Tongues Today?

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The question of ‘tongues’ in the church today continues to be a source of great difference of opinion. Some people are most enthusiastic. Others are quite certain that the current phenomenon represents Satan’s work in the midst of the church. Most evangelical believers simply don’t know what to think or how to respond.

How do you decide among these various opinions? You cannot deny that something called ‘tongues-speaking’ is occurring in the church today. But how do you reach a sound conclusion about its significance?

By the study of Scripture, of course. Certainly it is important to be sensitive to the religious experiences of various people. But ultimately all religious experience must stand the objective test of Scripture. The greatest favour that may be shown to Christian friends is to call them to test their experience by Scripture. For ‘iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend’ (*Prov.* 27:17).

The possibility of a ‘fresh look’ at the subject of tongues in Scripture may be viewed with scepticism in the light of the flood of material already available on the subject. But the effort must be made for exegetical re-evaluation.

In the New Testament only two books mention the phenomenon of tongues, excluding the longer ending of Mark. But in the Old Testament three different authors anticipate the New Testament phenomenon of tongues. Taken together, four

different aspects of tongues surface from these old and new covenant Scriptures which point to the same conclusion: the tongues now being manifested in the church are something other than the tongues anticipated in the Old Testament prophecy and realised in the New Testament experience. These four elements are as follows:

1. New Testament tongues were revelational;
2. New Testament tongues were foreign languages;
3. New Testament tongues were for public consumption;
4. New Testament tongues were a sign indicating a radical change in the direction of redemptive history.

Let us consider each of these aspects of biblical tongues as they may contribute to an understanding of the modern phenomenon.

1. NEW TESTAMENT TONGUES WERE REVELATIONAL

If exegetical considerations lead to the conclusion that New Testament tongues were revelational, it follows that unless a person is willing to allow for continuing revelation beyond the Scriptures, the tongues being manifested today cannot be regarded as the same as the tongues of the New Testament. Several considerations point to this conclusion, the first of these being the usage of the term ‘mystery’ in 1 Corinthians 14 and the rest of the New Testament.

In 1 Corinthians 14:2 Paul says, ‘He who speaks in a tongue utters mysteries.’ This term ‘*mysterion*’ in the New Testament has a very specific meaning which inherently includes the idea of the communication of divine revelation.

As already noted, a ‘mystery’ in the New Testament is a truth about God’s way of redemption that once was concealed *but now has been revealed*. In its very essence a New Testament ‘mystery’ is a revelational phenomenon. This conclusion is supported by virtually every usage of the term ‘mystery’ in the

New Testament.

The term ‘mystery’ occurs approximately 28 times in the New Testament. The consistency of meaning maintained in Scripture is striking:

> Matthew 13:11: Jesus says, ‘To you it is given *to know* the mysteries of the kingdom.’ These ‘mysteries’ are no longer hidden from Jesus’ disciples. Kingdom mysteries are truths *revealed* rather than concealed.
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> Romans 11:25: Paul explains, ‘I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery.’ The ‘mystery’ about Israel should no longer be a matter of ignorance, for the truth of the ‘mystery’ has been revealed.
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> Romans 16:25: Paul’s preaching is ‘according to the *revelation of the mystery* hidden for long ages past *but now revealed and made known.*’ Paul can preach with confidence because the ‘mystery’ of the gospel now has been revealed.

As he begins his letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains: ‘I proclaimed to you the mystery of God’ (*1 Cor.* 2:1). It was not an enigma that he proclaimed. He declared openly something that needed to be understood. Paul continues in the same vein by noting that Christian ministers speak God’s wisdom-in-mystery which *has been* hidden, but now can be openly proclaimed (*1 Cor.* 2:7). So men ought to regard Christian ministers as *stewards* of the mysteries of God (*1 Cor.* 4:7). Since they are stewards dispensing the mysteries, the ‘mysteries’ are now understood.

1 Corinthians 13:2: Paul proposes the hypothetical case in which he might come to ‘*know* all mysteries’, and in 1 Corinthians 15:51 he declares, ‘Behold I *tell* you a mystery’ Throughout his letter to the Corinthians, a ‘mystery’ appears as an element of God’s redemptive truth that now has become

known.

This understanding of ‘mystery’ continues throughout Paul’s writings. In Ephesians 1:9, ‘God *made known* the mystery of his will.’ It was ‘by revelation’ that the ‘mystery’ was made known to Paul (*Eph.* 3:3). He wants the Ephesians to ‘*know*’ his understanding of the ‘mystery of Christ’ (*Eph.* 3:4). He intends to make plain to everybody what is the ‘administration of the mystery which has been kept hidden through all ages’ (*Eph.* 3:9). Marriage in Christ is a ‘great mystery’, but now he is making it known to them. The Ephesians must pray that he will ‘fearlessly *make known* the mystery of the gospel’ (*Eph.* 6:19,20).

