

The gift of Tongues

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 19th June 2005

Introduction

In our discussion of gifts of the Holy Spirit, we need now to consider the question of the gift of tongues. Is the gift of tongues a gift that was given just for the first years of the life of the church, or is it a gift which is still in operation today?

As we approach this issue we need to realise that this is a matter over which true Bible-believing Christians have differences of opinion. There are good Spirit-filled men and women on either "side" in this debate, so we must approach the subject with humility, and love towards those with whom we might disagree.

The classical evangelical view, held almost universally up to 1900 by virtually all those who believed in the authority Scripture, was that the gift of tongues consisted of prophecy which was spoken in a language which was not naturally known to the speaker. This view maintained that now that Scripture is complete, the gift of tongues is neither needed nor in operation, and that anyone who claimed to have this gift after the times of the apostles was mistaken.

As with prophecy, however, there has been a shift in thinking since the early years of the twentieth century and the birth of what have been called the Pentecostal churches. Since the 1960s, with the so-called "charismatic movement" Pentecostal ideas have been accepted by many in the so-called "historic denominations". According to many in these groups the gift of tongues is a gift which continues today. Some would say that speaking in tongues is a sign of having been "baptised with the Holy Spirit" which they would regard as a "second blessing" subsequent to conversion, that every Christian should experience. It is also claimed that there is a continuing gift of "interpretation"

whereby someone with this gift is able to interpret what has been said through the person speaking in tongues, and deliver it as a prophecy to the congregation. According to this view, speaking in tongues is to be sought today, and actively encouraged in private and in public for the good of individuals and churches.

So we see that there are two very different views held by people who are in both cases Bible-believing Christians. You might ask, "Does it matter? As long as you are a Christian, does it really matter what you think about tongues speaking?" The answer is, yes, it does matter. It is not going to determine whether you are saved or not, but it is going to have a big impact our lives as individuals and as churches. If the gift of tongues is a gift for today we need to allow for tongues and interpretation in our services. If it is not a gift for today, we should not do so. And if it is a gift for today, we need to encourage individuals to speak in tongues in their private devotions. If it is not a gift for today we need to encourage people to pray and meditate using their own native language.

So how are we to know which view is right? We must go to the Scriptures. The gift of tongues is mentioned in four passages in the Bible, all in the New Testament. In what follows we shall look at these passages and then draw some conclusions.

1. The day of Pentecost, Acts 2.1 – 18

The first passage that mentions tongues is Acts 2.1 – 18 which records the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This is a very important day in the history of salvation, because this is the day when God first gave the Holy Spirit to the church. Up to this point the Holy Spirit had only been experienced in a fairly limited way in a small number of believers. Now he was poured out in a very strong way on all those who at that point were true believers, the 120 who were gathered in the upper room to pray.

God caused the giving of the Spirit to be very visible and public. We read in verse 2 that "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." Then in verse 4 we read "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

The word "tongues" in verse 4 means "languages". The NIV here is following the old King James translation which translated the word "tongues", which was the word that people used four hundred years ago if they wanted to speak about languages. However, the Greek word (glossa) that is used clearly should be translated here as "languages", as all the standard Greek dictionaries will attest. It would be much better if the NIV had used the word "languages", as per the footnote, because it would have saved a lot of confusion. Today, the word "tongues" gives a misleading impression of what the disciples were speaking, as if they were speaking a load of incoherent sounds. In fact it is clear from the context that they were making clear statements about Christ in other known human languages. We read in verses 4 – 11,

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!

Clearly all these different people from all over the Roman Empire heard in their own language, their own "mother tongue", accounts of what God had done through Christ.

This is no doubt very symbolic. No doubt God was saying through this that the Gospel is for all nations, not just for the Jews. Here is an encouragement for anyone who reads this who is wondering he has a place in God's saving purposes. YOU can be saved, along with anyone, from anywhere in the world, who calls upon the name of the Lord.

When the crowd expressed amazement at what had happened, Peter stood up and explained to them that what had happened was a fulfilment of a prophecy in the book of Joel. Joel had prophesied that all believers would prophesy.

