

The Gift of Tongues

1 Corinthians 14:1-28

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In John 3, Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to the wind, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). In that context, Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration, blowing upon whomever it wills, whenever it wills, bringing new birth and new spiritual life to the elect. From our perspective, the Holy Spirit is wild and untamed. It is like the wind. We don't know when or where it's going to blow. We don't know who it will blow upon and bring new birth. It just happens.

Jesus is specifically talking about regeneration and new spiritual birth in John 3. However, there has always been a temptation to read into that passage a more general principle that the Holy Spirit is wild and untamed (like the wind), not only in the work of regeneration, but also in how it affects the physical faculties of man. Among some charismatic Christians, the wild nature of the Holy Spirit is reflected in the wild nature of their worship. In some congregations you can be "slain in the Spirit" by falling over, fainting, entering into an ecstatic trance, or by losing control of your body in some way, all under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Some more extreme charismatics emphasize uncontrollable laughter (holy laughter), crying out in strange ways, barking like a dog, or roaring like a lion, all taking place during the corporate worship of the church.

I remember several years ago while at a campground for a youth retreat, a charismatic church was worshiping in the cabin next to us. Their worship was characterized by an "anything goes" mentality. That is, if the Spirit leads, do it, however wild and untamed that leading is. I'm not doubting that these were dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, but their worship was everything but biblical. It was chaos. Everyone was doing their own thing, most of it strange, one person spent the bulk of the worship service turning the lights on and off in rapid succession.

Some of you have come out of charismatic churches. Perhaps you have heard those strong arguments about the wildness of the Holy Spirit, and the danger of quenching the Spirit by imposing order on that which is untamed. We are often told that we can't put God in a box, and that we especially can't put the Holy Spirit in a box. It does whatever it wants.

We who do not belong to the charismatic tradition must ask ourselves, "How do we respond to this kind of thinking and practice?" I would answer briefly in three ways.

First, we must love our charismatic brothers and sisters. We ought to be able to acknowledge their error without unnecessarily destroying their character or challenging their motives.

Second, we need to be careful to pay heed to how the Holy Spirit works in our own lives. We don't want to be cold, hard, lifeless, Spiritless, crusty Christians. We don't believe in being slain by the Spirit, but we do believe that the Spirit convicts us of our sin (John 16:8), and therefore it is reasonable at times, in light of that conviction, to fall on our knees and faces in tears. Or, as the Holy Spirit illumines our minds to the scope of

God's grace, it is perfectly reasonable to laugh with joy, and to celebrate, sing out, and lift our hands in worship.

Third, we need to be thoroughly biblical in our assessment of the wide variety of Christian beliefs and practices that are out there. The running joke at the Christian college I went to was, no matter what, to always ask the question, "Is this biblical?" You couldn't even post a "bike for sale" sign without someone scribbling that question on it. We need to be like that - not in jest, but in sincerity and seriousness. We need to learn to apply God's Word to every part of our faith and practice. We need to ask, "Is this biblical?" about our own worship and practice, and the worship and practice of other Christian traditions.

This morning we want to do that with the difficult question of speaking in tongues. Our examination of this topic will revolve around three questions: 1) What are tongues (biblically speaking)?; 2) Does the gift of tongues continue today?; and 3) How does the Bible's teaching on tongues apply to us today?

What Are Tongues? Do They Continue Today?

We will deal with the first two questions together: what are tongues, and do they continue today?

The biblical witness is that tongues can be defined in four ways: 1) tongues are foreign languages; 2) tongues are spiritual gifts given, not for private practice, but for public use; 3) tongues are revelational; and 4) tongues are a sign of a new stage in God's redemptive work.¹

First, tongues are foreign languages. The word for *tongue* in Greek is *glossa*. *Glossa* refers both to one's physical tongue, or to a language. When we hear of speaking in tongues in the Bible, we most naturally think of speaking in languages. This, of course, is what we see at Pentecost in Acts 2:

And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language (Acts 2:3-6).

The miraculous gift of tongues in Acts 2 was very clearly the gift of foreign languages given to those who had not previously spoken them. In fact, the phrase, "speak in other tongues" is used almost interchangeably with, "speak in his own language" in the above passage.