Throughout Colossians, the same significance prevails for the term. In Colossians 1:25 Paul declares: ‘I present to you the Word of God in fullness, the mystery kept hidden for ages and generations *but now revealed* to the saints.’ He can make known the gospel only because God has ‘chosen to *make known* the glorious riches of this mystery’ (*Col.* 1:27). Paul has striven that they may *know* the mystery of God (*Col.* 2:2). To this end he asks them to ‘pray that we may *proclaim* the mystery of Christ’ (*Col.* 4:3)

2 Thessalonians 2:7 is something of an exception to this pattern. It refers to the ‘mystery’ of lawlessness that has not yet been solved. But in 1 Timothy 3:9 Paul explains that deacons ‘must *possess* the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience’. In 1 Timothy 3:16 Paul acknowledges that the ‘mystery’ of godliness is great. But then he proceeds to explain this mystery as consisting in the truth now made known that ‘God was *manifest* in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, *seen* of angels, *preached* to the nations, *believed* on in the world, received up into glory’. His point is that the mystery once hidden has now been made known.

Finally, in the book of Revelation the ‘mystery of the seven

stars' is explained. The seven stars are the seven churches (*Rev.* 1:20). John subsequently reveals that 'the mystery of God' will be accomplished '*just as he announced* to his prophets' (*Rev.* 10:7). In similar fashion, Babylon is the 'mystery' that the interpreting angel will 'explain' (*Rev.* 17:5-7).

Twenty-eight times the term 'mystery' is used in the New Testament. If we set aside for a moment the occurrence in 1 Corinthians 14 presently under consideration, twenty-seven cases explicitly talk about a 'mystery' as something once hidden *but now revealed*. Christianity emphatically is not a mystery religion. Christianity stands in drastic contrast with numerous other religions built on codes of secrecy. Christianity desires everything to be open and above board. The God of Christianity has nothing to hide. He openly manifests his truth to the world in the same way in which he sends light to dispel the darkness.

In this broader context, the reference to a 'mystery' in 1 Corinthians 14:2 may be properly understood. 'He who speaks in a tongue . . . *utters mysteries*,' says Paul. He does not conceal truth by speaking a 'mystery'. Instead he communicates the truth that has been made known to him by divine revelation. Tongues were a divine instrument for communicating revelation. They were a means by which God disclosed redemptive truth once hidden but now revealed. This interpretation of the term 'mystery' in 1 Corinthians 14:2 would seem to be contradicted at first sight by the remainder of the verse. For Paul says, 'Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; indeed *no one understands him*, for he speaks mysteries' (*1 Cor.* 14:2). How could it make good sense that a message spoken in tongues is revelational if it is not understood?

It could make good sense if the 'tongues' described throughout Scripture are foreign languages. If 'tongues' are

‘languages’ foreign to the speaker which might not be known to the audience, then it would make perfectly good sense that ‘he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, since no one understands him’ (I *Cor.* 14:2). He speaks as an instrument of revelation, but the language of his revelation is not understood apart from translation. In this regard, the situation at Corinth may be contrasted with the unique circumstance in Jerusalem on the first day of tongues-speaking. On the day of Pentecost, all the various languages of the world were represented by hearers as well as by speakers. So they all heard in their own native tongue the wondrous works of God. But in Corinth it is not likely that all the languages would be represented. As a result, no one would understand the speaker even though he declared the truth of God that was coming to him by revelation. A ‘mystery’ was being revealed in the utterance of the tongues-speaker, but since no one was familiar with the language he spoke, his revelation was not understood.

In any case, the use of the term ‘mystery’ as it relates to ‘tongues’ clearly indicates that tongues were revelational in nature. By the gift of tongues a ‘mystery’ concerning God’s way of redemption was ‘revealed’ to the new covenant people of God. The revelational character of tongues is further confirmed by Paul’s additional words of explanation:

> He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues; but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets. (*1 Cor.* 14:4-5, NIV)

According to the last phrase in the above quotation, tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy. The message brought in a tongue is brought up to the level of divinely inspired prophecy, once the tongue has been interpreted. If prophecy is

a revelational gift (as biblical evidence of both the Old Testament and the New Testament would appear to support), and tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy, then tongues also should be understood as a revelational gift.

To understand more fully Paul's point about the relation of tongues and prophecy in the life of the church, the question must be asked: how do words edify? Exactly what was it in the verbal gift of prophecy that 'edified'? Was it the sensations created by the voice of the prophet that edified? Was it the physical vibrations set up in the ears of the hearers that edified? Or was it the emotion experienced by the prophet himself that somehow had the effect of edifying his hearers?

No, it was not the aural sensations in themselves that built up the believers in their most holy faith. It was *the understanding* of God's truth brought about by a revelation through prophecy that edified. By the communication of truth which could be understood and believed the hearers were built up in their faith.

In a similar manner, tongues that were interpreted so that people could understand the revelation became equivalent to prophecy as an instrument of edification. Without interpretation, the observing of someone speaking in a tongue had no edifying effect on the spectator. But once the message spoken in the tongue was interpreted to the audience, edification could occur among them as it had occurred to the speaker. For tongues interpreted were equivalent to prophecy in their ability to edify. Once interpreted, the message spoken in a 'tongue' became the very voice of God to the people.

But a further question must be asked. How is it that tongues had the effect of edifying the *speaker?* Paul plainly states, 'He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself' (l *Cor.* 14:4). But what in the act of speaking in a tongue caused it to edify? Was it the physical vibration associated with the phenomenon of

tongues-speaking that edified the speaker?

Was it the emotion accompanying the experience? Tongues, like prophecy, are a verbal gift; and verbal gifts edify by communicating understanding. Edification through the exercise of a verbal gift does not occur by the physical vibration of the oral chambers. It does not occur through the non-rational stirrings of the emotions. Edification through a verbal gift occurs instead by the speaker's coming to understand and believe the truth that he speaks. Otherwise there is no edification.

