

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 7/17/94 PM
I Corinthians 12:10 "Spiritual Gifts: Tongues & Interpretation"

Intro: Last week we began a two part investigation into what the Bible has to say about the spectacular spiritual gifts, namely, the sign gifts. We looked at what I Corinthians 12 has to say about the gifts of healing and miracles. Tonight, our focus is on the gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues. We want to approach the issue from two perspectives.

- I. The New Testament Perspective on Sign Gifts
- II. Our Perspective concerning the Sign Gifts

I. The New Testament Perspective on Sign Gifts

A. The Gift of Tongues

An October 16, 1987 issue of Christianity Today records the following Gallup poll finding: Of the 29 million adult Americans who consider themselves "Pentecostal or charismatic Christians," 5 million claimed to have experienced the hallmark of the Pentecostal tradition, speaking in "unknown tongues", technically called glossolalia .

What is tongues speaking? I read about (MacArthur, 220) some charismatic Sunday School literature designed to teach kindergarten children to speak in tongues. It is entitled, "I've Been Filled with the Holy Spirit!!!" It's an 8 page coloring book. One page features a boy who looks like Howdy Doody with his hands lifted up. A dotted outline pictures where his lungs would be. Inside the lung-shaped diagram is printed, "BAH-LE ODOMA TA LAH-SE-TA NO-MO." A cartoon style balloon coming from his mouth repeats the words, "BAH-LE ODOMA TA LAH-SE-TA NO-MO." A brain-shaped cloud is drawn in his head, with a large question mark in the cloud. Also inside the cloud is printed, "MY MIND DOESN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING." Under the boy, I Cor 14:14 is printed: "For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful."

A typical view of tongues speaking is this. The gift of tongues is seen as a wholly mystical experience that somehow operates in a person's spirit but bypasses the mind. Many charismatics are even told that they must purposefully switch off their minds to enable the gift to function (MacArthur, 220). For example, Charles and Fances Hunter hold "Healing Explosion" meetings, where they teach people how to receive the gift of tongues. Charles Hunter tells people, "When you pray with your spirit, you do not think of the sounds of the language. Just trust God, but make the sounds when I tell you to. In just a moment when I tell you to, begin loving and praising God by speaking forth a lot of different syllable sounds. At first, make the sounds rapidly so you won't try to think as you do in speaking your natural language." (in MacArthur, 221).

There's no question that God gave the early church the gift of tongues. But did He intend for the gift to be an experience that bypasses the mind? And is the gift to be exercised today?

Few topics can sever fellowship between Christians faster than this one-- tongues. Some Christian teachers say that tongues have ceased (John MacArthur-- popular book "The Charismatics"). Others teach that tongues continue today (popular

pastor and author Les Flynn). Others take a more cautious approach. Charles Ryrie asks, "What about tongues today? One cannot say that God would never give this gift or others of the limited gifts today, but everything indicates that the need for the gift ceased with the production of the written Word."

Question: What are "tongues" in the Bible?

Tongues are mentioned in three books of the Bible: Mark (16-17), Acts (2, 10, 19), and I Corinthians (12-14). The book of Acts is primarily historical narrative. It tells us what happened in the early church, not what should happen in the entire church age. The passage in Mark is a textually disputed one, which simply mentions tongues as an apostolic sign (MacArthur, 224). The key text then for the tongues issue is I Corinthians.

Let me remind you that the context of I Cor 12-14 is a context of abuse. Paul is seeking to straighten out the abuse of spiritual gifts in Corinth. The Christians there were seeking the flashy, showy, attention-getting gifts. So in ch 13, Paul reminded them that gifts are futile if not exercised in love. 13:1 "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding bronze, or a tinkling cymbal."

Let's look at I Corinthians 12:10b "to another, various kinds of tongues." What did Paul have in mind when he talked about "various kinds of tongues?" What did "speaking in tongues" involve in the Bible?

Further questions. Are tongues a heavenly language? Is the gift of tongues a private prayer language known only to God? Though this is a common view, the biblical support is lacking. In the Bible, tongues are real human languages. Biblical tongues are not gibberish, but languages.

On the birthday of the Church, as recorded in Acts 2, the followers of Christ were enabled by the Holy Spirit to speak in foreign languages (Acts 2:6). This miraculous event enabled the believers to communicate to persons in their own languages. This did not substitute for preaching, because right after this Peter preached a sermon to the crowd. The tongues acted as a sign. They let the multitude know that God was about to speak through Peter and the other disciples of Christ.

