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THE HOLY SPIRIT

WHAT IS THE TONGUES PHENOMENON?

I Corinthians 12:27-31

Lesson 8

What is the gift of tongues? Who may get it? Is the gift of tongues a real language or an unintelligible utterance? These are questions we can only answer from Scripture and not from experience. The Bible becomes the criteria by which we judge all experience.

For years I was a cessationist, believing that all the spectacular gifts like tongues, healing and prophesy past out of existence sometime after the first century when the church received a completed canon of Scripture in the inspired, infallible Bible. However, experience has caused me to be open and cautious concerning the spectacular gifts. The experience is not my own for I neither speak in tongues or desire the gift, but I have had family and friends who have claimed to speak in tongues, prophecy and have strange experiences with the Holy Spirit. I have two sons who speak in tongues and one who is open to it if God sovereignly gives him the gift. I can't honestly tell my sons they are experiencing fraud or that they are deceived by Satan. I can tell them to take their experiences and put them to the touchstone of Scripture. If they do, they will get balanced and then we may graciously agree to disagree over some of the charismatic issues.

THE CORINTHIAN SITUATION

All of First Corinthians 12-14 was written to correct abuses by the Corinthians in the area of tongues. The Corinthian Christians were exalting the spectacular gift of tongues to the exclusion of the ordinary or other spectacular gifts. They were thinking the person, who could speak in tongues, was more spiritual than others who could not. Apparently, they were trying to get everyone to speak in tongues. This situation aroused Paul's ire, so he wrote not to encourage the use of tongues but to discourage the abuse and overuse of the gift. However, at no time does the Apostle Paul say it is sinful or of the devil to have and use the gift of tongues. He concludes the teaching of First Corinthians 12-14 by saying, *"Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:39).*

THE ORIGINAL MANIFESTATION OF TONGUES Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of

us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

Many Jews from various parts of the Roman Empire were gathered at Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Pentecost. The disciples had been commanded to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did not come upon them because they were in a “tarrying meeting” all night but because the day of Pentecost had come. In the sovereign wisdom of God, the day of Pentecost was predetermined. They spoke in tongues not because they were baptized by the Holy Spirit but because they were filled with the Holy Spirit. We are told that when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit they “began to speak in other tongues” (languages/*dialectos*). These tongues seem to be foreign languages that are reducible to writing. The Greek word for “other” is *heteros*, which means “tongues (languages) of a different kind.” We are specifically told that each visiting Jew understood the words of the disciples “in his own language.” Every language spoken on the day of Pentecost was a known tongue, perfectly intelligible and reducible to writing. There can be no question of the supernatural character of this gift. The miracle was in the speaking of a language previously unknown to the one speaking.

There are a few scholars who think the disciples spoke in unintelligible utterances on the day of Pentecost but the Jews from other countries heard their own languages; that is, the Holy Spirit supernaturally caused them to hear in their own language. This would then be a miracle of hearing, not speaking.

Some think this is unintelligible utterances is that the Jews thought the disciples were drunk (Acts 2:13). Actually, this proves nothing because there have been many recorded instances of Christians who appeared to be drunk but were actually filled with the Holy Spirit.

Oliver Cromwell came to power in England as Lord Protectorate of the nation through the battle of Naseby. The night before the battle, Cromwell prayed most of the night. His men reported that Cromwell staggered out of his tent, acting as though drunk. He, however, was not speaking in tongues but in English. This is what I believe happened at Pentecost. The disciples were so filled with the Holy Spirit that appeared drunk, but they spoke not in babblings but in various languages.

Acts 2 is the only place in the Bible that tells us what tongues are. At least in this context we can say they were most likely not gibberish, heavenly languages or divine utterances but foreign languages.

TONGUES ACCORDING TO FIRST CORINTHIANS 12-14

In First Corinthians 12-14, scholars disagree as to whether a tongue is a foreign language or divine utterances.

Tongues Are a Foreign Language

1. “Tongues” should be translated *languages*.
2. Acts 2 is definitely speaking about foreign languages and the reader would not think tongues should be anything else in First Corinthians.
3. There is a mention of the “language of men and angels” in 1 Corinthians 13:1, but there is no reason not to believe that the tongues of angels is a cognitive language and not unintelligible utterances.
4. Tongues according to First Corinthians 14:22 are **“a sign . . . for unbelievers”** (not believers) of the supernatural workings of God to confirm the gospel to them.
5. Corinth was a city that drew military, merchants and tourists from all over the Roman world. When these people visited the Christian churches out of curiosity, they may have known little or nothing of the common Greek language, so in the assembly someone stood up and supernaturally spoke in their language or dialect most likely giving the gospel. There would be an interpretation of the words spoken by the speaker so everyone would know what was said.
6. Tongues are used in the public meetings of the church in the Bible and not for private use. If this were a correct understanding, then tongues today would be limited to certain situations where the gospel needs dissemination.

