GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT SERIES – TONGUES

“Is the Gift of Tongues for Today? – Part III” (1 Corinthians 14)

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 and in the incidents in Acts 10 and 19 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.

4. Tongues were a clear sign that the disciples were Christ’s witnesses (Mark 16:7), that the “last days” had begun (Acts 2:16-17), and a sign of God’s judgment on the Jews for their rejection of the Messiah (1 Cor. 14:21-22; Isa. 28:11-12)

1 CORINTHIANS

Corinth was a seaport with people from all over the Roman world there. They would be able to speak many different languages. It also had a significant population of Jews there. Some Jews like Aquila and Priscilla came there from Rome so they would be multi-lingual in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and other dialects (Acts 18:2). There are a number of things to note about this epistle:

1. It was written during Paul’s third missionary journey from Ephesus around AD 54-58. Hence it was one of the earliest epistles written by Paul. It was certainly written within the immediate time frame of the incident of Acts 19 when John’s Disciples spoke in tongues.

2. It was written to a church with many spiritual problems. In fact it was one of the worst of the NT churches under Paul’s care. The Apostle Paul bemoaned,

   And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? (1 Cor. 3:1-3)

The most serious problem of the Corinthian church was pride and worldliness, which was due to an unwillingness to divorce from the culture around them. There was false doctrine, factionalism, petty jealousy, drunkenness, and gross immorality in that church. God had even chastened some by sickness and death for their conduct (1 Cor. 11). Many of the believers could not consistently separate themselves from their old, selfish, immoral, and pagan ways. 1 and 2 Corinthians are concerned with practical theology and the theological teachings Paul sets forth concerning divisions, fornication, marriage, role of women, divorce, celibacy, spiritual gifts etc. The
dominant purpose of the epistles is to set right a carnal and proud church that regarded lightly the attitudes, errors, and actions that the Apostle Paul knew would eventually destroy them.

(3) There were clearly some in the Corinth Church who had the genuine gift of tongues, “So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7). This gift would disappear from the NT church, “whether there be tongues, they shall cease” (1 Cor. 13:8), but clearly this exact moment had not yet been realised as Paul commanded, “Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39).

As tongues were a specific sign to the unbelieving Jews (1 Cor. 14:21-22; Isa. 28:11-12), it is perfectly understandable that the Lord would plant this church among such Gentile debauchery and use the gift of tongues to verify it to the unbelieving Jews in that city. It is interesting to note that in Acts 18:1-6 Paul went first to the synagogue at Corinth to preach. When he was rejected by the Jews, we read, “And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean; from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6). It would be a powerful statement of the power of the Gospel to these Jews to hear converted Gentiles from all over the empire being able to prophesy in multiple languages.

(4) There was also a counterfeit gift of tongues now present in the church at Corinth when Paul wrote his epistle. Archaeology and secular history confirms that Corinth was a place that was particularly idolatrous and sensual in its worship. There were many pagan religions there that engaged in ecstatic utterances and tongues. Indeed, the Greeks thought that this was the highest form of spiritual experience to be caught up in such trances and to communicate with the gods. Paul warns them of this danger,

Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. (1 Cor. 12:2-3)

Paul’s purpose in writing to the Corinthians about spiritual gifts, including tongues, was to bring order to the chaos that was happening there in his absence, “And the rest will I set in order when I come” (1 Cor. 11:34). He concluded the section dealing with tongues by commanding, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40).

Believers are explicitly taught to test everything that is claimed to be from the Holy Spirit. John writes,

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. (1 John 4:1-3; cf. 1 Thess. 5:20-21)
John warns that there will be demonic spirits who will use human tongues to blaspheme the name of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are to be cautious about everything we hear and fully test it. It is impossible for a believer to test the “tongues” of another professing Christian if he does not understand it and the person speaking does not understand it. You cannot verify gibberish or ecstatic languages as being “of God” if neither the speaker nor the hearer can even discern the meaning in the sounds. Steve Cole makes a good point, “It doesn’t seem to fit God’s character and power to have such a crucial miracle, which served to substantiate the authenticity of the apostles and the gospel message, be a totally unverifiable thing that took place in the heads of those present, not in the actual languages spoken.”

(5) The carnal spirit in Corinth had corrupted the gifts of the Spirit. Naturally they, like Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8, were drawn to the spectacular, “Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts” (1 Cor. 14:12). We read that they were impressed by oratory and knowledge as a status symbol, so Paul warned “And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know” (1 Cor. 8:2).