Tongues is from the Greek word "glossa," which can refer (like our English word) to the physical organ, or to a language (Mac, 225).

Why did God give the early church the gift of tongues? Paul substantiated that tongues are a sign of condemnation. Look at I Cor 14:21-22, "...tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not. . ." Tongues were being practiced in Corinth. Paul did not prohibit the use of tongues for that church. But he devoted an entire chapter to correcting the abuse of tongues (I Cor 14).

Priority in the church was to be given to the use of the gift of prophecy (proclamation of the Word). Why? Read I Corinthians 14:4--"He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself, but he that prophesieth edifieth the church." The gift of tongues was an authenticating sign in the early church. It was also a sign of the judgment to come on disobedient Israel.

Paul Van Gorder (in MacArthur, 224-5) offered this list of limitations on the use of tongues in the church from I Cor 14:

1. Tongues were for a sign to unbelievers (22).
2. Tongues were to be used for the edification of the church (26).
3. No more than 3 people in the assembly were to speak in tongues during a service, and then, each in his turn (27).
4. There was to be no speaking in tongues unless they should be interpreted (28).
5. Any confusion or disorder in the assembly was an indication of something that did not originate from God (33).
6. In the apostolic church, women were to keep silent and not to speak in tongues (34).
7. To recognize these regulations as the commandments of the Lord was imperative (37).
8. Though not forbidding tongues in the apostolic assembly, the predominant command was "covet to prophesy" (39).

If these rules were followed, much of the contemporary confusion would be eliminated.

One key requirement was that when the gift of tongues was exercised, the gift of interpretation must have been as well.

B. The Gift of Interpretation of Tongues

I Corinth 12:10b--"to another, the interpretation of tongues"

Paul's instruction for the Corinthian church is clear. I Cor 14:27-28, "If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two...and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church." Why? 14:33--"For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace."

MacArthur defines this gift as follows (227), "The gift of interpretation was a supernatural ability to translate a language one had never learned so that others might be edified by the message (14:5)."

This is how tongues were to operate in the early church. Individuals in the assembly had the ability to communicate in foreign languages. Others were gifted to interpret those languages for the benefit of the other hearers. Biblical tongues are not gibberish, but languages.

How does this compare with tongues today? William Samarin, professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto, wrote this about a study he conducted (in MacArthur, 227-8), "Over a period of 5 years I have taken part in meetings in Italy, Holland, Jamaica, Canada, and the United States. I have observed old-fashioned Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals; I have been in small meetings in private homes as well as in mammoth public meetings; I have seen such different cultural settings as are found among the Puerto Ricans of the Bronx, the snake handlers of the Appalachians (and) Russian Molakans in L.A...Glossolalia is indeed like language in some ways, but this is only because the speaker (unconsciously) wants it to be like language. Yet in spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia is fundamentally NOT language."

Application: What was the basic problem of the Corinthian Christians concerning their spiritual gifts? The basic problem was selfishness. They were unwilling to accept the fact that God is responsible for handing out spiritual gifts.

--v 11 ". . . Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will."

--v 18 "But now hath God set the members. . . as it hath pleased him."

The Corinthian problem was that the members were not content to discover and develop their gifts. Instead they sought the gifts which would bring them attention and admiration. The Corinthians weren't accepting this fundamental truth--the gifts had already been given, by God. And God does not want us to seek certain "flashy" gifts. Rather, we are to discover, develop, and use the gift we already have.

Observation: Very seldom do you hear of someone starting a "helps movement" or a "giving movement" or an "exhortation movement". Instead in the contemporary charismatic movement, people are urged to seek the spectacular gifts, namely tongues. Yet the gifts of helps, giving, and exhortation are gifts of the Spirit just as much as the gifts of tongues or healing or miracles. Paul's point in I Corinthians 12 is clear--Every Christian in the Body of Christ is vital, and every gift of the Spirit is vital.

Tran: We have seen the presence of the sign gifts in the church at Corinth. Now let's bring the issue up to date and consider. . .

