

## THE GIFT OF TONGUES – by William McDonald

The first mention of the gift of tongues in the New Testament is found in Mark 16:17:

“And these signs shall follow them that believe; . . . they shall speak with new tongues.”

The Lord had just commanded the disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, v.15. He told them that, when the message was received, certain miraculous events would follow. One of these was that those who believed would speak with new tongues.

The expression “new tongues” does not mean languages that had never been known on earth before, but rather foreign languages with which the people themselves had never been familiar.

This prediction of the Lord Jesus was fulfilled in part, at least, on the day of Pentecost. The apostles were “filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).

The following verses prove conclusively that these were foreign languages. The record is that at that time, there were Jews in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, v.5. They heard the Gospel preached in their own language, v.6. It amazed them that these apostles from Galilee should be able to speak languages which they had never studied, vv. 6, 8, 11.

Two other occurrences of the miraculous gift of tongues are found in the book of Acts. The first is in 10:46, when the Gentile Cornelius and his household received the gift of the Holy Spirit and spoke with tongues. The other is in 19:6 when John’s disciples

- a. were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, v.5
- b. had the Apostle Paul’s hands laid on them, v.6
- c. received the Holy Spirit, v.6
- d. spoke with tongues and prophesied, v.6.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-31, we have still further instruction concerning the gift of tongues:

- a. It is one of the many gifts of the Holy Spirit, v. 8,9.
- b. These gifts are given for the profit of all, v.7, that is, for the common good and not for personal glory.
- c. The Spirit does not give all the gifts to everyone and does not give the same gift to everyone, but divides to every man severally as He will, v. 11. This means that He makes an individual distribution, as He chooses.
- d. The gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation of tongues are mentioned last in the list of the Spirit’s gifts, v. 10. This may be a rebuke to the attitude of the Corinthians; they exalted the more spectacular gifts such as tongues, and depreciated some that were more important, such as prophecy.
- e. In verses 12-27, Paul teaches that every member of the body is needed. There is one body but many different organs in the body. If the body were all eye, it would be a monstrosity. Then there would be no hearing or smelling. So no Christian should consider himself unnecessary; neither should he look down on other believers who might have a less spectacular gift than he.

- f. In verses 28-30, Paul applies the illustration. God has set men with different gifts in the church. Not all are apostles - or prophets -or miracle workers. Not all have the gift of healing. Not all speak with tongues. Not all interpret. The proper functioning of the church depends on each one carrying out his own allotted work.
- g. In v.31, Paul teaches that some gifts are more important than others. In Ch. 14, for instance, we will learn that prophecy is more important than tongues. We should covet the best gifts and not just those that produce the biggest display.

Paul's magnificent chapter on love, Ch. 13, is closely related to the subject of tongues. A person may speak with the tongues of men and of angels, yet if he has not love, he has become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Love is the unselfish giving of oneself for the good of others. If a man uses the gift of tongues merely for personal honor and glory, it is utterly useless. It should rather be used for the good of others, as we shall see in Ch. 14.

The temporary nature of tongues is stated in v. 8. Prophecies shall fail; tongues shall cease; knowledge (supernaturally imparted) shall vanish away. But love never falls.

The longest section on tongues in the Bible is found in 1 Corinthians 14. This chapter was written to correct the abuses that had arisen in the assembly in Corinth. The Christians there were showing an immature preference for the gift of tongues. Those who had the gift were priding themselves on being able to speak languages they had never learned. The others were coveting this gift more than the gift of prophecy, for instance. It was largely a matter of display, and not what was for the spiritual benefit of the local church.

Therefore, Paul seeks to show the folly of their attitude:

- a. When a man speaks in a foreign language in the church, God understands him but the people do not. It may be that he is speaking very deep truths, but even deep truths are valueless when they are not understood, v. 2.
- b. When a man prophesies, he is talking in the language that the people understand, and they are therefore built up, and encouraged, and comforted, v. 3.
- c. That is the difference. A man speaking in a foreign language (miraculously received) edifies himself, while the one who prophesies edifies the church. The first is for one's own good only; the second is for the good of others, v.4.
- d. Paul recognizes that tongues are a gift of the Holy Spirit, and he would not disparage them. So he wishes that all the saints spoke with tongues. But he would rather that they had the gift of prophecy. This gift is greater because it has a wider usefulness, v. 5.
- e. Even if Paul himself spoke to the Corinthians in tongues, it would not benefit them unless he spoke to them in a manner they could understand. He must have a divine message ("by revelation or by knowledge") and it must be delivered in an understandable manner ("by prophesying or by doctrine"), v.6.
- f. Even musical instruments are valuable only insofar as they play notes that are clear and distinct. Otherwise there would be no tune or melody, v.7. So too, the notes of a trumpet must be recognizable. The soldiers must be able to distinguish the battle call from other calls, v. 8.
- g. The same applies to human language. Unless the human tongue speaks words that are distinct and understandable, you might as well talk into the air, because no one will know what you are saying, v. 9. There are many different languages in the world, and each has its own separate vocabulary. But if I don't understand the language a man is speaking, we

are like foreigners to each other, vv. 10, 11.