Paul wrote this epistle as a corrective to re-balance them. One of the particular areas that they were clearly attracted to was speaking in tongues. Paul especially wanted them to see that in the use of spiritual gifts that true love for others was to be the guiding motive. He also pointed out that they should desire to prophesy or preach, as this was a far more beneficial gift to the Church than the ability to speak in tongues that few could understand, “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). He urged them, “covet to prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:39).

Furthermore, he pointed out that tongues would eventually cease (1 Cor. 13:8–13).

The members in Corinth were misusing the real gifts of the Spirit and engaging in activity with counterfeit tongues that was both divisive and disruptive. The apostle told them to spiritually grow up, “Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men” (1 Cor. 14:20). Paul wanted them to focus on being a blessing to each other rather than simply drawing attention to self, “Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church” (1 Cor. 14:12).

ARE THE “TONGUES” IN 1 CORINTHIANS DIFFERENT FROM THE TONGUES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS?

Many charismatics claim that the tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians is categorically different from the tongues in the Book of Acts. They argue that verses like “For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries” (1 Cor. 14:2) and “For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14) is speaking of a category of tongues that they describe as ecstatic utterances or angel tongues. The burden of proof is entirely on the charismatics to prove from the Bible the truth of their claims. That they cannot do.

There is no reason to believe that the words used to describe “tongues” in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is any difference in meaning from the words in Acts 2, 10 or 19. Indeed 1 Corinthians was penned contemporaneously with the incident of Acts 19, which we have seen was clearly tongues of known, verifiable, real, unlearned, languages. Luke, who wrote Acts (around 5 years after 1 Corinthians), was a constant companion and confidant of Paul. It would be inconceivable that
they would use identical terms with completely different meanings in Acts and in 1 Corinthians\(^1\) without any attempt to explain the profound differences. Luke would be fully aware of the problems in Corinth concerning tongues and doubtless he would not have wanted to add further confusion on this vital and problematic subject to the NT saints, especially those in Corinth.

There are other insights in 1 Corinthians that add weight to the parallel with Acts. Paul makes it explicitly clear in 1 Corinthians 14 that any tongues spoken in the church there must be interpretation, “If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret” (1 Cor. 14:27). The Greek word translated “interpret” here means to translate or give the sense of something. Meaningless gibberish and ecstatic utterances cannot be interpreted, as they do not make sense to anyone. Only real and verifiable languages can be translated. Paul makes it clear that he is opposed to any utterances that cannot be understood by the hearer, “So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air…..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” (1 Cor. 14:9, 11).

No matter how beautiful the language is spoken it appears as foolishness to the hearers if they cannot understand it! Indeed, Paul says that unbelievers observing this will think they all are mad, “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?” (1 Cor. 14:23)

Another insight is the quotation by Paul of Isaiah 28:11-12 as to the purpose of the gift 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). The context of this quotation is the speaking of Gentile languages as a sign to the unbelieving Jews and not ecstatic babbling. If the tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians were gibberish or ecstatic utterances, it would not be much of a verifiable sign! Paul’s argument is that any exercise of true tongues must be for public ministry to others (there is no private prayer language tongues!). John MacArthur also points out further evidence,

Other parallels between Acts and 1 Corinthians 12–14 can be established. In both places, the Source of the gift is the same—the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4, 18; 10:44 –46; 19:6; 1 Cor. 12:1, 7, 11, et al.). In both places, the reception of the gift is not limited to the apostles, but also involved laypeople in the church (cf. Acts 1:15; 10:46; 19:6; 1 Cor. 12:30; 14:18). In both places, the gift is described as a speaking gift (Acts 2:4, 9-11; 1 Cor. 12:30; 14:2, 5). In both places, the resulting message can be translated and thereby understood, either by those who already know the language (as on the day of Pentecost – Acts 2:9-11) or by someone gifted with the ability to translate (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:5, 13).

