

Tongues and Prophesying

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An Outline and Discussion

Tongues and prophesying are the two predicted signs of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah (28:11, 12) predicted tongues and Joel (2:28-32) predicted prophesying.

I. SUPERIORITY OF PROPHESYING TO TONGUES FOR THE CHURCH, Verses 1-5

- A. Gifts are given as a channel for love, Verse 1
 - 1. Proper to desire all the gifts to be manifested among you
 - 2. Especially desire prophesying
- B. Contrasts between tongues and prophesying, 2-5
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 - (2) Content: utters mysteries (language not understood)
 - b. Prophesying is addressed to men, 3
 - (1) For edification
 - (2) For encouragement
 - (3) For comfort
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 - b. One who prophesies edifies whole church
 - 3. As to value of gift to the church, 5
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 - (2) Tongues does not -- unless interpreted

II. NECESSITY FOR INTERPRETATION OF TONGUES IN CHURCH, 6-19

- A. Only four ministries can benefit the whole church,
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 - 2. Knowledge -- Inspired use of known facts
 - 3. Prophesying -- Expounding of the relationships of truth
 - 4. Teaching -- Communicating truth in clarity
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 - 2. Each must wait his turn
 - 3. At least one must interpret
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b. Speak to himself and to God (Way to edify himself and yet keep silent)

C. The specific rules for prophesying, 29-33

1. Let two or three prophesy, 29
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3. If a revelation be given to a second prophet, let the first keep silent (no domination of meeting by one), 30
4. Take turns, one by one, 31
 - a. So all may learn and be encouraged
 - b. Possible, because each prophet can control his own spirit
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3. To resist this teaching is ignorance, so leave such to his ignorance

V. SUMMARY OF TEACHING ON TONGUES AND PROPHECYING, 39-40

- A. Be eager to prophesy
- B. Do not forbid utterance in tongues
- C. Do everything decently and in order

CONCLUSIONS FROM THIS STUDY

1. The only announced purpose of tongues is to be a sign to unbelievers. It must be used for this purpose.
2. When it is used thus, it also edifies the one who speaks, but that must not be made the end purpose of tongues.
3. Tongues was never intended for the edifying of the church, and can only do so when it is interpreted.

4. In no case is there any evidence for the use of tongues in private-it is a public gift.
5. Tongues are an initial gift, given at the beginning of the church because of its Jewish origin (Isaiah).
6. Prophesying is a continuing gift, to be present throughout the whole church age (Joel).
7. Yet a sovereign Spirit is free to do as he will in giving these gifts.

It struck me as I was preparing this study that tongues and prophesying are the two predicted signs of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, which is always the root of all New Testament doctrine, there are two passages which deal with the coming of the Holy Spirit. One is in Isaiah 28 and the other, in Joel 2, is the famous prediction quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost. Isaiah predicts tongues; Joel predicts prophecy. These two signs were an indication of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is recorded in Acts 19 that when the disciples of John the Baptist trusted Christ, as a result of Paul's ministry to them, they spoke with tongues and prophesied. So there again both gifts were in evidence as they were on the day of Pentecost when the disciples spoke with tongues and Peter prophesied.

Let's go through this chapter now, beginning with the first five verses.

Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless some one interprets, so that the church may be edified. {1 Cor 14:1-5 RSV}

I have supplied an outline of the chapter to facilitate our study. Throughout this outline, you will notice, I have consistently used the noun "prophesying" instead of "prophecy," found in the Revised Standard Version, in order to avoid confusion, because "prophecy" these days is usually taken in the narrow sense of "prediction," of predicting the future. But its root meaning is broader. It comes from two Greek words: *pro* and *phaino*. *Pro* means "before," and *phaino* means "cause to shine." The term is used in relation to the Word of God. So a "prophet," essentially, is one who stands before the Word of God and causes it to shine.

Peter uses the term this way. He says, "We have a more sure word of prophecy which shines as a light in a dark place," {2 Pet 1:19 KJV}. A prophet is one who takes the message of God and illuminates it, makes it shine out so that it attracts and motivates people. That is the ministry of prophesying.

In II. A. 3. of the outline. I have given the definition: "Prophesying -- Expounding of the relationships of truth." It is really expository preaching, essentially, which is the clearest use of prophesying in the church today.