- h. Therefore, in desiring spiritual gifts, we should desire those that will help us in edifying the church, v. 12.
- i. If a man has the gift of tongues, he should pray that he might also have the miraculous gift of interpretation, v. 13. Apparently a man who had the gift of tongues could understand what he was saying but was not permitted to convey it to others without the gift of interpretation.
- j. When a man prays in a foreign tongue he understands what he is saying, but his understanding doesn't help anyone else. It is unfruitful, v. 14.
- k. What is the conclusion then? Simply this. It is better to pray with the spirit and at the same time be understood. It is better to sing with the spirit and at the same time be understood, v. 15. Otherwise, those who are listening won't be able to say a sincere AMEN since they have not understood what has been said, v. 16. For the speaker has truly been giving thanks but the others have not been edified, v. 17.
- l. Paul himself had the gift of tongues to a greater extent than any of them. But in the church he would rather speak five words and be understood by the others than speak ten thousand words in a foreign language, vv. 18, 19.
- m. We should take a mature view on these things. It is childish to be occupied with display, with that which is spectacular, but which does not edify. Only in malice should we be children. Otherwise we should be men, v. 20.
- n. In the Old Testament, God spoke to His people for centuries in understandable words but they rejected His message. Finally, He declared that He would speak to them in a foreign tongue, as a judgment upon their unbelief. He did this by sending the Assyrian hordes to invade the land. When Israel heard the enemy speaking the Assyrian language, it was a sign to them of God's retribution, to confirm and consummate their unbelief, v. 21.
- o. So tongues are a sign to unbelievers, not to believers, v.22. Speaking in a foreign tongue doesn't produce conviction in the unbeliever who has rejected God's message. He can't understand what is being said.
- p. So too, if strangers come into a church building and find the Christians speaking with tongues, but without interpretation, they will think it is sheer insanity. No conviction will be produced, v.23.
- q. On the other hand, if they hear the Christians prophesying, they will understand what is being said, and may be convicted and converted, vv. 24, 25.

In view of the abuse of the gift of tongues, it was necessary for the Spirit of God to institute certain controls in public meetings of the church. These controls are given in 1 Corinthians 14:26-40:

- a. First of all, all ministry must result in edifying the church; otherwise it is not acceptable, v. 26b. We have already seen that speaking in tongues without an interpretation edifies no one but the speaker.
- b. Only two, or at the most three may speak in tongues in any one meeting. In addition, these may not all speak at once, but in turn, v. 27.
- c. Tongues may only be used when there is an interpreter present. If there is no interpreter, then the speaker must remain silent, v. 27, 28.

- d. Women must not participate, “for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but let them be in subjection, as also saith the law” vv, 34 - 35.
- e. Tongues should not be forbidden, but their employment must be decent and orderly, v. 39, 40, for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, v. 32.

These instructions are not optional; they are the commandment of the Lord, v. 37.

In closing this study on tongues, there are two important questions that merit consideration:

First, does the Bible teach that the reception of the Holy Spirit is always accompanied by the gift of tongues, We believe the answer to be “No,” for the following reasons:

- a. 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 teaches that the gift of tongues is given by the Spirit, not to every one who receives the Spirit, but to those whom He chooses.
- b. All the Corinthian believers were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians 6:19:

“... your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost.”

They all had been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ. “For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body... and were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Yet not all of them spoke with tongues, as is evident from 1 Corinthians 12:30, where Paul asks:

“Do all speak with tongues?”

The answer to this and the previous questions must of necessity be “No.” Not all are apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles! Not all have the gift of healing, tongues or interpretation!

- c. In Acts 8:17, we read of the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit, but we read nothing of their speaking with tongues.
- d. Down through the ages, there have been many men of God, filled with the Holy Ghost, who have never spoken with tongues.

The second and final question is, “Are tongues intended for use in the church today?”

While there is no direct statement in the Bible that tongues have ceased, there are strong suggestions that that is the case.

- a. First of all, it was important at the outset of the church that the Gospel should be proclaimed to people of different languages quickly. God made this possible by enabling men to speak foreign languages without having studied them. Today we have time to learn foreign languages. Even those who profess to speak in tongues have to learn the native languages when they go to the mission field.
- b. At the outset of the Christian dispensation, God confirmed the message of the Gospel “with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will” (Hebrews 2:4). With the completion of the written Word of God, the need for such signs ceased. Today we are called upon to believe the Gospel, not because of miracles, but because the Bible says it is so.

This is strongly implied in 1 Corinthians 13.

“ . . . whether there be tongues, they shall cease. . . ”

“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come (the complete Word of God), then that which is in part shall be done away.” v. 8-10.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, it may be said that the gift of tongues was the miraculous ability given by the Holy Spirit to speak an actual human language which one had never studied.

It was a sign to unbelievers, not of favor, but of God's judgment on them because of their unbelief. Their inability to understand the tongue was a sign of the darkness which had come upon them because of their rejection of God's Word.

For a person to use the gift of tongues in a meeting of the church obviously created serious problems. What should be done? Should their use be prohibited altogether? The Apostle Paul did not believe that to be the answer. Rather he laid down a set of standards which were to regulate or control the use of tongues in the church, namely:

1. No more than two or three could speak in tongues in a meeting, and they must speak in turn
2. There must be an interpreter.
3. The contents of the message must be of an edifying nature.
4. Women must not participate.
5. All must be done decently and in order, without confusion.

If these instructions were obeyed today as the commandments of the Lord, they would eliminate the Latin services of the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and the excesses of various Protestant groups on the other.

There is a strong suggestion in the Scriptures that tongues were intended only for the early days of the Church dispensation, and that with the coming of the complete Word of God, the need for this and other sign gifts passed away.

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