



Conducted by
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“In our Bible study we could not agree on the reasons behind “speaking in tongues” and would appreciate your comments. Tongues were apparently a ‘sign to unbelievers’ but what kind of a sign? In Acts 2 the tongues apparently referred to known languages but in 1 Cor. seem to refer to ecstatic outbursts. In Ch.14 v.1 we are told that he that speaks in tongues edifies only himself and speaks not to men but to God — what was the point? Also it appears that he who spoke in tongues could also interpret (v.5,13). What was the point and purpose of all this? Why should they not speak in known languages or in words that all could understand?”

This question is, in reality, five questions. It is concerned with a topic which has engendered a certain amount of confusion down the ages, and one which is still debated and discussed among Christians without, seemingly, any concrete resolution. It is a topic which, because of its so-called complexity, many writers and preachers choose to ignore. However, I believe there *are* some guidelines which can be explored with profit, and these we shall look at in some detail.

The Promised Advent of the Holy Spirit

Luke records that the resurrected Lord, after He had opened the eyes and understanding of the disciples about the Scriptures concerning Himself, said unto them, “And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:44-49). In Acts of Apostles, Luke records that Jesus reminds the disciples again of His promise, while they stand together on the mount called Olivet. He says, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:5-8).

What was the purpose of the promise, and what effect did the realisation of it have? Luke 24 makes it clear that the purpose was ‘that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in the name of Jesus’, and that the disciples ‘should witness to Him’. This should commence in Jerusalem. In short, the Gospel of Salvation in

Christ should be proclaimed to the people, and as the Christ had been witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets in the Old Dispensation (Rom. 3:21), so He should be witnessed to in the new Dispensation by His Apostles. Furthermore, we must not be unmindful of the Divine arrangement. Luke records in Acts 4 the prayer of the company of Christians, "The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou has annointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done" (Acts 4:26-28). So the stage was set, and the Apostles, endued with the power of the Holy Spirit, were upon it. The announcement of Grace was to be made to the world. This, I believe, was the paramount purpose of all that was to ensue.

The effect was dramatic. The Apostles began to speak, and very soon the word spread that a supernatural phenomenon was taking place. The multitude came together (Acts 2:5-6) and were astonished to hear, in their several languages, the wonderful works of God. But not all. To those who did not know the tongue, it sounded like the inane babbling of drunken and besotted men. Nevertheless, on that day three thousand souls heard and believed (they understood) the message, and the Church of the Lord began. We cannot but conclude that the events were the fulfilment of the predetermined plan of God, for the Apostles *did not of themselves* speak the tongues, but they spake 'as the Holy Spirit gave them utterance' (Acts 2:14), and John teaches us that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit *agree* in one. Therefore, let those today who claim the ecstasy of the operation of the Holy Spirit ponder this sober and unmistakable fact; the purpose of Pentecost was not to elevate the *speaker*, but to announce the wonderful Grace of God through the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

The Corinthian Experience

There is little doubt that the post-Pentecostal period was one of extreme euphoria so far as Christians were concerned. The Holy Spirit was abroad. He was dispensing a diversity of gifts. Christians confidently expected that the return of the Lord was imminent. It was only to be expected that Apostolic warnings would have to be issued against undesirable excesses of attitude and behaviour. The Corinthian community had its full quota of such problems, and Paul had to deal with them. One of the serious problems which threatened the orderliness of the Church was the problem of the gift of tongues.

The teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 furnishes us with the main thrust of Paul's argument. The first points which we have to acknowledge are the recorded *facts*. Paul says, "Follow after love, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophecy" (14:1). Love is *first*, and is a *grace* which is far superior to any *gift* (see Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 13). Love, says the Apostle, will abide; gifts will cease. A person may have a gift, and yet can be unloving and unloved. Such a one *has not* the grace of God. But true exegesis must acknowledge the exhortation of Paul to the Corinthian Christians, "desire spiritual gifts"; having said that, Paul lays down the principle that one gift is preferable to another, "rather that ye may prophecy". So speaking in an unknown tongue was a spiritual gift, but for the edification of the Church it was *not as good a gift* as prophecy. These two spiritual gifts need some explanation in the context of the teaching.

