

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Tongues And Their Interpretation

by Dan Trygg

“...to each one is given the disclosure of the Spirit for the common good (‘carrying together’). For, on the one hand, to one is given a word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another a word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to a different person a faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healings by the one Spirit, and to another in-workings of powerful-acts, and to another a prophetic-utterance, and to another distinguishings of spirits, to a different person kinds of tongues, and to another an interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit in-works all these things, distributing to each one individually according as He intends.”

1 Corinthians 12:7-11

“Whether anyone speaks in a tongue, according to two or at most three, and one at a time, and let one interpret; but if ever there might not be an interpreter, let that person become silent in the gathering, but let that one be speaking to him/herself and to God. ...Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues; but let all things happen with good decorum and according to orderliness.”

1 Corinthians 14:27,28,39,40

The gift of tongues has often been a topic of debate, confusion and suspicion among many believers. It is unfortunate that this gift has been so poorly used, abused and ridiculed that, for many, it is a source of division. Isn't it amazing that a gift, clearly revealed in the NT as a legitimate expression of the Holy Spirit, meant for the *edification* of the church, should come to be so negatively perceived by some Bible-believing Christians, that they will practically turn and run in the other direction when they find someone using it? On the other hand, the wanton disregard of the clear counsel of the NT as to the proper use of tongues by many of those who have this gift is equally frustrating. Their continued abuse feeds the prejudice set against the gift that the Spirit has entrusted to them. The result is a polarization within Christian groups, often with the “have’s” on one side of the fence, and the “have-not’s” on the other side. While we are supposed to be known by our love (Jn. 13:35), we are instead lobbing theological “shells” at each other’s “camps”, or “sniping” at one another. I believe that if we would simply take a closer look at what God’s revealed counsel to us has to say, ...and *live by His word*..., we could put our divisiveness aside and formulate a healthy, balanced, practical way of utilizing this gift, ...a way that honors the God Who gives it, and that edifies the church in the manner He has intended.

What does the Scripture say about “tongues”?

First of all, **it is one of the revelatory gifts that *can be given for a temporary situation***, listed with the other gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. What that means is that **it could be given to any of us, at the Spirit’s discretion**. A good example of this would be the experience of the 120 at Pentecost, or the Gentiles gathered at Cornelius’ house, or the disciples of John who Paul baptized into Jesus (Acts 2:4-12; 10:44-11:18; 19:1-7). In each of these cases, tongues served as a sign, which God used to indicate the presence of the Holy Spirit. There is no other indication in the book of Acts that these people spoke in tongues again, or made it a regular practice. Nor did anyone *ask* for the gift in *any* of these situations. It appears that Peter was as surprised that the Gentiles would speak in tongues as he was when he had first done it himself at Pentecost.

Secondly, while these examples were historical events, **Paul clearly indicates that *not all Christians will “speak with tongues”*** (1 Cor. 12:30). It is not a sign of the Holy Spirit which *all* Christians will experience, contrary to the teaching of some. The Greek phrase precludes any distinction some might wish to make between a “gift of tongues” and a “sign of tongues”. By saying, “Not all *speak* with tongues...”, Paul includes any possible form of tongue-speaking. We must conclude that just as it is the Spirit’s discretion to distribute tongues as He may desire (1 Cor. 12:11), in the same way it is the Spirit’s purpose and choice to *not* give the ability to speak with tongues to at least some believers. Paul also wrote, “I desire you all to speak in tongues...” (1 Cor. 14:5). This implies that they did *not* all do so.

Thirdly, **it is clear that *some people receive an ongoing ability to operate with this gift***. Paul certainly recognized this, and he himself regularly spoke in tongues in his private life (1 Cor. 12:28-30; 14:5,18). **There are “kinds” of tongues**. The Greek words indicate that these are actual languages, whether earthly or heavenly, not simply ecstatic utterances.

What is the gift *for*? Why would God desire to give His people an ability to speak in a language that they do not naturally know how to speak?

(1.) It is given as a sign to unbelievers. That certainly was the impact of the tongues given at Pentecost (1 Cor. 14:22; Acts 2). It was a powerful indicator that God was doing something unusual. It succeeded in getting the attention of the crowds, who then listened to Peter’s message, and some 3,000 people responded.

(2.) It is given as a sign to believers. Some would argue that this contradicts Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 14:22. I don't think Paul meant that statement to be taken as an absolute, exhaustive, "God could never..." kind of a remark. We have seen at least one example where the phenomenon of speaking with tongues convinced believers of an important spiritual reality (Acts 10:44-11:18).

