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“Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue,” I Corinthians 14:19.

## Known and Unknown Tongues

**Lesson Aim:** To enable believers to understand the spiritual gifts of “tongues.”

**L139. Date:** April 1975. **Text:** I Corinthians 14:1-5, 12, 18-19, 26, 33, 37, 39. **Topic:** Holy Spirit: Gifts of.

GLOSSOLALIA! What problems have grown up around that word! It is a combination of two Greek words (**glossa**, “tongue,” and **lalein**, “to speak”) and refers to “speaking in tongues,”

Speaking in ecstatic and unintelligible utterance is believed by many to be the single positive evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and power and is an experience to be gained at all costs. It is found today among Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and others. (It is also found in the Muslim religion and some pagan religions.) Fortunately, since it was a problem in Corinth, the Holy Spirit led Paul to write upon the subject. From I Corinthians, chapter 14, we can glean truths which give God's direction on the “tongues” question.

Just what is a “tongue”? The term is used in three general ways in the Bible. (1) A tongue is the fleshly organ which lies in the mouth between the jaws (James 3:5-10). (2) A tongue is anything of an elongated shape which resembles the design of the human tongue (Acts 2:3). (3) A tongue is the native language spoken by a particular people (Revelation 5:9; 14:6; 16:16). Much confusion arises today because men do not generally use “tongue” to mean “language,” except in those instances when we speak of one's “mother tongue.” When the King James Version of the Bible was written, “tongue” meant “language.” The comments which follow are based upon the belief that every New Testament instance where “tongue” is used to refer to

vocalized sounds it refers to a distinct and known language among men.

Today's lesson aims to aid you in understanding the spiritual gift of “tongues.”

## **I. TONGUES IN CORINTH**

The church at Corinth was the only New Testament church which placed an emphasis upon the importance of the gift of languages. The gift was also received in Jerusalem (Acts 2) and Ephesus (Acts 19), but it seemed to make no unusual impact there. It is quite evident, however, that a problematic and distorted form of tongues-speaking existed at Corinth. Not one time in I Corinthians, chapters 12-14, did Paul encourage the brethren to seek a gift of tongues. Instead, he restricted the practice and tried to correct abuses which existed.

It is evident that the church in Corinth was a very carnal church (3:1-3). The first epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians dealt with a series of problems. Tongues was one of the problems. It seems the church had written to ask Paul some questions (7:1) about tongues as well as other perplexing problems. It is evident from Corinth that tongues and spiritual immaturity (carnality) can exist side by side.

How did the tongues at Corinth relate to the tongues in Jerusalem at Pentecost? It is evident from Acts 2 that the tongues of Pentecost were distinct human languages. (1) The word translated “utterance” in Acts 2:4 means “to speak intelligibly” (2:14; 26:25). (2) People who heard the disciples speak at Pentecost understood what they were saying, without the aid of an interpreter (2:11). Luke plainly identified the “other tongues” of Acts 2:4 with known languages (verses 6, 8, and 11), even using the word “dialect” one time to describe the speech.

It is evident that the tongues of Corinth were the same as the tongues of Jerusalem at Pentecost. Paul used the same terminology which Luke used in Acts, where Luke specifically identified the tongues with languages. The word “unknown” is found in I Corinthians 14, but it is in italics, indicating that the King James translators added a word that was not in the Greek as Paul wrote it. Since Paul and Luke traveled together for several years, and were together when portions of the New Testament were written, it is most unlikely that they would use the same terms to refer to two kinds of tongues—one intelligible human language, and the other unintelligible ecstatic utterance. Jerusalem and Corinth had the same kind of tongues.

The tongues in Corinth were considered a true spiritual gift (12:7). What was spoken was capable of translation. (The Greek word for

“interpretation” in I Corinthians chapters 12 and 14, simply means “translation” from one language into another as in John 9:7 and Mark 15:34 where the same Greek word is used.) The tongues of Corinth were capable of rational control and not irresistible divine compulsions, for the number could be limited, and they could be entirely withheld (14:27, 28, 32). The tongues in Corinth were identified with a foreign language, the language of the Assyrians. Paul quoted from Isaiah 28:11 in I Corinthians 14:21. There was a highly emotional element which seems to have accompanied early speaking in foreign languages, but the speaking was in a distinct human language even so.