Anyone who teaches or preaches the Word of God understands this rudimentary principle about spiritual edification. The preacher knows full well that he is not edified by the mere exercise of his gift for preaching. He must understand and believe what he says if edification for himself is to occur.

If this were not the case, a totally different concept of the way edification occurs would have to be envisaged. For if the Spirit can use merely the exercise of a verbal gift for the speaker's edification apart from his understanding what he says, then the same effect could be experienced by the hearers as well as by the speaker. If the one who spoke in a tongue could be edified even while not understanding what he was saying, could not the congregation expect to be edified in the same way? If the sensations associated with uttering a sound like 'quesrylespoyou' have the capacity for edifying the speaker, why could not those same sensations vibrating in the ears of the hearer have the effect of edifying?

But an audience is not edified one whit, no matter how zealous the speaker may be, if the message is unintelligible. Paul makes this very point. No one is edified when no one understands (*1 Cor.* 14:2). Edification through a verbal gift is linked intrinsically to understanding the utterance.

In accordance with this principle, it must be concluded that tongues edified as they communicated the truth of God first to the speaker and then to the hearer. Apart from understanding, there was no edification. It was the revelational experience of the truth of God directly to the tongues-speaker that caused him to be edified. The experience of the tongues-speaker was a revelational experience in which God brought to him knowledge that had the effect of edifying him.

At this point it is essential to look closely at 1 Corinthians 14:14. For Paul appears to contradict this principle when he says: ‘For if I pray in a tongue my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.’ This statement may seem to indicate that the one who prays in a tongue fails to understand what he is saying. It might appear that Paul is asserting that his non-rational ‘spirit’ expresses itself quite effectively as he speaks to God in a tongue. But his ‘mind’ is ‘unfruitful’, which seems to indicate that he fails to understand the words he himself has uttered in the tongue.

However, this on-the-surface understanding of the phrase rests on a false dichotomy between the human ‘spirit’ and the ‘mind’ as these concepts appear in the New Testament Scriptures. The human ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*) and the ‘mind’ (*nous*) cannot be separated so radically from one another. An example of the closeness of their interworking may be illustrated from an incident in the life of Christ. Some of his opponents began to ‘think within themselves’ that he was blaspheming (*Mark* 2:6). But Jesus ‘knew in his spirit’ what they were thinking. The word for ‘knew’ derives from the root for ‘mind’ (*nous*) as it is found in 1 Corinthians 14:14, while the word for ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*) is the second word found in the same verse in 1 Corinthians. According to the Gospel, Jesus possessed ‘rational knowledge’ in his ‘spirit’, which clearly indicates that the ‘spirit’ does not contain simply the emotional side of man. ‘Mind’ and ‘spirit’ in man communicate with one another. It is a false dichotomy

contrary to the scriptural teaching about man that suggests that man's 'spirit' (*pneuma*) is an irrational, purely emotional aspect of man, while his 'mind' (*nous*) refers to his reasoning capacities.

When Paul says, 'My spirit prays' (*1 Cor.* 14:14), he means that from within his soul he offers prayers to God. But this praying 'in his spirit' is not without full rational understanding. As a consequence of this understanding as he prays, he is edified. But at the same time, his 'mind', that instrument by which he would formulate his thoughts for the purpose of communicating them to others, remains 'unfruitful'. It bears no fruit. No one else in the assembly is edified with him, because no one else understands what he has spoken in the tongue. He is edified well enough. But no others are edified because his thoughts are not being communicated to them in a way that they can understand. No one else can join in his prayer because no one else understands the utterance of his 'tongue'. But if the inspired utterance of his spirit is translated into a language known by the people, then they too can be edified along with the speaker.

This understanding of verse 14 finds strong confirmation in the immediately following verses. Paul says to the possessor of the gift of tongues:

> If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. (*1 Cor.* 14:16-17, NIV)

If it is to be presumed that a *speaker* can give thanks 'well enough' without even understanding what he is saying, could not the *hearer* just as well join in to give thanks in his heart without ever understanding what the speaker might be saying?

It would be far more consistent with the true mode of edification through a verbal gift to conclude that the one speaking in the tongue understood what he was saying since he gave thanks adequately. But the hearer could not join him because he did not understand.

It has been supposed that Paul intends to describe a verbal gift which edifies the speaker despite his lack of understanding, but which cannot also edify the hearer. But the evidence points in another direction. The speaker gives thanks well enough because he understands his divinely inspired utterance, even though it comes to him in a language he has never studied. But the utterance 'bears no fruit' of sanctification among the audience because it is not understood by them.

This perspective on verse 14 may be supported by a further consideration of verse 5. Paul says, 'He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in a tongue, *unless he interprets*' (*1 Cor.* 14:5). The point is strongly made. Interpreted tongues are equivalent to prophecy. But what was God's intent in prophecy? Why did he institute this form of communication?

God's intent in prophecy was to communicate his verbally-inspired, infallible and inerrant Word to his people. God would not settle for less, because he wanted his people to have a secure deposit of truth. In the same way, God's original intent in inspiring a person to speak his word in a 'tongue' was to give expression to his verbally-inspired infallible and inerrant Word. Tongues interpreted could be equivalent to inspired prophecy only because tongues themselves were a revelational gift. By speaking in tongues a person was delivering the very Word of God, infallible and inerrant in all its parts.

