

Life in the Spirit, “What’s the deal with Tongues?” 1 Corinthians 14, 9/1/2024

So **What’s the Deal with the Gift of Tongues?** Are tongues a private prayer language? Angelic Language? Or something else? And what about prophesy? That’s what we want to examine from the Scripture. But we want to make sure that we don’t substitute the sands of experience for the solid ground of the reveal Word of God. So what does the Bible say?

The Greek Word for the Tongues that is used in our main text we are going to look at today, 1 Corinthians 14, is the word “Glossa”. The New Testament and before the New Testament, the word means either the literal tongue (the muscle in your mouth) or a coherent human language. Now when Paul speaks of this gift of tongues he does not give a definition for what it is. And so we should expect that since there is no other word used, or a different definition given that the **gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak in coherent human language (that was not previously known)**. That would be what we should expect to find.

Now, is that true? Well, the only way to find out is take a look through the New Testament. Let's see how it's used. I want you to turn with me to a passage from Acts 2. Now in Acts two, this is the only time in the entire Bible that the gift of tongues is actually described, that we actually see it in operation where there's enough there to get a handle on what's happening. So I think it seems logical, doesn't it, that this passage should carry the primary weight in helping us decide exactly what the gift of tongues was, since it's the only one we have. Right? Seem logical?

2 *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.*

3 *They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.* **4** *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.* This historical event- Pentecost, is the birth of the Church. A supernatural occurrence, a sign that salvation was no longer found through the Jewish people and the temple sacrificial system, but through Jesus Christ, salvation was coming to all nations, all people, all languages. A very multisensory experience, extraordinary. But we don’t have to imagine what speaking in tongues means.

5 *Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.* **6** *When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.*

7 *Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?”* **8** *Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?* And then he lists 15 different languages. **V. 11** *“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”*

Incredible! And what amazes the people is the fluency that the apostles are using with their language. I also want you to notice that this really is supernatural here, because these

unschooled Galileans certainly didn't know all these languages. I mean, it's very unlikely that Peter had ever taken a course in Cappadocian and highly unlikely that his brother Andrew had ever taken a course in Arabic, while casting their nets in the Sea of Galilee.

And so the principle of Bible study is to interpret what is unclear with that which is clear. Acts 2 is clear so this should be our primary assumption that this is what Paul meant by the Gift of Tongues- speaking in a coherent foreign language. Now the only other place where tongues is talked about and where we get specific instructions is 1 Corinthians 14. So let's read it for ourselves and see what we find.

14 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit.

³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy.

The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified. ⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?

⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?

⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning.

¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

Now a little context. Greek was the main language in Corinth, however there were at least a couple dozen different languages also spoken because this was a port city with people from all over the known world who were living and finding work there. While most religions were ethnic or culturally based- Christianity was unique, and the church was marked as being the most diverse place in the world. And so while most people would have spoken Greek, their native or heart language would have been something else. Greek as a second Language.

And so using the understanding of what tongues means, speaking in a coherent language. Here's the picture that Paul is painting for us.

Blank Slide All these Christians from lots of places and with other native tongues, come into a worship service. And during the gathering, there are people getting up and speaking, or maybe singing, or prayer in their heart language, native tongue. Imagine we are in the service worshipping and someone gets up and shares a Scripture in Hindi, and then the next person prays in Farsi, and then another guy in the balcony begins to sing a song to God in Mandarin. Or possibly, someone with the gift of tongues- began speaking in one of these other languages that they didn't previously know. For most of us unless you happen to be a poly-linguistic, that would be pretty confusing. We don't speak those languages. This is the situation that Paul is speaking about. ² *For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit.* He says, "God knows what you are saying, you might personally be encouraged by it, but that's not the purpose of a Spiritual gift, it's for the benefit of other people."

And it seemed that what Paul was very concerned about with the church in Corinth is that church had become a spectacle. And that's the point of his two illustrations of musical instruments in v.7-9, what's the point of just blowing on a horn or randomly hitting piano keys unless the notes are in a pattern that others understand. You see the emphasis is on clarity and the benefit for all present.

Not only that- Paul was also concerned about the poor witness this would be to the non-Christian visiting that morning. ²³ *So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?*

See some Christians and even some churches can become more focused on their own experience and expressions than demonstrating love and concern for the whole group, and even their witness to visitors and seekers.

Blank Slide When I was pastoring a small church plant in Northern VA, we had a gentleman come with a tambourine, and during the worship he went all the way up front and was jumping up and down smacking his tambourine loudly and out of rhythm. He was an interesting fella to say the least. And on one hand, it was good to see him excited about Jesus. However, it was also a distraction, it was chaotic, and I was especially concerned like Paul was, for the non-Christian who might be in our midst for whom this would be a distraction to the Gospel. And so we had to talk to him and he wasn't happy, but guess what Scripture I went to. This one! Because your gift, isn't for your own personal edification, it's for the church.

Now is it bad to have a personal encounter with God in a worship service. NO! That's awesome, we encourage you to it...It's not weird to cry out to God in your heart language. But they are out of place if it happens at the expense of the whole gathering. While we have an individual identity, we also have a corporate identity.

