

TONGUES in the Bible

The Nature of Tongues: There are three primary views regarding the gift of tongues.

(1) It is a heavenly language that is unknown to man, an ecstatic utterance.

(2) It is the supernatural ability to speak in a foreign language that was not previously known.

(3) It is a combination of both views 1 and 2, an ecstatic utterance with language elements intermixed.

The second view, that tongues are the supernatural ability to speak in foreign languages, seems most plausible for the following reasons.

1. The gift of tongues appears first in the book of Acts (2:1-13). There the words "language" (2:6, 8) and "tongues" (2:11) are used interchangeably, and specific known languages are listed (2:9-11). In fact, the Greek word for "tongues" primarily means human languages when used in the Bible (e.g., Ro. 14:11; Phil 2:11; Rev. 10:11, 17:15, etc.)

Note: Some say that the miracle in Acts 2 was in hearing not speaking (Acts 2:6, 8). That is, what people heard was understandable though what was spoken was not actually their language. They argue that if this wasn't the case why would some people assume the speakers were drunk (Acts 2:13)? This seems to ignore the fact that it was the speakers who possessed the gift of the Spirit, not the unbelievers who heard it. Some who were present may have concluded that the disciples were drunk simply because the particular language they heard was unintelligible to them (also see Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 138 ff.). If tongues was babbling, one would wonder how the miraculous nature of the event could be perceived at all. Anyone can babble. However, to hear Galileans speaking fluently in other languages could only be interpreted as miraculous.

2. The second occurrence of tongues is in Acts 10:46 which according to Acts 11:15 was the same phenomenon that happened in Acts 2 ("the beginning" refers to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2). If the experience was the same, we can assume that the tongues spoken were also the same.

3. The third and final occurrence of tongues in Acts is found in Acts 19:6. The wording in Greek is identical to that in Acts 2 and there is no evidence to suggest that the tongues were any different.

SEE Carson, *Showing the Spirit on Acts* (138-158).

In I Corinthians 12-14 the gift again appears. The question is, "Is there ample evidence to prove that the tongues in I Corinthians are any different than the tongues in Acts?" The following suggests that there is not.

1. The exact same wording appears in both Acts and I Corinthians. Unless there is additional evidence or an explanation showing that there are two different gifts that have the same name there is no valid reason to draw that conclusion.

2. In 13:1 "tongues of men" can only be interpreted as languages of men.

3. In I Corinthians 14 the word "tongues" appears both in the singular ("a tongue" 14:2, 4, 9, 13, 14, 19, 26, 27) and plural ("tongues" - 14:5, 6, 18, 22, 23, 39). The use of both the singular and plural only makes sense if languages are in view. Babbling cannot be divided into different kinds, so there is no need for a plural. Language can be spoken of in both a generic sense, or divided into kinds of languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, French, etc.

4. Words form the content of the tongues in both Acts 2 and I Corinthians 14 (14:19). Words are associated with language as we know it.

5. In I Corinthians 14:11 Paul explains the frustration of someone who hears a foreign language, but does not understand it. The frustration comes from the fact that the language is foreign, not because it is unintelligible. Foreigners speak foreign languages; they don't babble.

6. Tongues are likened to the Assyrian language in I Corinthians 14:21.

CONCLUSION: There appears to be ample evidence showing that the gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak a foreign language, as well as evidence that the tongues in I Corinthians 12-14 are the same as those in Acts.

OBJECTIONS: There are a number of objections to this view. The major ones are listed below.

1. I Corinthians 13:1 speaks of the tongues of angels. Doesn't this indicate that tongues are a heavenly language?

REPLY: I Corinthians 13:1-3 Paul is demonstrating the futility of using spiritual gifts without love. He is speaking in hypothetical terminology, taking each gift mentioned to the limits of the imagination. In 13:2 he imagines possessing the

gift of prophecy to the extent that he knows all mysteries and has all knowledge and he imagines possessing faith (literally, all faith) to the degree that he can move mountains. In 13:3 he pictures himself as being able to give all he owns, even giving his own life for the benefit of others. In actuality none of the gifts were experienced to these degrees. No one knows all mysteries or has all knowledge except for God. No one can actually move mountains. Paul is using extreme examples to say, "Suppose I had the gift of prophecy to the extent that I possessed the totality of divine revelation, or I had the gift of faith to the extent that I could trust God for anything imaginable, or the gift of service to the extent that I gave all I had (even my own life) to others, but did not have love, what would my contribution to the body of Christ be?" His answer is, "I would be nothing." I Corinthians 13:1 is simply one more piece of the same type of reasoning. Paul is not saying that some can actually speak the tongues of angels, rather he is supposing an extreme manifestation of the gift of tongues to the degree that the individual could speak every conceivable language both in heaven and on earth, both the tongues of men and of angels. He is describing someone who has the ultimate linguistic ability which has never been realized before. Even he, if he did not have love, would contribute no more to the body of Christ than the noise of a gong or a symbol would.

This verse is not teaching that tongues is a heavenly language, rather it demonstrates it is not. Tongues of angels expresses the limits of the imagination never realized, not the reality of the gift.

2. I Corinthians 14:2 states, "For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries." If no one understands how can tongues be a known language?

REPLY: There is no need to conclude that this verse teaches that tongues is unintelligible. All this demonstrates is that the situation in the church of Corinth was different than that in the book of Acts. In Acts 2 people were present from many different countries who understood what was being said. Evidently no one in the church of Corinth knew the language being expressed by the tongues speaker. As 14:10-12 demonstrates, the problem with the understanding is in the foreignness in the language, not the unintelligibility of it. The issue to Paul in 14:2 is if only God understands what is being said there is no benefit to the church at all (cf. 14:6-9).

3. Romans 8:26 says, "the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings too deep for words." Doesn't this show that tongues are inarticulate sounds, not languages?

REPLY: This is a not tongues for the following reasons: (1) what is spoken of here is a promise for all believers, the gift of tongues is not (I Cor. 12:30) (2) the gift of tongues has a different purpose (I Cor. 14:22), (3) it has not been proven that "tongues" are "groanings," and (4) there is no mention of spiritual gifts in this context at all. This is not speaking of tongues but is a reference to the fact that when we don't know how to express our prayers or thoughts adequately, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. He fills the gap between the desires of our heart and our inability to express it.

4. In I Corinthians 13:8 tongues cannot be languages because languages won't cease.

REPLY: The gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak a foreign language never learned before. I Corinthians 13:8 is stating that this supernatural ability will cease, not language itself.

The Content of what was spoken:

1. The wonders of God (Acts 2:11)
2. Revelation from God (i.e. "mysteries" I Cor. 14:2; prophecy - Acts 2:17b - 18 tongues are explained as a fulfillment of Joel - dreams, visions, and prophecy)

The purpose of tongues: The primary purpose of tongues was for a sign. A secondary purpose was to convey direct revelation from God.

1. Tongues as a sign (I Cor. 14:22): A sign was a directional arrow or fingerpost of God used to authenticate (Ro. 4:11; II Thess. 3:17) the message of God's servants or the messengers themselves. In most cases it was miraculous (Acts 2:19, 22; 14:3; Ro. 15:19; I Cor. 1:22; II Cor. 12:12). Usually signs pointed to God but at times they pointed to an enemy of God (II Thess. 2:9). They provided evidence of God's working in crucial times in history.

In I Corinthians 14:21 Paul makes an analogy between tongues in the church and the days of Isaiah (Isa.28:11-12) when the Assyrians conquered Israel. God had sent His prophets to preach repentance but the Israelites refused to listen. In response God sent the Assyrians, a people of a strange tongue, to conquer them, become His spokesman, and gain the attention of those who had refused to listen any other way. As the Assyrian tongue was a sign of divine activity to the unbelieving Jews in Isaiah's day so tongues were a sign of divine activity to the unbelieving in the early church (I Cor. 14:22; cf. Acts 2), many who were also Jews.

Since the miraculous nature of a sign was to authenticate the message as having come from God, believers did not need signs for they were already convinced of the message's divine origin. This explains why Paul says that prophecy is more beneficial to believers (I Cor. 14:22). Prophecy results in edification, exhortation and comfort (14:3), whereas uninterpreted tongues does not. If the church gathers together and is speaking in tongues, both those who cannot understand (the ungifted) and the unbeliever will think the church is mad (I Cor. 14:23). What might appear to be a contradiction between verse 22 and 23, that is, that unbelievers will be repelled by the gift of tongues (v.23) and that tongues are a sign for believers (v.22), is reconciled when the *place* where unbelievers experienced tongues is considered. Outside of the church, in a secular setting, the gift of tongues was an effective sign to the unbelieving (Acts 2:1-13), but in the church it became an object of disdain since it was used indiscriminately and no one understood what was being said (I Cor. 14:23). Had prophecy been given priority, the message could be understood and it would result in conviction with those present (I Cor. 14:23-24).