(3.) It is given for the common good of the Body. When it is accompanied by interpretation, it can edify the church (1 Cor. 12:7-11; 14:5). Since it is listed along with the other revelatory gifts, it is a disclosure of the Holy Spirit which can supply information necessary for a variety of needs. Without interpretation, however, it is incapable of fulfilling this valuable service (1 Cor. 14:6-13).

(4.) It is given for the private encouragement of the speaker. That is no small service. It can give great comfort and help to be able to experience the flow of the Holy Spirit, even if I were not able to understand what is said. It must be valuable for Paul to have utilized it so extensively that he could claim to "speak in tongues more than you all" (1 Cor. 14:17). Some testify that by utilizing this gift, they find it easier to be open to other gifts, or they find their faith built up to act on something that the Spirit may be prompting them to do.

How does it work? At Pentecost, the believers were "filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues according as the Spirit was giving them to speak forth" (Acts 2:4). **This indicates a partnership. The Spirit was giving them the ability to speak out in these other tongues, but they had to actually do the speaking. They were giving voice to what the Spirit was doing inside of them,** responding out loud in accordance with what was being disclosed or revealed inside. I think it is noteworthy that they were responding to the *Spirit's initiative*, ...not "priming the pump" by trying to "make something happen" that was not already there. Later, Paul tells us that **when someone prays in a tongue, it comes from his spirit, not from his mind.** It is not meant to be a *replacement* for praying with the mind. Paul still found it necessary and valuable to do that, as well (1 Cor. 14:14,15).

Why does Paul find it necessary to so strongly limit the use of this gift? He clearly instructs us not to forbid speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14:39), but he does insist that specific parameters be followed (1 Cor. 14:27,28).

(A.) There is a tendency to rely too heavily on this gift, even though it may not be appropriate in the context of the gathering of believers. Evidently, because it edifies the person who is speaking, even though he or she may not understand it, it is a positive experience for that person. It can sometimes make them *feel* close to God, and they naturally want to utilize this as a tool to draw near to Him, or to feel "connected". Unfortunately, though it may be a "feel-good" experience for *them*, it does little or nothing for *those around them*.

(B.) Without interpretation, there is no content communicated that can build up others, or establish anything permanently. If it is only an experience, with no perceptible content, then it really only is valuable to the speaker. When we come together, we ought to attempt to maximize our time to benefit the entire group (1 Cor. 14:5-19). *With* interpretation, however, it is just like prophecy. *It is a direct message inspired by God to edify His people.*

(C.) Without interpretation, it is difficult to evaluate the origin of the utterance. We know that in pagan religions of the time, and even today, that a similar phenomenon occurs, some of which is demonically inspired. It has been demonstrated that humans can also be "taught" to bypass the brain and utter a string of nonsensical syllables. We are especially prone to this in a highly emotionally charged environment. Being worked up into an emotional frenzy, we can actually flip into an altered state of consciousness, where we could be susceptible to outbursts, either spiritual or emotional in origin. **By requiring only one to speak at a time, and at most three, Paul limits the danger of emotionalism.** The interpretation gives us a glimpse into the *content* of what is being said. **When we know what is said, we can evaluate it** by comparing it with the Scriptures, and any other revelation that God may be giving.

(D.) Room must be made for all of the gifts. Paul's restrictions also keep us from focusing too much upon any one gift, making room for other expressions of the Holy Spirit. Even the gift of prophesy is to be limited, though Paul values it very highly (1 Cor. 14:1,5,29-32). Disregard of Paul's wise counsel produces unhealthy Body life.

What is the interpretation of tongues? This is the only gift that is directly dependent upon the expression of another gift in order to have the chance to operate. [There are actually two different, but related, words used for this. The simpler, more basic form (*hermēneia*) is used in 1 Cor. 12:10 and 14:26. The other, more intensive verbal form (*dihermēneuō*) occurs six times (Lk. 24:27; Acts 9:36; 1 Cor. 12:30; 14:5,13,27), and one noun form (*dihermēneutēs*) occurs in 14:28.] **The basic definition is to "explain the meaning", or "convey the sense", ...not necessarily to translate.** The more intensive form is a more thorough unfolding of the meaning. Again, this disclosure of the Spirit can come in many forms. Those who speak in tongues are encouraged to pray for the ability to interpret (1 Cor. 14:13). There is to be only one interpreter functioning at a given meeting, and if it is evident that there is no interpreter, the one speaking in a tongue is to "become silent" in the meeting, but let him continue speaking only to himself and to God (1 Cor. 14:27,28). Note that it is all right for a person to speak in tongues quietly, or "under their breath" in a quiet manner. We need not be offended by this. **The value of the joint ministry of these two gifts is that God is speaking through His people to communicate to the Body as a whole, or to other members of the group. It is a wonderful example of Body-life interdependence.**