

Title: So, What is Speaking in Tongues? Pt.2

Text: 1 Corinthians 14.1-5

Theme: Defining Speaking in Tongues

Series: 1 Corinthians #80

Prop Stmt.

Read Text:

In this letter we have seen how critically important it is for the church to be holy, unified and loving. Since we, as a community of believers are the visible representation of God by means of our lives and relationships, we must be holy because God is holy, unified because God is Trinity and loving because God is love.

In chapter 14 we are looking at two of the spiritual gifts that were problematic for the church at Corinth; the gift of prophecy and the gift of speaking in tongues. Both of these gifts are speaking gifts. The gift of tongues in particular was a real problem because the way in which it was being expressed was harming the unity of the church and was not being handled in love. Last week I addressed the fact that one's view of how to grow and deal with life's problems as a believer in Christ is what often drives a person's view of the role and purpose of the gift of tongues. This message is a continuation of that one. If you did not hear it, please listen on-line, or get a copy of it. Here is the big idea. Many believe that after you become a follower of Christ, that you need a 2nd infusion of grace or a specific 2nd blessing in order to live a victorious Christian life. Many who hold to this view, believe that the evidence for having received this 2nd blessing is speaking in tongues which, in their view takes your prayer life to another level. 2nd blessing theology is not an accurate reflection of the Bible. This morning, I want to help you see that the view of tongues being the language of angels is not accurate either.

1. **The two main views on the precise nature of tongues.**

A. **The Gift of Tongues is the language of angels.**

This view presents tongues as the language of angels that enables one to communicate directly with God at a higher level of speech. Many of those who hold this view think of tongues as being a form of angelic speech based on 13.1. The idea that is given is that when you have this gift/ability, you are able to communicate at such a deeper or higher level with God than using your normal human language. The advantage of this is that you are given some greater level of spiritual power because your spirit connects with God in a much more intimate way and the demons cannot understand your prayers like they would if you used normal languages and therefore are not able to thwart your plans as they would if they could hear your prayers like they normally can.

Based on what I have read and a number of conversations, I would guess that this view is the most popular view of the gift of tongues. The goal of this view, no doubt for many, is to have a more vibrant, intimate, and powerful spiritual walk. I applaud that goal. I appreciate and affirm that desire. I disagree with this view because it does not accurately

reflect the text, but I agree with the goal of seeking a more intimate relationship with God.

If tongues is the language of angels that enables us to communicate with God on His level (sometimes called celestial speech), then why does Paul say that when “perfection comes” the imperfect, the talking like a child, the poor reflection part of life in which he includes the gift of tongues, will be over with? If it is the heavenly language, or the language of angels, then why would it cease? That makes no sense at all. In fact, it ought to continue. But instead of being something that is better, Paul says that tongues is part of our present “imperfect” condition. Tongues will cease because something better comes. Now, I cannot make the argument based on 1 Cor. 13 that the time or era of tongues is over with now, but verses 9-12 make it very clear that it is not a superior heavenly language.

If tongues therefore, is not a superior heavenly language, then what was Paul saying in v.1? Paul was clearly and obviously speaking hypothetically. He was not giving a definition of the gift of tongues in v.1 saying that they are some form of angelic languages available to us anymore than he was saying that we have the ability or possibility of understanding all mysteries and all knowledge. He is speaking hypothetically to demonstrate how incredibly important love is. If I possessed powers and abilities that no one has ever had or will have in this present era, but I did not have love, all of those abilities would be a complete waste!

B. The Gift of Tongues is a known human language previously unknown to the speaker.

Evidence for this view rests first of all upon the meaning of the actual word. Glossa (Greek for tongues, or languages) specifically means languages. The very concept of language is not a series of random sounds that have no cognitive content. A language is a structure of expression that communicates intelligible thoughts and ideas. Whenever tongues is mentioned in Scripture, the context assumes that it is a specific language, although it is not necessarily known to the speaker.

The gift of tongues spoken about in Acts 2 is clearly a known human language. This is obvious from verses 6 and 8 (read text). There is no getting around this definition in Acts 2. I grant you that neither Luke nor Paul give us a formal definition of this gift, but Luke’s account here clearly assumes this definition that tongues is a legitimate foreign language. In Acts 2, there is no need for interpreters and interpretation since, people from these other countries are present and hear the “wonders of God in our own tongues.” The question is, is this how tongues is understood in the other passages that deal with it? Or, is the gift of tongues ever given a different definition, or would the view that Luke gives us differ from Paul’s explanation?