II. Our Perspective concerning the Sign Gifts

Key Question: Are the spectacular, sign gifts still present today? Renald Showers summarizes (Israel My Glory, Aug/Spt 88, p. 18), "It is important to note that the heart of the disagreement is related to the intention of God, not to the authority and power of God. Certainly God has the authority and power to do whatever He wants, whenever He wants. Thus, the real issue is not God's ability to continue all the spiritual gifts throughout the history of the church. Instead it is God's intention. Did God intend to make all the gifts permanent in the Church, or did He intend to make some temporary?"

We find a key statement in I Cor 13:8, which reads, "Love never fails, but...whether there be tongues, they shall cease." The Greek verb means "to cease permanently." This passage does not say WHEN tongues would cease. Some believe v 10 indicates it will happen "when that which is perfect is come." When is that? Some believe it is when the NT is complete, that is, when the canon is complete, tongues will cease. Others say "the perfect" refers to the eternal state.

Here's a key question. Since Paul said tongues would cease, has it already happened, or is it yet future? Is there evidence that tongues ceased? It's interesting that the last recorded miracle in the NT occurred around A.D. 58, with the healing on the island of Malta (Acts 28:7). From A.D. 58 to 96, when John finished Revelation, no miracle is recorded.

History verifies that tongues (like miracle-working) did cease. Paul wrote 12 epistles after I Corinthians and never mentioned tongues again. Peter never mentioned it. Nor did James, or John, or Jude. Once the church was established, tongues were gone. Chrysostom said that tongues had ceased by his time. Augustine said tongues were a sign for the apostolic age, and had ceased (for quotes, see MacArthur, 233).

During the first 500 years of the church, the only people who claimed to have spoken in tongues were followers of Montanus, who was branded a heretic. Not until the 17th century is tongues a factor, and then only in some groups on the fringe of Christianity (p. 234).

When the apostles passed from the scene, so did the presence of the sign gifts. Let's investigate the nature and purpose of sign gifts. Three key passages stand out.

1. Mark 16:15-18

The point? Spectacular signs were associated with the apostles' ministry.

2. II Corinthians 12:12 "Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds."

Certain sign gifts had the function of identifying apostles in contrast with other believers.

3. Hebrews 2:3-4

"...so great salvation..." Two phases are mentioned here. One, "at first spoken by the Lord." Two, "confirmed unto us by them that heard Him (apostles)." How did God confirm their message? V 4 "with signs...and gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Why did the Lord provide the early church with these spectacular, sign gifts? Sign gifts were given to authenticate the message the apostles preached. But since we now have the authoritative Word of God in written form, we no longer need sign gifts to authenticate our message.

What should be our response to those who believe that such gifts are to be used today? First, it should drive us again back to the Scriptures. Just because everybody is doing something doesn't make it right. The Bible is our final authority for both belief and practice. That applies to tongues and healing. That applies as well to any other issue. Secondly, we ought to be challenged to keep in step with the Holy Spirit.

Millard Erickson suggests the following approach, "Whether or not we believe the Holy Spirit is bestowing charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues today, we can be assured that He is at work filling, sanctifying, empowering and guiding believers, and producing His fruits. In this we can rejoice. And this we ought to seek."

Conclusion:

We've considered a controversial subject today. Granted there has been a great misunderstanding and misemphasis concerning the matter of the spectacular spiritual gifts. But permit me to offer this word of caution: Let's not throw out the Spirit in our reaction to the misuse of certain spiritual gifts!

There's an ancient fable about a dog which had a bone. While crossing a bridge carrying the bone in its mouth, the dog saw his reflection in the water below. The bone he saw in the reflection looked so much better than the one in his mouth, that he dropped the substance for the shadow and went hungry. There are a lot of hungry people today. They've dropped, ignored, or by-passed the satisfying reality of the Spirit-filled life.

Why did Jesus send the Holy Spirit? The Lord gave His indwelling Spirit to us for a specific twofold purpose, as stated in John 16:

1. To convict unbelievers of their need for Christ (v 8).
2. To guide believers into all truth (v 13).

The Holy Spirit has been given to exalt Christ. Are you cooperating with the ministry of the Spirit in your life? Perhaps He is convicting you of your need for total submission to Jesus Christ. Perhaps He is guiding you according to the truth of the Holy Scriptures. Are you yielding to His work, and allowing Him to exalt Christ in your life?

Recommended Reading on Sign Gifts:

The Corinthian Catastrophe, George Gardiner

The Charismatic Chaos, John MacArthur

Keep in Step with the Spirit, J. I. Packer