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my

Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy (verses 17 and 18).

In other words, on the day of Pentecost what we call "speaking in tongues" was actually prophecy in naturally occurring human languages which were unknown to the speakers.

2. Peter at Cornelius's house, Acts 10.44 – 46

The second account that we find in the book of Acts of the gift of tongues or, as we should perhaps call it, the gift of languages, is in Acts 10. This records when Peter visited the house of Cornelius. This too was a very significant event, because it was the first time the Gospel was preached to Gentiles. Ordinarily, Peter, a Jew, would never have even gone inside the house of a Gentile, as it was entirely contrary to the traditions he had received. However, God had previously spoken to him in a dream to tell him that he must not regard as "unclean" what God had made clean. God had also told him that some men were coming to fetch him, and that he should go with them. So Peter went to Cornelius's house and started to preach the Gospel to him, and then we read in verses 44 to 45,

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues [or languages] and praising God.

Peter was subsequently called to give an account of himself for going into the house of a Gentile and eating with him. He told the story of how he had been told by God to go to Cornelius's house and said "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them *as he had come on us at the beginning*" (Acts 11.15, emphasis added). There was a strong similarity between what happened at Cornelius's house and what happened at Pentecost, so much so that it has been rightly called the Gentile Pentecost. We can safely assume that what happened there was the same as happened on the day of Pentecost, in other words that Cornelius and his family prophesied in other languages.

3. The disciples at Ephesus, Acts 19.6

The third incidence of tongues, or languages, is in Acts 19. This records how Paul encountered a group of "disciples" who had not received the Holy Spirit. On

asking them about what baptism they had received, Paul discovered that they had only received John's baptism. So Paul explained to them about one who was to come after John, Jesus. Following this they believed and were baptised. Then we read "When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues [or languages] and prophesied" (verse 6).

This account is in some respects similar to the account of what happened at Cornelius's house. Here was a group of people who previously had not known the Holy Spirit at all. They heard the Gospel, and then they received the Holy Spirit, and this is shown in a very tangible way by them speaking in other languages.

4. Tongues at Corinth, 1 Corinthians 12 - 14

The fourth and final reference to tongues is in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 to 14. We need to remember that 1 Corinthians was one of the first books of the New Testament to be written, when the church was still in its infancy, and the Holy Spirit had only very recently been given. None of the later letters written by Paul and the other apostles mentions tongues again.

Much of 1 Corinthians chapter 14 is concerned with the appropriate regulation of the gift of tongues or languages, and I hope for us to come back to the passage on a future occasion to learn from principles for church life from what Paul says. The thing I want to learn from the passage now is what it shows us about what the gift of tongues or languages in New Testament times. There are a number of reasons for thinking that the gift tongues, or languages, in 1 Corinthians was the same as tongues practiced in the book of Acts.

First of all, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13.1 "If I speak in the tongues [or languages] of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal". This implies that the gift that people were exercising was the gift of speaking actual languages.

Secondly, Paul says that what someone who was speaking in tongues or languages said was to be "interpreted" so that it could benefit those in the church who did not understand it (verse 13, 27, 28). The word "interpret" in this chapter is the same word that the NIV translates as "translate" in Acts 9.36. This further implies that an actual language was being spoken.

Thirdly, Paul says in verse 2 that a person who is speaking in tongues or languages utters "mysteries". The word "mystery" is consistently used in the Bible to describe truths which God had previously hidden but has now revealed through this apostles and prophets (See for example Ephesians 3.2 – 6). Paul also speaks in 1 Corinthians 13.2 about the possibility of having the gift of prophecy and the ability to "fathom all mysteries" but without love. These things taken together imply that speaking in tongues or languages is prophecy in a different language.

Fourthly, in this chapter, whilst Paul discourages speaking in tongues or languages without translation, if there is translation he puts it alongside prophecy in value. Two or three people should speak in languages if there is interpretation, and two or three prophets should speak (verses 27 and 28). This further implies that Paul regarded speaking in tongues or languages as prophecy in a different language.

