

The Gift of Tongues¹

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Preliminary Matters

The Crisis

It certainly would be no exaggeration to say that the tongues² phenomenon has caused one of the greatest crises the church has faced in this generation. Tongues is no longer something witnessed in Pentecostal churches only; it is now seen everywhere from Roman Catholicism to Baptist and other independent churches. For centuries all of Christendom recognized the gift to be inoperative; now, along with its accompanying claims to healings, miracles, revelations, and "slayings in the Spirit," (which, by the way, is something completely unknown to even the early church itself), it has invaded virtually every denomination. Its preachers are claiming the occurrence of a modern Pentecost. Some are accusing preachers who refuse to recognize the gift of being deceivers who rob God's people of God-sent blessings. In short, it has become one of the hottest issues on the ecclesiastical scene: those who believe in it cannot stop talking about it, and those who do not accept it seemingly never stop hearing about it!

The Standard

It should be emphasized that there is, of course, only one Standard by which we can measure such claims -- Scripture. The question involved at this point is not whether or not any genuine Christian has had some kind of experience; an experience may be very real and yet very wrong, or it may be very real and yet very misunderstood. This issue of authority is particularly essential in a discussion of the gift of tongues, for there are many who are sure that they have experienced it. But let us reemphasize it: only Scripture has the answer to this question. Any and all experiences must be evaluated in light of the Word of God. We do not judge an experience on its own claims but on the basis of Holy Writ, for the Holy Spirit will never be the author of any experience which is not in accord with His Own Word. This can never be over-emphasized, especially in dealing with a matter which is essentially experiential.

Relevant Passages

The gift of tongues does not occur in Scripture as often as some may think. The only passages which deal with the gift in any specific way are Acts 2:1-13; Acts 10:44-48; Acts 19:1-7; and I Corinthians 12-14. It is possible that the gift of tongues was also exercised in Acts 8:14-19, but it is impossible to be certain (the question is what Simon "saw," verse 18). All of these passages will be investigated, but since I Corinthians 14 is the passage which gives the most specific instruction concerning this gift, it will receive most of the attention.

The Nature of the Gifts

Definitions

It is not at all difficult to define the gift of tongues; because of the debate surrounding this issue, however, support for the definition given here will be surveyed in some detail.

The gift of tongues was the supernatural ability to speak in a foreign, human language which was previously unknown or unstudied by the speaker. Notice that the gift of tongues is not the ability to speak gibberish -- that requires no supernatural ability. But this is precisely where the debate begins. Virtually all liberal theologians, because of their denial of the possibility of supernatural, direct revelation, teach that the gift of tongues was merely ecstatic utterance. While they do not question the possibility of the supernatural, virtually all Charismatics and many non-charismatics teach the same. Many of them believe that while the tongues of the

² Greek: γλῶσσα, (glossa, glossolalia), speaking in tongues, other languages

book of Acts were indeed foreign languages, the tongues of I Corinthians were different -- they were ecstatic utterances, gibberish, which contained a revelation from God understandable to God Himself (for private, devotional use) and to the interpreter (for public use). This is not the case, however, and that tongues were foreign languages is evident from the following considerations.

1. The Greek word translated "tongues" in Scripture (glossa) normally refers either to the tongue as a physical organ or to a human language. This is precisely its use today -- we speak with our tongues in our native English tongue. The word can be used in reference to ecstatic speech, but such usage is completely foreign to the New Testament. Unless there is good reason (evidence) to understand the term as referring to gibberish, it is unwarranted to assume that it does, especially in light of the fact that its meaning elsewhere in the New Testament is always to the contrary.

2. In Acts 2 tongues, clearly, were known human languages (that is, known to the ones who heard). The "other tongues" (heterais glossais) of verse 4 are explained to be the languages of the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, etc., in verses 9-11. In verse 6 those who heard the disciples preach heard them in their "own language." The Greek term for "language" in this verse (and in verse 8) is dialektos, from which comes the English word "dialect"; it can only mean language, never gibberish. Furthermore, it is clear that in Acts 2 tongues were designed to be a method of effective communication to those visiting Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. In other words, the tongues of Pentecost broke down the language barrier; it did not set up a language barrier. This rules out the possibility of gibberish.

3. Likewise, the gift was clearly that of languages in Acts 10 also, for in Acts 11:15-17 Peter identifies it as the same phenomenon which occurred in Acts 2. It would seem obvious, then, to assume the same for the tongues of Acts 19 as well.