This original intent for tongues could be maintained only if

the gift of interpretation also functioned as a gift equivalent in its inspiration to the gifts of tongues and prophecy. Only a translation made under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit could retain the verbally inspired, infallible and inerrant character of the Word of God. Anyone who has attempted a translation of the Bible from Greek to English would understand the necessity of an inspired gift if the preciseness and authority of the original Word from God was to be maintained absolutely perfectly. It is clear from 1 Corinthians 14:28 that the tongues-speaker did not necessarily have the gift of interpretation — a gift that required an exactness which went beyond the understanding of the sense of the revelation possessed by the tongues-speaker.

No claim could be made by any translator of Scripture that his product was identical with the verbally-inspired, infallible and inerrant Word of God as originally given unless he could affirm unequivocally that God himself had been directly and infallibly inspiring the change from one language to another. In any case, Paul indicates in these verses that tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy. If prophecy is revelational and tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy, then tongues also must be a form of revelation that God used for his church.

For this reason, the tongues being experienced today cannot be regarded as the same as New Testament tongues, apart from opening the door to continuing revelation beyond the Scriptures. The effect of this conclusion would be quite far-reaching, and would include bringing into question the completeness of God’s revelation through the apostles and prophets appointed by him to provide a foundation for the church that would remain undisturbed throughout the present age.

2. TONGUES WERE FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Acts 2:6 makes the point very clearly: ‘Each one heard them speaking in his own language.’ The testimony throughout the rest of the book of Acts gives no indicator that a different kind of tongue was manifested in the experiences of the church after Pentecost. On the contrary, the evidence supports a continuation of the same kind of ‘tongues-speaking’ as occurred on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 10, Peter justifies the baptism of the Gentiles who had spoken in tongues, for ‘the Spirit came on them *just as it did on us*’ (*Acts* 10:47). In reporting his action to the church at Jerusalem, Peter calls special attention to the same point: ‘The Holy Spirit came on them *just as it did on us at the beginning*’ (*Acts* 11: 15). The experience of the Holy Spirit at Caesarea corresponded to the Spirit’s baptism that came on the apostles on the day of Pentecost. If the gift of speaking in tongues in Acts 2 involved speaking in a foreign language never studied, then the same explanation would apply to the experience of tongues as manifested among the Gentiles in Caesarea. In this light, it may be assumed that the same explanation would apply to the gift of tongues manifested in Ephesus (*Acts* 19:7). It may be worth noting that the experience of tongues in Ephesus occurred after Paul’s visit to Corinth (cf. *Acts* 18:1-19). While no specific description characterises the tongues-speaking in Ephesus, the use of the identical language used to describe the phenomenon in Ephesus as had been used in previous narratives in Acts strongly suggests that the nature of the ‘tongues’ in Ephesus corresponded to the ‘tongues’ mentioned by Luke throughout the book of Acts.

No mention is made of a tongues-speaking occurrence at Corinth in the book of Acts (cf. *Acts* 18:1-18). But according to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the phenomenon of tongues obviously had a prominent role in their church life.

What was the nature of this phenomenon at Corinth? It would seem rather strange indeed if before and after Corinth as described in Acts one kind of ‘tongue’ manifested itself while

at Corinth a totally different phenomenon appeared — and that without any elaboration in Acts of a supposed difference. In both Acts and 1 Corinthians the same terminology is used. Acts 2:4 speaks of ‘other tongues’, and 1 Corinthians 14:21 similarly refers to ‘other tongues’. The Greek is almost identical in both places, and may be translated ‘other languages’ in each case. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 14 employs an Old Testament quotation clearly speaking about foreign languages to explain the phenomenon in Corinth (*1 Cor.* 14:2 1, cf. *Isa.* 28:11,12, *Deut.* 28:49). As a result, it may be concluded that either Paul is making an application of an Old Testament passage that does not strictly apply, or that the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14 were foreign languages as anticipated in the Old Testament passage cited by Paul. Still further, the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14 were translatable, which would suggest that they were foreign languages. Even if it were concluded that these ‘languages’ of 1 Corinthians were the ‘tongues of angels’, they still were languages that were translatable into human equivalents.

Strong cumulative evidence supports the conclusion that the tongues of the New Testament times, both in Acts and in 1 Corinthians, were foreign languages. The effect of this conclusion is to place a large portion of modern tongues-speaking activity outside the realm of valid New Testament experience from the outset. Whatever may be going on today, it is not the kind of worship-experience described by the Scriptures of the New Testament.

In this regard, one view that has been promoted widely in recent days must be rejected, not for its initial points but for its rather unexpected conclusion. This particular viewpoint begins by affirming that the tongues described in the New Testament were for public usage in the church. It *is* furthermore asserted that the tongues of today must be regarded as something other than the phenomenon of tongues

described in the New Testament Scriptures.

But in the end it is proposed that the tongues of today, though not of the nature of New Testament tongues, are nonetheless a gift of the Spirit to the modern church. Though admittedly not the same as the tongues of the New Testament, it is said that they have a proper role in the life of God's people today. Because of the frantic pace of modern life, God's Spirit has devised this means by which the modern-day, stressed-out Christian may find emotional and psychological relief. Through 'speaking in tongues', an answer may be found to the tensions associated with living in today's world.