How does Paul deal with this? He could have forbidden all speaking out and say, just Greek only. But instead, he gives them orderly instruction: v. 40 *But all things should be done decently and in order.* v.13 *therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.*

v.27-28 *if any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three and each in turn and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.*

First, **Paul Puts Parameters in place** to take into consideration the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual community but also to keep in mind what will benefit the whole, with the various people in the service, with their various spiritual gifts. He says speak a tongue, but there need to be someone who has the **gift of interpretation**, or you need to do the interpretation. If our brother gets up and testifies in Farsi, make sure someone is interpreting! And he says, let's not get carried away. **2 or 3** is plenty in one service. Now I think you can appreciate this- I mean we all love Jesus- but it doesn't mean I love Jesus more if I'm at a service for 2hrs and you love Jesus less if it's only 1.5hrs. Not everything needs to be said. Decent and in order.

Secondly, **Paul prioritizes Prophecy over Tongues**, did you pick up on that?

³ *But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.* ⁴ *Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church.*

Now what is Prophecy in this context? Well there are two kinds of prophecy. There is **Foretelling**. Now we don't have time to get all into this one but in the Bible this foretelling gift was almost without exception given to the Apostles, as those who carried the very authority and the direct words from God, many of which became the contents of our Bibles we are reading now. But the vast majority of prophesying in the Bible is **Forthtelling**- people gifted with particular insight into the Scriptures, helping people connect the dots to application in their lives, knowing specifically how to encourage, exhort one another from the Word. And this gift seems to be what Paul has in mind here.

Why does Paul value prophecy so much? ⁹ *But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.* Because again, he is most concerned not with you getting to show off your gift, but helping everyone else grow. And check this out, how does this kind of prophesy benefit the unbeliever who comes into worship?

²⁴ *But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all,* ²⁵ *as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"*

See this is what I love. This is what I want more of in our church gatherings, small groups, Bible studies. When I'm preaching my hope is that the Spirit of God uses my words to convict so that

someone might say, wow it was like he knew me and I was the only one he preached that message for.

This is why Paul said eagerly desire this gift- he seemed to be saying it's possible that through studying the Word and asking the Lord to use you, and trusting the Holy Spirit, that we all have the opportunity to prophesy in this way and be used to edify one another.

Blank Slide Now a little counsel on this. Never, ever, ever, ever claim the authority of God when you speak. What you are saying is fallible, and other people need to discern if it is from God. I never ever say to someone, "This is what God says," unless I have a chapter and verse to back it up. Instead, I'll say something like, "Listen, I think God has put this on my heart, and I think he might be saying... but you gotta weigh this out."

Now let's tie up some loose ends. Some of us have questions about this tongues thing. **"Can't tongues be a private prayer language** between me and God where I just open my mouth- bada bada...I don't know what I'm saying but God does?" Again, here's where I would repeat the saying, don't substitute the sands of experience for the solid rock of God's revealed word. The problem I find with the notion private prayer language is that it's just completely absent from Scripture. And...1- Remember, gifts are not for yourself, they are for others benefit. 2- They are coherent languages. 3- Nowhere in the entire Bible are we ever instructed to pray like this to God. Go through the entire Bible and look at every single prayer and every instruction on prayer, and see if you will ever find instruction to pray like this. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray in Matthew 6, he didn't say pray, "Batta Batta" He said gave decent and in order. Because that's who God is. In fact, verse 7 he said, the pagan's go "Batta, Batta."

Now I know I may have upset some of you with that, because you treasure your private prayer language. And maybe I am wrong, and I need to leave mystery of the Holy Spirit here. I just would encourage you to study it for yourself.

One more loose end, "Nate **Can't tongues be the language of angels?** After all, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:1 "If I speak in the tongues of men or angels." OK, so this is the only reference to this in Scripture so I would be very careful to not build an entire theology on it. In the context Paul is using hyperbole. He's using extreme examples of gifting to make a point that even if you have uber-gifts, gifts on steroids, but you exercise them without love. They are meaningless. So I don't think this is an actual gift. I think it's hyperbole to prove a point. And remember, even if you don't speak in an angelic language- it's useless in the church unless someone can interpret it. So keep that in mind.

OK let's wrap up.

- Our gifts are for building up the **body**. not for ourselves.
- Tongues are coherent languages, not angels, for the benefit of the speakers of that language.
- Exercise tongues within parameters. Tongues should be used decently and in order within limits and with an interpreter

-Prophecy is prioritized over tongues because it instructs, encourages and convicts those who are present.

Now, if you land differently on any of these topics or practice differently on these topics, I want you to know you are loved and welcome here. These are secondary issues, these are not part of our statement of faith and you can be a full member and believe differently on these issues. What unites us is the gospel of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, not what we think and experience with the charismatic gifts. Having said that, I will tell you what my pastor friend likes to say, "Respect the House." In this house of God at Brandywine, we do not practice tongues in our services for the specific reasons Paul laid out in this text.

I hope this was helpful, clarifying, and again I am happy to dialogue with you about this as a brother or sister in Christ as we seek to "Introduce people to Jesus Christ and help them follow him."