4. The gift of tongues in I Corinthians is never stated to be anything different from that in Acts. To understand it as something different would require some explanation. Furthermore, the Acts accounts were written by Luke, who was Paul's associate; it is inconceivable that he would speak of another kind of tongues without explanation.

5. In I Corinthians 14:4 Paul states that the one speaking in a tongue edifies himself. It is evident, then, that he understood what he was saying, for edification would be impossible apart from understanding (which point Paul proceeds to establish in the following verses). Incidentally, it is also evident from this that the true gift of tongues was not a purely emotional experience but one in which the mind was active. Paul's implication is that the one speaking in a tongue understood what he was saying and so was edified. His point in the following verses is that what is not understood cannot edify. The gift of tongues is often characterized, today, as though it were a holy trance of some kind, speaking things unknown even to the speaker himself! This is clearly excluded by Paul's implication here. The assumption is that the speaker, in complete control of his mental faculties, knows what he wants to say and is able, supernaturally, to say it in another language. Like all other gifts, tongues were exercised intelligently.

6. I Corinthians 14:10-11 clearly demand the same. Paul is speaking of tongues "in the world" and demands distinct sounds, known language.

7. In I Corinthians 14:18 Paul states that he had spoken in tongues more than any of them. He follows with a statement affirming that this was never his practice in the church (verse 19). The only thing which could make it necessary for Paul to speak in tongues more than they, then, would be his need of it on his missionary journeys. Again, this points to language, not gibberish, for gibberish would have been pointless in his foreign mission work; language, on the other hand, would have been most helpful.

8. In I Corinthians 14:21 Paul associates their gift of tongues with Isaiah's prophecy of Israel's hearing of the Assyrian language. To understand the gift as gibberish would destroy his point of reference entirely.

9. In I Corinthians 14:22 Paul says that tongues were "for a sign." They were so spectacular that they would arouse attention. Only human language could be effective as a sign. Ecstatic speech was well known from as far back as the eleventh century, BC, especially as a part of the Greek mystery religions; it would have served only to associate the Christians of Corinth with their pagan background. What made the Christian gift of tongues different and significant was the fact that those so gifted were able to speak in previously unlearned languages; mere gibberish, ecstatic speech, would have meant nothing and so could not have served as a sign.

10. The Greek words *hermeneuo* and *dihermeneuo* rendered "interpret" and "interpretation" in I Corinthians 14, normally mean "to translate" from one language to another. This is how the word is often used today: when a man of one language speaks to an audience of another, he speaks through an "interpreter." This is its usual meaning throughout the New Testament and the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament; e.g., Genesis 42:23; Ezra 4:7; John 1:42; Acts 9:36). "Translation," then, points to language, not gibberish.

11. Jesus specifically forbids ecstatic speech in prayer: "When ye pray, use not vain repetitions as the heathen do" (Matthew 6:7). The Greek term translated "vain repetitions" has nothing to do with repeating a prayer request (although Jesus does use the word here to refer also to mindless repetition of prayers) but rather means "to babble" or "to speak babble." Jesus, here, expressly forbids gibberish. It is inconceivable that He would forbid something which is itself a spiritual gift. The only alternative is that the tongues were, indeed, languages. God never needed or intended for men to speak or pray in a "language" which even they themselves could not understand. Such a thing would be pointless.

Objections

It would seem that the evidence given above is insurmountable. Those who hold that tongues were ecstatic speech, however, present the following arguments.

Objection #1. On Pentecost, when the apostles spoke in tongues, they were accused of being drunk (Acts 2:13).

This is a common and fair argument. A close examination of the passage, however, reveals that there were two groups of people present: 1) the foreigners who understood in their own language and were "all amazed" at such an astounding phenomenon (verses 9-12), and 2) the Palestinian Jews who, because the apostles were speaking in foreign languages, could not understand what was being spoken. These local, Palestinian Jews are described as "others" (*heteroi*) in verse 13 in contrast to the foreigners listed in verses 9-12. Verse 13 says, then, that it was these local Jews who were issuing the charge of drunkenness. The languages being spoken were understood clearly by the foreigners, so they were not the ones to raise the charge of drunkenness. Furthermore, as already shown, the tongues of Acts 2 are specifically called "languages" (*dialektos*) in verses 6 and 8.

