



Chapter 9

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

The gift of tongues is such an encouragement to people as is it gives the recipient the opportunity to express to God their deep feelings and emotions that words can't express. I remember one particular time in our church we had a time for people to receive the gift. A lady in our church had never spoken in tongues before and, after praying, she received it almost immediately. Then, for the longest time, she almost didn't stop speaking in tongues - it was mixed with tears and joy. I asked her about it later. She said it was the first time in her life that she felt able to express to God the deep hurt that she has been carrying, her spirit reaching out to God.

I will often personally use tongues to align myself with what God is doing in a ministry session. Our heart when praying for people is to hear God for them, or hear what God is doing at that particular time. When I pray in tongues quietly and below my breath (so I don't distract the person - they may not even know that I am doing it), I find that I have a clearer mind for prayer and feel I can hear God with greater clarity in the moment. I believe what's happening is that my prayer is aligning my spirit with the Spirit of God for the time of ministry.

I find to be able to worship God and not need to find words to express the overflow of my heart towards Him is a wonderful gift from God. What a joy to be gifted by God to worship more, pray with increased clarity, and know that God can know us beyond what we can accurately express. Thank you God!

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Of all the spiritual gifts, the gift of tongues (*glossolalia*) is associated with the most stigma, confusion and baggage. Some believe that the gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of tongues, have ceased to be available today. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that the gift of tongues is a necessary sign of having the Spirit indwell a believer. Parties on both sides of the discussion hold firmly to their particular standpoints and many of us are left floundering somewhere in the middle, not knowing what to think about the gift or where to even begin to look for answers to our questions. Or, worse still, our disillusionment with this one gift leads us to shy away from all of the gifts, throwing them all in the 'too hard basket'. Still more of us see our relationship with Jesus as more 'mature' than all of that 'nonsense', preferring instead to rely upon our reasoning and intellect when approaching Jesus; after all, doesn't the Bible stress 'orderly' worship? In chapter 5 I discussed the role and purpose of the gifts of the Spirit and why they are so important. In this chapter I hope to address some of those issues in regards specifically to the gift of tongues and in doing so provide a starting point to understanding the purpose and biblical application of this precious gift.

1 Corinthians 12-14 will once again provide the basis for this discussion. When reading any text we must always remember the context. Paul here is writing to the Corinthian church because their usage of the spiritual gifts was becoming inappropriate. Competition and comparison was arising, with some people claiming to be more spiritual than others because of their receipt and use of the gift of tongues. Paul provides correction and instruction to the church and explains why there is need for orderly worship and how best to achieve this order *without* losing sight of the importance of the spiritual gifts. Many of us today have pursued strictly ordered worship services but in doing so have lost sight of Paul's encouragement to allow the gifts to flourish within this framework. This response is a tragedy.

In regards to tongues, this passage can sometimes appear confusing if we do not realise that Paul is speaking here primarily about the use of the gift in a *public* setting. As we shall see, the gift is just as edifying when used as part of a holistic *private* prayer life. But firstly, what is the gift of tongues?

What is the gift of tongues?

David Pytches in his book *Come Holy Spirit* provides a wonderfully succinct definition. I have included it here and will explain some of its elements.

“This is spontaneous inspired utterance by the Holy Spirit, where the normal voice organs are used, but the conscious mind plays no part. The languages spoken or sung are entirely unlearned by the speaker ... ‘Speaking in tongues’ or ‘praying in the Spirit’ is what happens when a Christian believer allows the indwelling Spirit to guide the form of words he utters. It is not an act of divine ventriloquism, but an act of collaboration.”¹

The gift of tongues is a supernatural language given to the believer by the Holy Spirit. It is not a learnt language in the same sense that someone may learn to speak French or German but is a divinely given language. Occasionally, though, the utterances are of another earthly language not otherwise spoken by the person. This is by no means always the case and is given the term ‘xenoglossolalia’ by theologians.

Receiving the gift often requires the believer to cooperate with God. Usually, the believer needs to begin to speak something – usually praise in their own language – and then shift from English by choosing to use an alternative ‘phrase’ to represent the same heartfelt praise. Rarely does God ‘take over’ your mouth. In that sense it is not ‘divine ventriloquism’. The conscious mind plays no part in that the believer does not have to mentally construct sentences and paragraphs in the way they would if speaking English or some other learnt language. This does not mean, though, that the believer is in an unconscious state. Tongues is not the product of an ‘ecstatic’ state nor is it a product of a trance. The believer is in full conscious control of the act and can start or stop whenever they choose. There is no loss of awareness of surroundings, or even loss of concentration when speaking in tongues whilst participating in some other activity such as reading a book or driving a car.²

1 Corinthians 14:2 states that anyone using the gift “does not speak to men but to God.” In verse 14 Paul says, “my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.” It can therefore be concluded that tongues is a *prayer language* in which your spirit prays, enabled and inspired by God. This differs from regular prayer, with which we are all familiar, which is uttered in English and usually processed in the mind.