In both places, the gift served as a miraculous sign for unbelieving Jews (Acts 2:5, 12, 14, 19; 1 Cor. 14:21-22; cf. Isa. 28:11-12). In both places the gift of languages was closely associated with the gift of prophecy (Acts 2:16-18; 19:6; 1 Cor. 14). And in both places, unbelievers who did not understand what was being spoken responded with mockery and derision (Acts 2:13; 1 Cor. 14:25). Given so many parallels, it is exegetically impossible and irresponsible to claim that the phenomenon described in 1 Corinthians was any different from that of Acts 2. Since the gift of tongues consisted of authentic

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\(^1\) For instance, Luke records in Acts 2:4 that they did “speak” (from the Greek verb \(\text{laleo}\)) in “tongues” (from the Greek noun \(\text{glossa}\)) and he uses the exact same terms in Acts 10:46 and 19:6. Paul uses the same Greek combination 13 times in 1 Corinthians 12:30; 13:1; 14:2, 4, 5, 6, 13, 18, 19, 21, 27, 39)
foreign languages on the day of Pentecost, then the same was true for the believers in Corinth.

WHAT WAS GOING ON AT CORINTH?

If we piece together all the evidence, there were seemingly three types of tongues speaking going on in this church:

(1) Genuine Tongues – These were real, unlearned, verifiable, translatable languages from around the Roman Empire as per Acts 2, 10, 19.

(2) Counterfeit Tongues – we know the devil has always sought to imitate the real (2 Cor. 11 – Satan has even “ministers of righteousness”). These counterfeit tongues were probably drawn from the pagan ecstatic utterances of the false religions round about them. Carnal or unsaved church members would be swept up in an emotional ecstasy to imitate the genuine manifestations of gifts of tongues. Some may even have been demon possessed.

(3) Known Language Tongues – as we know that the carnal Corinthian church members craved the gift of tongues, some may well have spoke in languages that were native to themselves but not to others to impress people with their spirituality. Remember, Corinth was a city that was a melting pot for nationalities and languages from around the Roman Empire. Anyone trying to draw attention to self could have spoken in the church in languages that no one else understood.

WHY DID PAUL COMMAND REGULATION OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES?

It is obvious from Acts 2, 10, and 19 that the real language tongues given there by the Holy Spirit did not need any form of regulation. They only spoke when led by the Holy Spirit, “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). The apostles didn’t have to control or regulate the true workings of the Holy Spirit. It was obvious to all this was a miraculous work of God. However, what needed to be regulated and tested are man’s claims to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul could not physically be in Corinth when he wrote this epistle. He had learned from others (e.g. household of Chloe – 1 Cor. 1:11) and maybe his 18 months there that there was a tendency for them to indulge the flesh. Paul’s concern was to regulate and control the actions of carnal and even unsaved members in the church worship service there. He was not forbidding or inhibiting in any way the genuine gift of tongues, “Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39). He stated that he himself had the genuine gift of tongues in his ministry, “I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all” (1 Cor. 14:18).

But Paul did need to guard the flock from error in his absence. There was no need to regulate the speaking in tongues on the Day of Pentecost, as there were no erroneous practices mixed in with the real. Clearly that was not true at Corinth. Men’s claims to be led by the Spirit need to be tested and regulated. But the Holy Ghost must not. Alan Cairns points out,

In the genuine gift of tongues could the Holy Ghost ever speak at the wrong time? Could He ever speak out of turn? Could He ever say the wrong thing? And I put it to you that that is impossible. Therefore the regulations of 1 Corinthians 14 were needed not
because of the use of the gift of tongues, but because people were either talking gibberish in some ecstasy or they were misusing a foreign language naturally acquired.

So Paul gave a system of testing, “Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret” (1 Cor. 14:13) and “If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret” (1 Cor. 14:27). His overriding message in 1 Corinthians is that everything must be understood in the worship service of the church. It is not about quantity of the sounds but the quality of the sounds! Confusion in the worship is a sign that this is not from the Holy Spirit. He bluntly commands, “But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God” (1 Cor. 14:28).

Paul could not regulate and sift out the true from the false by remote control from a distance. So he decided the wisest policy was to have an objective testing procedure in the Corinth church to protect its reputation and to preserve them from the counterfeit and the conceited.

There was nothing in these tests that contradicted what happened in Acts 2, 10, and 19 or inhibited another similar manifestation! It was fully in line with the Joel 2 and Isaiah 28 prophecies also! Such testing was fully in line with the other statements of Scripture (Deut. 18:20; Isa. 8:20; 1 John 4:1-3; 1 Thess. 5:20-21). Self-control is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Confusion is an attribute of the devil and not of God, “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33a; cf. James 3:13-18). Paul makes clear that these regulations were the inspired commands of God, “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37). This inspired framework given to regulate the worship in Corinth was certainly not an attempt to “quench the Spirit” but to quench the false spirits!