(This, by the way, also shows that the miracle at Pentecost was in the speaking, not in the hearing, for there were those who did not understand. A miracle of hearing would have been experienced by local and foreign Jews equally.)

Objection #2. Paul speaks of the "tongues of angels" in I Corinthians 13:1, which must refer to a heavenly language unknown to any human.

The problem with this understanding of this phrase is that Paul, in this entire scenario of verses 1-3, is speaking in hypothetical terms. The "thoughts" in these verses are in the subjunctive mood, the mood of unreality. In these verses Paul is speaking of things that clearly had not happened, such as giving his body to be burned (verse 3). He is simply speaking in the superlative to make his point. There is nothing here which demands gibberish. Furthermore, there is no example of anyone in the New Testament speaking in an angelic tongue.

Objection #3. In I Corinthians 14, Paul uses the term *laleo* ("to speak"; e.g., verse 2). This word signifies unintelligible chatter.

The fact of the matter is that this Greek verb need not mean chatter at all; it very often means simply "to speak" (e.g., Matthew 9:18). Paul uses this verb in verse 21, no doubt, because this is the verb used in the Septuagint which he is quoting. Furthermore, verses 34-35 of the same chapter use the verb to describe "asking questions." Finally, verse 16 equates it with *lego*, a Greek verb which always means "to speak" or "to say."

Objection #4. The term "unknown tongue" indicates ecstatic utterance.

The first and most obvious problem with this argument is that the term "unknown" is an addition by the King James translators; the word is not in the Greek manuscripts (note that it is always italicized). Evidently the translators fell into the common error of allowing their theology to unduly influence their translation. Furthermore, even if the word were genuine, it would not demand gibberish; it could just as easily refer to language unknown to the speaker.

Objection #5. I Corinthians 14:2 says that the tongues speaker speaks "to God" and that "no man understands" the tongue.

It is interesting to find some verses of Scripture used to support a point when the verse teaches the exact opposite; such is the case with this argument. As will be shown, Paul argues in this passage that an interpreter is necessary, otherwise tongues are worthless, because they will not be understood. As a result the one speaking in tongues (without an interpreter) speaks only to God, for, by the nature of the case, no man can understand him (because there is no interpreter).

Objection #6. That an interpreter was needed in Corinth shows that Corinthian tongues were different from the tongues in Acts.

Again, this argument also supports the opposite point. In Acts, the foreigners heard in their own language, so they needed no interpreter. In Corinth when a man spoke in a foreign language, it by the nature of the case was unintelligible; a translator was needed simply because there were no foreigners present to understand the languages spoken. The utterance was unintelligible to the hearers but not to the speaker.

Objection #7. I Corinthians 14:14-15 says, "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also." It is argued that Paul here contrasts praying with the spirit with praying with the

mind. Praying with the spirit, it is said, means praying with unintelligible speech, the mind being "unfruitful"; praying with the mind is praying in human language.

The Corinthians just may have been abusing the gift of tongues that way, and that is what Paul seeks to correct in these verses. These verses, then, would say that very thing in order to teach the exact opposite. The word "unfruitful" means "unproductive." It is evident by the explanation of verse 16 that Paul is speaking of public prayer. All he says is that if you pray in a tongue, you may think you are praying, but you are really accomplishing nothing; it is unfruitful, unproductive. You should rather be seeking to edify the church (verse 12); i.e., by praying in a language all can understand.

In verse 15 he gives the solution: all prayer should be with the spirit and with the understanding both. In other words, it should all be intelligible; else it will not be productive, and those who hear will not be able to say "Amen" when you are finished "because he does not know what you say" (verse 16b). Whatever else may be unclear about this verse, it is very clear that in the apostle's mind "praying in the Spirit" does not indicate the absence of understanding; prayer must be both "in the Spirit" and "with the mind." Furthermore, as was shown above, speaking in tongues was not something done without the mind; it was intelligent and deliberate.

Many appeal to Romans 8:26 to support this same contention that praying "in the Spirit" is praying in ecstatic speech. "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities, for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." But notice that the "groanings" are made by the Spirit, not the Christian. This verse simply pictures the believer in prayer wanting but not really knowing how to pray in God's will, in which case the Holy Spirit takes that sincere heart of prayer to the throne in a prayer pleasing to God. The verse says nothing about "praying in tongues." Nothing.

