

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT SERIES – TONGUES

“Is the Gift of Tongues for Today? – Part II” (Acts 8:5-17; 10:44-48; 11:15-17)

We have learnt so far that:

- (1) The baptism by the Holy Spirit happens to every believer at the moment of conversion (1 Cor. 12:13).
- (2) The baptismal filling “*with the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 1:5) and the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18) are synonymous terms for the same event as a witness to Jesus Christ. This is a repeatable experience for every Christian (cf. Acts 4:8, 31; 13:9; Eph. 4:19).
- (3) The tongues of the Day of Pentecost were real, known, unlearned, verifiable, translatable languages only (Acts 2:6, 8). There was no private prayer language or ecstatic utterances associated with the gift of tongues in Acts 2. Any so-called modern gift of tongues that does not parallel Acts 2 is a counterfeit, unbiblical gift of tongues. People may call themselves “Pentecostal tongues speakers” but that does not mean they are!
- (4) The Bible alone must resolve the validity of tongues speaking today. The question is not did I have an experience, but did I have a biblical experience?

PURPOSE OF TONGUES

The Bible makes clear that the gift of tongues was a promised sign,

(1) The Lord Jesus Christ promised, “*And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues*” (Mark 16:7). These gifts were a sovereign act of God, “*God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will?*” (Heb. 2:4). Peter explained that this preaching or prophesying on the Day of Pentecost with known languages was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy from the OT, “*But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams?*” (Acts 2:16-17).

(2) Paul, quoting Isaiah 28:11-12, gives further revelation about 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*” (1 Cor. 14:21-22). This was a fulfillment of God’s promised judgement on disobedient Israel that He would send people, “*whose tongue thou shalt not understand.*” (Deut. 28:49) Alan Cairns points out, “When God reduces His people to hearing His message in a language they don’t understand it is not spiritual progress, it is judgment on their sin.” So, tongues were also a sign to unbelieving Israel that they were under God’s judgment for their rejection of Christ. A true Jew always believed that Hebrew was the language to praise Jehovah. It is interesting in Acts 2 that seemingly all the languages spoken by a tongues-speaker were Gentile languages, which was a blow to the Jews’ pride to hear the Gentiles praising Jehovah.

So on the Day of Pentecost when God gave the gift of tongues, He was verifying that the disciples as His witnesses and that the “*last days*” had begun. He was also signifying His judgment on the Jews for their rejection of the Messiah. This purpose was evangelistic rather than a devotional one. No other purpose is mentioned. Tongues were not a private prayer language for personal edification or ecstatic utterances etc.

TONGUES & ACTS 8, 10, 19

On the Day of Pentecost, the tongues were present to fulfill the promises of the OT and for a witness to the unbelieving Jews. There is no indication that the same people who spoke in tongues in Acts 2 did so again. They may have done but there is no indication anywhere that this occurred. In fact, in Acts 4:29-31 there was no tongues recorded when they experienced another baptismal filling of the Spirit.

(1) ACTS 8 – SAMARITAN PENTECOST

The Lord Jesus Christ had made clear that His Jewish disciples were commissioned to go into the entire world and preach the Gospel. Indeed in Acts 1:8 after they received the corporate outpouring of the power of the Holy Spirit they were commanded to be witnesses, “*unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*” The first real steps to non-Jewish evangelism began in Acts 8.

An amazing revival broke out in the city of Samaria with many converted, “*But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*” (Acts 8:12) There had been a historic bitter division between Jews and Samaritans for centuries (John 4). So this was a delicate yet exciting moment in church history. The apostles reacted cautiously but also positively to this news,

Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost. (Acts 8:14-17)

Verses 13-14 makes it clear these people were true believers and they must have had been baptized by the Spirit into the Body of Christ (with the fullness of the Spirit that all believers have in salvation) and immediately indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9). They were not “half-saved” up to this point, as there is no such doctrinal concept in a crisis new birth! They could not have believed the gospel, had there not been the quickening operation of the Holy Spirit.

SO WHAT WAS HAPPENING HERE?

These Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit before the apostles laid hands on them or they could not be believers. However, the Holy Spirit had not come upon them in the infilling corporate power that was witnessed on the believers on the Day of Pentecost. Without this,

there would have been a distinction between them and the believing Jews from the Jerusalem church who had experienced this Pentecostal power. This may have resulted in them being seen as “second class” believers if the situation had continued in such a state.