Conclusions from these passages

1. The gift tongues, or languages, marked the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church.
2. Tongues or languages were spontaneous. There is no account anywhere of "lessons" on how to speak in tongues or languages.
3. The speakers spoke in recognisable and translatable languages.
4. "Tongues" consisted of prophecy in a language other than those known by the speaker.

The gift of "tongues" today

For honesty's sake we need to ask, is what people call today the gift of "tongues" really the same thing as occurred in the New Testament? Here are some questions:

1. Are modern "tongues" spontaneous? My experience, and I know that it is limited, is that at meetings where people are being encouraged to speak in tongues they are prayed for and then they are given "coaching" about how to start mouthing syllables. That seems a long way from what happened in the New Testament. What I have observed is confirmed by linguistic analysis of

modern "tongues" speaking. Thousands of hours of modern "tongues" speaking have been analysed by linguists. It has provided strong evidence that the "tongues" that are spoken in particular groups have been "learned" from the person who introduced the phenomena to those groups.

2. Are modern "tongues" languages? Again the analysis of "tongues" by linguists will help us here. Don Carson is not unsympathetic to "tongues", so his summary of the findings of these linguists all the more striking:

To my knowledge there is universal agreement among linguists who have taped and analysed 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 recognisable word slips out; but that is statistically likely, given sheer quantity of verbalisation. Jaquette's conclusion is unavoidable: 'We are dealing here not with language but with verbalisations which superficially resemble language in certain of its structural aspects.' (*Showing the Spirit: A theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12 – 14*, Baker Book House, 1987, pages 83 – 84)

3. Are modern "interpretations" really translations? Ones that I have heard have sounded more like trite formulaic sayings than translations of words from God.

4. Is the modern "tongues" phenomenon prophecy in other languages, in the Biblical sense of the word of prophecy, of being God's actual words on the lips of men? The answer is that even the advocates of modern "tongues" will not on the whole claim that it consists of God's actual words to men.

Lessons for us for today

We can draw a number of lessons from what we have seen:

1) Do not allow people to pressurise you into speaking in "tongues"

I can fairly confidently predict that, if it has not happened to you already, if you attend a Christian church before long somebody will come up to you and ask you if you speak in "tongues". The implication will be that if you do not speak in "tongues" you are missing out on something that you should be doing. What we

have seen from this study shows us that the "gift" you will be encouraged to exercise may well be bogus, and that you would do well to resist the attempts of others to get you to exercise it.

2) Do not feel guilty about stopping speaking in "tongues"

It is not uncommon for Christians to have spoken in "tongues" in the past, and then for the "gift" to have lapsed, either because they have had doubts about whether it is genuine, or because they have not felt the need to practice it. Some who have done so have felt guilty about "neglecting" their "gift". What we have seen in this study indicates that you should not feel guilty about stopping the practice of speaking in "tongues". The "gift" you have known may well have been false, and if so, no harm will come by stopping practicing it.

3) Speaking in "tongues" should not be a part of church life today

Much contemporary speaking in "tongues" and singing in "tongues" is plainly contrary to Scripture, as no attempt is made to translate what has been said. Even if there is a claimed gift of interpretation, I suggest that there should not be speaking in "tongues" as we have strong reason to believe that the modern phenomenon is not the gift that is described in the New Testament.

4) Build your life upon the Word of God

Remember, the church in Corinth needed the gifts of prophecy and tongues with interpretation because it did not have most of the New Testament Scriptures. We are in the very privileged position of being in possession of the entire cannon of Scripture. God has fully and finally spoken. How foolish we are, then, if we neglect the Scriptures! We need to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" them.

5) Take the Gospel to all

The gift of tongues showed that God wants the Gospel to be made known in every language upon the face of the earth. God's plan is that there should be "a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the lamb." (Revelation 7.9) If the gift of speaking in other languages supernaturally is no longer available, some of us will need to go to the effort of learning languages that we do not

naturally speak, so that we may take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

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