Summary

The gift of tongues was the ability to speak in a foreign language previously unknown or unstudied by the speaker. The true gift had nothing to do with gibberish. The gift of the interpretation of tongues was the ability to translate the message given in a foreign tongue. There is no evidence that the tongues of Acts is any different from the tongues of I Corinthians, except as there may be some abuse of the true gift by the Corinthians.

The Value of Tongues

It is important to understand the value which the New Testament places on the gift of tongues. Is the gift important? It is to today's Charismatics. It was to the church at Corinth. Was it important to the New Testament writers? The answer to that is clearly, "no!" To be sure, the gift had purposes to be served, and so it was important for those purposes. But the gift itself was never emphasized by the New Testament writers.

The Book of Acts

In the book of Acts, the gift of tongues is exercised only three times (Acts 2, 10, 19). It is further referred to in chapter 11 and may have occurred in chapter 8. But that is all Luke says about the gift in the entire book of Acts covering all those many years of the first century church. Judging from Paul's remark in I Corinthians 14:18, he spoke in tongues often during this period, but the Holy Spirit (and so, Luke) did not recognize it as meriting record.

The Pauline Epistles

No New Testament epistle ever discusses or even mentions the gift except Paul's letter to the problem church of Corinth. Even in Ephesians and Romans where Paul mentions and lists various spiritual gifts, tongues are strikingly absent.

I Corinthians 12-14

Paul discusses the issue of tongues at length in I Corinthians 12-14; indeed, all of chapters 12-13 are building to his direct discussion of tongues in chapter 14. To emphasize tongues' relative unimportance, however, Paul is careful to always mention the gift last in his lists of gifts (along with the gift of interpretation of tongues; cf. I Corinthians 12:10, 28, 29-30). It is his specific purpose in his list of gifts in I Corinthians 12:28 to show which gifts are more important than others; again, tongues are last. He further shows the relative unimportance of tongues in I Corinthians 12:29-30 by pointing out that God never intended for everyone to have the gift.

I Corinthians 14

1. The Theme

The striking thing about I Corinthians 14 is that even a casual reading of the chapter reveals that Paul is not at all emphasizing the gift of tongues, but he is actually de-emphasizing it. This is significant in light of the common argument given by tongues speakers today: "since Paul wrote so much about the subject, it must be very important for us." This argument misses the point entirely. Paul did not write I Corinthians 14 to elevate the gift of tongues but to examine and evaluate their abuse and overemphasis of it. He wrote to deal with a problem associated with the gift. Paul wrote just as much about eating meats and Christian liberty (I Corinthians 8-10), but it was not to elevate the exercise of one's liberty but to curtail it. He devoted time and space to a specific problem in a specific situation for a specific purpose; it is not up to us to then elevate their specific problem but rather to understand the principles involved and apply them to our own circumstances.

Paul did not write I Corinthians 14 to elevate the gift of tongues, and it is a complete misunderstanding of the chapter to think otherwise. Paul states at the very outset (verses 1-2) that tongues are inferior, and then he proceeds to establish that point through verse 25. The relative worthlessness of tongues is his stated theme throughout these verses. I have heard that one radio preacher has said that the entire thrust of I Corinthians 14 is, "cool it!" This is exactly right. It is amazing, then, how some could look to the Bible where it depreciates something and use that very passage to elevate it.

Paul's stated purpose in chapter 14 is to show that gifts which present clearly the Word of God, either by revelation (prophecy, verse 1) or by teaching (verse 19), are vastly superior to tongues; this is his starting point in verse 1: "desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy."

2. The Explanation

He then proceeds to explain this preference in verses 2-25 where he goes to great lengths to demonstrate the inferiority of tongues. The principles involved are 1) understanding, or intelligibility (verse 2), and 2) edification (verses 3-6). Nothing is edifying that is not understandable; this is the principle which dominates the following discussion. Tongues, he says, are not so edifying because they are not understandable (until they are interpreted); so why make such a bother for them?

3. The Illustrations

He then gives two illustrations of his point: 1) musical instruments (vv.7-9) and, 2) human language itself (vv.9-14; note the "so likewise" or "even so" of verse 9, pointing to the fact that he is illustrating his point of the

preceding verses). The point of his first illustration is that the sounds must be distinct and clear, or else they are worthless. Did you ever hear a speaker who could amaze you with his speaking ability, but when he finished you wondered what he said? This is Paul's second illustration. Such a speaker "speaks into the air" (v.9). That, Paul says, is precisely what people think when you speak in tongues. You are like a barbarian to them, a foreigner, because they cannot understand you. What edification is there in that (see v.16)?