So when the apostles laid hands on them, they became partakers of the same experience of a corporate filling of the Holy Spirit. Although there is no mention of speaking in tongues here, it may well be that they were present after the apostles laid their hands on them (Simon clearly witnessed some change or sign accompanying this as he requested the power from the apostles in v18). John Gill explains in his comments on verse 16 the nature of this reception of the Holy Ghost,

They had received Him as a spirit of illumination and sanctification, and as, a spirit of conversion and faith; they had been regenerated, enlightened, and sanctified by Him; and were converted by Him, and brought to believe in Christ, and live, by faith upon Him; they were baptized believers, and no more; as yet, none of them had gifts qualifying them for the ministry; and still less could any of them speak with tongues, or prophesy, or work miracles; the Holy Ghost had not yet descended on them for such purposes.

God could have filled these Samaritan saints with power for service immediately they believed without any external physical manifestations or the laying on of hands of the Apostles (cf. Acts 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9). Probably, God withheld this baptismal filling until the Apostles laid hands on them to demonstrate the unity of the new Church and included some visible signs to affirm it to the Jewish believers and Jewish unbelievers. We can see the wisdom of God in this balance, as the Apostles would now have to accept these Samaritans and the previously hostile Samaritans would have to submit to the authority of Jewish Apostles from Jerusalem. God helped to seal the unity of the Church before the Apostles by pouring out His Spirit in a baptismal filling for empowerment for service as He did on the converted Apostles and Jewish believers in Acts 2.

(2) ACTS 10 – GENTILE PENTECOST

We see a similar situation in Acts 10. If the Jews historically disliked the half-breed Samaritans, it is fair to say that they regarded the Gentiles as untouchables. Some Jews taught that God only created the Gentiles as fuel for hell. Indeed, if a Jewish man married a Gentile his family would hold a funeral for him!

Acts 10 records the historical account of the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles. Simeon had sung of the salvation hope of the Gentiles as part of the blessing of the Lord’s incarnation (Luke 2:32). This was the clear mandate of Jesus Christ to the disciples (Matt. 28:18-20). Peter was led by God to preach the gospel to a group of Gentiles. The gospel Peter preached to the Gentiles was exactly the same message, which he preached to the unsaved Jews in Acts 2. The results were also the same. In nothing did these Gentiles come short of that which had been bestowed at Pentecost.

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God.

Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? (Acts 10:44-47)

Cornelius and his company received the baptism by the Holy Ghost (conversion) and a corporate infilling of the Holy Ghost direct from on high in a singular sovereign act of God without the laying on of apostolic hands. This special manifestation of tongues was entirely in keeping with the purpose – as a sign that:

- (1) The Holy Spirit was poured out, “*upon all flesh*” (Acts 2:16-17) including the Gentiles;
- (2) That these are Christ’s witnesses (Mark 16:7); and
- (3) As a judgment to unbelieving Jews (1 Cor. 14:21-22; Isa. 28:11). There was no greater humiliation for unbelieving Jews than to see Gentiles and Samaritans speak in tongues “*and magnify God*” under the power of the Holy Spirit.

John MacArthur makes a good point to note in light of the modern charismatic movement,

Nowhere in the New Testament is speaking in tongues ever recorded as happening with one individual, as is the case in most modern Pentecostal experiences. On the three occasions in the book of Acts where tongues are mentioned, they are spoken by a group of people (Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6). Speaking in tongues was a phenomenon that occurred corporately to help build the church. They never occurred in the book of Acts in the experience of any one individual. Therefore, they had a place as a sign to the Jews of the equality of other groups in the unity of the church.

These tongues were not ecstatic utterances but proper languages like as in Acts 2 as they were understood by the Jews listening to “*magnify God.*” Indeed to reinforce this parallel experience, Luke records in Acts 2:4 that they did “*speak*” (from the Greek verb *laleo*) in “*tongues*” (from the Greek noun *glossa*) and he uses the exact same terms in Acts 10:46 and 19:6. The Jews cognition of this direct parallel with what on in Acts 2 enabled them to attest to the salvation of these Gentiles in chapter 11,

And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? (Acts 11:15-17)

It should be noted that Peter links the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on these Gentiles to the promise of Acts 1:5, “*Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.*” Clearly, this was a promise that included not just those on the Day of Pentecost but also subsequent Gentile believers years later. He also points out to the Jewish believers that the tongues gift in Acts 10 was an identical one to the Acts 2 one, “*Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us....*”

The fact that God poured out His Spirit on these Gentiles contradicts Jewish prejudice that a holy God would not pour out his Holy Spirit on unclean Gentiles, unless they became ritually pure Jews. This brought the Gentiles into parallel privileges and positions of not just the

Jews, but also the Apostles themselves. So without being circumcised or engaging in the rituals of Judaism, these Gentiles were immediately accepted as full members of the international, multi-racial church of Jesus Christ. As FF Bruce comments, "The event was not so much a second Pentecost, standing alongside the first, as the participation of Gentile believers in the experience of the first Pentecost."