2. *As a means to communicate direct revelation (14:2):* I Corinthians 14:2 says that the one who speaks in a tongue utters mysteries with his spirit. The term mystery, as used by Paul, refers to truths about God and His plans that were not revealed in the past but are revealed now (Eph. 3:1-13). A mystery, therefore, is direct revelation from God. Both the gift of prophecy and tongues involved the reception of direct revelation. The difference between the two gifts was that tongues provided revelation about God in a foreign language while prophecy provided revelation in the native language of the speaker.

The prophetic element of tongues is also seen in Acts 2 where Peter cited the prophet Joel and insisted that the tongues speaking event that had just transpired was evidence that the last day Joel had predicted had dawned, a day in which "your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Acts 2:17).

3. *As a means of prayer (14:14):* I Corinthians 14:14 says that the one who speaks in a tongue prays in his spirit. From this we can also see that tongues utterances were also used in prayer. Paul, however, warns against praying in a way that no one else can understand.

Directives on proper use of the gift:

1. Tongues were to be used primarily as a sign for unbelievers, not believers (I Cor. 14:21-22; cf. Acts 2:1-13)
2. Tongues were to be accompanied with interpretation (I Cor. 14:27). If an interpreter was not present the tongues speaker should remain silent. His gift should not compel him to speak on every occasion (I Cor. 14:28).

3. Tongues should be spoken in an orderly fashion (I Cor. 14:27,33;40)
4. Tongues should be limited to two, or the maximum three (I Cor. 14:27)
5. At no time should people speak simultaneously (I Cor. 14:27)
6. Women should neither prophesy nor speak in tongues in a public meeting (I Cor. 14:33-36).

The improper use of the gift:

Some claim that the gift of tongues was intended to be a prayer language for personal edification and private use and that it is a gift that should be sought after. The following are some verses used to support this view followed by a response.

1. In I Corinthians 14:18-19 Paul states that he speaks in tongues outside the church (interpreted as privately) but in the church he prefers to speak in 5 intelligible words than in a tongue.

REPLY: When Paul states he uses tongues outside the church he is simply saying that he uses the gift in the proper setting. This should not be construed that he is advocating private use of the gift. He used his gifts in ways that brought the most benefit to others. Though he spoke in tongues, he preferred not to use it in a place where it was not intelligible to those who heard him. Five words that people can understand are much more profitable to them than 10,000 words they cannot understand.

2. In I Corinthians 14:4 Paul states that tongues result in self edification (interpreted as a purpose of the gift).

REPLY: The issue in this verse is whether Paul is approving of self-edification and stating that this is the purpose of tongues or is simply stating the results of what happens when someone speaks in a tongue that is not interpreted. The latter is more likely for the following reasons.

4. Earlier Paul referred to gifts as both manifestations (something displayed outwardly - I Cor. 12:7), and services (something focused toward others - I Cor. 12:5; also I Pet. 4:10). He had also stated that spiritual gifts are given to benefit of others (I Cor. 12:7). What good would the gift of evangelism be if it was for private use? The gift of teaching if someone only taught himself? Mercy, if it was only directed toward one's own needs? In the same way, tongues as a spiritual gift is other-oriented.

B. In the context Paul's whole argument revolves around the issue of what is best for the church, not the individual (I Cor. 14:4, 5, 12, 17). Although the person who receives a message in a tongue is edified, that doesn't mean that that is the intended use of the gift. To use a gift solely for one's personal blessing is contrary to the principle of love (I Cor. 10:24).

3. In I Corinthians 14:14-17 praying in tongues is spoken about (this combined with misinterpretations of Ro. 8:28 and I Cor. 13:1 forms the basis of tongues as a heavenly prayer language).