Say your pastor got up for his pastoral prayer next Sunday morning and said, "Eulogetos ho theos kai pater tou kuriou hemon Iesou Chistou." Could you say "Amen" to that (see v.16)? Say then someone else got up and gave the interpretation -- "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." You would say, "So why didn't he just say that the first time?!" Paul's point exactly. By the nature of it, the prayer as it was given the first time was unintelligible to any who did not know the language, and so it could not edify; thus, tongues are inferior.

4. Paul's Practice

Precisely because of this, Paul says in verse 19, "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 a tongue." It is amazing how this verse is so overlooked. If words have any meaning at all, Paul says here that he never spoke in tongues in the church. He said that he simply would rather not, because it does not serve to edify as do teaching or prophesying. The clear teaching of the Word of God was preeminent, for that is what edifies. (His reference in verse 18 to his tongues must then refer to his use of them in his missionary enterprises, not as a function of worship in the local church.)

In verse 20 he tells them that this understanding requires a bit of maturity on their part. Their present thinking about the gift of tongues was childish and selfish.

5. An Example Proves the Point

Finally, in verses 23-25, he pictures a church meeting; he is still working out his point that prophecy is superior to tongues because it is much more edifying. "If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all, and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest, and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth." "What is it you want to do in your meetings?" he asks. "Do you want to show off? or do you want to see people edified?" This question answers itself. In light of this, the only solution is to do as Paul did; i.e., don't practice tongues in church (v.19). That is why he tells them to grow up in their thinking (verse 20).

Summary

It is always important that our attitudes be reflective of the inspired apostle. It is abundantly clear that Paul did not emphasize the gift of tongues, but rather he de-emphasized it. After all this, one can only wonder how little the gift of tongues was exercised in the Corinthian church!

"But," someone may object, "if we follow that, we will never have any more tongues services at church!" A very interesting and insightful observation.

Tongues Speakers: Who May Speak?

While many today are claiming that every Christian should enjoy the blessing of speaking in tongues, it is plainly evident that the New Testament never even implies any such thing. Gifts are given sovereignly, "as He

will" (I Corinthians 12:11). The church is a body, each member having different functions. If the whole body had the same gift, there would be nothing but confusion: "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?" (I Corinthians 12:17).

Paul expressly states in I Corinthians 12:29-30 that all do not speak in tongues: Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?" The questions, as they are constructed in the Greek, demand a negative answer. To understand it fully, the questions should be read "All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they?" etc. The plain statement is that God never intended for all believers to have the same gift.

Many contemporary Charismatics, seeing the force of this, simply say that there are two different kinds of tongues -- one as the gift per se, and the other is a tongue for personal, private use and intended for all believers. Evidence? Nowhere does the Bible even hint that there is a gift of tongues which is not the gift of tongues. The assertion of it is simply gratuitous.

The Purpose of Tongues

The Wrong Purpose

It is commonly believed that tongues serve the purpose of self-edification. Tongues, many think, edify the one who speaks with them, and so this is their purpose.

However, the idea that tongues are for edification of self is completely unfounded; it is precisely contrary to all that Paul was building toward in I Corinthians 12-14. The apostle went to great lengths to emphasize that spiritual gifts are for edification of others. He says in I Corinthians 12:7 that gifts are "for the common good." Paul's love song in I Corinthians 13 is so beautiful, in and of itself, that many have missed its very point: he is showing that gifts must be exercised in love, and if they are exercised in love they will be exercised for the benefit of others, not self. "Love seeketh not her own" (verse 5) but focuses on others. To exercise a gift simply for its personal benefit would be a prostitution of it.

This is precisely the burden of Paul's argument in I Corinthians 14. Gifts are for the edifying of others, the church, not self (see verses 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26). His argument in verses 1-3 is simply that tongues are inferior simply because they do not tend to edification as does prophecy.

