



WHAT IS THE GIFT
OF TONGUES?

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INTRODUCTION

Few topics are more difficult for the modern Christian to understand than the gift of tongues. The subject inspires everything from ecstasy to fear, easily dividing believers. Part of the problem is that only a handful of New Testament texts describe or mention the gift at all. How can we understand what it is all about?

Often, the key to understanding a New Testament concept is to see how it is rooted in the Old Testament. One plan of redemption unites the whole Bible. This one “covenant” (ultimately known as the gospel) was revealed progressively, so that themes and ideas introduced in the Old Testament find their full meaning in Christ.

In this case, an Old Testament perspective reveals the gift of tongues to be precisely the kind of supernatural sign one would expect to herald the international phase of the Church. Far from being a strange and incomprehensible phenomenon, it actually serves to illustrate the fulfillment of God’s promises in Christ.

Therefore, let us begin our study of the gift of tongues at the beginning ...

IN THE BEGINNING

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

(Genesis 3:15)

Within God’s curse against the serpent lies the first promise of the gospel covenant¹. God declared that He would cause a change in Eve’s soul. She chose the serpent (Satan) over God; but God declared that He would transform her heart so that she would change her choice. Furthermore, this change of heart would extend to a stream of humanity known as the woman’s “offspring”. They are distinguished by this change of spirit from the rest of humanity, who remain loyal to the serpent as his “offspring”. As the prophecy continues, the entire group of transformed people are suddenly represented by a masculine singular, a “he” who will personally destroy the original serpent, although at personal sacrifice. These prophetic images throw their shadow all the way into the New Testament as they describe the outworking of redemption.²

1 A covenant is simply a binding relationship between two parties. The saving relationship God establishes with His people is called the gospel, or “good news”.

2 cf. Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 12:9

Genesis 3:15 outlines the rest of the Old Testament. Starting in Genesis 4, a genealogy is maintained including one very special family line within the “woman’s offspring” – the one family line that will bring forth the serpent slayer. That genealogy will take us through centuries of history. At each fork in the road of descendants, the path is clearly marked for us to follow. Every time the line is threatened with extinction, we see how God intervenes to keep it alive. Along the way, God reveals to this “covenant line” more and more detail about the salvation promised back in Eden.

God’s saving plan was revealed in the history of this one family. The entire Old Testament was written to carefully record their genealogical tree and the progressive revelation they received.

CONFUSION OF TONGUES

In order for that family tree to be completed, however, several very large matters had to be resolved involving the unfolding of human history in general. At issue was how to contain the ongoing devastation of human sin while revelation was being given and the covenant line moved toward its ultimate Son.

The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them.”

(Genesis 6:5-7)

A long life span allowed evil to be cultivated in ways unimaginable to us today. In addition, God had prohibited humanity from usurping His unique role as Judge,³ so there was no effective government to keep a lid on sin. The stench of human sin became so great that the Lord found it necessary to cleanse the planet with a great Flood.⁴

After the Flood, God promised He would not destroy the Earth in that way again.⁵ In order to keep that promise, God found it necessary to take measures to limit the freedom humanity uses to express its sin.

³ Genesis 4:13-15

⁴ Genesis 6:17 ff.

⁵ Genesis 9:11-16

One thing God did, in conjunction with the Flood, was to shorten our life span⁶. More relevant to this discussion, the Lord also authorized the concept of human government.⁷ That is, God authorized mankind to express a temporal taste of His judgment.⁸ These changes were made to prevent the unrestrained evil that would necessitate another cleansing Flood.

For a time, humanity developed and prospered under this system.⁹ However, it is not the nature of sinners to use entrusted power well. Concentrated power eventually brought out all that is dark in the heart of mankind.¹⁰ Tyranny is very different from anarchy, but it can become just as offensive to God.

the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.
(Genesis 11:5-9)

Human government had to be maintained, but unrestricted concentration of power had to be avoided. God's answer was to make it impossible for people to work together efficiently on too large a scale. The Lord did this by breaking apart the one, universal language mankind shared. God created a confusion of languages (often called "tongues" in both the biblical languages and in English), a confusion of tongues that all the forces of politics and science throughout the millennia have been unable to overcome.