Now, the modern understanding of tongues is quite different. Today, those who speak in tongues usually do not claim to be speaking in human languages. They claim to speak in "the language of heaven," or "the tongues of angels" that Paul mentions in 1 Cor. 13:1.² Unlike the tongues of Acts 2, modern tongues are usually thought to be a kind of spiritual language. Some suggest that this change in the nature of tongues took place in the time between Acts 2 and the experience of the Corinthian church. 1 Corinthians 14 is

often viewed as an argument in favor of "tongues" being, not human languages, but a spiritual or heavenly language.

Evidence for this is taken from v. 2, for example. There Paul writes, "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit." If you look at that verse by itself it is pretty easy to think, "There it is... tongues are a private, spiritual language." The passage speaks about "speaking to God... mysteries in the Spirit," after all.

But in v. 2, Paul is most certainly *not* setting out a pattern for what speaking in tongues is. Instead, he is showing the Corinthians precisely where they have gone wrong. His point is that when you do speak in tongues (a human foreign language), no one else in the church understands, only God, and that is not good!

The phrase, "he utters mysteries in the Spirit" (v. 2), may also seem to imply some sort of spiritual language, but in fact it is best understood as a reference to the mysteries of the gospel. When Paul uses the word "mystery" in the New Testament (and he uses it dozens of times), he almost exclusively uses it to describe the message of the gospel, which was once hidden (thus the mystery), but is now revealed. We see this in Colossians 4:3, "At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ..." Paul's point in 1 Cor. 14:2 is simply to say, "When you speak in tongues, you utter mysteries in the Spirit - that's good - that's the gospel - but the problem is that only God understands it, and that's not good."

The flow of vv. 6-13 point very strongly to the understanding that tongues were nothing more than human foreign languages. In v. 6, Paul says, "if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?" The strong implication here is that the whole purpose of speaking in tongues is to bring revelation and teaching to the hearers.

In v. 10, he says, "There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me." Paul's point here is to say that if you come to church speaking a different language, Russian for example, it does no one any good. Thus Paul goes on to emphasize the need for tongues to be interpreted for them to be of use as a gift.

Several verses later (v. 21), Paul quotes from the book of Isaiah (Is. 28:11-12). This is one of the Old Testament passages that provide the foundation for tongues in the New Testament, and in Isaiah the tongues spoken of are without question human foreign languages, the language of the Assyrian invaders.

Throughout chapter 14, Paul consistently thinks of tongues in terms of human foreign languages. He emphasizes repeatedly that if tongues are going to be useful, they must either 1) be understood by someone who speaks that language, or 2) be interpreted into the language common to the church.

Second, tongues are spiritual gifts given, not for private practice, but for public use. This is clear in several places. In 1 Cor. 12:7 we read, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." In 1 Cor. 14:12-13 we read, "So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret." In other words, the manifestations of the Spirit ought to go hand in hand with

building up the church, not merely an individual. So, if tongues are present they ought to be interpreted.

Again, some today suggest that tongues are a spiritual language used to supplement one's private devotional and prayer life. Those who suggest this sometimes look to what Paul says in vv. 18-19, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue." It is argued, "Look, Paul speaks privately in tongues! He withholds the gift in the church." But, a more careful reading reveals that Paul never says he speaks in tongues privately. He simply says that he speaks in tongues a lot, just never in church if no one understands him.

We can imagine Paul speaking in tongues more than anybody. After all, he was a traveling apostle, going places, meeting people, teaching in different cultures. The gift of being able to speak in foreign languages would have been immeasurably valuable for his ministry. Paul indicates that he used the gift all the time. But his use was not private, it was public, when the language of the moment dictated it. At church, where everyone spoke the same language, the use of tongues would have been unnecessary. Tongues, just like all other gifts, are for public use, not private use.

Third, tongues are revelational. Again, we see this in Acts 2: "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11).

In 1 Cor. 14, Paul speaks about how the church is built up.

On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up (1 Cor. 14:3-5).

How is the church built up? Paul says that it is through prophecy, or through interpreted tongues. Here Paul draws a contrast. If you prophesy, everyone understands the revelation and everyone is built up. But if you speak in tongues, no one understands and the church is not built up. The big picture here is that the upbuilding of the church comes by revelation that can be understood. This is why Paul is so insistent that tongues must be interpreted, because tongues are in essence revelation that, if interpreted, can build up the church. In v. 5, Paul suggests that interpreted tongues are equivalent to prophecy. Tongues are revelational.