The argument is often given that in I Corinthians 14:2 and 4 Paul states that self-edification is the purpose of tongues: "He that speaketh in a tongue speaketh not unto men but unto God, for no man understands him.... He that speaketh in a tongue edifieth himself, but he that prophesieth edifieth the church." This, however, is a complete misunderstanding of the verse; in fact, it is a precise reversal of its intended meaning. Yes, if a man gets up in church and speaks in a tongue (with no interpreter), only God understands him, so he is not speaking to men, only to God, and only the person himself is edified. But Paul is not commending that -- he is criticizing it. He says, "this is what you are doing, but it's not good. It's bad! It is a misuse of a gift. You should rather `edify the church.'" He is simply stating their practice as a prelude to his condemnation of it; he is not stating the purpose of tongues. (Paul used this very same type of argument earlier; see I Corinthians 11:21.)

This is not to say that a gift can not edify the one exercising it. A preacher or teacher is continually edified by the use of his gift, as is every other person by the use of his own gift. But it simply means that this is not the purpose of any gift; gifts were given to enable believers to minister to others. To use them for any other purpose would be a selfish prostitution of them. No man has a right to use his gift for the sheer purpose of self-edification.

Furthermore, the fact that tongues were given to be a sign to unbelievers also excludes any idea of a private, devotional use of the gift (this will be developed below).

What's more, if tongues were designed to edify, the church at Corinth would surely have been a different church. No church in the New Testament spoke in tongues more than the church at Corinth, yet no church in the New Testament was more carnal. Clearly, tongues did not edify the Corinthians.

The Stated Purposes

The New Testament is clear in its teaching that spiritual gifts are for the purpose of edifying the church. Tongues did have that effect: when they were translated, they were the functional equivalent of prophecy. That tongues were then edifying to the church (when properly used) cannot be questioned. However, in the case of tongues, edification was only secondary; they had a greater purpose.

After exhorting the Corinthian believers to have more mature thinking about the gift, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12 to establish the purpose of tongues: "In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people, and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not." (I Corinthians 14:21-22). This is the stated and intended purpose of tongues: they are for a sign, a sign to unbelievers.

This, then, is why tongues have so little purpose in the church: they are a sign to unbelievers. Their primary purpose was not ministry to believers, but to unbelievers -- to arouse their attention to the gospel and to confirm the credibility of Christianity in general. This is precisely the purpose served with the initial occupance of the gift of tongues (Pentecost, Acts 2).

Nor does Paul necessarily imply in these verses (I Corinthians 14:21-22) that tongues are a sign of judgment or a sign to the Jew only, as is often taught. He merely quotes Isaiah's statement to draw a principle from it, namely, that tongues serve as a sign to unbelievers. Jesus said that the Jews would be given no sign at all, except that of the resurrection (Matthew 16:4); and the apostle Paul himself had already told the Corinthians that the Jews ask for but receive no sign at all (I Corinthians 1:22-23). If this sign were to the Jew only, Paul would surely have stated it to this largely Gentile church in Corinth; rather, he merely says that tongues were a sign to the unbeliever whether Jew or Gentile. This is all that is required from this statement. Tongues were a sign to the unbeliever confirming the gospel and the new Christian message.

If the long ending of Mark is genuine or even historically accurate, Jesus also stated this to be the purpose of tongues; tongues are "signs" (Mark 16:17).

Although this was the stated and so the primary purpose of the gift of tongues, they also served another purpose: they demonstrated the reception of the Holy Spirit and the unity in the Body of Christ. Now be careful! This is not to say that tongues is the evidence of a Spirit Baptism subsequent to salvation. But in the book of Acts, tongues did serve to demonstrate the reception of the Spirit, i.e., salvation. By the nature of that, then, those who spoke in tongues gave evidence of their unity in the body of Christ. This is precisely what happened in Acts 2. It was the gift of tongues given to the house of Cornelius that convinced Peter that the Gentiles too had received the Spirit and so had become a part of the church as well (Acts 11:15-18, referring to the events of Acts 10:44-48). The same was demonstrated in Acts 19 with the disciples of John the Baptist and also in Acts 8 with the Samaritans, if indeed tongues did occur then. Believers of all kinds -- Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile -- received the same gift and by it gave evidence of their unity in the same body, the Body of Christ.

Summary

Tongues were never intended for personal, devotional use, nor can any verse of Scripture be found to teach such a thing. Such would be a selfish and so unjustified reason for exercising the gift. Spiritual gifts were given to edify others. The gift of tongues, specifically, was given as a sign to establish the gospel and the Christian movement. They further served to demonstrate the reception of the Holy Spirit (salvation) and so the unity of all those within the household of faith.

