

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

27 Strange Tongues

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 14:1 – 28. See also all of chapters 12 to 14, Acts 2:1 – 13, Acts 10:44 – 48 and Acts 19:6.

Tongues And Interpretation Of Tongues

In 1 Corinthians 12 where he lists the kind of gifts the Holy Spirit distributes the apostle Paul includes “different kinds of tongues” and “the interpretation of tongues.” These are the gifts we are going to consider this evening.

Of all the gifts of the Spirit the gift of tongues must be the most controversial: probably because it has come to be the badge of the pentecostal and charismatic wings of the church — the mark of a Spirit filled believer.

Speaking in tongues is mentioned in the four passages listed above. Three of them are narratives giving accounts of the Holy Spirit coming upon three distinct groups of people for the first time. We have already thought about their significance when we talked about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit some weeks ago. The fourth, in 1 Corinthians 14 is the only didactic or teaching passage which addresses the subject and so it is on that one that we will focus our attention.

What Is It?

The gift of tongues is a supernatural, God-given, ability to speak in a language that is not the native language of the speaker and that he has never learned.

That the language spoken is a recognisable human language is clear in Acts 2 and though it is not explicitly stated in the other passages there is no reason to think that they have in mind anything other than recognisable human language.

Some disagree. They argue that the language spoken in Acts 2 was not recognisable and that a miracle was worked on the hearers so that each of them heard his own language spoken. The passage will not support that view.

Others argue that the phenomenon spoken of in 1 Corinthians 14 was different to that recorded in the book of Acts and that what Paul was speaking about there was the kind of babble that is characteristic of much modern tongues speaking. However, once again that is not the natural reading of the passage. The word translated “tongue” would have been understood by Paul’s readers as referring to a spoken language and the fact that what was said was capable of interpretation shows that it carried a coherent message.

What Is It’s Purpose?

Paul has a number of things to say about the purpose of the gift of tongues.

1. Any person who speaks in a tongue speaks to God (verse 2).
2. Any person who speaks in a tongue does it for his own edification. There can be no benefit to the church unless somebody is able to interpret what he says (verses 1 – 19).
3. Paul, quoting from Isaiah 28:11 – 12, shows that speaking in tongues was to be seen as a sign to the nation of Israel of their rejection by God. So it was primarily given as a sign to unbelievers (verses 20 – 23) but even to them it gives no edification and it will not lead them to faith (verses 23 – 25).

How Should It Be Practiced?

Paul’s primary purpose in writing to the church at Corinth was to address matters that had become controversial among them and to restore order in their church meetings where it had broken down. So, having explained these things about the gift of tongues, which presumably was being used to excess and in a disorderly way, Paul’s turns to the matter of how the gift should be exercised in church assemblies.

He does not say that the gift should not be exercised at all (verse 39) but he does strongly play down its importance. Speaking in tongues is a good thing but when the church comes together it is much more important that people speak in a way that is intelligible and fit to edify others. As with all the gifts, this one must be exercised in love and that means putting other people first not indulging yourself (verse 26).

The exercise of the gift, then, must be restricted to two or at most three people in any service (verse 27). Only one person may speak at a time. If there is no one present who can interpret what is said then it should not be said aloud (verse 28).

Is It For Today?

What is represented as being the gift of tongues today is far removed from what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14. It is not recognisable language but the kind of gibberish commonly associated with emotional arousal. No doubt such ecstatic utterances have subjective and emotional benefits for those who practice them but they also occur in the practice of other religions and are something anyone can learn to do.

But is biblical tongues-speaking something we should expect to encounter today?

In 1 Corinthians 13:8 Paul states that tongues will cease and the language he uses means that when they do they will cease permanently, but we are not told when that will happen.

However history indicates that speaking in tongues did cease with the end of or soon after the apostolic age and, with the exception of a few known heretical groups, no one practiced anything like it until the late seventeenth century. Still, to be fair, we cannot argue strongly with those pentecostals who say that it did not cease but rather declined, to be revived in the last of the last days. Never the less, that speaking in tongues ceased with the close of the apostolic age would make sense in the light of the purpose Paul ascribes to it: a sign to unfaithful Israel of their rejection.

Wrong Notions

Some ideas commonly expressed in relation to speaking in tongues are not consistent with the teaching of Scripture.

- Speaking in tongues is the mark of a person who is filled with or Baptised with the Holy Spirit.
This is an example of the doubtful practice of deriving a doctrine from narrative portions of Scripture. The three accounts we have mentioned from the book of Acts do not tell us that every believer who receives the Holy Spirit will speak in tongues; they merely tell us that those who were present on those particular occasion did. On the other hand, Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 12 that speaking in tongues is only one of many gifts given by the Spirit, that all the gifts are distributed according to God's choice and that believers differ in the gifts they are granted.
- Speaking in tongues is speaking the language of angels.
Those who hold this view present 1 Corinthians 13:1 in favour of it but there is no reason to think that this is the case and it is certainly not what the verse is teaching. In it, Paul is merely putting forward a hypothetical case to strengthen his argument.
- The person who speaks in tongues is overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit and is not in control of his own actions.
Paul's exhortation to see that all things are done in order and his appeal for restraint go contrary to this. The common charismatic practice where many people sing in the spirit or speak in tongues at the same time is the very thing Paul is saying should not happen.
- Those who speak in tongues bring a message from God to the church.
According to 1 Corinthians 14:2, those who speak in tongues speak to God. It is prophesy, teaching, or a word of knowledge that will reveal the mind of God and bring edification (verse 6).

Next Week

Next week we will look at the gift of prophecy.