used such a foreign language as a symbol or sign of the judgment of the Assyrian captivity. Isaiah revealed that the “tongues” was one of judgment.

Paul and “Sign”

The word “sign” can mean a miracle that points to God’s message. The seven signs in John are positive miraculous pointers. The miracle of feeding 5,000 points to Christ as the bread of life. But, a sign can be simply a signifier to show God’s truth or attitude. Isaiah 28 does not use the word “sign”, but the foreign tongues are a pointer or sign. In Isaiah 28, the sign of tongues refers to the Assyrian language they do not understand. This is not miraculous and it is not a positive sign. Grudem shows that biblical signs can be simply indications pointing to God’s attitude. (Grudem, *Prophecy and Tongues*, 381-96; Hodge, 295) They can be positive or negative. In some cases, they may be both, like the gospel being an “aroma”. It is “death to death” to unbelievers and “life to life” to believers (2 Cor. 2:15-16). Isaiah 28 determines the kind of sign Paul means. In this context prophecy is a sign to believers. That is, “When the Hebrews were disobedient, God sent foreigners among them; when obedient, he sent them prophets.” (Hodge, 206). Tongues here is a “punishment ... on unbelievers” (Calvin, 297). Isaiah 28 is clearly the sign of the Assyrian foreign language which was a sign of judgment referring to captivity.

Paul and “Unbelievers”

“Unbelievers” is used twice in close context and naturally we would expect the same meaning in both. However, the “unbeliever” in verse 22 is dramatically different than in verse 23. The unbeliever in verse 22 is described by Isaiah as a “rejector”, “mockers” and “hardened” to the word of God. The unbeliever of 14:23 is described by Paul as freely coming to a church service. This context means an unbeliever who is a “seeker”, “inquirer” or “interested unbeliever”.

When Paul quotes Isaiah, he gives a clue of the type of unbelievers that Isaiah is describing. The quote about a foreign tongue (14:21; Isaiah 28:11) skips a sentence. Then, Paul adds a phrase from Isaiah 28:12. He quotes, “even then they would not listen.” This implies that they heard God’s words, rejected it and were hardened so they would not listen even after God’s judgment. Paul gives clear clues that Isaiah is referring to an unbeliever-rejector while he is describing an unbeliever-seeker.

Two Types of Unbelievers

This understanding is the hardest to prove. It seems natural that the word “unbelievers” used by the same author at the same date and in the same close context, would mean the same thing.

I think Paul would respond. It is clear that I meant “unbelievers” in two different ways. The word is used by two different authors (Paul, Isaiah), separated by 700 years in two very different contexts.

Paul quotes Isaiah about the “foreign tongue”. So, Isaiah determines what “unbelievers” means in the quote (11) and in Paul’s summary of the quote (12). This will be contrasted by the “unbelievers” who enter the Corinthian church.

Isaiah is very clear what “unbelievers” mean. He means “unbelievers” who (1) heard the word of God regularly, (2) rejected the word of God, (3) mocked the prophet who brought the word of God, and (4) were hardened in their unbelief so that even judgment could not wake them up.

What a contrast to the “unbelievers” in the Corinthian context. At Corinth, the whole church is gathered, and “unbelievers” come to visit. This was rare in the New Testament church and indicates what we would call a “seeker” or “inquirer” or “interested unbeliever”. They want to hear what the church has to say. This is made even clearer because Paul couples the “unbeliever” with “some who do not understand.” The emphasis on both is that they don’t understand and are seeking to understand. Paul by contrasting the context of Corinth with that of unbelieving Israel, has made it clear that he has two different kinds of unbelievers in mind, that is, a rejector and a seeker. God treats them differently and so

should the Corinthian church. The rejector deserves judgment (Assyrians) and the seeker deserves clear truth.

Meaning of ἰδιώτης

Paul does not say only “unbelievers”, but he adds another group. To unbelievers, Paul adds those who “don’t understand”. The translation of “ἰδιώτης” is difficult, but Schlier notes that adding this term is important (Schlier, 217) The Greek ἰδιώτης can mean “ordinary”, “outsider”, “untrained/amateur”, “uneducated”, “ungifted”, “inquirer”, “one who does not understand.” And even a “halfway Christian” (Bauer, 371) (Acts 4:13; 1 Cor. 14:16, 23-24, 2 Cor. 11:6) “Those who do not understand” fits well here (14:23-24) as well as in 14:16 “how can *anyone who does not understand*, say ‘Amen’ at your giving of thanks since he does not know what you are saying?” The NIV uses “those who do who does not understand” and this seems appropriate. But, this term is used with “unbeliever” showing the emphasis is not on lack of faith, but lack of understanding. That is why the unbeliever voluntarily comes to the church assembly.

Author	Time	Context	Response
Isaiah	750 BC	Rejecting Israel	Judgment of Assyrian “foreign tongue
Paul	62 AD	Seeker visiting church	Give clear truth of the gospel

The apparent contradiction is easily dispelled by substituting the two meanings of “unbeliever”. “Tongues are a sign for the rejector.” “If a seeker comes into the church” don’t treat the “seeker” like a “rejector”. God does not and neither should the church.

There is no contradiction with Paul’s meaning, that is, **“The foreign language sign of judgment to rejectors.”** That is appropriate for the rejectors of Israel, but not for the seeker.

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