The Regulations

As we have seen throughout I Corinthians 14 Paul has been severely restricting the gift of tongues. Beginning with verse 26, however, he adds even more regulations. No other gift is regulated as is the gift of tongues. Paul has explained to the Corinthians the purpose of the gift, that it served as a sign to unbelievers. Now he tells them that this purpose cannot be served unless the gift is exercised in the proper way and in keeping with certain guidelines.

The Rules

Here are the rules which the apostle Paul gives for the exercise of the gift of tongues.

1. Edification (verse 26). This is the undergirding principle regulating all of the gifts in general. They must serve to edify others.
2. No more than three in a service (verse 27). "At the most by three" indicates that to have three different people speak in tongues in a given service would be rare. Entire congregations speaking, singing, or praying in tongues is specifically forbidden here.
3. One at a time (verse 27). "And that by course" restricts the tongues speaking to one man at a time; any more at once would only add to the confusion. It is confusing enough to listen to a foreign language; to listen to two or more at once would be futile and certainly could not edify. The common contemporary practice of standing up with a tongue during the preaching service is also forbidden here.
4. There must be an interpreter (verses 27-28). The giving of this regulation demands that the tongues speaker know in advance of the presence of one with the gift of interpretation. If no interpreter is present, Paul demands that the tongues speaker remain silent.
5. There must be only one interpreter (verse 27). The Greek word "one" is the number one, not a general word referring to "someone." Paul requires here that the same interpreter give the interpretations of the one, two, or at the most three tongues-messages given. No other interpreters are to speak.
6. The interpreter must be someone other than the tongues speaker (verses 27-29). Paul does not allow the one speaking in a tongue to give his own interpretation.
7. Order (verses 29-33, 40). The gifts must never be exercised in a way that tends to "confusion," for that would detract from their purpose (to edify). While formalism is not the only answer, chaos is clearly excluded. The worship service must be conducted in an orderly fashion.
8. Self-control (verse 32). "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" clearly excludes any excuse such as, "I just couldn't restrain myself; the Holy Spirit just took over!" Paul expressly requires

that a man be in control of his faculties at all times. Being "carried away" is reflective of the pagan religions, not Christian gifts (I Corinthians 12:2). This regulation precludes any so-called "slaying in the Spirit" or the like in which a person is completely out of control; when the Holy Spirit requires self-control, He will not then cause the opposite. He will not violate His own word. The objection is often given, "But what if the Holy Spirit should so overwhelm me that I lose touch with reality?" or, "I just couldn't hold it in," or the like. But the clear assumption of this verse is that the Holy Spirit will never do that. He has forbidden it, and He simply will never cause anything which is contrary to His word. Never.

9. No women allowed (verses 35-38). Paul could not be more clear in this prohibition. "Let the women keep silence in the churches." Whatever else this refers to, it at least refers to the exercise of the gifts of tongues and prophecy, for this is the context in which this command is given. Realizing, evidently, the storm of protest this command would receive, Paul follows it with a statement of authority in verses 36-38, which say, in effect, "if you don't agree with me on this score, you are conceited (verse 36), unspiritual (verse 37), and rebelliously ignorant" (verse 38). The regulation could not be more clear; to reject it is to directly defy the inspired apostle.

Other restrictions already noted but not so stated or listed in these verses also apply. They are as follows.

10. Tongues must be languages. Gibberish is completely foreign to the New Testament gift of tongues. To speak in an "ecstatic utterance" is entirely without Biblical warrant.

11. Tongues must serve the proper purposes. Personal, devotional use is not a Biblical purpose served by the gift.

12. Tongues must be public. Private use of the gift is completely without precedent and cannot serve as a sign to unbelievers.

Summary

These are the regulations for the gift of tongues for which the inspired apostle leaves no room for debate (verses 36-38). Where these rules are not followed, we may be sure that it is not the genuine gift, but a counterfeit.

Again, someone may object, "But all these restrictions could do away with the practice entirely!" And also again, that is a very insightful observation. I wonder what happened in Corinth.

The Cessation of Tongues

It raises no small protest, in some circles, to even question if tongues are for today. To say that they have ceased usually evokes a response something like this: "The church of the New Testament had it, and so then should we!" "All I want is what they had!" "There is no verse in the Bible which says we can't have them today!"