People can work together and govern themselves to restrain sin within the confines of a people group. Eventually, however, power tends to concentrate, moving a developing empire toward despotism. But such Babel-like towers of power cannot stand for long. Other people groups cannot be permanently assimilated and they inevitably join together to tear down their common threat. The confusion of languages ("tongues") effectively separates ethnic people groups, none of whom can ever win their ongoing, winless game of king-of-

6 Genesis 6:3

7 Genesis 9:6

8 cf. Romans 13:1-7

9 Genesis 10

10 Genesis 11:1-4

the-hill. This frustrating design is actually a blessing to sinful humanity, since it assures a balance between chaos and oppression.

At first glance, Genesis 5-11 may seem to have little to do with God's promise of a Savior. It does, however, reveal His design for stabilizing society so that sin is restricted just enough to postpone judgment. This confusion of languages to separate nations set the stage for the next development in the covenant family saga.

ONE TONGUE AMONG MANY

The story of the covenant line picks up again in Genesis 12. Now, however, there is a new situation. The confusion of tongues has brought about the division of mankind into ethnic nations. The covenant line must now enter one of these. From our perspective, the one chosen was arbitrary. The covenant could have descended through Chung-Lee of China, or Aruna of Africa, or Running Bear of North America. For reasons known only to God, the covenant line descended through a man named Abram (later called Abraham) of Mesopotamia.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

(Genesis 12:1-3)

This covenant promise to Abraham is two-fold. First, he was promised that his descendants would have a great future, one uniquely blessed among all the ethnic groups of the earth. Abraham would later come to understand that this blessing is the covenant promise of bringing forth the Savior.¹¹

Secondly, Abraham was told that the ultimate intent of this gospel blessing was to bring salvation to every ethnic group. There was nothing inherently superior about Abraham and his children (just as there would have been nothing inherently superior about Chung-Lee, or Aruna or Running Bear). The covenant line had to go *somewhere*. Since revelation could no longer be given in the universal language of mankind; it had to be given in Chinese, or Swahili or Sioux ... or Hebrew.

¹¹ Romans 4

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of Abraham's family, a family that eventually multiplied into a nation named after Abraham's grandson, Israel. Many details are given about how God preserved them from enemies and from their own foolishness. As God designed how Israel was to govern itself and worship, He revealed the Law and Grace of His covenant – the good news of the promised serpent slayer.

But this gospel was no longer available to all the nations. Of necessity, it developed almost hidden in a spiritual womb, a covenant known only to one people and spoken in only one tongue.

MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE

The first chapter of the New Testament opens with a truly profound thrill, for the immense chronicle of the covenant family comes to a definitive end with Jesus of Nazareth. The carefully kept genealogy ends with Him¹². There can be no Savior other than Jesus, for the purpose of the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Him. No one has even tried to carry on the genealogy since. There simply is no other who can be directly linked to Genesis 3:15.

The fulfillment of the Old Testament promised covenant is called the “New Covenant” or simply the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled in His personal character and in His deeds the essence of Old Testament Law and Grace. He lived a sinless life, perfectly representing the covenant people whose hearts are reborn from the love of sin to the love of God. Just as importantly, He took personal responsibility for their debt of sin before God. On the cross Jesus was the Champion of God's people, destroying forever the influence of the serpent over everyone who is reborn in God's grace.

The period at the end of the Gospel accounts, after Christ's resurrection and before His return to Heaven, is a time charged with anticipation. For 2,000 years the gospel promises had been the privilege of the Hebrews, known only to them because of the division of nations brought about by the confusion of human tongues. Now it was time for “all peoples on earth to be blessed”.

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am

12 Luke 3:23-38; also Matthew 1:1-17

going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

(Luke 24:45-49)

“What my Father has promised” referred to more than a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit. It referred to a special *work* of the Holy Spirit, one specifically connected with preaching “in his name to all nations.” The Father had promised a serpent slayer for all segments of humanity, not just for the one nation blessed with bearing the serpent slayer.

It was time for the gospel to break out of its Jewish chrysalis and fly. While confused languages would continue to balance chaos and despotism for the world at large, it was now time for the gospel to become “owned” by every nation, tribe, tongue and people. As far as salvation was concerned, it was time for the Babel curse to be reversed.