What is it for?

The gift of tongues is perhaps the only spiritual gift which has a genuine role outside of gathered community. We can reach this conclusion because of its function. As already established, the primary role of the gifts is for the building up and encouragement of the church. Tongues is included in this function. Tongues, though, can still fulfill its role on a personal level and in a private setting.

An illustration may help here. On a simplistic level you could view it like a pack of cards. My extended family is quite large and every year as I was growing up we would all go on a holiday together. The evenings were often taken up with long and very large card games in which everyone was involved. During the day, though, this same deck of cards would often be used by just one person to play solitaire. The pack of cards remained exactly that: a pack of cards. But when used slightly differently under different circumstances, the same pack of cards achieved the same result – enjoyment – for the individual as it did when it was being used in a group. Obviously this analogy has its limitations but the point remains: tongues can be used by God's people when they are gathered together or when they are alone. What Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians is simply putting some guidelines in place for when the gift is used corporately.

PRIVATE USE OF THE GIFT

“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself...” (1 Cor. 14:4). Jude 20 also links praying in the Spirit with building yourself up. Tongues, then, is a gift given by God which encourages us in our personal relationship with Him. That is why it's such a precious gift and partly why Paul valued the gift so highly. Paul continues in 1 Cor. 14:18, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.” Paul's statement here is saying a lot. From what we know of the situation in Corinth, it seemed they spent much of their time together speaking in tongues. Paul's statement shows us he obviously used and valued the gift. It becomes clear that Paul is referring to his personal prayer life because, come verse 19, he makes the distinction between using the gift privately and in a church service. Privately, tongues express verbal intimacy with God and can bring a whole new dimension to one's prayer life.

This new dimension of prayer may be in the form of praise or intercession. Romans 8:26 says that the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. In a similar way, the gift of tongues allows one to pray without requiring English words to be formed. Sometimes English words just won't cut it. Sometimes a situation is just too overwhelming. In the moment when we are lost for words, tongues can be used for intercession. At other times the revelation of God is just so beautiful that words cannot express the inner cries of the heart. After all, English only provides a handful of phrases that can express "Jesus, I love you," and English certainly can't begin to describe His majesty. It's in these times that tongues allows one's heart to overflow with praise and in doing so we are encouraged. This is what Paul means when he says, "...the mind is unfruitful." (1 Cor. 14:14). This bypassing of the mind means that we can use tongues to pray even when there is loss of concentration or when we are doing something else. I know some who use the gift to pray as they are driving to work or washing the dishes. Obviously, though, this is not the only method of prayer that should be used, for Paul continues in verse 15 to encourage us to use the mind also.

Is it for everyone?

"I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues..." (1 Cor. 14:5). What does Paul mean by that? When we look at the personal benefits of the gift discussed above, and at Paul's reasoning behind them, his statement starts to make logical sense. The gift has the purpose of edification and the potential to revolutionise your prayer life and intimacy with Jesus. That said, there must have been people in Corinth who did not speak in tongues, otherwise Paul would not express this desire. And yet, I can see no reason why Paul would say this if the gift were only available to a handful of select people. Nor do I think God would withhold from some of His children a gift that would enable them to be encouraged and to worship Him in greater intimacy. Therefore, it is my conclusion that, although not everyone *does* speak in tongues, the offer is extended to all believers. At the very least, Paul instructs us not to forbid it (14:39).

Wait a minute! Are you saying I have to speak in tongues?

Not at all! God's grace is totally free. We do not *have* to do anything. The gospel is about freedom! But my response to this question would be this: wouldn't you like to? After

all, don't you want to be built up? Is that not why you read your Bible and pray, or take communion? Don't you want to experience greater intimacies in prayer, intercession and praise?

PUBLIC USE OF THE GIFT

While most discussion revolves around individual speakers' experience of tongues it's important to note that the early church valued the gift as much, if not more, for its congregational contribution. Two uses are common:

First: the practice during worship where the congregation responds to God by worshipping together in the form of harmonic singing in a mixture of tongues and English. This is, in actual fact, the *private* use of the gift in a public setting and does not require waiting for an interpretation. Instead, it's understood to be free, inspired doxology.³ Although some argue this practice is in breach of Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:23, 27, 28, it's here suggested that Paul's instructions relate to the second type of use: the public use of the gift.