(3) ACTS 19 – EPHESUS PENTECOST

The Apostle Paul is on his third missionary tour. This final journey began in Acts 18:23 around AD 54 and ends when Paul went to Jerusalem in Acts 21:17 around AD 58. These events are at least twenty years after the Day of Pentecost. At Ephesus he meets some disciples of John.

And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. (Acts 19:1-6)

There is debate over whether these men were truly disciples. Some say John only taught a baptism of repentance over sin in a ritualistic fashion and they were mere followers of his ethical teachings who never embraced his command to follow Jesus Christ. However, John was the one who pointed his disciples to the Lamb of God and even sent his disciples to Christ. Therefore, true baptized disciples of John's teachings were believers saved by grace and as Paul mentioned the phrase "*since ye believed*" so the presumption must be they probably were. Hence they were not Old Testament saints who needed to be brought to Christ, but converts who needed to have a more perfected knowledge of Him. Maybe we could compare them to believers converted e.g. in a prison in China who had never been taught God's Word until later when they were released. If so, then this receiving of the Holy Ghost when Paul laid hands on them was simply the infilling of the Spirit parallel to the Day of Pentecost.

The reply of John's disciples, "*We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost*" would likely indicate that they were ignorant of the Pentecostal promises of Acts 1:5 and Acts 1:8. One writer put it,

But since they were disciples of John the Baptist, and since John clearly taught that the Messiah would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16), probably they meant that they had not heard that the Holy Spirit had been given in the sense that John had predicted.

Like the Samaritans and Gentiles, these disciples now entered into the blessings and sign gifts of Pentecost, "*And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.*"

Any outward gifts such as tongues were confirmatory outward signs of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Church at the beginning of its establishment and the unification of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles in the NT Church. While it lasted, the gift of tongues fulfilled that purpose perfectly. Once that specific purpose had been fulfilled the gift of tongues was unnecessary. Hence when the stated reason for the gift of tongues was realised, the Lord chose to no longer give that gift to the church. This is specifically predicted in the Bible (1 Cor. 13:8–13).

Now, tongues are no longer required as a sign to the unbelieving Jews as the “Berlin Wall” between Jews and Gentiles no longer exists. It was a transitional sign of this transitional era, not normative for all times. Although these associated gifts (like the: speaking in tongues, shaking room, sound of rushing wind from heaven etc.) were temporal and transitional but the outpouring or filling of the Holy Spirit was repeatable for these saints and for us today. It is not without coincidence, that subsequent revivals with the outpouring of the Spirit on the Church such as the Reformation, the three Great Awakenings, and the “Singapore Pentecost” under John Sung affirm that these associated gifts and signs in Acts 2, 10, and 19 were not present, as they were never intended to be in the Church in its maturity.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the gift of speaking in tongues was not limited to the Day of Pentecost. God sovereignly bestowed in on the Gentiles in Acts 10 and John’s Disciples in Acts 19. He may also have given the gift to the Samaritans in Acts 8 (I suspect He did). In each instance in Acts all the believers received the baptism at once, and seemingly all spoke in tongues at once. None sought these tongues but it was sovereignly bestowed on them. However, there is no indication that it was repeated in the lives of the same individuals subsequently or demonstrated repeatedly to the same group of persons. Each time the gift was given corporately and in a public demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit for a specific purpose. The gift was real, known, unlearned, verifiable, and translatable languages, which was identifiable to those observing, especially unbelieving Jews.

Outside these specific groupings, there is no indication that the Lord gave the gifts of tongues to authenticate the conversion of others in the book of Acts. For instance, we don’t read of tongues being present the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, the Apostle Paul, Lydia, the Philippian jailor, the believers in Thessalonica and Berea or the islanders on Malta. That leads us to the last mention of the gift of tongues in the NT – the epistle to the Corinthians.