

# Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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## Why Tongues Were A Sign To Unbelievers

(Jerry Fite)

**I**n the midst of discussing miraculous tongue speaking, Paul concludes, “Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to the unbelieving...” (*I Corinthians 14:22*). Why does Paul conclude such?

It is not because tongue speaking was the definitive gift turning the unbeliever to the Lord. For Paul says in the next verse: “If therefore the whole church be assembled together and all speak with tongues, and there come in men unbelieving or unlearned, will they not say that ye are mad?” (*I Corinthians 14:23*). The unbelieving see no sign, but can only conclude the tongue speakers are crazy or incapable of communicating for they hear no coherent speech.

The Corinthians exalted the tongue speaker above the prophets who were likewise miraculously gifted. Paul makes his concluding statement by referring to Isaiah in the Old Law. Isaiah is admonishing God’s people in his day for not heeding the message spoken by God’s prophets. By rejecting the patient instruction of

the Lord, they will experience God’s judgment by a conquering nation who speaks a foreign language. “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers will I speak unto this people” (*I Corinthians 14:21, Isaiah 28:11*). Because Israel disbelieved God by rejecting His prophets, God would now speak to his unbelieving people in judgment via the conquering arm of an invading power speaking a foreign language. In this sense tongue speaking was a sign to unbelievers.

In the fourteenth chapter of *I Corinthians*, Paul stresses the way of love in exercising all miraculous gifts. Love seeks to edify the church. Edification is achieved through understanding (*I Corinthians 14:1-3*). Because the prophet speaks in the language of the hearer, the unbeliever will respond to God’s secret revealing message by confessing that God is indeed behind the prophetic message (*I Corinthians 14:24-25*).

Edification is also accomplished through the tongue speaker when the message is communi-

cated in the language of the hearer. The tongue speaker was only to speak when the hearer understood the language, or when one gifted to “interpret tongues” (*I Corinthians 12:10*) was present to interpret the spoken words (*I Corinthians 14:27-28*). Paul warns the Corinthians that one should not glory in tongue speaking above prophecy, but should weigh all the miraculous gifts on the scales of edification.

Paul’s statement reveals some interesting facts regarding speaking in tongues. First, it was a “sign”, not just a method of revelation. While Paul points to tongue speaking in a negative way from Isaiah for teaching purposes with the Corinthians, it also provided a positive sign. When one heard a message in a language which the speaker did not previously know, it “signified” that the message must be from God. Secondly, “tongues” were languages of men. While Israel would be conquered by a foreign tongue, it was the Assyrian language, not some “unknowable gibberish”.