TONGUES OF FIRE

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

(Acts 1:4-5,8)

Jesus spoke of the Father’s promise of a new phase of redemptive history empowered by His Holy Spirit. He clearly identified this new phase as the expansion of His witness to all nations. The “power” about to be received was the power to build the church across ethnic bounds that had been in force since Babel. It was the power to introduce the gospel to non-Jews of every kind, revealing to them convincingly that while the gospel is “from the Jews” historically, it is not Jewish in its essence¹³. Jesus underscored this point in the way He described the progress of the gospel: first Jerusalem (Jews), then Judea and Samaria (those who were half Jewish, half Gentile) and finally the ends of the earth (non-Jews).

13 cf. John 4:21-24

The promise of Genesis 3:15 had been fulfilled. The covenant line had brought forth the Savior and salvation had been accomplished. Now, the Holy Spirit was sent to apply this salvation to people of every nation, opening the walls that divide ethnic groups at one common, narrow gateway called the gospel. When He was with us in the flesh, Jesus authenticated His work among us with miraculous signs. What sign would point to this great work of Christ through the Holy Spirit?

Whatever it was, they were to wait for it in Jerusalem. They waited until the Feast of Pentecost, the Old Testament feast signifying the beginning of the harvest. Pentecost drew faithful Jews from all over the world to Jerusalem. What better time to fulfill the first stage of the gospel's harvest – revealing how Christ offers salvation to all believing Jews, regardless of what adopted culture and language might divide them?

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 Rome¹¹ (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."

(Acts 2:1-13)

Verse 4 says that this phenomena was a result of being "filled with the Holy Spirit". It was, therefore, the sign that the Holy Spirit had initiated the work of

gospel expansion. The universal offer of the gospel was symbolized by a miracle involving language. The Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to “speak in other languages”. What does it mean for a group to speak in other languages?

It is often thought that the miraculous nature of this event was that each disciple spoke intelligently in a different foreign language he had never learned. But this is not what happened. The key to understanding Pentecost is to see that it was a sign testifying that the Babel curse has been lifted or reversed – not in the world at large, but in Christ. At Babel, one language was miraculously split into many so that people would be divided in their sin. At Pentecost, many languages were miraculously united into one so that believers from all nations could embrace a common salvation.

This is born out clearly in the text used to describe the miracle. “Each one heard them speaking in his own language”. This fact was merely curious. A visitor from, say, Rome, might well wonder why these Galileans would be speaking Latin. Note carefully, however, what this Roman heard: he “heard them speaking in his own language” (vs. 6). He heard *all* the disciples speaking Latin, praising God together in words he understood quite well.

What lifted this from curiosity to awe is that the Greek standing next to him heard all the disciples speaking in Greek! “How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?” That is, how can people from different cultures each hear someone speak in their respective languages *at the same time*? Furthermore, this miracle (like all the other miracles recorded in the Scripture) was demonstrable; it was objective. While hearing different languages, they heard the same content! “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Their interpretations matched!

The common idea that each disciple spoke in a specific language he had not learned is not quite accurate. The Pentecost sign signaled a lifting of the Babel curse and consequent restriction of the gospel to Israel. The gift of languages, or “tongues”, consisted of the disciples speaking, and “God-fearing Jews” (vs. 5) hearing, a universal language – one which transcended the confusion of languages and marked the gospel (immediately preached by Peter, vv. 14-41) as a message of salvation to *all* peoples.

Note that some, those distinguished from the “God-fearers” perhaps, may have not heard this universal language (vs. 13). They seem to have been left in confusion, hearing nothing intelligible. At any rate, it is clear that the gift was not a “one way” phenomena, but one involving *communication* from speaker to hearer. That is to say, the gift of languages required a parallel work of God in hearers to be effective, later called the gift of interpretation. The gift of

interpretation enabled someone to comprehend the gift of universal languages, understanding the speaker as if he or she were speaking in his native tongue.

The effect at Pentecost was as real and overwhelming as Babel. The sign of tongues and interpretation would ultimately demonstrate that the gospel is for *all* the nations.

HE WHO HAS EARS TO HEAR, LET HIM HEAR

On Pentecost, the message was that Christ was a Savior for all Jews, regardless of their adopted culture. But what about Samaritans, a people of mixed Jewish and Gentile descent? Not everyone at that time would assume that the Old Testament covenant was fulfilled in Christ for them.