In four instances, Paul seemed to have approved the speaking which was going on in the Corinthian congregation. Upon closer examination, however, it is seen that he set forth a superior alternative. (1) “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church,” verse 4. (2) I wish that you all spoke with tongues, but I had rather that you prophesied,” verse 5. (3) “I speak with tongues more than you all: yet in the church I had rather speak with five words to edify others than ten thousand words in a tongue,” verse 18-19. (4) “Forbid not to speak with tongues, but covet to prophesy,” verse 39. Do you see the permission and the alternative in each of those statements? There is something better than tongues!

The church in Corinth was located at a crossroads of the world. People from over the civilized world passed through Corinth. God gave a gift of languages there that the church may be enabled to witness to the foreigners. Tragically, some in Corinth used their gift to show off their superior “holiness,” and others counterfeited the gift to keep from being left behind. The result was confusion. Chaos follows when a spiritual gift is not exercised as God intended. It happened in Corinth; it might happen in your life also.

## **II. TONGUES AND PREACHING**

“Speaking in tongues” is much inferior to inspired preaching in the native language of a congregation? Preaching rather than languages is to be desired (verse 1). The whole body is built up by inspired preaching, but not by tongues (verses 2, 3). People will be turned away from Christ by speaking in tongues in the church, whereas they will be brought to Christ by inspired preaching (verses 23, 24). Orderliness and peace reign in a church where preaching is paramount (verses 26, 40). Why is there such an emphasis of importance of tongues-speaking today? Preaching is much superior.

The classic statement of relative importance between speaking in a foreign language and one's native language is found in I Corinthians 14:19. It is better to speak five distinct words than ten thousand indistinct words. Translate that into time. At a rate of one hundred eighty words per minute, it would take slightly less than two seconds to speak five words. At the same rate, it we take about fifty-five minutes to speak ten thousand words. Two seconds compared with fifty-five minutes! That demonstrates the relative value of tongues compared with inspired preaching. Which do you value the higher?

Sounds must be sensible to have profit (verse 7:17). Even musical instruments must make distinct sounds in order to have meaning (verses 7, 8). In like manner, the human voice must speak distinctly in order for good to come from it (verse 9). Spiritual gifts are for the purpose of “edifying the church,” verse 12. Why magnify any gift unless the whole body can be edified thereby? Tongues do not edify as does preaching. The purpose of all speaking in the assembly of Christians is to teach, to admonish, and to build up each.

The Apostle Paul, therefore, placed strict limitations upon the Corinthian use of foreign languages (real or counterfeit) in the meetings of the church. (1) They were limited in number: “. . . **two, or at the most three,**” verse 27. (2) They were limited as to order: “. . . **and that by course. . .**” verse 27. One at a time! (3) They were limited by interpretation: “. . . **let one interpret. If there were no interpreter, let the tongues speaker keep silence in the church . . .**” verses 27-28. (4) They were limited as to participants: “**Let your women keep silence . . . for it is a shame for women to speak . . .**” verses 34, 35. (5) They were limited by importance: “**Acknowledge the superiority of inspired preaching,**” verses 5, 19.

Watch what kind of speaking goes on in your church. Be alert to the purpose of the speech. Speaking in the Christian assembly has three primary guidelines. (1) Speak to build up the church and not to display personal excellence, (14:12, 16, 17, 26). (2) Speak to teach others and not to enjoy private ecstasy (14:18, 19, 26-28). (3) Speak to bear witness concerning Jesus in words which people can understand (12:24, 25). There may be some personal value to the individual who speaks with ecstatic utterance (verse 4); but at best, it is much inferior to inspired preaching. Good Bible preaching will edify the whole church, convert sinners, and glorify God. It is impossible to improve upon that kind of speech.