I believe that the pouring out of the Spirit upon the Samaritans in Acts 8, more than likely included the gift of tongues, even though Luke does not give that detail. But in Acts 10, when Peter is preaching the gospel to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, the people

believed and the Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues. Again, there is no mention by Luke of interpreters present either because he chose not to include that detail, or, more likely as the text indicates, Peter recognized the experience as being identical to what had taken place in Acts 2 and said (Acts 11.15) “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.” Peter makes it very clear, that what these Gentiles experience in Acts 10 was the same as he experienced in Acts 2. No new definition of the gift of tongues is given.

The same type of experience is repeated in Acts 19. When these believers in Ephesus learn of the advent of the Spirit, because they were believers, the evidence of the authenticity of their faith and the fact that they were clearly part of body of Christ is seen in the fact that they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Luke uses the same word for tongues in Acts 19, Acts 10 and 11 as he does in Acts 2.

When we come to 1 Corinthians, we find that Paul uses the same word that Luke does and that Paul does not provide a new definition for it. Therefore, Luke and Paul are not dealing with two fundamentally different gifts, although, like the rest of the gifts there is probably some variety in quantity and duration.. It is clear from chapter 14 that Paul sees the gift of tongues as the gift of languages because Paul will not permit the gift of tongues to function in a public gathering of the church without the gift of interpretation. Interpretation as it is most naturally understood is the ability (here gift) to translate from one language to another. Secondly, Paul’s statement in 14.10-11 (read) and his quotation from Isaiah 28 (14.21 - read) is absolutely clear that Paul views tongues as a known foreign language.

Last week I spoke of two dangers that I want us to avoid. I desperately want us to stay away from a dull, dry, sterile, predictable and complacent existence and call it Christianity. I also want us to stay away from an experientially driven, emotionally-manipulated, biblically inconsistent Christianity. If I was convinced that tongues was anything other than a known foreign language, I would say so, but I am convinced by the Scriptures that it is a known foreign language that was previously unknown to the speaker that was used to communicate praise to God.

2. **The two main views on the role and purpose of tongues.**

A. **A Private Prayer language for spiritual power and growth.**

- 1) Tongues is a language that speaks directly to God (14.2)
- 2) One who speaks in tongues is edified (14.4)
- 3) Speaking in tongues is praying with your spirit (14.2, 14)

Question #1

What does Paul mean when he says, that a person speaking in tongues is speaking to God? (14.2) He is saying that a person in church, who speaks in a language that no one else understands might as well be outside screaming his head off in the woods where no

one is around, because when you speak in tongues in church, no one has a clue as to what you are saying and it does not benefit the church in anyway.

In these opening verses of chapter 14, Paul is not giving us two choices: You can either opt for your own edification and speak in tongues or you can opt for the church's edification and prophesy. No, the dominant question throughout this section is: does it edify the church? Please get this! Can you honestly say before God that you gathered here this morning because you were chiefly concerned for the spiritual health and well-being of others? I personally struggle with that, and I preach on it! Some Sundays I find myself just hoping that nothing blows up or that I make it through the sermon before I make a complete fool of myself or some other extremely carnal goal. Without being focused truly on doing what I can to personally benefit the spiritual vitality of my brothers and sisters, then other concerns that are not important will become important and replace what is truly important. Things such as; did that song or prayer move me today; or did we get out on time; or did I get to sit in my favorite seat and was the temperature to my liking? Over and over in this letter Paul is taking issue with those who are abusing the church as a means to advance themselves. We dare not pursue something for the goal of personal exaltation instead of being driven by the desire to benefit the entire body. Here he is exposing the utter self-centeredness of those who are claiming that the gift of tongues makes them superior to the other believers and gives them position and privilege that the rest do not have.