God's answer involved Peter, and almost certainly involved the gift of tongues. The keys of the kingdom had been given to the apostles as a whole,¹⁴ authorizing them to declare the saving message of Christ to the world. Peter, however, was the first to confess Christ,¹⁵ and as a reward he was given the honor of "opening the gospel door" in each stage of its expansion. That is why Peter was first to preach to the Jews in Jerusalem on Pentecost.

The first person to actually preach to the Samaritans, however, was not the Apostle Peter, but Deacon Philip.¹⁶ Since the apostles had not been involved, there was confusion in the church as to whether confessing Samaritans (who were only partially Jewish) had been granted salvation simply by faith in Christ, without becoming more connected to their Jewish roots. That is why Peter had to travel to Samaria as Christ's appointed "door opener" to officially bring the gospel to them. When he did, something happened – some objective sign – that clearly indicated to all that the Holy Spirit had blessed and accepted their faith. While we are not told what that sign was, it seems very likely that it was the gift of tongues, the unmistakable miracle declaring that ethnic walls come down in Christ.

What we can only surmise in the case of the Samaritans becomes once again explicit in the last stage of gospel expansion: the opening of the gospel to the Gentiles. Gentile salvation by faith alone, without becoming Jewish, was very hard for Christian Jews to accept. It required several visions just to motivate Peter to share the gospel in a Gentile's home.¹⁷ Peter was at

¹⁴ Matthew 18:18

¹⁵ Matthew 16:13-19

¹⁶ Acts 8:4-6

¹⁷ Acts 10:1-22

first hesitant to grant Christian baptism to Cornelius, but his fears were put to rest by a sign that he recognized, the sign of universal language.

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 and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." (Acts 10:44-47)

Apparently, Peter and the others intelligently heard Cornelius praising God in Aramaic or Hebrew! When Peter later had to defend the notion of Gentile salvation, and did so by reporting how “the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.”¹⁸ In fact, the uproar over accepting Gentiles as Christian brothers became so great that leaders of the church assembled in Jerusalem to address the issue. The crucial argument came from Peter, who insisted that the supernatural gift of tongues given to Cornelius was conclusive evidence that the Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews.¹⁹ Once again, the Holy Spirit had given a sign, enabling people from another culture to understand the gospel in their own language.

The only other reference to speaking in tongues involved a very small group of people who had heard the message of John the Baptist, but had not yet heard the entire gospel.²⁰ Once again, in this unusual situation the gift of a universal language was used to convincingly demonstrate that the Holy Spirit had united another group of people into Christ’s Church.

These are all the references to speaking in tongues found in the Book of Acts. In every case, the gift of tongues was a sign of the Holy Spirit indicating that all people are welcome as equal partners in the gospel. The gift was not simply intended to demonstrate the salvation of particular individuals. The gift demonstrated that the gospel reverses the curse of Babel, allowing the Holy Spirit to bring people from all nations into God’s family.

18 Acts 11:15

19 Acts 15:1-11

20 Acts 19:1-7

A CLANGING CYMBAL

Paul wrote the Corinthian epistles to deal with a whole series of problems as best he could from a distance. Many of these problems stemmed from the disruption of teachers who visited Corinth after Paul had left. Sarcastically calling them “super-apostles”, Paul implied that they claimed spiritual superiority, offering a flamboyant style and asking for money as proof of their worth.²¹

We do not know directly what they taught, but we do know from Paul’s response how Corinth was plagued with erroneous ideas about what it means to be spiritual. Some found spirituality in being identified with a great teacher, others in sexual “freedom” outside of marriage, others in sexual abstinence within marriage, others in thoughtlessly flaunting their freedom from idolatry, and so on.

One of the worst problems facing the Corinthian church must have involved the gift of tongues, since Paul’s response to it consumed Chapters 12-14 of 1 Corinthians. Those chapters imply that another legacy of the “super-apostles” was the idea that the gift of tongues is a mark of spiritual superiority, something intended to exalt the user.

It is important to understand that the gift of tongues discussed in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is the same gift mentioned in the Book of Acts; there is no reason to think otherwise. The issue of whether the gospel was exclusively Jewish was still occasionally a “hot” one as the Church grew into new cultures. Corinth was a good example of a cosmopolitan community of that era. Both land and sea travelers passed through the city from all over the known world. A “Jewish” message would not even be considered by the vast majority of traveling Gentiles. One the other hand, a message designed for all people would have gained an interested hearing.