In the outline I have entitled the first five verses, "I. Superiority of Prophesying to Tongues for the Church." As we will see, Paul is dealing throughout this whole chapter with the church gathered together as an assembly. This is very clear because he consistently refers to them this way, and addresses them collectively. For example, when he says, "Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy," the "you" is plural, i.e., "you-all." So he is not referring to each individual among them but, rather, desires that the gift be manifested in their midst.

His first admonition to them is that these spiritual gifts are given as a channel for love. He has just written extensively about love. In Chapter 12 he has listed the spiritual gifts. Then he moves to love in Chapter 13. Now he moves right back, tying the two together. He says, "Make love your aim, but earnestly desire the

spiritual gifts." There is a relationship between those two, and it is in the exercising of gifts that you have a channel for the flow of love. Love is not a spiritual gift. It is a part of the character of Christ, a fruit of the Spirit. So here is a helpful relationship between these two categories -- the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit. Paul says, "It is proper to desire that all the gifts be manifest among you, but especially desire prophesying." Clearly he is emphasizing, right from the very start, the superiority of prophesying over tongues for the church. The best gift to be exercised in church is prophesying.

Now he moves to contrast these two gifts. Three elements of contrast are given to us:

- As to those being addressed by each gift,
- As to those who are edified by each gift, and
- As to the value of the gifts to the church.

In the first Paul says that tongues are addressed to God while prophesying is addressed to man. That is a very helpful identifying feature of the gift of tongues. It is always addressed to God. "He who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men," he points out, "but to God." It is not intended to be used as a means of preaching the gospel, or of conveying messages to individuals present, or of predicting the future. It is to be used as praise and thanksgiving and prayer addressed to God. Its origin is by the Spirit. The speaker speaks mysteries either "in the Spirit" or "by the Spirit" -- the Greek can be translated either way. Its content is mystery, not necessarily in the nature of what is said so much as in the fact that it is uttered in a language which is not understood. Praise, thanksgiving, and prayer are not mysterious as to content unless they are uttered in a language that is not understood. So this is what Paul means by "mysteries" here. But he says that prophesying, on the other hand, is addressed to men. And it has a threefold effect: it is

- For edification,
- For encouragement, and
- For comfort.

Therefore, it obviously would be superior to tongues in the church.

As to those who are edified, Paul says that the speaker in tongues edifies himself; there is some effect upon the person who does this. I will say more about that later, but for the moment we can recognize the distinction that the speaker in tongues edifies only himself while the one who prophesies edifies the whole church. Therefore, obviously, prophesying is the better gift to exercise in the church.

Then as to the value of gift in the church he says that tongues are desirable, but prophesying much more so. He who prophesies is greater as far as the church is concerned, is of greater value to them, than he who speaks in tongues. Tongues does not edify the church unless it is interpreted.

That forms the thesis for the next argument Paul presents; Verses 6-19:

Now brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how shall I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will any one know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? So with yourselves; if you in a tongue utter speech that is not intelligible, how will any one know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning; but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves; since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Therefore, he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how can any one in the position of an outsider say the "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not

know what you are saying? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all, nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. {1 Cor 14:6-19 RSV}

This whole section I have entitled, "II. Necessity for Interpretation of Tongues in Church."

Paul is dealing with the fact that if the gift of tongues is exercised in church it must be interpreted. He spends a lot of time on this and underscores it again and again. So it is obvious that he is very concerned about it. The reason for that is that there are only four ministries which can benefit the whole church. In Verse 6 he says, "Now brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how shall I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?" So tongues must fall within one of those four categories in some way or it can't benefit the church.

I have tried to define the categories in the outline:

1. Revelation is the unfolding of truth which is undiscoverable by man. That is the stricter sense of the word. It is also used in a wider sense to refer to the whole revelation of God, the whole Bible for instance. But in its stricter sense it is truth which man could never know unless God revealed it.
2. Knowledge, however, is truth which man knows but which is used in an inspired way so that it is guaranteed to be accurate in its usage.
3. Prophesying is the expounding of the relationships of truth so that the great patterns and principles which are revealed in Scripture about God and man and life are made apparent.
4. Teaching is instruction, the communicating of truth with clarity.

Tongues therefore would usually fall under the category of knowledge -- the inspired use of known facts. That is what praise and prayer would be -- thanking God for things which men have known about him and praising him for them. But only when it is interpreted can it benefit the church.

Paul emphasizes the need for interpretation by two illustrations. One is taken from the realm of music and the other from the realm of language:

The flute, the harp (*kithara* in the Greek, from which we get our English word "guitar"), and the bugle must utter distinguishable notes -- otherwise no one will enjoy or respond. There has to be some meaning. So it is with tongues: they must be interpreted or they are not useful to the church.