This second type of use is when an individual feels prompted to publicly address God in a tongue. This is usually appropriate when the congregation is 'waiting' on God or within the worship time. The understanding is that this is a divine prompting and the resulting utterance is to then be interpreted in English in accordance with 1 Cor. 14:13, 27-28. In this instance, tongues functions very similarly to prophecy within the community. The difference of course is that a tongue, and therefore its interpretation, is directed to *God* in the form of prayer or praise (1 Cor. 14:2), whereas prophecy is a revelation from God directed to the *community* or the individual. Often, though not always, God gives the interpretation to a different member of the congregation. This further enhances the sense of unity within the body. Paul's emphasis in 1 Corinthians 14 regarding this is that it be done in an orderly fashion (14:40). This is easily achieved by ensuring the prompted tongues are given one at a time and an interpretation is given for each in turn. If no interpretation is given, then there is no point in continuing the process in that particular meeting (14:27, 28).

In both uses above, the tongues function to encourage the community and enable the congregation to function as a body. The second usage in particular increases expectation and dependence on both God and other members of the congregation for the interpretive phase of the partnership. In both cases, the gift serves as a powerful symbol of freedom and joy in praise as well as God's presence with us.

HOW TO RECEIVE THE GIFT

We've already established in chapter 5 that we are allowed to eagerly desire (seek) the spiritual gifts. It therefore seems appropriate that we are able to pray to receive the gift of tongues, just as the person who has the gift may pray for an interpretation when giving a tongue in a public setting (1 Cor. 14:13). Matthew 7:7, 11 also suggest we can ask our Father for good gifts. Sometimes a person receives the gift at the same time as their conversion. Often it is received subsequently, as was the case for me personally.

Many people find it helpful to ask for the gift while worshipping in song. This sometimes makes the transition from using English words a little easier and helps keep one's focus on Jesus rather than the words or phrases being said. Let's be honest, the whole thing sounds a little odd. Feeling self-conscious is sometimes a key inhibitor to a believer beginning to use the gift. Any method to help remove this feeling of awkwardness is beneficial. Praying with someone who already speaks in tongues can also be helpful. Having that person speak in tongues audibly (the private use of the gift) yet within earshot sometimes helps remove that initial 'awkward silence'. The laying on of hands is also recommended as demonstrated in Acts 19:6 and mentioned by Paul in 2 Timothy 1:6.

After praying for the gift, either alone or with someone else, the important thing is making a conscious decision to start. As mentioned, the gift of tongues is not divine ventriloquism but requires an act of the will and cooperation on behalf of the believer. As simply a starting point I often encourage the person I'm praying with to pick a phrase and let that sound represent all that their heart longs to say to God. When the person feels comfortable with this they may begin to add more phrases as the Spirit enables them.

Personally I received the gift after having been prayed for. I did not think anything had 'happened'. I had no profound spiritual experience and thought I was just making up noises. It wasn't until I was relaxed and alone, lying on my bed praying late at night, that I began to feel the freedom associated with these phrases. Since the mind is unfruitful when praying in tongues, the initial worrying about *what* to say often needs to be removed.

Some instances take longer than others, however I have not yet met someone who wanted the gift and has not been able to receive it. For some, their previous theological bias against the gift had to first be removed before they felt free enough to receive the gift, and this has taken time. For others a strong need to always feel in total control acts as the inhibitor. One should note once again that once received, the gift is always under personal control and one can choose to start or stop at any time, just as one can choose to pray audibly in English or not. If you are reading this and desire to pray in tongues, I'd encourage you to ask God for the gift and have someone pray with you. If you used to pray in tongues but have for some reason or another stopped doing so, I'd encourage you to try again! It's such a precious gift which will edify you in your Christian walk with Jesus.

The main pointers:

- The gift of tongues is a supernatural language given to the believer by the Holy Spirit.
- It is not divine ventriloquism but an act of collaboration with the Holy Spirit.
- Like the other gifts it is for edification.
- The believer has control over the use of the gift.
- Tongues can be used personally in private. Its public use is as a response to the Spirit's prompting and requires interpretation so that others can be encouraged.
- It can be used for intercession and praise.
- When speaking in tongues the mind is unfruitful.
- The apostle Paul spoke in tongues and did not forbid its use.
- I suggest that while we do not have to speak in tongues, it is a gift available for all believers.