Tongues Are Divine Utterances

1. In First Corinthians, the tongues need an interpretation whereas in Acts 2 no interpretation was needed. The interpretation was needed because it was a divine utterance which no one understood and therefore needed supernatural interpretation. **“For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit (1 Cor. 14:2).”**
2. Tongues is a prayer language where one “does not speak to man but to God.” The person may be praying but it is prayer in the spirit, not necessarily with the mind. **“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful (1 Cor. 14:14).”** It is a prayer language of praise where one can give divine utterances and sometimes do it through singing. **“I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind (1 Cor. 14:15).”**
3. The gift of divine utterance may be used in public but if it is there is always to be an interpretation. **“If there is no interpretation, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God (1 Cor. 14:28).”**
4. The speaker in tongues does not have to speak and can speak quietly in his mind without any verbalization . . . **“and speak to himself and God” (1 Cor. 14:28).**
5. While divine utterances can be used publicly on occasion, it is best used in private as a prayer language. **“I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Cor. 14:18).**

How do we solve this problem of whether a tongue is a foreign language or a prayer language? There are no easy solutions. For myself, I believe tongues may be a literal foreign language at times or a divine utterance of praise. Just in the same way there is a primary and secondary meaning to prophecy (no inspired, infallible prophets but fallible prophecies), so there may be different levels of tongues given to God's people. In I Corinthians 12:10, tongues (*glasson*) are in the plural which could open the door to different levels of tongues. Most modern tongues (divine utterances) are something less than foreign languages but a prayer language to bless some Christians who in turn are made stronger in faith to bless the whole body.

While I have come to believe that God does give some Christians divine utterances for their own edification, I do so with great reservation. *I am open but cautious.* Whenever we get into tongues and prophecy, there is a great deal of subjectivity and the only way to curb abuses is to adhere very closely to the Scriptures. Whatever position we take on tongues, we must remember that modern day tongues as claimed by charismatics are not in any way languages of men or angels; that is, they are not cognitive.

To my knowledge, there is universal agreement among linguists who have taped and analyzed thousands of examples of modern tongues speaking that the contemporary phenomenon is not any human language. The patterns and structures that all known human language requires are simply not there. Occasionally a recognizable word slips out; but this is statistically likely, given the sheer quantity of verbalization (D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*).

TONGUES IS THE LEAST OF THE GIFTS 12:27-28

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Spiritual gifts are given to the universal church and are to be used primarily through the local church.

“And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.” It seems that the Apostle is ranking the gifts to the church in order of importance. While all spiritual gifts are indispensable for the proper functioning of the church, there is some which are honored, respected and valued because of their function within the church.

We see something of Paul's sarcastic sense of humor here as he gives an order of rank of spiritual gifts, putting the gift of tongues last. Perhaps in Paul's mind the gift of tongues was the least of all the gifts and had the least affect for the common good of the church. It was a valid gift but way out of perspective at Corinth and in the modern church today. When was the last time you heard of charismatic Christians gathering together for an all night prayer meeting or having special classes or conducting a laying on of hands service to get the gift of helps? Probably never! Yet, the apostle Paul implies helps are more important than tongues.

TONGUES ARE NOT FOR EVERYONE 12:29-30

“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing?” In the Greek, each of these questions has the negative particle *mai* so that the question expects a negative answer. “All are not apostles, are they? No! All are not

prophets, are they? No!” Paul dogmatically states that no one person has all the gifts. It would be preposterous for all the members to have all the spiritual gifts or to seek all the spiritual gifts. God has sovereignly given different spiritual gifts in kind and degree to Christians. Paul would say, “All do not have the same spiritual gifts, do they? No!”

“Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” Again the negative *mai* in the Greek is used and should be translated, **“All do not speak in tongues, do they? No!”** The Apostle Paul does not deny there is a spiritual gift of tongues, but he flatly denies that everyone has the gift. In fact, Paul’s point is that in the sovereign purpose of God only a few speak in tongues. In Paul’s mind, tongues were no big deal. It was just another gift to be exercised biblically for the common good of the church.

TONGUES ARE NOT TO BE SOUGHT FIRST 12:31

“But eagerly desire the greater gifts.” Paul clearly tells Christians to seek after the greater gifts. What are the greater gifts? They would be gifts like prophecy, teaching, faith and evangelism which would most build up and edify the church. Paul’s point seems to be that tongues is the least of all the gifts and all other gifts should be sought before seeking tongues. Any gift is greater than tongues.

“And now I will show you a more excellent way.” This sentence belongs to First Corinthians 12:31. This is the lead-in sentence to the love chapter of First Corinthians 13 that deals with the fruit of the spirit. **“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . .” (Gal. 5:22).** There is a greater way than gifts. There is a higher level of maturity than just the exercise of spiritual gifts. All do not have the same spiritual gifts but all can exercise love that is the more excellent way. There is a big difference between the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. Gifts are important but love is more important!

