

Tongues--Purpose and Use

Speaking in Tongues versus Gift of Tongues

As we have seen in the previous lessons¹, speaking in tongues is the initial evidence or manifestation of receiving the Holy Spirit. Does this mean that if you don't speak in tongues that you haven't received the Holy Spirit? Not necessarily. The Holy Spirit is a gentleman and doesn't force anyone to do anything. We have to co-operate with Him. Some refuse to yield their mouth and tongue to the Holy Spirit either through fear or ignorance and consequently don't speak in tongues. However, because speaking in tongues is the initial evidence, the enemy can cause you to doubt the experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit if you don't speak with tongues. Anyone who receives the Holy Spirit and refuses to speak in tongues is missing a blessing and a powerful prayer tool. Anyone seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit should be expecting to receive tongues also.

When looking at all of the scriptures that relate to speaking in tongues it becomes apparent that the “speaking in tongues” received at the time of being baptized in the Holy Spirit is different from the “gift of tongues” as used in the Church. To clarify our understanding many teachers have distinguished between these by labeling the tongues received with the Holy Spirit as “prayer tongues” or “a prayer language”. This is constructed terminology that is not used in the Scriptures but does provide an easy way to differentiate between the two uses of tongues. I will use the same terminology in presenting the rest of this lesson.

To understand the difference we have to look at the way each is used. Their use reveals their function. In these next verses, Paul is contrasting “speaking in tongues” with “prophecy”.

1 Corinthians 14:1-6 NASB

- (1) Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy.
- (2) For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in *his* spirit he speaks mysteries.
- (3) But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.
- (4) One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.
- (5) Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but *even* more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.
- (6) But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?

Lets put the verses that deal with process of speaking in tongues together so that we can easily see what is being said about it:

- (2) For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in *his* spirit he speaks mysteries.
- 4) One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.

¹ For further explanation see the lessons “Receiving the Gift of the Holy Spirit” or “The Purpose of the Father”.

These verses reveal several important facts about speaking in tongues:

1. If you speak in tongues you are speaking directly to God, because people don't understand what is being said.
2. Your spirit is speaking, not your mind or understanding.
3. Your spirit is speaking mysteries which are not known to you in the natural.
4. When speaking in tongues you are edifying (building up or charging up like a battery) yourself.

This is contrasted with prophecy which speaks to men and is understood and builds up (edifies) the Church. Paul goes on to say that if you speak in tongues in the assembly it doesn't edify the Church unless it is interpreted. Without interpretation speaking in tongues in the assembly is not profitable.

Since speaking in tongues is your spirit communicating directly with God, then it must be some form of "spiritual language". The fact that it needs to be interpreted within the assembly also reinforces the concept of a language. This is underscored by Paul when he said, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels ..." (I Cor. 13:1). When the Holy Spirit provides a language for you, He has all of the languages of men and of angels from which to choose.

We see then that in the list of the gifts of the Spirit in I Corinthians 12:6-10, the "gift of tongues" goes together with the "gift of interpretation". Therefore, when in the assembly, it is the gift of tongues which operates because it must be followed by the gift of interpretation.

The goal is to edify the Church and not ourselves, so Paul says that if we speak in tongues we should pray to interpret. (If interpretation is required then he is speaking in Church.)

Paul again says that when you pray in tongues your spirit is praying but your mind doesn't understand what is being prayed by your spirit.

1 Corinthians 14:12-17 NASB

- (12) So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual *gifts*, seek to abound for the edification of the church.
- (13) Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.
- (14) For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.
- (15) What is *the outcome* then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.
- (16) Otherwise if you bless in the spirit *only*, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?
- (17) For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified.

Paul summarizes the results in verse 15: I will pray with the spirit (in tongues) and I will pray with my mind (understanding) also; I will sing with the spirit (in tongues) and I will sing with the mind (understanding) also. We should do both: pray or sing in our "spiritual language" and pray or sing in our natural language.

Paul goes on to say that if you say a blessing or give thanks using tongues, the one who has not received the Holy Spirit will not know when to say “amen” because he doesn't know what is being said. Therefore, even though you are giving thanks well enough in tongues, you should pray with understanding for the benefit of the ones with you.

We see then that speaking in tongues in the assembly is the operation of the gift of tongues because of the interpretation requirement; however, in the instances of receiving the Holy Spirit that we looked at in our previous lessons, there appeared to be no interpretation involved, which implies that the use of tongues in those instances was different from the use of tongues in the assembly.

Paul said that in the Church he desired to speak a few words with his mind (understanding) so that others might learn rather than many words in tongues.

