

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT SERIES – TONGUES

“Is the Gift of Tongues for Today? – Part IV” (1 Corinthians 13)

We have learnt so far that:

- (1) The baptism by the Holy Spirit happens to every believer at the moment of conversion (1 Cor. 12:13).
- (2) The baptismal filling “*with the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 1:5) and the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18) are synonymous terms for the same event as a witness to Jesus Christ. This is a repeatable experience for every Christian (cf. Acts 4:8, 31; 13:9; Eph. 4:19).
- (3) The tongues of the Day of Pentecost and in the incidents in Acts 10 and 19 were real, known, unlearned, verifiable, translatable languages only (Acts 2:6, 8). This is the only real gift of tongues in the Bible. There was no private prayer language or ecstatic utterances associated with the real gift of tongues.
- (4) Tongues were a clear sign that the disciples were Christ’s witnesses (Mark 16:7), that the “*last days*” had begun (Acts 2:16-17), and a sign of God’s judgment on the Jews for their rejection of the Messiah (1 Cor. 14:21-22; Isa. 28:11-12)
- (5) There were likely three types of “tongues” in 1 Corinthians 12-14 – real gift of tongues, a counterfeit gift (probably mixture of ecstatic utterances and demon-possession that blasphemed Christ in other languages), and carnal people speaking foreign languages to pretend they had the gifts of tongues.
- (6) The only gift of tongues that Paul permitted in the worship services are real, known languages that are known to some people in the worship service or will be translated for others. Nothing else was to be permitted. Paul sought to only ban counterfeits and confusion but not the real gifts of tongues.

CEASING OF REAL GIFT OF TONGUES

It is very clear that there was a real gift of speaking in tongues in the early church. It is important to note that the occurrence of tongues speaking was rare in the NT. Even in the Book of Acts, which spanned almost thirty years of NT church history, we read of only three direct references to speaking in tongues (Acts 2, 10, 19). There are far more references to the filling of the Holy Ghost and especially to preaching. That is because the ability to prophesy or preach was a far greater gift for the edification of the saints. This is in line with what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians, “*greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues*” (1 Cor. 14:5) and “*Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy.*” (1 Cor. 14:39a)

Tongues had a role in the NT church but a very limited one. It was a sign gift to authenticate the apostolic message as true and to condemn the rejection of Christ by unbelieving Jews. However, that purpose would soon be redundant as the Gospel was established throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul knew that the Corinthians craved the gifts of tongues. These professing Christians were proud, self-seeking, and self-centred. In their carnal state, many of them wanted to have this spectacular gift to impress others. This church was disorderly and fleshly. John MacArthur points out,

It's interesting to realize that in the entire letter of 1 Corinthians (sixteen chapters), there is not a single mention of an elder or a leader of that church. Apparently, no one was leading. In fact, they had come to the place where their whole view of church worship was, "We'll just come together and let the Holy Spirit do His thing and let it all happen." Finally, in 14:32, the Apostle Paul cries out, "...the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." Then in 14:40, he says, "Let all things be done decently and in order." A church can't operate without leaders. God never intended for the church to be a group of people who get together and do whatever they feel. The church is to have structure and order. Why? Because God is a God of order. The Corinthian church had no leadership or order. Instead, they had decided to come in each week and fight to see who could be the most prominent. So Paul says, "These gifts that you have exalted, these independent expressions of so-called spirituality are all just temporary--even the true ones...to say nothing of those that are false and counterfeit. However, love will go on forever. Love is the more excellent way."

It seems everyone was doing what was right in his or her own eyes at Corinth. Women were clearly usurping the leadership role so Paul commanded them to keep silent in the corporate worship. The Apostle not only reminded them of the limitations of the tongues gift and placed a regulatory framework to prevent the misuse and abuse of tongues, but he also made clear that this gift had a limited timeframe in God's kingdom,

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. (1 Cor. 13:8-13)

Paul's point of emphasis here is that love is the only eternal thing because "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8b). That was the one major thing that was needed in the motives and actions of the Corinthian church members who fought, sued, abused, divorced, and exalted themselves over each other.

Paul specifically predicted, under inspiration, that "*whether there be tongues, they shall cease.*" The Greek verb translated "*cease*" is the word *pauro*, which is a strong word indicating that once tongues stopped, they stopped for good. The Greek grammar here also indicates that the tongues will cease by themselves. Paul uses the middle voice or reflexive to reveal that fact. So the statement "*whether there be tongues, they shall cease*" can be literally translated "Tongues will stop by themselves."

This is different from prophecies and knowledge, which Paul argues will only be disappear, "*But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.*" He uses the passive voice to describe the verb translated "*done away.*" The passive voice is a grammatical form that indicates that an outside person or thing will cause prophecies and knowledge to be

abolished. So these two gifts (prophecy and knowledge) will continue on till that which is perfect is come. Then they will be abolished. However, the gift of tongues is going to stop all by itself before “*that which is perfect is come.*” Whether we take the word “*perfect*” here to be the close of the canon of Scripture or whether we take it to mean the Eternal Golden Age, Paul’s argument is that tongues would cease by themselves before it.

The real gift of tongues was never meant to be a permanent feature of church life. The Corinthian church members were like children who wanted to play with toys even after they had physically matured into adults. Paul tells them that they have to spiritually grow up by putting away childish things and their attraction to the spectacular, “*When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*” (cf. 1 Cor. 14:19-20)

Now everyone agrees that 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 teaches explicitly that tongues *will* cease but what is not universally agreed is *when*. All the evidence suggests that the real gifts of tongues ceased before the end of the apostolic period. This would also be consistent with the purpose of the giving of this sign, as after the first century the sign was redundant. It also should be noted that Paul is not predicting the end of all the powerful workings of the Holy Spirit but simply the end of certain miraculous spiritual gifts like tongues. Every time a soul is saved is a miracle of divine grace.

EVIDENCE FOR CESSATION OF TONGUES

(1) Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a church that tongues would cease as a gift. There would frankly be little point in emphasizing this if tongues were never going to cease until the return of Christ. It is interesting that Paul never mentions the gift of tongues in his subsequent epistle to this church, 2 Corinthians. He also never mentions it in the rest of his 11-12 epistles. Indeed, in two later epistles, Ephesians and Romans, Paul discusses at length the gifts of the Spirit but he makes no reference to the gifts of tongues. No other NT writer mentions the gift of tongues in any future writings (save for Luke’s historical account in Acts).

(2) Tongues we have noted were a sign authenticating the apostolic message, signifying the beginning of the last days, and a rebuke to unbelieving Jews. When Titus Vespasian, the Roman conqueror, destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70 this scattered the Jews for the next 1900 years. The practice of Judaism as a national religion ceased to exist. This sign was now effectively redundant. It is interesting to note that those charismatics who claim to have this gift today do not make any attempt to use it to signify to the Jewish world that they are fulfilling Scriptural prophecy (1 Cor. 14:21-22; Isa. 28:11-12).

(3) The writings of the early church fathers are completely silent on the continuation of tongues speaking. They wrote on many issues that were prevalent in the early church still but never on this one. Interestingly, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians around A.D. 95 in which he brings up many practical problems evident in this church but he makes no reference to tongues. John Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407) in his *Homilies on First Corinthians*, makes the following comment on chapter 12:

This whole place is very obscure; but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur, but now no longer take place.

Another prominent church father, Augustine (A.D. 354-430) stated of Acts 2:4,

In the earliest times, “the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake with tongues,”...These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit....That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away¹.

(4) Two thousand years of church history attests to the fact that these *known* language tongues have been done away with. The Reformation was the greatest move of God since Pentecost. Yet we do not read of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox etc. speaking in tongues. We do not read of any tongues in the Three Great Awakenings in the West. We do not read of tongues speaking in the great Singapore Pentecost under the preaching of John Sung. Indeed, Luther, Calvin, John Wesley, CH Spurgeon, John Sung all had to spend many hours studying foreign languages. Charismatics can provide no convincing theological explanation for the disappearance of real tongues speaking during most of church history.

Ironically, all Charismatic missionaries have to go to language school! Indeed, in 1976 charismatics held an international world conference in Jerusalem to celebrate “the ongoing miracle of Pentecost.” The delegates had to use interpreters through headphones in order to understand one another! I have a Pentecostal friend from UK who claims to speak in tongues every day and goes around Africa teaching a video Bible School to pastors. He spends thousands of dollars translating his materials into all the various dialects there and needs an interpreter everywhere he speaks.

All the evidence – biblical and historical - speaks to the fact that the gift of tongues ceased in the Apostolic age and will never be restarted. The gift of tongues was a wonderful and real gift. God used it in a mighty way for the specific purpose for a particular time and place. However it has ceased - never to return.

It is not cessationists who have divided the NT era between Apostolic and post-Apostolic but the Holy Spirit. However, even the most radical charismatics accept that there are no apostles today exactly like the 12 who wrote inspired Scripture, saw Christ, are the foundation of the NT church, and have their names on the walls of the New Jerusalem. Nowhere does the Bible promise that the spiritual gifts given to authenticate their writings and ministry of the 12 Apostles would continue throughout church history.

WHERE DO CHARISMATIC TONGUES COME FROM?

The “experience” or “sincerity” argument of Charismatics proves nothing other than they have had a sincere experience. Other religions have sincere religious experiences. For instance, Plato (429-347 B.C.), refers in multiple places in his famous work, *Dialogues* to pagan ecstasies of

¹ “Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John,” *The Nicene-and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, edited by Philip Schaff. New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1888

speech. A person may be sincere but may be sincerely wrong! You will feel better by a host of things. Some feel “holier” when they enter a great cathedral and are overpowered by its awesome architecture, incense, and quietness. Others feel better if they eat chocolate, go running, engage in sexual experiences, or even take wine or drugs but these are not spiritual experiences! Feelings cannot be used to make a final conclusion on the rightness of an experience.

If the claimed tongues experience is not in line with the biblical gift, they are not valid, no matter what the seeming results. Many cessationist Christians down the centuries have lived joyful, Christ-glorifying, and fruitful lives without ever speaking in tongues. These things are not conditional of speaking in tongues! By simply checking with Acts 2, what we can be sure is that the tongues of the modern charismatic movement are not the same as those on the Day of Pentecost. So, we can only conclude that they are either self-induced, group-induced by the flesh (such as hypnosis or ecstatic emotion) or they are satanically induced. Certainly, none of these sources commend themselves to the child of God.

We don't have to always default to the “demon-possessed” for all supposed tongues speaking today. It may be but it does not necessarily have to be. Many true Christians are deluded by false pastors/prophets and sensory experiences. Remember it was the Apostle Peter who was rebuked by Jesus Christ with these words, “*Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.*” (Matt. 16:23) That is why the NT writers wrote so much to the true church warning them of this danger. Most believers will accept that there are times when they naively believed something was God's will and leading but with the benefit of hindsight they recognise was merely a fleshly impulse. Most will also confess to the desire to want to appear to be seen as spiritual – tongues speaking promises not just instant gratification but the appearance of being in a eclectic group of higher spirituality. That particularly appeals to the pride of man.

Sometimes the desire to speak in tongues today may be based on good motives – a spiritual hunger and desire for a closer walk with God. Many poor saints are rooted in a joyless, judgmental, and unemotional Christianity that starves their soul. A person like that can be easy prey to a false experience and a false teacher. We must never underestimate the wiles of the devil to deceive. Often he leads us to identify the correct symptom but persuades us to seek the wrong solution.

There is no justification for suspending our minds and babbling in a private devotional tongue or ecstatic utterances. The Bible warns we are to worship the Lord with our minds, “*I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also*” (1 Cor. 14:15). Bypassing of the mind is thoroughly unbiblical (Mark 12:30; John 4:23). Jesus Christ specifically stated that Christians must not babble in ecstatic utterances like the pagans do in their worship, “*But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.*” (Matt. 6:7) In the prayers of Jesus Christ to His Father, the words were a real language and were recorded by the NT writers. We are always to pray in an intelligible, understandable way. It is frankly astounding today that so many place such an emphasis on unintelligible communications that nobody, including the speaker, understands.

CONCLUSION

It would be wonderful if believers today could preach the gospel in foreign languages that we have never learned. However, that is not God's sovereign will. The gift of tongues is not for today. They have ceased, as the Holy Spirit promised they would (1 Cor. 13:8). Tongues speaking

may generate excitement or make a person feel better for a time but that does not validate the modern tongues speaking movement. Charismatic proponents of modern tongues are wrong regarding the nature, purpose, and practice of tongues. The modern tongues speaking movement is simply guilty of repeating the errors of the carnal Corinthians of two millennia ago. Pentecost is a biblical word, but the modern Pentecostal movement has not inherited the tongues of the biblical Pentecost!

Nowhere are we commanded in the Bible to seek the gifts of tongues. If it truly was a mark of a higher spiritual experience and draws us closer to God, we would expect much teaching on this doctrine. Indeed, the Bible speaks much of how Christians are to mature and be edified but not once is it related to speaking in tongues. It is a foolish and dangerous thing to seek something that God has not asked us to seek, as we leave ourselves open to the devil to snare us.

The devil only provides the counterfeit work of the Holy Spirit to distract us from the real. As NT Christians in the last days, we need to continually cry unto God for the outpouring of the Spirit of God. We must not allow the devil to hijack the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. There are no experiences that provide instant Christian maturity. We need the real power of the Holy Spirit every moment of every day and we need to pray for it. Lets not be distracted with an empty substitute for the real thing.

**O Breath of life, come sweeping through us,
Revive Thy church with life and power;
O Breath of life, come, cleanse, renew us,
And fit Thy church to meet this hour.**