

Spiritual Gifts #8: SPEAKING WITH TONGUES

Read Acts 2:1-4, 17

Pentecost

What happened at Pentecost was exceptional. This was *xenolalia* ie speaking foreign tongues. It was a once-only occurrence. Remember the two-or-three principle (Deut 19:15b) – only when there are two or three witnesses can a practice or pattern be established. So we have no basis for expecting xenolalia to happen on a regular basis. Nevertheless, it may still happen today as a sovereign work of the Spirit.

Some years ago a missionary friend of mine was told he was speaking in a rare French dialect. A classics scholar told my own brother Ken that a tongue he interpreted was Hebrew and that he had given a fair translation. On another occasion, Ken was praying for a Lebanese man who averred he was speaking Arabic. Another missionary friend heard a villager in Papua New Guinea praising God in a prayer meeting, saying repeatedly in English, ‘He is not in my head, he is in my heart and he has saved me.’ A successful church-planter in Victoria recalls how a member of a church he founded spoke in German and that another believer gave a fair translation. These stories are astonishing but all from reputable sources. Nevertheless, they are still the exception rather than the rule.

Read 1 Cor 14:1-5, 14-15

Glossolalia

Speaking (*laleo*) in tongues (*glossa*) is also known as glossolalia. It has an important place as a prayer gift so we need to understand it

In the NT there are three uses of tongues—

- The generally accepted initial sign of being empowered by the Spirit
- Prayer, praise, petition
- The ‘gift’ of tongues – a public utterance usually accompanied by interpretation

It is the public usage that Paul refers to when he asks, ‘Do all speak in tongues?’ (1 Corinthians 12:30). The obvious answer is ‘no’ because only some people use this gift. (This will be developed further in a future study).

Values

There are five values of personal speaking in tongues...

1/Prayer

- When we speak in tongues, we pray to the Father (1 Corinthians 14:2)
- We speak ‘mysteries’ (1 Cor 14:2) ie divine secrets (cf Col 1:27; Eph 3:8-11)
- Charles Widdowson suggests these are prayers that Satan cannot decode because only the Spirit of God can discern spiritual matters (1 Cor 2:9f)
- Clearly although we don’t understand, there is a profound meaning in these prayers

- We maintain communion with God
- Such communication may be non-rational but this does not make it less meaningful. Compare other forms of non-rational communication such as music, touch, embracing or attitude which may be even more meaningful than verbal or rational communication.

2/Praise

Glossolalia enables us to praise God fluently and to express the inexpressible (Act 10:45; 1 Cor 14:17). Helen, a cancer sufferer, was sent home to die. She was too weak to speak normally or even to pray aloud in her own language, but to the day she died, she was able to pray quietly in tongues and to worship the Lord with her spirit.

3/Poise

- When we speak in tongues we are edified (1 Cor 14:4; Jude 1:20).
- Compare the effect of music which may ennoble or inspire us with or without lyrics
- Consider the 10/5 program. This means praying in tongues ten minutes a day, five days a week
- Recall the experience of College students who did this as an ‘assignment’ and testified to changed lives and to deepened spirituality as a result. Colin: ‘This practice revolutionised my prayer life.’ Judy: ‘I have a much closer relationship with Jesus.’ (See B.Chant, *Praying in the Spirit*, pages 128-131)

4/Petition

- Read Romans 8:26-27
- When we don’t know what to pray for, the Spirit comes to our aid
- The phrase ‘words cannot express’ is a translation of *alaletos* (beyond normal expression) not of *alalos* (mute). This refers to petitions that cannot be put into normal words, not prayers that cannot be uttered at all. It may include various expressions such as groans or tears or sighs or speaking in tongues
- That this intercession comes through us is indicated by the word ‘hearts’
- It is according to the will of God (Romans 8:27). Because the Spirit gives the form of expression it is clearly according to God’s will
- In this way we can ‘wrestle’ in prayer (Romans 15:30) or share another’s burden (Ephesians 6:18). Or we can express the yearnings of our own hearts.

5/Power

- When we pray in tongues, our spirits pray (1 Cor 14:14 [‘my spirit...’]; John 7:37-39)
- Is there a therapeutic value here?
- If more troubled people prayed more with the spirit would they have less need of counsel?
- Compare psychoanalysis which attempts to uncover hidden ‘memories’ buried deep in the unconscious. When we pray in tongues our spirits pray (1 Cor 14:14, 15). Could it be that we are releasing these hurts and wounds in a powerful spiritual way?

Our priorities

In the order of things, we heed Paul's admonition that love and prophecy are of greater value to the church than tongues. Our aim must always be to edify the church (1 Corinthians 14:5,12) But glossolalia is a valuable prayer-gift that personally edifies the believer.

Challenge

- If you speak in tongues, will you commit yourself to the 10/5 program?
- If you don't, and you would like to, then seek God earnestly (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1). It is not enough to sit back and wait. We are exhorted to be eager and earnest in our seeking
- Above all, be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18). This is a command, not a request!

SOMETHING TO THINK OR TALK ABOUT

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

Biblical

1. In 14:1-5, the apostle talks of three things—love, prophesying and tongue-speaking (glossolalia). In what order of priority does he put them? Why?
2. Some people say that if we have love we don't need spiritual gifts. What does Paul say? (14:1).
3. What should our attitude be to spiritual gifts? Compare different translations here (12:31; 14:1)
4. What are the benefits of praying in tongues? (At least three—see 14:2, 4).
5. What are the benefits of prophesying? (At least four—see 14:3-5)
6. What is Paul's personal attitude towards glossolalia? (14:18).
7. Why would Paul prefer to prophesy in public than to speak in tongues? (19)
8. What is the difference between praying in tongues and praying in one's own language? (14:14, 15; see also Romans 8:26, 27).

Personal and practical

9. Which word in verses 3, 5, 12 and 17 emphasises the primary aim for public ministry of gifts (or for any ministry, for that matter)?
10. What are some other unacceptable aims that people might have?
11. Share a testimony of how praying with the spirit has blessed you.
12. Some people experience different tongues at different times, such as when they are interceding or worshiping. What has been your experience?
13. Memorise 1 Corinthians 14:1.

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