

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

To provide a contextually interpretative analysis of 1 Corinthians 14:2:

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.

OVERVIEW

This verse is the primary verse used to support a private prayer language. On the surface, the verse appears to indicate that some people do speak in a “tongue” that is not understood by others and only understood by God. Therefore, it is easy to see why this verse would be used to support a private prayer language.

However, upon further investigation, it becomes clear that Paul did not pen these words to support a private prayer language, but rather Paul penned these words to support a larger point that he was making in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 through chapter 14, namely that followers of Jesus should seek to participate in activities that will build up the church (both locally and globally).

CONTEXT

Although oversimplified, here is a brief summary of the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 14:2:

- **Chapter 12:** Every person is given a gift for the purpose of the common good (i.e. helping others and building the Body of Christ).
- **Chapter 13:** Even though temporal gifts are good, the goal is love because love acts on behalf of someone else and puts their interests in front of your own.
- **Chapter 14:** After establishing the fact everyone has a gift and the goal is love, Paul then begins to deal with the real issue in Corinth: the elevation, normalization, and practice of the Gift of Tongues during an assembly of the Church. In order to communicate the lack of importance of Tongues during the gathering, Paul contrasts it with Prophecy.

INTERPRETIVE ISSUES

There are at least three interpretative issues to consider:

1. The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 14

In 1 Corinthians 14 it appears that Paul is addressing specific issues that have arisen when the local church in Corinth physically gathers. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that in chapter 14 Paul uses the word church nine different occasions and in six of the nine uses, Paul is specifically talking about the physical gathering of the local church.

1. "Nevertheless, in church I would rather..." – 14:19
2. "If, therefore, the whole church comes together... "– 14:23
3. "let each of them keep silent in church..."-14:28
4. "as in all the churches of the saints..." -14:33
5. "women should keep silent in the churches..." 14:34
6. "for a woman to speak in church...." – 14:35

In the other three uses of the word "church" in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is discussing the general "building up" the church.

1. "builds up the church." – 14:4
2. "church may be built up" – 14:5
3. "building up the church." – 14:12

Based on the above, it is clear that in chapter 14, Paul is discussing a specific issue that has arisen when the local church in Corinth physically gathers and that issue is that some people are talking in "tongue" that no one understands and because no one understands this "tongue" no one is being built up.

2. The use of the word "tongue"

The word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 14:2 for "tongue" is the word "glossa" which means a known language. Therefore, it is unlikely that Paul is referring to some language that no one, anywhere on earth understands.

3. The meaning of the referent "no one"

This is the most significant interpretive issue in 1 Corinthians 14:2 surrounds the referent of "no one."

There are essentially two options:

1. "no one" = "no one in the world" –

Proponents of a private prayer language favor this option. If this what Paul intended, then the word "tongue" in 1 Corinthians 14:2 would be a language unknown to humans. However, as stated above, the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 14:2 is the word "glossa" which means a known language. Therefore, it is unlikely that "no one" means "no one in the world" because every known language is known by someone in the world.

2. "no one" is "no one who is physically gathered at the local Corinthian church" –

An example would be helpful to explain option #2: *if during a Corinthian worship service, a person starts speaking in a Spanish tongue, but the audience is a mixed crowd who speak Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew then “no one” in the crowd would be able to understand the person speaking Spanish. In that situation God would be the only person who understands what the Spanish speaker is communicating.*

Although Spanish is a known language, in the example above, the person speaking Spanish would be considered a “mystery” of the spirit. Why is this a mystery? Because the ability to speak that language was given to the person speaking Spanish and it was given to him so he could bless others and build up the Body of Christ.

If viewed through the lens of the example above, it seems reasonable that “no one” refers to “no one physically gathered at the local Corinthian church.”

CONCLUSION

Since it appears that Paul is addressing specific issues that have arisen when the local church in Corinth physically gathers, since the word “tongue” Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 14:2 is a known language and since the most reasonable explanation of “no one” is “no one physically gathered at the local Corinthian church” it is highly unlikely that Paul is referring to a private prayer language in 1 Corinthians 14:2.

Therefore, based on the above, here is a summarized interpretive analysis of 1 Corinthians 14:2:

- **For one who speaks in a tongue** (*known language in the ancient near east, but unknown by anyone in the Corinthian Church*)
- **speaks not to men** (*because no one in the Corinthian congregation understands the known language*)
- **but to God** (*because God understands the known world language, which is unknown to the congregation*)
- **for no one** (*no one in the Corinthian congregation*)
- **understands him** (*because they don't speak his known language*),
- **but he utters mysteries in the Spirit** (*this known language is a spiritual gift and the spirit understands what he is saying*).