Obviously this conclusion cannot arise from an exegesis of Scripture, since the position affirms that the tongues of the New Testament are not the same as modern-day 'tongues'. Instead, it is being proposed that the public assemblies of God's people be opened to a most spectacular phenomenon on the basis of psychological observations concerning the possible effects of tongues-speaking. Modern-day tongues are presented as a legitimate element in worship today on the basis of a hypothesis about the way God might decide to meet the special emotional stresses of the modern world.

But is it to be supposed that the apostle Paul had no need for emotional relief from the tensions associated with his 'care of all the churches' (*2 Cor.* 11:28)? Should it be concluded that Martin Luther had no need of the 'psychological relief' that comes from the supposedly modem gift of tongues? With kings and governors constantly seeking his life, did Luther have a less stressful situation than Christians in the world today?

Many activities can function as psychological reliefs. Going out to eat, watching a video, or playing a game of golf can serve to uplift the spirit. Yet none of these things should be viewed as a 'gift' of the Spirit. Spiritual gifts are special

administrations of the Holy Spirit by which members of Christ's body nourish and minister to one another. To suggest that the modern tongues phenomenon is not of the same nature as the tongues of the New Testament and yet is a gift of the Spirit for the church today could open the door to almost any kind of experience-centred phenomenon.

It would appear much more consistent with the biblical evidence to acknowledge that because the tongues of the first century were foreign languages, the tongues of today, which do not appear to be foreign languages, must be regarded as a phenomenon not endorsed by the New Testament Scriptures.

3. NEW TESTAMENT TONGUES WERE FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION, NOT PRIVATE USE

All gifts of the Spirit were for the benefit of Christ's church. A 'gift' in the New Testament was bestowed on an individual so that he might provide a blessing for the people of God. By a 'gift' of the Spirit, one person is enabled to minister to others. Rudimentary to the whole concept of gifts is the fact that they are not for private consumption, but are given for the sake of edifying the body of Christ. Paul says:

> There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:4-7, NIV)

It is with this understanding in mind that Paul proceeds to develop the image of the church as a body. Each part of the body is given a ministry by which it may aid the rest of the body. The eye keeps the body from stumbling. The mouth feeds the body its nourishment. The ear hears for the rest of the body. All the various gifts enable the members of Christ's

body to minister to one another.

With this larger picture of the public nature of spiritual gifts in mind, consider more closely 1 Corinthians 14:18-19. Paul says:

> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Now, at first glance it seems that Paul intends to contrast private tongues with public tongues. Is not Paul saying, 'I thank God that [*privately*] I speak in tongues more than all of you, but [*publicly*] in the church I would rather speak intelligible words that instruct others?' The contrast between private words spoken in a tongue and public words spoken in prophecy seems to be underscored by his usage of the phrase 'in the *church*' only in conjunction with the 'intelligible words' of prophecy.

But the interpreter must be very careful about introducing words or concepts that do not appear in the original text of Scripture. As a matter of fact, the word order of verse 18 in the original language makes quite plain the true contrast intended by Paul in these verses. It is not a contrast between private and public utterances. Instead, Paul is contrasting his experience in speaking in tongues, in the advancement of Christ's kingdom in general, with the practice of those who were so eager to promote tongues in the church at Corinth. 'More than all of you,' he says, 'I speak in tongues.' Paul's emphasis is made plain by the order of his words. 'In relation to *all of you*, I speak more in tongues' (verse 18). The comparison is between Paul and those of the Corinthian church who are so interested in promoting tongues-speaking. Perhaps to their surprise, Paul affirms that he speaks in tongues more than the whole lot of them.

Then in the next verse he introduces his contrast. ‘But with reference to *the church* I prefer to speak five words for understanding’ (verse 19). This, then, is Paul’s contrast. It is not a contrast between private tongues and prophecy spoken in the church. Instead, the contrast is between tongues as they relate to those who are promoting tongues among the Corinthians and tongues as they relate to the church as a whole. Paul says, ‘In relating to you, my record is plain. Recognise this fact. Don’t talk to me about speaking in tongues as though I know nothing about the matter, for I have spoken in tongues more than all of you. I know first-hand about speaking in tongues. *But* with reference to the *church*, I would prefer to speak clearly in a language that will edify. Although I do as a matter of fact speak in tongues more than all of you, my concern is for edification.’

That is the contrast in verses 18 and 19. No mention is made of private tongues in contrast with public tongues. For New Testament tongues were never meant for private consumption. Like all other gifts of the Spirit, they were intended for the whole body. With this perspective in view, it becomes clear at the Outset that a vast majority of tongues-speaking activity today could not be the same as New Testament tongues. Private tongues are not New Testament tongues. If tongues are a gift for the church, they should be brought out into the open for the benefit of the church.

Endorsement of the idea of a ‘private’ gift of tongues may lead to a peculiar situation. Suppose a man affirms his sense of call to the ministry. The church responds by indicating its desire to test his gifts. He affirms that in his judgment he has the gift of preaching, so the church tests that gift. He says that he senses in himself the gift of administration. So the church tests that gift.

But what if this candidate for the gospel ministry declares that he also has the gift of tongues? Shall the church also test that

gift? Or shall it be concluded that tongues are a ‘private’ gift that cannot be tested? Strange indeed would be such a circumstance. A person concludes that he possesses a gift meant for the body, and yet his gift cannot be tested. Every other gift of the Spirit must be tested publicly by the church. But a category of gifts is being introduced that cannot be subjected to the testing of the brothers. This kind of circumstance in the church would be strange indeed.

Yet one other verse must be analysed carefully with respect to the possibility of ‘private’ gifts in the church. For 1 Corinthians 14:28 states that if no ‘interpreter’ is present to provide the meaning of an utterance spoken in a tongue, then the speaker must keep silent in the church, and must ‘speak to himself and to God’. Does not this statement appear to endorse a private gift which does not function publicly in the church?

If approached in a certain way, this verse admittedly would appear to endorse the privatisation of the gift of tongues-speaking. If no interpreter is present, the tongues-speaker should ‘speak to himself and to God’.

But further consideration would not appear to lend support to this position. For the whole point of the passage is to provide orderly control of multiple gifts as they function in the church. ‘Two or at the most three’ should speak in tongues, and someone must interpret (verse 27). In a similar way, ‘two or three prophets’ should speak, and the others should discriminate (verse 29). The whole context deals with the orderly functioning of gifts within the assembly. In the context of this precise discussion, Paul makes the point that the tongues-speaker without an interpreter is to remain silent, speaking to himself and to God (verse 28). The two actions are simultaneous. As he restrains himself until an interpreter is present, he speaks within himself while communing with God.

The question is not whether the gift of tongues should function in private or in public. Instead, the question is when the gift of tongues may function in the assembly, and the answer is that tongues may function properly in the church only when an interpreter is present. From the comment in verse 31 that ‘all can prophesy’ in due time, it may be assumed that the same principle would hold for tongues. As soon as an interpreter is present, the utterance may be delivered. But in the meantime, the tongues-speaker must manifest patience in the assembly, just like the prophet. For the spirits of all prophets are subject to the orderly control of prophets.

In any case, the context presumes the public functioning of the gifts. The verbal gifts of tongues and prophecy are intended for the whole community, not merely for an individual to exercise in private. A person may justify the private exercise of ‘tongues’ from personal experience. He may testify to the fact that he derives great relief from tension through letting his vocalisations in prayer run ahead of his rational processes. His ‘prayer-language’ is to him a ‘gift’ from God that helps him cope with life today.

But in the end, experience must be judged by Scripture, and not vice versa. It may be that the groanings of prayer sometimes express such deep emotions that they are not easily framed into rational expressions. But these kinds of experiences should not be identified with the tongues of the New Testament unless a convincing exegetical argument can establish that point.

4. NEW TESTAMENT TONGUES WERE A SIGN

Tongues served as a signal from God concerning the fulfilment of particular prophecies about a dramatic change in the direction of God’s procedure for working in the world. God does not often surprise his people with something totally

unexpected. He prepares them so that they can understand what he is doing. This rudimentary principle about the way of God's working in the world applies to the manifestation of the gift of tongues in New Testament times. Prophecy and fulfilment, preparation and realisation work together for the edification and enlightenment of God's people.

An elder in a church outside Chicago, Illinois does stunt flying for a hobby. Taking a ride with a stunt pilot can be great fun, provided you are properly prepared.

'Want to take a little spin?'

'Sure, let's go up! Just don't surprise me with any unexpected manoeuvres.'

'Okay, let's start with a little loop. But be prepared. You will experience a certain "G" factor — a "gravity" pull. Your skin will feel as though it's about to pull right through the skeletal outline of your face. That's the "gravity" factor.'

Next he announces the 'hammerhead'. In this manoeuvre, the nose of the aeroplane points straight upward. The plane climbs heavenward until gravity overcomes the pulling power of the engine. When the motor begins to die, the plane falls sideways. You hope the engine will catch again as you plummet downward. That is stunt flying. Once you have been properly prepared for the various manoeuvres, you should have no problem.

In a much more reasonable fashion, God prepares his people for what is coming in the realm of redemption. He does not startle his people with surprises. God did not suddenly introduce the phenomenon of tongues as something wholly new on the day of Pentecost. Old Testament prophecies set the stage for the tongues that were to come.

We have already noted Peter's reference to the prophecy of

Joel on the day of Pentecost (*Acts* 2:16-21). When the twelve apostles began to speak in languages they had never studied, Peter indicated that they were fulfilling Joel's prophecy. Joel had prepared God's people for that moment by stating that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. He prophesied that sons and daughters would *speak in tongues*.

Is that what Joel said?

No, that is not what Joel said.

What did Joel say? He said that sons and daughters would prophesy. Yet Pentecost is clearly characterised as the great day of tongues-speaking.

Has Peter perverted Scripture? Has he twisted Joel's prophecy to make it say what he wanted to hear?

No, he has not. But his application of Joel's prophecy to 'tongues' points to a basic understanding about the nature of tongues. Tongues must be regarded as a subset of prophecy. So Joel's prediction about prophecy in the last days gave some preparation for the phenomenon of tongues. From Peter's application of Joel's words on the day of Pentecost, it becomes clear that tongues are a form of prophecy.

But even more significant for understanding the basic nature of tongues is the citation from Isaiah by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:21. His Old Testament quotation actually refers to 'other tongues'.

'Tongues' are mentioned explicitly in the Old Testament no less than three times. Three different authors in three different books of the Old Testament explicitly prophesy about tongues. In each case the Old Testament Scriptures indicate that tongues are a sign of covenantal curse for Israel.

Paul quotes one of these prophecies about tongues in 1

Corinthians 14:20-22. ‘Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults’ (*1 Cor.* 14:20). The people in Corinth were being childish about their use of the gift of tongues. They were using this gift from God as though it were a toy. They did not care whether or not others understood the meaning of the tongue.

Paul says, ‘Stop being childish.’ A two-year-old may squeeze food through his fist and eat his meal off his knuckles. But at some point he needs to stop being childish. In the same way, a gift of God may be used in a childish way. Paul urges the Corinthians to stop being childish in their tongues-speaking. He grounds his admonition in an Old Testament scripture that speaks about ‘other tongues’. He says,

> In the Law *it* is written: ‘Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord. (*1 Cor.* 14:21, NIV)

By this quotation from Isaiah 28, Paul sets tongues-speaking in the context of the history of redemption. He demonstrates an accurate understanding of the context of his quotation. The prophet had asked: ‘Who is [God] trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message?’ (*Isa.* 28:9a). Then the prophet answers his own question: ‘To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast’ (*Isa.* 28:9b, NIV).

The people of God in Isaiah’s day had anticipated the problem of childishness that was so obvious to Paul among the Corinthians in their use of spiritual gifts. The prophet had then depicted vividly the rudimentary way in which instruction had to be communicated from the Lord to his infantile people:

> For it is:
> Line upon line, line upon line, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there. (*Isa.* 28:10)

Because of their childishness, God must speak to his people like children. A rule here, a command there. ‘Don’t run in the street. Put your napkin in your lap. Go and make your bed.’

Then the prophet had pronounced God’s judgment on the people for their folly: ‘Very well, then, with foreign lips and with strange tongues I will speak to this people’ (*Isa.* 28:11). If you will not hear the plain word of God in your native tongue, then God will speak to you in a foreign language. He will speak to you so that you will hear words just as an infant hears the conversation of the adult world. If you are going to act like a baby, then God will speak to you like a baby.

The baby sits in the middle of the floor with his cookie and milk. He eats his cookie and pours his milk on the floor. Mother returns to the room. She begins to talk to the baby. What does the baby hear? The baby hears what sounds like gobbledy-gook. Because the baby cannot understand the language of an adult, he hears the words of his mother as though they were babblings.

But more particularly, the baby hears words of judgment. Isaiah says that the ‘tongues’ of foreigners will represent the arrival of God’s judgment for Israel. When the unrepentant nation hears men who have invaded their land speaking in foreign languages, they must recognise it as a sign that God has brought his judgment of an alien army on them. The army of the ‘babbling Babylonians’ represents for Israel a return of the judgment that first brought the confusion of tongues at the tower of ‘Babel’.

But eighth-century Isaiah was not the first to speak of foreign languages as a sign of judgment for God’s people. As far back as the time of Moses, foreign tongues represented the arrival of God’s judgment. One of the most awesome passages in Scripture describes the curses of the covenant that would come to a disobedient Israel. Among these curses that were

sure to fall on the covenant-breaker was the following:

> The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose *tongue you will not understand*. (*Deut.* 28:49, NIV)

In this prophetic context dating back to the days of Moses, the significance of tongues is clear. Tongues serve as a sign that judgment has come for Israel. The threat of covenantal curses must be fulfilled because Israel will fail to hear the Word of God. This same message recurs once more a hundred and fifty years after Isaiah in the days of Jeremiah. From Moses to Isaiah to Jeremiah the significance of tongues for Old Testament prophecy is the same.

Jeremiah lived in the day of the Babylonian conquest of Palestine. The prophet anticipates the judgment that was to fall in his day:

> 'O House of Israel,' declares the Lord, 'I am bringing a distant nation against you — an ancient and enduring nation, a people whose tongue you do not know, whose speech you do not understand.' (*Jer.* 5:15)

Once more tongues serve as a sign of covenantal judgment on a disobedient nation. When the 'babbling Babylonians' invade Israel, speaking their strange dialect, then God's covenant people will know that judgment has come on them.

So Scripture presents a unified testimony about the significance of tongues. Prophecies from the fifteenth century B.C., from the eighth century B.C., and from the sixth century B.C. all unite to make the same point. When foreign languages overrun Israel, they will be a sign that God's judgment has come.

In the light of this larger Old Testament context of specific prophecies concerning tongues, Paul's explanation of the passage from Isaiah becomes more understandable. 'Tongues,' he says, 'are a sign' (*1 Cor.* 14:22). Tongues are a sign, and a sign is not to be regarded as an end in itself.

A sign points to something else. A sign serves as an indicator, highlighting another object worth noting. A sign may indicate a change in the direction of the road ahead. It may indicate a curve in the road which will force a turn toward a different direction. In this case, tongues function as a sign in the history of redemption indicating that God is making a change.

What is the change that God was making when he introduced tongues at the beginning of the new covenant era? God was indicating that he no longer would speak a single language to a single people. At least since the time of Moses, he had spoken one language to one people. But now, by the gift of tongues at Pentecost, God indicates that he intends to speak in many languages to many peoples. He will speak in all the languages of the world to all peoples of the world.

Tongues, therefore, mark a point of drastic change in the direction of God's work in the world. On the one hand, tongues signified a distinctive judgment for Israel. Jesus speaks of this same judgment when he says, 'The kingdom shall be taken from you and given to a people bringing forth the fruit thereof' (*Matt.* 21:43).

When the people of Israel heard the foreign tongues of the Babylonians in the streets of Jerusalem, they were experiencing the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. They had persisted too far and too long in the rejection of the words spoken so clearly by God.

In a similar way, the foreign tongues spoken on the day of Pentecost were a sign of covenantal curse for Israel. No longer would God speak exclusively to them in contrast with all the

nations of the world. But at the same time, tongues at Pentecost served as a sign of the great blessing of God to all the nations of the world, including Israel. Tongues were a sign of the extension of the blessing of the covenant to all the nations of the world. For even though God took the kingdom from the Jews, he also grafted believers from among them back into the kingdom by his mercy and grace.

For this reason, tongues should be seen as a dramatic sign at a very specific point in redemptive history. They marked the transition to a truly world-wide gospel. For this reason, tongues played a significant role in the history of redemption.

But inherent in the nature of a sign is its temporally limited character. A sign marking a curve in the road is no longer needed by the traveller once the change of direction has been made. The traveller does not grasp hold of the sign so that he can take it along with him. Once the turn has been made, the sign has completed its usefulness.

Once the world might have presumed that Christianity was a Jewish religion. Christianity began with a Jewish Messiah and twelve Jewish apostles. But God gave an indicator to the world in the foundational age of the apostles that made it plain that any man from any nation who called on the name of the Lord could participate equally with Israel in the blessings of the messianic kingdom. God spoke in many languages so that everybody could hear. Gentiles as well as Jews had the opportunity to understand in their own tongue that they too were invited to participate in Christ’s kingdom.

Tongues illustrated dramatically the universalistic character of Christianity. God was not limiting himself to one people. His wondrous works could be heard in all the languages of the world. Tongues were a dramatic sign of a change of direction. Christianity was not exclusively a ‘Jewish’ religion, despite its clearly Jewish origins.

Once the need for a sign to indicate the universal characteristic of Christianity was obvious. But who today would be in danger of thinking that Christianity was a 'Jewish' religion? The need for a sign of transition exists no longer.

By the gift of tongues God made it obvious to all that he had moved from speaking one language to the world to speaking all the languages of the world to all the peoples of the world.

Tongues are a sign, a sign that is no longer needed. Indeed, in their day they also served the purpose of being a mode of revelation. For tongues interpreted were equivalent to prophecy. They were the very words of God which, when tightly understood, could edify the church of God. But just as the church no longer needs a sign establishing its world-wide character, so neither does the church need the revelation of new divine truth that tongues might supply. No further prophetic word is needed because the fullness of the word of prophecy has been preserved in Scripture.

The church needs neither pseudo-prophetism nor pseudo-tongues. It needs no diversion from the plain declaration of the divine mystery that now is revealed in all its fullness. The one thing the church and the world needs today is the faithful proclamation of the Word of God once given. It needs no more.

This continuing need for the clear proclamation of the prophetic Word now found in Scripture is brought out by Paul as he continues his explanation of the phenomenon of tongues as predicted in the Old Testament: 'Tongues are a sign, not for believers but for *unbelievers'* (*1 Cor.* 14:22). Tongues clearly indicate God's judgment on unbelief. If the Lord would bring such devastating judgment on his old covenant people as the Babylonians brought on Israel, then he surely will bring a finalising judgment of even greater proportions on all who

hear and reject the gracious message of the new covenant. This new covenant judgment was demonstrated to all when by the gift of tongues God turned from speaking one language to one people and dramatically demonstrated his intentions to speak many languages to many peoples.

But the gospel of the new covenant cannot rest with communicating a symbol of God's righteous judgment. It must move on to the clear proclamation of the message of salvation in words calculated to lead men to repentance. So Paul continues. The assembly of Christians must not rest contented with the manifestation of the gift of tongues, the sign of judgment given over the unbeliever, If the unbeliever is to be convinced that he is a sinner, the spokesmen in the assembly must move on from tongues to prophecy (*1 Cor.* 14:24). Then the secrets of his heart will be laid bare, he will fall down to worship God, and will perceive the presence of God among the people (*1 Cor.* 14:25). It is prophecy, not tongues, that ultimately will make believers out of unbelievers (*1 Cor.* 14:22b).

For this reason, prophecy (in its finalised, inscripturated form) will continue its active role in the life of the church throughout the present age. Until Christ returns in glory, the 'more sure word of prophecy' found in Scripture serves the church as the divine instrument for the conviction and conversion of sinners (*2 Pet.* 1:19). It is that living and powerful Word, the two-edged sword that pierces to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (*Heb.* 4:12).

5. CONCLUSION

Tongues, as in the case of all the other workings of God in the world, find their significance when located properly in the history of redemption. The barrier-breaking experience of the apostolic church at Pentecost allowed it to proclaim the gospel

in all languages of the world. When seen in its unique historical setting as a sign of transition to a world-wide gospel, tongues give greatest glory to the universal gospel. While tongues served as a sign, the fuller role of inscripturated prophecy now must be allowed its permanent place of continuing priority as the church progresses from age to age, proclaiming the message of the prophetic Scriptures in the power of the Holy Spirit to men of all nations.

Author

Dr. O. Palmer Robertson, pastor and Seminary teacher (now serving in the Africa Bible College, Malawi) is not concerned to defend the traditional, and he upholds the spirit in which differences among Christians should always be discussed. But he seeks to show from Scripture that the call today for such gifts as prophecy, instead of showing the sway forward to a more biblical Christianity, represents a failure to grasp the fulness of New Testament privileges.

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