1 Corinthians 14:18-19 NASB

- (18) I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all;
- (19) however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

However, he also said that he spoke with tongues more than all of the Corinthians. Since he was trying to correct their overuse of tongues, he must have spoken in tongues a lot. Yet, he didn't do it in Church. So, when did he do all of his speaking in tongues? It must have been when he was alone in his prayers. This enforces the idea that the “tongues” received with the Holy Spirit is primarily for prayer and not the “gift of tongues” for use in the assembly.

Not everyone has the “gift of tongues” even though everyone baptized with the Holy Spirit should have a prayer language. The fact that not all have the “gift of tongues” is made clear in these verses.

1 Corinthians 12:28-31 NASB

- (28) And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues.
- (29) All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not *workers of* miracles, are they?
- (30) All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?
- (31) But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

It is obvious from the questions that Paul is speaking about the Church or ministry within the assembly and from that we see that not all would have the “gift of tongues” just like all do not have the “gift of interpretation” or gifts of healings. However, as we saw previous lessons, all who received the Holy Spirit spoke in tongues, i.e., their prayer language.

The scriptures list what should be expected when the believers assemble together. There should be every member involvement and there should be a diversity of activities.

1 Corinthians 14:26-29 NASB

- (26) What is *the outcome* then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for

edification.

- (27) If anyone speaks in a tongue, *it should be* by two or at the most three, and *each* in turn, and one must interpret;
- (28) but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

However, the use of the gift of tongues is limited to, at most, three messages and each must be done in order and interpreted. If the first is not interpreted then he should be quiet as it was not the “gift of tongues” that he spoke but simply his “prayer language” for use between him and God.

Because of the possibility of abuse, many assemblies don't allow speaking in tongues; however, this is in direct contradiction to Paul's statement to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 14:39 NASB

- (39) Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.

The Purpose of Tongues

The primary purpose of tongues is individual not corporate. The “gift of tongues” is not to be used corporately unless there is also the “gift of interpretation” active within the assembly. But, privately, speaking or praying in tongues has great benefit; otherwise, why would Paul say that he spoke in tongues more than the Corinthians?

Some advantages to tongues:

1. **Our spirit is praying.** This bypasses our mind so that any carnal or natural interest is avoided. We are praying perfectly for what we exactly need according to the plan and purpose of God.
2. **We are praying directly to God.** There is not question about to whom our prayers are directed. Men do not understand our prayers in the spirit.
3. **We are praying correctly.** We are being helped by the Holy Spirit.
4. **We are speaking mysteries.** We are speaking to God about things that we don't know in the natural.
5. **We are building ourselves up.** The word for edify means “to charge up” like you would charge up a battery. Jude tells us that our faith is built up also².

The Prophetic Typology

There is also an important aspect involved with the purpose of speaking in tongues that goes all of the way back to the tower of Babel. The story is told in Genesis chapter 11. Up to that time, the whole earth spoke the same language. They joined in a purpose that was contrary to the purpose of God and as a consequence, God confused their language and, I believe, split the continents as part of their judgment.

2 Jude 1:20

The baptism of the Holy Spirit brings with it a unity of the Spirit that did not exist previously and which we are to diligently strive to preserve or maintain³. The Holy Spirit also brings to us a new unity of language, a spiritual language provided by Him with which we are to use to communicate with God as an addition to our natural language.

This is a direct reversal of the judgment at the tower of Babel. God brings forth a unity of purpose by the Spirit and provides the communication language necessary to walk in that purpose.

Use of Tongues

As we have seen, the primary use of tongues is as a supplement to our individual prayers. Praying with tongues does not replace praying in our natural language, it only adds to or acts as an accessory to our normal prayers. This is particularly helpful when you do not know how to pray about a specific matter. You can pray in tongues trusting the Holy Spirit to cause you to pray a correct prayer that is fully in line with God's will.

While praying in tongues adds a new dimension to your prayer life, it doesn't make you “super spiritual”. You receive the Holy Spirit and you receive tongues by faith. There is absolutely no merit or achievement involved. It is not a “reward” that God gives the faithful. There is no “worthiness” on our part. We need to keep all of this in the proper perspective.

The bottom line, the goal, is to produce love in us. The mark of the spirituality mature is the fruit of love not the gifts or works of power. It can't be said any clearer than Paul said it to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 13:1 NASB

- (1) If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Using any gifts of the Spirit, including speaking in tongues, without operating in love causes us to be just an unpleasant noise maker.

3 Ephesians 4:3