Question #2

What does it mean that "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself"? In what way does speaking in tongues help your spiritual walk? I wonder if Paul is doing a play on words here and is using "edifies himself" in quotes. That may be a bit strong. But, Paul's concern is always for the body as a whole, not the personal enhancement or exaltation of one person. Ok, tongues may not help the church as a whole but don't they still edify the person? (14.4) And...the argument goes, if it edifies the person, then would it not at least in that way edify the church because it is edifying at least one person in the church? If one person benefits, then would not at least that part of the church be benefited? True, but the question remains, is that how the church is supposed to spend its time?

For example, I like to play the piano, but I am a very poor pianist. Therefore, I like to sit at the piano and sing songs to the Lord, and I benefit from that, but no one else does, which is why I only do it when no one else is around. Brothers and sisters that is not being modest, that is being honest. If I chose to sit down this morning and attempt to play and sing something, I, may be worshiping and gaining some benefit, but my playing and singing would be so unappealing and distractive that your worship and edification would need defibulation in order to get going again.

I grant you that the gift of tongues itself is presented as having some limited value in private and therefore it is possible that Paul acknowledging that here in v.4. But its public use in Corinth was so wrapped up in status seeking and public personal affirmation, that the negative affect of tongues outweighed any benefit it may have had.

Question #3

What does it mean (v.14) that to pray with tongues, my spirit prays, but not my mind? I will deal with this a little more when we get there, but Paul appears to be saying basically the same thing in v.14 as he does in v.4. Praying in a tongue may be the communion of your innermost being with God, but if your mind, your conscience, your understanding has no benefit from this, then this gift is really not a benefit to the church.

Therefore, while I reject the idea that the gift is a private prayer language that only angels speak, the text does seem to teach that the gift of tongues was

B. A Public means of authenticating the Mission and Message of the Apostles

I have mentioned that we cannot argue from 1 Cor. 13 that tongues will cease when the Bible is completed because 1 Cor. 13 does not demand the cessation of tongues until the return of Christ. However, 1 Cor. 13 nor any other text demand that tongues be a prominent part of the life of the church until the return of Christ.

Let me give you a couple of things to consider.

2 Corinthians 12.12 says, “The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance.”

God has always used miracles as a means to authenticate His message and messengers. Let me say that again, but this time in a way that more accurately reflects the entire picture. When God has used miracles it has been for the purpose of authenticating His message and His messengers. While God has used miracles, they do not appear to be the normal means that God has used. According to 2 Cor. 12.12, they marked an apostle. Should we expect them to continue when the time of the apostles was over? Some argue that miraculous gifts ceased when the apostles died because these miraculous gifts were limited to their era, and when the apostles died, miraculous gifts were rendered obsolete.

2 Cor. 12.12 sounds very similar to Hebrews 2.4, which speaks of how when the gospel was originally presented to the Hebrews, it was accompanied by signs, wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. This was similar to what God did when He revealed His Word to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. It was accompanied by signs, wonders and various miracles which authenticated both the message and the messenger.

Tongues is a miraculous gift.

Tongues is a temporary gift (it will cease).

Miraculous gifts were used to authenticate the mission and message of the apostles.

(Clearly, that is what took place in Acts 2, 8, 10-11, 19)

The apostles are dead, so are miraculous gifts.

I am not comfortable with being that cut and dry, only because God uses events for more than one purpose at times. I think that there is much to be said for the limited attention that tongues and miraculous gifts receive in epistles. I think you have to consider that 1 Corinthians is one of the earliest of the letters written, and that there is nothing else said in any of the other letters about tongues. I think you have to consider that in the entire story line of Scripture that miracles are not the normal, every day occurrences that God uses with His people. When I put all of this together, I believe that tongues is a gift of the Holy Spirit that enables people to speak in other known languages that God used to authenticate His message and messenger in places where the gospel was first being heard, that God used as a sign of judgment on unbelieving Israel (a point I will develop next week) but that tongues do not appear to be the normal nor necessary part of every believers' life. I believe that it is very possible that when the gospel is moving into new territory, that there will be more "miraculous" type events that God uses, but that we should not demand nor necessarily expect this sort of thing to continue, since the ongoing "miracle" if you want to put it that way, the ongoing testimony of the presence and power of God in this world, is the new community of believers living in committed, vibrant, holy, unified and loving relationships in and through the local church.

Tonight – 5.15 p – Q/A – in the Worship Center before the Sunday PM class.