### III. TONGUES TODAY

It is the writer's studied opinion that the spiritual gifts of tongues are not being seen today. The current tongues phenomenon is an emotional overflow, psychologically conditioned to express itself in babbling vocal sounds. How can such sounds have meaning to God or to man in the light of New Testament teachings?

It seems proper to evaluate all tongues speech by the guideline established in Acts 2. In that case, distinct languages and dialects were spoken. To some it was an "unknown" language. They said, "These men are drunk." Those who did not understand, and thus falsely judged, were "men of Judaea, and all . . . that dwelt at Jerusalem," Acts 2:14. Those who were from Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Egypt, Cyrene, Rome, and the other nations represented responded, "**How hear we every man in our own tongue** (language), **wherein we were born?**" Acts 2:8. The local citizens heard only unintelligible sounds. Foreigners present were amazed for ". . . every man heard them speak in his own language," Acts 2:6. The tongue was "unknown" only to those who did not understand the language spoken.

If a gift of tongues were needed today, God is as able to give it as before. What He would give would not be unintelligible **jibberish** but distinct tones or human language. It was so in New Testament times. In an excellent book entitled *The Holy Spirit in Today's World* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids), Dr. W. A. Crisswell has made six observations concerning modern tongues speaking. (1) The basic doctrine back of it is wrong; that is, that tongues are the one absolute evidence of being baptized in or filled with the Holy Spirit. (2) No mighty hero of the faith—John Wesley, Martin Luther, Charles G. Finner, Dwight L. Moody, Charles H. Spurgeon, nor any other—ever spoke in "unknown tongues." (3) From the close of the New Testament onward tongues speaking has been considered a heresy by main line Christianity, when it has appeared occasionally. (4) Modern **glossolalia** is bewildering in the way one seeks it and in the way it is expressed. (5) Modern tongues speaking is no distinct human language. The Toronto Institute of Linguistics, as well as many other specialists, has studied the sounds and declared they are not human languages. In that sense, they are different from Pentecost (Acts 2). (6) Tongues speaking has always been hurtful and divisive. When it has appeared in an evangelical denomination, it has caused problems. Take care that you are not caught up in it.

Compare the New Testament gift with the modern phenomenon. Then it was a human language; now it is mere ecstatic utterance. Then it was used to edify the church and to proclaim the gospel; now it is used for personal

elation and private devotion. Then it was sovereignly bestowed by the Holy Spirit without being sought or expected; now it is received only by those who diligently seek and earnestly desire it. Then it was understood by men as a known human language; now it is not recognized as having the qualities of language even by specialists in linguistic studies. Then it was declared to be temporary and would cease; now it is claimed to be abiding for all Christians of all ages. Do you follow the New Testament pattern or modern opinions?

Do not be misled by those who claim that an experience of tongues is proof of the Spirit's presence and power in your life. Quite the contrary, the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every Christian (I Corinthians 12:7), but the gift of languages was given only to some (I Corinthians 12:30).

The Christian is to be concerned about character produced by the Spirit and not the experience of gifts from the Spirit. The purpose of the Spirit's gifts is to equip believers for Christian ministry and testimony. What is the place of the Holy Spirit in your life?

When you were saved you received the Gift, which is the Holy Spirit Himself. He brought with Him the gifts, which are divine enablements to serve. Be content with the gift He gives you. Do not seek a gift He has not given. Be content to serve without the exhilaration which some seem to say is necessary as proof of a spiritual gift. Live by faith, not by feelings. Serve God faithfully with the language you now have. If you need more, He will give it. Do not seek ecstatic experiences lest experience becomes more important to you than faith.

## **Questions**

1. What is a tongue?
2. What was the spiritual gift of tongues?
3. How did tongues in Corinth relate to those at Pentecost?
4. How valuable were tongues compared to preaching?
5. What does I Corinthians 14:19 teach?
6. What limits did Paul put upon tongues in Corinth?
7. What are the purposes of speaking in the Christian assembly?
8. How do "tongues" today compare with "tongues" in Acts 2?
9. Why should Christians not seek "tongues?"
10. How can you best use your language to magnify Christ?