In Chapter 12, Paul began by laying a groundwork to understand the manifestations of Holy Spirit (translated “gifts”) within the Church. The ministry of the Holy Spirit through us is an expression of Christ’s Lordship (12:1-3), given for the common good (12:4-11), and distributed among us so as to foster interdependence within the Church (12:12-31). He urged us to avoid over-emphasizing our personal gifts, thus exalting ourselves. What is important is how we use what we have to build up each other.

In Chapter 13, Paul stressed that the true measure of spirituality is Christlike love. He hinted at how empty it would be to exchange the expression of God’s love between believers for a self-centered passion for the gifts, themselves.

This brings us to Chapter 14 ...

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. 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. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Now, brothers, 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? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? 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. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? 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. If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

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.

Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord.

Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

(1 Corinthians 14:1-28)

Here, Paul directly addressed the problem at Corinth regarding the use of tongues. The problem was that the gift was being exercised for personal enjoyment, even when there was no need for it in the assembly. That is, people who believed themselves gifted to speak in tongues used that gift when there were no visitors present whom God desired to bless with the gift of interpretation (vv. 27-28).

Paul's response is that the only proper use of tongues – as with *any* spiritual gift – is the building up of the Church at large. Paul reminded them that tongues are a sign designed to convince visitors that the gospel is for people

like them. If there are no visitors, or if God does not see fit to grant them gifts of interpretation, then the sign cannot be appropriately used. (vv. 22-25).

Apparently, once it had been given the gift of tongues could be used at will, at least to some degree. But the need for the gift – the need to convince people that the Church is multi-ethnic – was declining.

The really tragic thing was that by misusing the gift of tongues, the Corinthians communicated precisely the opposite of what the sign was meant to communicate. By greeting visitors with unintelligible speech, the Church conveyed the impression that God's Word is unintelligible and hopelessly foreign. In verse 21, Paul quoted from Isaiah 28. Isaiah warned the people of his day that since they would not listen to God's prophets when they warned them clearly in Hebrew, they would be forced to hear God speak through the conquest of Babylonian foreigners. Perhaps an exile among foreign-tongued pagans would be a "language" they could understand! But surely God's curse is not what we want to convey in Christian worship.

If God did not see fit to use this gift by granting interpretation of the universal language for some hearer, then insisting on using the gift anyway would mimic the Babel curse rather than announce the gospel blessing. People would be made foreigners to each other, rather than members of one kingdom (vv. 9-11).

Paul goes so far as to exhort frustrated tongues-speakers to ask God for the gift to interpret their own speech (vv. 13-17). In that case, at least the speaker would understand himself, hearing his own native language and thus able to later translate his foreign sounding praise. This might at least remind the Church of its multi-cultural mission. Without interpretation, however, the tongues speaker can only edify himself, something inappropriate and childish in a public worship service (vv. 1-5, 18-20).

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

What is the gift of tongues?

The word “tongues” simply means “languages”. It is the gift of speaking a universal language, miraculously reversing the curse of Babel to illustrate the international offer of the gospel.

What does the gift of tongues sound like?

The gift of tongues is part of a sign gift of communication. What is heard depends on the whether a hearer (including the speaker) is gifted to interpret. Those not gifted to interpret probably hear nothing but unintelligible babble (note how that word comes from “Babel”). Those who are gifted to interpret hear their own native language. Different people who are gifted to interpret may simultaneously hear the same content in different (native) languages.

It is commonly thought that the gift of tongues sounds like gibberish even to people who are gifted to interpret (presumably through some unverifiable mental impression of what the gibberish means). There is nothing in the Bible to substantiate such a notion. Mere unintelligible speech requires no miracle and makes no point. The biblical gift of tongues, on the other hand, is a demonstrable miracle. Different languages may be heard by different hearers at the same time, and those who hear can verify the divine sign simply by translating what they heard and finding it to be the same.

What were tongues designed to accomplish?