REPLY: A tongues message could be expressed by means of prayer, but if tongues were intended for private use it would be the only gift that is not used for the benefit of others. (See number 2 above)

4. In I Corinthians 12:31 and 14:1 Paul tells believers that it is good to desire spiritual gifts and in 14:5 he desires that all would speak in tongues. (these verses are interpreted as meaning that tongues are intended for every believer and all believers should desire the gift) See notes in Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 141 ff. as to why Acts 2 shouldn't be taken as normative Christian experience.

REPLY: I Corinthians 12:31 and 14:1 could be interpreted a number of different ways.

A. It could mean that we should personally desire spiritual gifts for ourselves and God will give them to us if He so desires.

B. It could mean that we should desire spiritual gifts - not personally, but for our church to be balanced in the distribution and use of gifts. Gifts, like the gift of prophecy, should not be neglected but desired. And if other gifts are missing we might desire that they come through converts or those who come from a different assembly of believers.

Though either view is possible, view B seems to harmonize best with the previous discussion in chapters 12 and 13. Paul just informed the readers that there is no one particular gift given to all Christians (I Cor. 12:29-30). Secondly, there is an emphasis in chapter 12 showing that the gifts are distributed by God's sovereign choice, not man's determination (12:11, 18, 28). This guarantees that the body would be diversified and gives the rationale for being content with the gift we were given, as well as the reason for not looking down on those who have seemingly lesser gifts

(I Cor. 12:14-25). Considering the fact that the church in Corinth had what appears to be an over emphasis on the gift of tongues this view makes good sense.

I Corinthians 14:5

Since Paul had just stated that God doesn't give everyone the gift of tongues (I Cor. 12:29), it's unlikely that he would now desire what he has already stated as being contrary to the will of God. It seems better to assume that his desire is only hypothetical in order to stress that he was not opposed to tongues. In other words, he would be saying, "It would be great if everyone could speak in tongues, but it would be even better if everyone had the gift of prophecy, because that way the church would receive more edification."

Comments on tongues today:

1. The greatest danger with the tongues movement today isn't that people are speaking in tongues, but that there is a general lack of discernment by its adherents. Subjectivism seems to be the norm. Rarely is any effort made to determine if someone truly has the gift of tongues or interpretation of tongues because there is no standard of measure to determine this. Since many tongues spoken are said to be a heavenly language, there is no way to check if the tongues or their interpretations are valid or not. As long as what is said isn't blatantly unbiblical it is generally accepted as being from God. A major problem arises, however, when unlearned Christians aren't able to distinguish truth from error and false teachers use alleged miraculous gifts as signs to validate a false message. Experience is a poor determiner of truth.

2. Many times the tongues that are spoken today do not fit the Biblical pattern described by Paul. Although the following cannot be said to be true in every tongues speaking church, tongues are often directed toward believers, they are not used as a sign, they often go uninterpreted, they are spoken by women in the public assembly, they are used for personal edification, they are said to be a heavenly, not a human language, they are not spoken in an orderly fashion, they exceed the limits of two or three speakers, people speak simultaneously, they are said to be evidence of spirituality, they are often taught and encouraged to be sought after. Based on these things alone one should question if the gift being used today is in any way related to what the Bible describes.

3. There is no definitive statement saying when tongues will cease (I Cor. 13:8-10 has numerous interpretations), however, the book of Acts and the NT in general does reveal a decline in miraculous activity. In addition, if a sign is intended to authenticate the message and messengers of God in crucial times in history, one

would expect that once the message was established, the sign would no longer be needed. This is not to say that God would cease doing miracles. God was, is and always will be a God of miracles, but not all miracles are considered signs.

4. It should always be remembered that we do share a common love for Christ, zeal to see Him honored, and belief in those doctrines that are essential for salvation with many who speak in tongues. Although we should maintain a firm footing on what we believe the Bible teaches, we must remember that every believer in Christ is also our brother and no matter what distinctions we see in our interpretations there should be a genuine love for each other. Paul predicted a day when tongues would cease. Whether that day is past or is yet to come, we must remember that faith, hope and love are greater than any spiritual gift and love is the greatest of all (I Cor. 13:8-10, 13).

For further Study:

- ✓ Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts: A Verse-By-Verse Study of 1 Corinthians 12-14*
- ✓ D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit : A Theological Exposition of I Corinthians 12-14*
- ✓ Thiselton, *NIGTC, I Cor., 970-989, 1108-1111*