Similarly, no human language is a mere babble, a mere torrent of syllables. It must have meaning. But if it is not understood because no one knows that language, then the effect is the same as though it were just random sounds. So tongues must be interpreted in order to be of use to the church, to edify the church. Thus he proves his point.

Because tongues must be interpreted in order to be edifying, Paul says that he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. This, by the way, is the only instance I know of which suggests that there is the right to pray for a specific spiritual gift. But it is linked here with this gift of tongues, since the two -- tongues and interpretation -- are indispensable one to another. So he apparently does encourage individuals who speak in tongues by the Holy Spirit also to ask God to supply the power to interpret. And he gives the reason for this. He says, "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful." That is very revealing. He is saying that the spirit of a man deep within him is praying in this language of tongues but the man's own mind does not understand what he is saying. His conscious mind does not grasp what his own spirit is doing in praising God. He feels something deep within -- this is where the personal edifying comes in, in some unconscious sense of release -- but he himself does not understand what he says. So his conclusion is, "What am I to do, then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also." That is, to speak in tongues is to pray and sing with the spirit, but to sing and pray with the mind means to interpret it. So here again he is insisting that tongues be interpreted. For the ultimate benefit of the individual speaking in tongues, Paul says, it is best to pray for the power to interpret because otherwise he himself does not understand what he has said.

Another reason that interpretation alone provides edification for the church is that it is necessary in order to permit others to participate in the praise. You cannot even say "Amen" unless you know what somebody is saying. And, finally, even though Paul himself is able to speak in tongues beyond them all -- and I think he did this in the synagogues where his exercise of the gift would fulfill the purpose for which it was intended -- nevertheless he infinitely prefers that prophesying be used in church. "I would rather speak five words with my mind (prophesying), than ten thousand words in a tongue."

That brings us, then, to the heart of the issue, "III. The Purpose of Tongues and Prophesying," Verses 20-25:

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature. In the law it is written, "By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord. Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophesy is not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. {1 Cor 14:20-25 RSV}

Notice how carefully he approaches this issue. He begins with an admonition to mature consideration at this point. He says, "With regard to evil, be babes, but in thinking be mature. That is, don't get involved with evil things -- don't even investigate them. You can learn the nature of evil from Scripture. You don't need personal investigation into it. It will defile you if you attempt it. So be innocent with regard to evil. But when it comes to gifts and to thinking, that which requires judgment and evaluation, then go right into it and investigate. Thus he lays the groundwork for us to go back and consider the reasons why these gifts are given and the purposes behind them. He encourages us to investigate carefully. Then, as an apostle, he moves immediately to the purpose of tongues. And, as the apostles always did, he goes back to the Old Testament base. Isaiah had predicted that these tongues would be given and Paul quotes him:

"By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." {1 Cor 14:21b RSV}

Here is an example of the frequent phenomenon in the Bible which we call "double fulfillment." Isaiah predicted this, and its immediate fulfillment was in the Chaldean invasion of Israel, when the Babylonians overran and captured the country. This was a picture to the Israelites, a sign to them that at that time God was removing them from their favored position and allowing them to be carried into captivity in Babylon. But now it has a double fulfillment in that the apostle here cites it as a sign to Israel again. He says that, when they hear strange tongues and foreign languages spoken within the land, it is a sign that God again is removing them from their privileged position, and, in this case, that the gospel is to go out to the Gentile world. "This people" always refers, of course, to the Jews. Therefore the gift is linked closely with the nation Israel.

Yet the effect of the tongues, according to the prediction, would be only to highlight their unbelief. It did not say they would be converted because they heard tongues, only that they would be exposed in their unbelief. "Even then they will not hear me," the Lord said. So tongues becomes a sign of the judgment of God, of the time when he cuts Israel off and turns to the Gentiles, but it has no effect upon Israel, the unbelievers.

Paul agrees with this prediction. He says, "Thus [in this same way], tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers." They are not intended for believers. In other words, tongues is not for the church. It is not basically intended to be exercised in church. This is why the apostle is so careful that, if it is exercised in church (presumably originated by the Holy Spirit), at least it be interpreted so it would have some edifying effect. At least people could join in with an "Amen" to the praise which was being given. Otherwise it is just a confusing issue interjected into the midst of the congregation, because it is really not intended for them at all. It is a sign to unbelievers to confirm their unbelief, to demonstrate and to highlight it. On the three other occasions in Acts when the gift of tongues occurs you always find unbelieving Jews present, especially those who are unbelieving concerning the fact that God is going to move toward the Gentiles on the same basis as the Jews. This is always the case, for that is the purpose of tongues.