EXPLANATION FOR TONGUES IN THE CHURCH TODAY

We must give an explanation for the tongues phenomena we see in the church today. Is it true or false? There is no question that charismatics are having experiences and in some cases, these experiences are having a life-changing effect on them. So how do we explain modern day tongues?

Fraud. There have been many people who have been told that tongues are a mark of spirituality or even a mark of salvation, and these people do not want to be ostracized from the group so they fake tongues. It becomes a learned experience. Sometimes people listen to tapes on tongues or they are coached by a team on how to speak in tongues. This approach to tongues is suspect because it is man-induced, not Holy Spirit given. One of my own observations is that people who speak in tongues often have a very good ear for music. They can pick up sounds very easily.

False tongues have been practiced for thousands of years, even before the time of Christ. In his discourses, Plato discusses how tongues were used as early as 1100 B.C. in the mystery religious cults of Greece. Today false religions such as Hinduism, Shinto and Islam are claiming to speak in tongues. Cultists, such as the Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons, are claiming to have

this gift. *It seems to be an experience that anyone can have if he or she wants it bad enough.* It is no wonder then that many evangelicals could speak in ecstatic utterances and mistakenly call it biblical tongues.

Emotionalism. A person may work himself into such an emotional state that he may place himself in a mystical trance. *There are very few experiences one cannot have if he or she seeks them long enough.* A few emotions which could produce something like tongues are: (1) Hysteria—emotions control the tongue; (2) Drunkenness—a person’s mind becomes detached from the tongue and babbling results; (3) Praise—a person may be in spiritual ecstasy and praise the Lord without knowing all that he says.

Almost invariably, those who have experienced the so-called “baptism” have been suffering from a very deep personal or family problem. They are looking for a way out . . . Others are emotionally troubled about their own spiritual life and are seeking a deeper, more consistent walk with God . . . Quite a few who are drawn to the movement are emotionally high-keyed people. Some are mystics and visionaries. Some seek only experiences to save them from the hard work of studying the Word of God. (R.T. Hitt, “The New Pentecostalism,” *Eternity Magazine*).

Christians who get what they think is the gift of tongues in hyped up emotional meetings should put their experience under suspicion. It may be a gift anyone could get (saved or unsaved) under similar controlled emotional circumstances.

Self-Hypnosis. A person could put himself in a hypnotic state so as to free his tongue from his mind.

Instead, the seeking worshiper is noisily coached by a team of specialists who gather around him, or in the majority of cases, around her, stamping their feet, dancing, clapping their hands, chanting, shouting advice in their ears and giving them a treatment any psychologist would recognize as designed to lead the victim into releasing cerebral control of his body to the autonomic nervous system. This is a form of self-hypnosis (Carrol Stegall, Jr., “The Modern Tongues and Healing Movement”).

Satanic Deception. Satan is the great counterfeiter and can produce false tongues in a person through demons. He can get people away from the simplicity that is in Christ Jesus. It is possible to seek tongues and find them an unsatisfying experience and want nothing to do with Christianity, thinking that Christ has been known through this false experience.

Many people simply burn out on tongues. We must remember that Christ is completely satisfying and we have not found Him unless we have found Him in the Bible. Satan causes Christians to burn out on ecstatic experiences. People who claim to speak in tongues today need to be warned about the excessive use of this phenomenon. There are cases on record of people who have been victims of brain damage because of excessive abuse of tongues. The human mind and spirit are not intended to go on hysterical emotional jags continually.

Real Thing. Tongues may be real, given by the Holy Spirit, for building up the Christian who in turn builds up the body of Christ. For reasons known only to God, He gives some

Christians the gift of tongues. These tongues may be foreign languages or divine utterances used as a prayer language for praise and worship. If Christians claim to have this gift of tongues and want to use it in their personal devotional lives, it is perfectly all right to do so as long as the experience glorifies Christ and causes one to have a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. If the experience does not make a person more Chris-like, it may not be the real thing. The gift of tongues is never to be abused and must meet all the biblical criteria.

THE BIBLICAL CRITERIA FOR THE USE OF TONGUES

The biblical criteria are: 1) tongues are not connected with the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurring sometime after conversion to Christ; 2) not everyone can or will speak in tongues; 3) tongues is just one of the spiritual gifts and may be the least of all the gifts; 4) God gives the gift of tongues to whom He pleases; 5) tongues may be sought but they are not high on the list of important gifts; 6) tongues does not make a person more mature or more spiritual than those who do not have the gift; 7) the primary place to use the gift of tongues is in private; and 8) if used publicly there must always be an interpretation and no more than two or three can speak.