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Question: What did Paul mean when he said, “I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding”?

1 Corinthians 14:14-15 (NKJV):

14 - “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.

15 - What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding; I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.”

Answer:

In 1 Corinthians 14, the Apostle Paul addresses confusion in the early Christian church regarding the use of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. This confusion has persisted in many church communities to this day, particularly

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surrounding the nature and purpose of tongues and prophecy.

To understand what Paul meant, it’s important to first grasp the basic function of spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts, including tongues, are given by the Holy Spirit for the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 12:7). The gift of tongues, in particular, serves multiple purposes, such as:

- Edification of the individual believer – when one prays in tongues, their spirit is built up and strengthened (1 Corinthians 14:4).
- Evangelism and the spread of the gospel – in some cases, tongues can be a sign to unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:22).
- Edification of the church – when interpreted, tongues can benefit the congregation by bringing understanding and spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 14:5, 13).

The Nature of Tongues

The gift of tongues is divided into two categories:

1. Human languages – These are known languages, like Swahili, Maasai, or others, but they can be spoken by the Holy Spirit in situations where the speaker does not understand them (Acts 2:4-11, where the apostles spoke in various languages that were understood by people from different regions).
2. Angelical or spiritual languages – These are languages not known by human beings and are used for direct communication with God. Paul alludes to this in 1 Corinthians 13:1, where he says, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...”

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Purpose of Tongues

The primary purpose of speaking in tongues is to communicate with God in the spirit. This is a personal prayer language that is not meant to be understood by others unless it is interpreted.

1 Corinthians 14:2 says, “For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.”

However, tongues can also serve as a sign to the unbelievers.

In 1 Corinthians 14:22, Paul writes:

“Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.” The use of tongues in this way is meant to demonstrate the power of God to those who do not yet believe, pointing them toward salvation.

Paul’s Point in 1 Corinthians 14:14-15

Paul’s statement, “I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray

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with the understanding,” speaks to the balance between the two types of prayer:

- Prayer in the Spirit – Praying in tongues allows the believer to communicate directly with God. The spirit prays, but the understanding (or intellect) does not grasp the content of the prayer. This can be edifying for the individual, but without interpretation, it doesn’t build up the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:4).
- Prayer with understanding – This refers to praying in the known language, where both the speaker and the listeners understand what is being prayed. This type of prayer is beneficial for corporate worship, as it can encourage and instruct others in the faith.

Paul’s approach is not to downplay the importance of tongues but to emphasize that understanding should not be neglected. In a corporate setting, tongues should always be accompanied by interpretation, so that the church can be edified.

The Problem in the Church

In 1 Corinthians 14:6-12, Paul addresses the confusion caused by speaking in tongues without interpretation. He explains that if a person speaks in tongues without offering an interpretation, they are only speaking to themselves and God, not edifying others. He likens it to speaking a foreign language in a place where no one understands it— it would be unhelpful to the listeners (1 Corinthians 14:11).

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Paul then urges those who speak in tongues to pray that they may also interpret (1 Corinthians 14:13). Without interpretation, the tongues are only beneficial for the speaker, not the congregation.

The Gift of Interpretation

The gift of tongues is complemented by the gift of interpretation of tongues, which allows the message spoken in tongues to be understood by others. 1 Corinthians 12:10 lists the gift of interpretation as a spiritual gift given by the Holy Spirit. Paul encourages believers to desire the gift of prophecy and interpretation, as prophecy edifies the church in a way that tongues alone cannot (1 Corinthians 14:5).

Paul's Conclusion

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1 Corinthians 14:19 is clear:

“Yet in the church, I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

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Here, Paul highlights the importance of speaking in a way that benefits the body of Christ as a whole, particularly through understanding, teaching, and prophecy.

Praying in the Spirit and with Understanding

Paul’s teaching is that both forms of prayer (in the spirit and with understanding) should be used appropriately. In private, praying in the spirit (in tongues) is a powerful means of personal edification, as the Holy Spirit intercedes for us (Romans 8:26-27). But in public worship, praying with understanding (in a known language) is essential for the edification of others, so they can join in prayer and worship.

Conclusion: A Balanced Use of Gifts

As we see from 1 Corinthians 14:26-33, spiritual gifts are meant to be used in an orderly and edifying manner within the church. 1 Corinthians 14:33 states, “For God is not the author of confusion but of peace.” Therefore, when we speak in tongues, we must be mindful of how it affects others, ensuring that it builds up the body of Christ and does not cause disorder.

Key Bible References:

- 1 Corinthians 12:7 – Spiritual gifts are for the edification of the church.

What does it mean to “pray in the spirit, and also pray with the understanding”?

- 1 Corinthians 14:2 – Tongues are for personal communication with God.
- 1 Corinthians 14:22 – Tongues are a sign for unbelievers.
- 1 Corinthians 14:5, 13 – Tongues should be interpreted for the edification of the church.
- Romans 8:26-27 – The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us when we don’t know how to pray.
- 1 Corinthians 14:19 – The importance of praying with understanding in church.

God bless you.

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