Fourth, tongues are a sign of a new stage in God's redemptive work. In Acts 2:17, we read, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...." These prophetic utterances find their center and focus in Jesus Christ. Thus Acts 2:21, "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Through the gift of tongues at Pentecost, God gave the message that the gospel of Jesus Christ will go forth into all the world, to people from every tribe, nation, and language (glossa). The gift of tongues shows us that it was never God's design to limit his blessings to merely one nation or one people, but instead to bless people from all nations and tongues through Jesus.

In sum, tongues are not, as popularly understood today, a private spiritual language. Tongues do not continue today. The modern practice of tongues does not match the biblical practice of tongues. Tongues are revelational. They are foreign languages. They are given to build up the church. And they serve as a sign of the worldwide scope of the gospel. The mystery of Christ is now being revealed to all people, regardless of language.

Application for Today?

The final question we must deal with is the question of how the Bible's teaching on tongues applies to us today. Here we can make three observations.

First, the gift of tongues shows us the absolute necessity of the missionary endeavors of the church. As a church we want to be very strong in building up our own body, but we want to remember that the gospel is for everybody. We want therefore to devote as much of our time and as many of our resources as possible to bringing Christ to the nations. We want to maintain a priority on church planting in unreached areas. We want to robustly support our missionaries with prayer and financial support. We want to engage them and get to know our missionaries. We want to take advantage of the times we can hear of their work when they speak at church. We ought to be anxious to hear how God's Word is going forth into the nations, and how we can better pray for and support that work. Some among us ought to consider becoming missionaries.

Second, we need to be a people of the Word. We saw in vv. 3-5 that the church is built up, not by some unintelligible utterances under the controlling power of the Holy Spirit, but by revelation. We are strengthened and established in the faith when God's Word is delivered with clarity. Without God's Word we can never be edified or built up. Without it we won't grow. Without it we won't stand firm against the schemes of Satan. We need to be serious students of God's Word. We need to feed on it as if our very lives depend on it, because they do! 1 Corinthians 14 isn't ultimately about tongues or prophecy, it is about the Word of God and its central place in the lives of believers. We don't want to put God in a box, but we do want to worship and know the God of the Bible.

Finally, we need to be a people of the Holy Spirit in the fullest sense. To be a people of the Holy Spirit doesn't mean that we need to go looking for miraculous gifts today. We would do well to remember Jesus' warning in Matthew 7:22 against those who prophesied and did miracles in his name. In spite of the miraculous manifestations among them, they weren't Christians. They weren't people of the Spirit. Jesus says of them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Mt. 7:23). The true mark of the Christian is not the presence of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, but the presence of spiritual fruit.

To be a people of the Holy Spirit is to strive to grow in spiritual fruit. In 14:1, Paul commands, "Pursue love...." To be a people of the Holy Spirit is to strive to build up the church in all we do. And, if by the illumination of the Spirit on our hearts and minds we come under a new conviction of our own sin, or if we stand in new wonder at the grace and glory of God, we need to remember that that is the Spirit's work within us! If it brings us to our knees in repentance, or if it brings an almost uncontrollable joy to our

souls, then so be it, for this is exactly what it means to be a spiritual person under the influence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds.

Ultimately, to be a Holy Spirit filled church is to be a church focused on Jesus. Remember, it is the Holy Spirit that Jesus says will bring to remembrance all he said to his disciples (John 14:26). It is the Holy Spirit who bears witness about Jesus (John 15:26).

Isn't it interesting that John Calvin was known as the theologian of the Holy Spirit? Why? Not because Calvin believed in the ongoing miraculous gifts of the Spirit (he didn't), but because he was deeply interested in how the Spirit applies the work of salvation to the elect; and how the Holy Spirit regenerates our hearts; and how the Holy Spirit unites us by faith to Christ; and how the Holy Spirit illumines our minds to the truths of God's Word; and how the Holy Spirit sanctifies us; and how the Holy Spirit intercedes for us when we pray.

To be a people of the Holy Spirit is to remember and rejoice in this work the Spirit does among us, even now, even today.

¹ For a thorough discussion on the cessation of the gift of tongues, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993).

² When one basis their modern experience of tongues as an angelic language on 1 Cor. 13:1, they stand at best on exegetically shaky ground. There Paul is quite obviously speaking in hyperbole, saying essentially, "Even if you could speak in the tongues of angels, which you can't, but even if you could, that would be worthless without love." Paul does the same in Galatians 1:8, "But if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."