The gift of tongues was given to help graft Gentile branches onto the Church’s Jewish roots.²² The Book of Acts chronicled how a completely Jewish movement became predominantly Gentile. In that transition, tongues had a major role. They provided a miraculous, attesting sign indicating the Holy Spirit’s acceptance of non-Jews into the covenant community on equal terms.

The common concept that the gift of tongues is a revelatory gift is essentially incorrect. One could say that divinely inspired speech is technically a kind of revelation, but that would confuse sign with substance. Signs were wonders that *attested* to revelation; they did not, themselves, perform the function of revelation. Tongues, in particular, attested to

²² cf. Romans 11:11-24. The inclusion of Gentiles in the covenant community is a major theme tying the Old and New Testaments together. See also Romans 4, Galatians 3:6-14 and Ephesians 2:11-22.

the specific revelation that the covenant had been extended to believing Gentiles. While it is true that a sign using language must involve words, there is nothing to indicate that the actual words conveyed through tongues ever included anything other than generic praise. Judging from the biblical data, no mystery concerning Christ or salvation (let alone specific oracles of guidance) was ever revealed in a tongue.

Therefore, the common notion that “tongues plus interpretation equals prophecy” is a serious misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 14:5. Paul does not there equate the proper use of tongues with prophecy, but simply states that each ministry is equally valid when performed properly. In fact, in verse 22 he specifically says that the two gifts are quite different. The gift of tongues is called a “sign” for unbelievers – an attesting miracle inviting the foreigner to believe in the message of Christ. Prophecy is not called a “sign”; rather, it ministers the message of Christ which we must believe in order to be saved and grow in grace. Tongues were designed to be a sign gift. It is confusing to consider tongues to be a revelatory gift of any kind, let alone one that is on a par with prophecy.

It is also incorrect to think that the gift of tongues is a gift designed as a normal part of public worship. It is true that Paul begins 1 Corinthians 14 saying that someone who speaks in tongues speaks to God, edifying himself (vv. 2,4). Some think this teaches that tongues is essentially a gift for worship. That is not, however, Paul’s intent. He simply meant that when a person speaks in tongues when there is no one to interpret, *only* God hears; *only* the speaker may be edified. The Church at large is not built up at all. Paul calls this a childish act (cf. vv. 18-20). The topic introduced in verses 1-5 is indeed the public use of tongues in Christian worship (note the contrast with prophecy, which is also used in public worship). But Paul’s conclusion was to strictly limit the public exercise of tongues, insisting that the *only* time it may be used is when visitors are present who are gifted to interpret (vv. 27-28).

The private use of tongues is not addressed in 1 Corinthians 14 at all. Verses 14-15 still have the public use of the gift in mind (look at verses 16-19). While tongues without interpretation may be a spiritual act in some sense, Paul implied that there is no benefit from this kind of *public* experience. In fact, since the “sign” purpose of the gift (vs. 22) is inherently public, the private use of tongues may never have occurred to Paul at all.²³

23 It is questionable whether any true spiritual gift can be used privately. Can hospitality?

Are tongues for today?

There is nothing in the Bible that directly teaches whether or when the gift of tongues would cease. Paul even ended his discussion in 1 Corinthians 14 by admonishing, “do not forbid speaking in tongues” (vs. 39). The common assertion that 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 refers to a cessation of tongues is unconvincing. The text deals more with the perfection of the Church than the perfection of revelation.

Perhaps the question is best answered by considering the purpose of the gift. The gift of tongues was a sign affirming God’s revelation concerning the multi-ethnic nature of the New Testament gospel. The real question, therefore, is whether there is still a *need* for the gift of tongues. Surely, the issue of including Gentiles into the Church is no longer a matter of debate. Even in first century Corinth, people who genuinely possessed the gift had to voluntarily limit its use because God, Himself, no longer saw the need to use it regularly.

Like other sign gifts, the usefulness of tongues faded as the Holy Spirit completed biblical revelation in the apostolic age. In its day, however, the gift of tongues was a tremendous tool in the transition from the Old to the New Covenant, spawning a missions endeavor that continues to this day. More than any other spiritual gift, it enabled the cross cultural advance of the gospel, declaring that in Christ the Babel curse is suspended, and every nation, tribe, tongue and people are invited to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

healing? prophecy? leadership? Spiritual gifts are designed as tools to help Christians love and serve each other. They may benefit their user in passing, but they were never designed for private use.



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