We sometimes teach that tongues used at Pentecost were foreign languages, and that those spoken about in 1 Cor. 14 were 'ecstatic babblings', but I wonder if this was really the case? Paul says, "Yet 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 an unknown tongue" (1 Cor. 14:19). Now we know that the voice

causes sounds, but when we *articulate*, the sounds are joined together to form speech and this is accomplished by the tongue and the lips. When Paul speaks about "ten thousand *words* in an unknown tongue", he is surely speaking about *articulated* sounds; my own opinion about the phrase 'unknown tongue' would be that this refers to a language *unknown to the people present at the time*. We must not forget that the situation in the Corinthian Church as regards the knowledge of language would be vastly different to the cosmopolitan nature of the multitude at Pentecost. Therefore, if what I believe is true, then if a Corinthian Christian with the gift of an unknown tongue had to edify the Church, the situation would need another Corinthian Christian to have the gift of interpretation so that all the Church could benefit. If the one with the gift of unknown tongue were to do his own interpreting, then the argument of Paul seems to be that this would be tantamount to the gift of prophecy, so why not prophecy in the first place?

We need to understand what prophecy is in the context. Paul says, "But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort" (14:3). We notice here that there is not a suggestion of *prediction*. Again, "If all prophecy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all" (14:24). So we can conclude, I believe rightly that prophecy in this context was the power to expound the Word of God; to know the truth, and to be able to impart it to others.

I believe the Apostle sums up these two gifts in 14:11, "therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me". We must understand that Paul is writing to Greeks, and to the Greek the non-Greek was a barbarian. In the context of this letter this could only have been meaningful when applied to the speech uttered.

The 'Signs'

"Wherefore, tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not" (14:22). Throughout his ministry, Jesus was asked to give signs; Matthew records, "Then certain of the scribes and Pharisees answered saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee" (Matt. 12:38). What they were asking for, of course was, an indication of Divine authority and power. There were many signs evident of Divine power and love but these were not the signs the Jews sought; they wanted signs of a Messianic Kingdom, with temporal power, and with they themselves as the chosen ones. Such cravings evoked Jesus to describe them as "a wicked and an adulterous generation," and He referred them to the sign of the prophet Jonas.

There is evidence that the Apostles met the same demands. Paul says, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor.1:22, 23 R.S.V.). With such requirements, the Gospel of Christ was indeed a stumbling block to the Jews.

There is an interesting prophecy in Isaiah chapter 28. After recounting the degraded position of the priests and teachers of Israel he says, "For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to his people" (Isa. 28:11). This prophecy is freely quoted by Paul in 1 Cor.14:21 and its import is unmistakable. What God accomplished in Christ, His resurrection and ascension, the dispensing of gifts by the Holy Spirit, the supernatural acts of the Apostolic ministry, the operation of the gifts of tongues and prophesying, all these were confirmatory signs of what he had done in Christ and what He was doing through the operation of the Holy Spirit, but the tragedy was, and is, that the Jews would not accept this. Incidentally, there is no scriptural record of speaking in tongues and prophesying after the circumstances recorded in Acts 19:1-20 (The reader will understand, of course, that the time span of events as recorded in Acts of Apostles would embrace the periods of time when the

operation of the Holy Spirit was evident in the Churches, such as the Corinthian Church, for example).

Conclusion

Let us not delude ourselves. Christianity, and our relationship to God will always evoke deep emotional feelings which are difficult to put into words. Truth and error exist side by side. It is true today that Christians will have deep emotional feelings towards their God and His Christ; it is error to say that this will result in the gift of speaking with tongues as in the early Church. Those gifts have ceased, but the love of God is still shed abroad in the hearts of men through the Gospel. Love will always remain; gifts were only to confirm the Divine Will and power. What more does the Church need than the Gospel, and the gracious in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives?