

UNDERSTANDING THE GIFT OF TONGUES

A STUDY OF THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE GIFT



FAITH DEFENDERS

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TONGUES/ "VARIOUS KINDS OF LANGUAGES"

A complete study of the nature and functions of the gift of speaking in languages is far beyond the time limitations of this seminar. The most we can do is to share with you the results of thirty years of research on the issue.

A. PRINCIPLES OF APPROACH:

1. This is a highly emotional topic, and people tend to go off the deep end when they feel that their gift is being put down or denied.
2. This is particularly true of the so-called "gift" of speaking in "unknown tongues" because many Christians have been taught that the "proof" of their "baptism of the Holy God" is speaking in tongues. It has become a source of pride as well as contention within Christian circles. Those who had "it" are "first class" Christians, while those who do not have "it" are poor "second class" Christians. It has come to mean a spiritual elite in the church.
3. There are two separate issues that if not kept separate will create a great deal of confusion and ill will.
 - a. First, there is the issue of your interpretation of specific passages and words found in the Bible. Your interpretation could be wrong due to ignorance of the original languages and the science of hermeneutics. This issue has nothing to do with feelings or subjective experiences. The exegesis of Scripture is objective and follows hard rules of grammar and syntax that are oblivious to emotions.
 - b. Second, there is the issue of your subjective personal experience. Everyone has some experiences in the past that moved them emotionally. But experience qua experience does not carry within itself its own interpretation. The meaning or interpretation of your experience comes from outside of that experience.
4. We can deny someone's interpretation of Scripture and deny their interpretation of their experience without denying their experience.
 - a. If you had a strong emotional experience in which you felt waves of joy and peace come over you, then no one can deny that you had such an experience. But it is open to interpretation whether those feelings came from God, the flesh or the devil.

b. The nature and origin of your experience is open to interpretation. Thus someone can deny your interpretation of your experience by offering you an alternate explanation. For example, a New-Ager tells you that she fell into a trance in which she experienced her own godhood. But a Christian interprets her experience as an encounter with the devil in which he deceived her into thinking she was god.

5. If you are closed-minded on the issue of “tongues” and you are not interested in listening to alternate interpretations, it would be best to skip this section as we do not want people having heart attacks or fainting spells.

6. Our primary concern in this seminar is to discover what the BIBLE says about spiritual gifts, including “tongues.” We are not interested in your personal opinion or experience. You should not be interested in our personal opinion or experience either. It is Scripture alone that should decide what we believe and how we live. Thus we interpret experience according to Scripture instead of interpreting the Bible according to our experience.

7. Let us put aside our experiences, both positive and negative, and any denominational prejudices and try to be as objective as possible in the interpretation of Scripture. Don’t let some theological system dictate your opinion either. All theological systems are man-made and none of them are infallible.

With these brief introductory words let us begin our study of Scripture as if we were reading it for the first time with no prior commitments.

B. THE MEANING OF THE WORD “TONGUE/TONGUES:”

1. The first task in the study of the Bible is to define the pertinent Biblical words that relate to the issue. An examination of the Greek words reveals the following:

a. The word is found in the singular form 25 times and in the plural 25 times. Thus there are fifty references in the Bible to “tongue.” This is enough to come to some kind of conclusion concerning its various meanings.

b. Out of the 50 references, it refers to the literal organ in our mouth 15 times.

c. It refers 1 time to the fiery manifestation of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

d. It clearly refers to languages or language groups 34 times. This is the normal everyday meaning of the word.

e. Out of those occurrences, it refers to human languages spoken naturally with no supernatural element involved 13 times and 1 time to angelic languages.

f. This leaves 20 references where there seems to be a supernatural or miraculous element either in the speaker or in the hearers. In such places as Acts 2, the miracle was in the ear of the listeners, not in the mouth of the speaker. When one person is speaking and different people hear it in several different languages, the miracle is in the hearing, not the speaking.

g. Out of those 20 times, it is found in the Book of Acts around 2-3 times and in I Corinthians 18 times.

2. Hermeneutically, we should not use historical narratives as the basis for doctrine or morals. Thus the Book of Acts, while interesting to read, cannot legitimately be used as the basis of our understanding of whatever "tongues" means. Luke records what happened, but he does not go on to interpret those events and make them into doctrines or morals.

3. This means that our understanding is limited to one book in the Bible, I Corinthians. This is not hermeneutically sound either. It means that we are limited to what was happening in only one church.

4. The fact that "tongues" is not mentioned in the other church epistles is obviously important. But how to interpret that silence is tricky.

a. Some interpret the silence of the other epistles as evidence that tongues were not present in the other churches. Thus Corinth was a weird church with weird things going on.

b. Others interpret the silence to mean that all the other churches practiced tongues in a proper way and thus did not need correction.

c. The fact that two totally contradictory interpretations based on the same silence reveals how precarious it is to put too much weight on arguments from silence.

d. But what is clear is that the Corinthian church was absolutely

the worst church in the NT with the most problems. Paul condemned the members as carnal, immoral, divisive, heretical, slanderous, etc. They were clearly abusing the gifts in general and, in particular, the gift of "tongues." As a result, it came under severe rebuke and admonishment from the Apostle Paul.

e. This means that we must not exalt the Corinthian church as if it should serve as a model for churches to follow. The Corinthian church was so unspiritual and wicked that we must avoid following it.

f. But this is where the modern charismatic and Pentecostal movement is clearly at fault. They point to the Corinthian church and say, "We need to pattern our church services after the Corinthian church. We need to be like them."

g. This means that what is described in 1 Corinthians should be viewed as what we should NOT do today. Why imitate the worst church in the New Testament?

5. The word "unknown" was added by the translators of the KJV, but it is not in the Greek text. It has caused a great deal of confusion and is used by the ignorant to prove that the "tongues" were not languages, but gibberish. The fact that "unknown" is not in the Greek text refutes one of the historic Pentecostal arguments.

6. The word "tongue" was the regular, every day word for "language" in 1611 and is thus not a mystical term. Therefore, it should be translated "language" in order to avoid any mystical connotations. By translating it as "language," this will demythologize it.

C. EXEGETICAL FACTS FROM 1 CORINTHIANS:

What are the exegetical facts that we can glean from I Corinthians?

1. While Paul clearly says that God does not give the gift of languages to everyone, all the Corinthians claimed to have it. What does this mean?

- a. Most of those who claimed to have the gift did not really have it.
- b. The gift of languages can be fraudulently claimed.
- c. It can be fraudulently exercised.

d. Those who teach that it is the sign of being baptized with the Holy Spirit and that we must all seek it are clearly in error.

2. While Paul clearly says that only two or three people can exercise the gift of languages during the worship service, all the Corinthians engaged in the gift during the service. They all came with a language. What does this mean?

a. When more than two or three people exercise the gift during a worship service, this violates Scripture.

b. Worship services in which many people speak in languages are not of the Holy Spirit.

3. While Paul clearly condemned speaking in languages if there was no immediate translation, the Corinthians did not bother with translations. They all spoke in languages with no translations. What does this mean?

a. Any worship service in which speaking in language is not immediately accompanied with translation is bogus and not of God.

b. When "tongues" are practiced without valid translation, the church that engages in it is wicked.

4. While Paul clearly said that when someone is speaking, no one is to interrupt, the Corinthians interrupted each other all the time. What does this mean?

a. Any worship service in which people interrupt is bogus and not of God.

b. The more the gift is exercised, the more we know that the Holy Spirit is not there.

5. While Paul clearly puts down speaking in languages as a lesser gift and instead emphasizes that we ought to seek greater gifts and better character, the Corinthians exalted the gift of speaking in languages as the greatest gift. What does this mean?

6. While Paul emphasized that it is better to focus on the development of the character qualities of faith, hope, and love in your life than speaking in languages, the Corinthians focused on the gift and ignored the need for Christ-like character qualities. What does This mean?

7. While Paul condemned confusion during the service, the Corinthi-

ans had confusion and chaos in their services. What does this mean?

8. While Paul discouraged women from creating chaos during the service, the women in the Corinth church were creating confusion in the worship service. What does this mean?

D. BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL TREATMENT:

A biblical theological treatment of the gift of speaking in languages results in the following conclusions:

1. Speaking in languages not known to the speaker took place in order to evangelize those who did not speak the language of the speaker. Thus it was given for evangelism and missions. What does this mean?

2. It is a sign to unbelievers of the judgment of God upon them. Thus it is not a sign to believers that you are spiritual or holy. What does this mean?

3. Speaking in languages does not profit anyone unless it is translated. What does this mean?

4. It is better to speak five words that people understand than thousands of words that no one understands. What does this mean?

5. Paul discourages both seeking the gift and exercising it in every way possible. What does this mean?

6. The Greek words for "tongues," and the passages where they are found clearly indicate that real languages are in view, not speaking in gibberish, repeating animal noises, or meaningless sounds. In order to qualify as a language, there must be grammar and syntax. Barking or grunting does not qualify as a language. What does this mean?

7. There is no indication in Scripture or in church history that the Apostles held classes to teach everyone how to "speak in tongues." Such classes are so carnal in nature as to preclude any work of the Spirit. What does this mean?

8. The attempt to defend the speaking of gibberish in public by claiming it is a private prayer language will not work. What does this mean?

9. Not knowing what you are saying is not good. What if you are blaspheming the Lord? What does this mean?

10. The cults and the occult have trained their people to speak gibberish as "spirit languages." The early Mormons, Voodoo followers, and followers of the Way deny the gospel and speak in tongues at the same time. What does this mean?

E. CHURCH HISTORY:

In terms of church history, the gift of speaking in foreign languages has rarely appeared. There are few examples where a missionary was enabled by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel in a language that he did not know. While we cannot limit God by saying what He can and cannot do, the fact still remains that He has rarely given this gift.

Conclusion

The ministry gifts change from age to age depending on the needs of the church in each generation. God never gives gifts that are ill-suited to the times or useless to the church.

God clearly gave some spectacular gifts at the beginning of the Church to support the infant church and to verify His servants. That they would be slowly withdrawn as the church became established is what happened to such gifts as apostle or prophet. As we mature we learn to walk by faith instead of by sight.

We have no problem believing that God can reactivate the gifts whenever He desires, and even Give new ones not mentioned in Scripture. We accept His sovereignty over the Church to do as He pleases.

What is important is for us to major on developing faith, hope, and love in our lives and minor on seeking ministry gifts that best benefit the people of God. The way of love is always the right way, and that way is not selfish or self-centered, but Christ-centered.

The church is like an organ; its members are the keys, stops, and pedals that play different notes and perform different functions; the Holy Spirit is the organ player who sits at the console; He plays a glorious symphony to God by using different keys, stops, and pedals as He sees fit. Thus the gifts are not static things we carry around in our pockets. They are temporary and dynamic manifestations of the Holy Spirit by which He glorifies Christ. He uses us where, when, and how He wants.



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