First of all, that the early church had the gift in and of itself does not require that we should have it any more than it proves that we shouldn't. Next, to have what they had may not be so good after all -- how would you like to live without a complete Canon of Scripture, without a sure Standard to measure religious claims? It would be a step backward, not forward. Furthermore, that there is no verse which precisely states the issue is debatable (as we shall see), and even if there were none, Christian theology has never rested merely on proof texts but rather on inductions drawn from the entire Bible (ever look for a single verse of Scripture to prove the Trinity?). What's more, neither is there any verse of Scripture in the Bible which says we can have the gift today.

The question will never be settled on the basis of emotional sentiment -- "I want what they had!" It can only be settled by the teachings of Scripture; this is the only Standard capable of providing the answer.

Evidence

The Bible states in several ways and provides several reasons why tongues can not be a part of the church today.

1. Paul directly stated in I Corinthians 13:8 that tongues would cease. In Paul's later epistles and in the other New Testament epistles, tongues are strikingly absent. It is significant also that for some nineteen centuries this gift of tongues was absent from the life of the church and never claimed by any legitimately Christian group (see B.B. Warfield, Counterfeit Miracles, The Banner of Truth Trust). Whatever may be unclear about this passage, the plain fact is that the inspired apostle said that they would stop. And they did. If nineteen centuries of absence is not "ceasing," it is difficult to imagine what else could qualify.
2. The Pattern of Biblical history is that miraculous gifts are given for a short time only and then withdrawn. To assume that they should have remained is an assumption impossible to support.
3. The history of the New Testament gives clear record that the miraculous gifts were dying out even before the death of the apostles themselves.
4. Revelation has ceased, and so the gift of tongues, which was a revelatory gift, has ceased as well.
5. The purpose of tongues has been served, and so they are no longer needed. They were to serve as a sign to authenticate the gospel and to demonstrate the unity within the body of Christ. With the Christian church and its unity an established fact, the signs of the same would serve no purpose.
6. The complete inferiority of the gift of tongues to prophecy (I Corinthians 14:1-3) or even teaching (verse 19) renders it unneeded. It really can accomplish nothing but what could be better and more easily accomplished by teaching.
7. The very attitude of the apostle Paul toward tongues expressed in I Corinthians 14 and his stringent restrictions placed upon the gift almost eliminate tongues entirely (e.g., verse 19). The attitude is so severe and the regulations are so many, that proper exercise of the gift is almost impossible, even if it were for today.

Objection: I Corinthians 14:39

The objection is often raised that in I Corinthians 14:39 Paul says not to forbid tongues. Does not this demand us to allow them today?

The question is a fair one, but the answer may not be as simple as the questioner may think. Paul does not command that we blindly accept all that claims to be the gift of tongues, else this would be a blanket endorsement of many cults and pagan religions as well as the obvious frauds within the church itself. He obviously means not to forbid the gift as it is legitimately given and properly exercised; this, in context (verses 26-40), is clearly Paul's point. As we have seen, for many reasons there is no legitimate gift of tongues today; so this verse would not require us to accept the claims of those who say they have it (however sincere they may be). Furthermore, even if the gift were given today, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find it exercised in

accordance with the regulations Paul gave for it (see the twelve rules listed above; I, personally, have never witnessed a tongues meeting in which all of these rules were heeded), and wherever these regulations are not heeded, this command (verse 39) could not apply.

Because of the Corinthians' abuse and misunderstanding of it, throughout the first thirty-eight verses of I Corinthians 14, Paul severely restricted the gift of tongues; indeed, he had scarcely a good word to say about the gift. Therefore, he very tactfully gave the command of verse 39, so that the Corinthians would not think that he felt the gift to be entirely wrong; it was only wrong in its violation of the principles which he laid out.

For a man to claim that the command of verse 39 applies to him, then, he must be able to demonstrate that, 1) God gives the gift of tongues today (giving answer the Biblical reasons given above), and 2) his gift is being properly exercised and is in keeping with the apostolic regulations for it. Only then could verse 39 apply to him.

Conclusion

The gift of tongues was the gift of languages, a miraculous sign gift directed toward unbelievers but emphasized very little in the New Testament. The gift was given to only a relative few in the early church and was never intended to be possessed by all believers. Even while the gift was being given, certain stringent limitations were placed upon its use. Following the foundational phase of the church with the death of the apostles, the gift was no longer given. It naturally follows, then, that the gift of the interpretation of tongues is gone as well.