Now Paul shows what the effect of unregulated tongues is in the church. He says, "If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?" This verse has been misunderstood by many people because they have taken it out of its context. In context it is very clear. He is talking not just about the mere use of tongues, which was intended as a sign to unbelievers, but about the unregulated use of tongues in the church and the failure to interpret, etc. The effect of tongues indulged without regulation or interpretation is the rejection of Christians as mad by any unbelievers who may be present. "If all speak with tongues," Paul says, "and there is no interpretation, why, everybody will think you're nuts, and rightly so!"

I have seen this happen. I was in a meeting once where everybody was praying in tongues, and it was just babble, confusion. Some people came in off the street, and they went back out twirling their index fingers alongside their heads!

Then Paul moves to the purpose and effect of prophesying. Prophesying, he says, is designed to edify believers. That is its purpose and that is why it was given. Therefore it is to be used in the church. But it also has a beneficial effect upon any unbeliever who observes it in the normal church service because it is truth, and it is truth put in clear language. Therefore it has a three-fold effect:

1. It convicts or awakens him,
2. It calls him to account, forces some self-evaluation on his part, and
3. It discloses to him the secrets of his own heart.

So it unveils the reality of where he is spiritually.

We have seen this happen so many times at Peninsula Bible Church. People come in and, sitting under the teaching of the Word of God to believers, are convicted and awakened and alarmed, and they come to the Lord. Hundreds of conversions have come about in this way.

So prophesying produces an acknowledgment of divine activity amid human rationality. There is nothing disorderly about that, because it is conducted in a language which everyone understands.

This section deals with, "IV. Prescribed Practice of Tongues and Prophesying in Church:"

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. What? Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?

If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized. {1 Cor 14:26-38 RSV}

Notice the logical development of the chapter. In Paul's careful way he gives the teaching first and then comes to the application and practice. He starts with the basic rules for all gifts. He says that when you come together all these gifts are to be exercised: a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation. All the gifts are intended for use when you come together, and all must result in edification. That is basic. There is no reason for any gift which does not fit those two qualifications.

Then he comes to the specific rules for tongues, and these are very clear. Only two, or at the most three, are to speak. Otherwise it can easily be turned into a tongues meeting, and this he doesn't want because then there is no place for prophesying, which is what is really edifying. Each speaker must wait his turn, and at least one must interpret. Again he underscores the absolute necessity that tongues, if it is exercised at all, be edifying.

I have drawn several conclusions from this study:

1. First, the only announced purpose of tongues is to be a sign to unbelievers. That was its predicted purpose and that was its stated fulfillment by the apostle. That is what it was in every case in which it is exercised in the New Testament. Therefore it must be used for that purpose. That is what it is given for.
2. Second, when it is used for that purpose it also edifies the one who speaks. But the edifying of the one who speaks must not be made the end purpose for the use of tongues. In other words, it is not given to edify the one who speaks. It is given to be a sign to unbelievers, though, in the process of being that, it edifies the one who uses it.

Similarly, when I preach I am not doing so for my own benefit. Yet I do benefit from it. I am blessed by my own preaching, but that is not the purpose for which I preach. It would be wrong, and a misuse of the gift, for me to preach for my own benefit.

3. Third, tongues was never intended for the edifying of the church and it can do so to its limited extent only when it is interpreted.
4. Fourth, in no case is there any evidence for the use of tongues in private. It is a public gift by virtue of its purpose as a sign for unbelievers.
5. Therefore, in view of the conclusion above, I have come to the further conclusion that, fifth, tongues are an initial gift, given at the beginning of the church because of its Jewish origin. They were to help the church break away from the hold of Jewish tradition. That, essentially, is what Isaiah predicted.
6. On the other hand, sixth, prophesying is a continuing gift which is to be present throughout the whole church age. That is what Joel predicted. He even put it within parentheses: the pouring out of the Spirit at the beginning, and the darkening of the sun and the turning of the moon to blood at the end.
7. And yet, finally, a sovereign Spirit is free to do as he will in giving these gifts. So, if, today, because of an unusual combination of circumstances, he wishes to exhibit the biblical gift of tongues, he can do it.

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