

Issues in Charismatic Theology

The Meaning of Tongues

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1. Introduction

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the Charismatic movement is the claim of speaking in tongues. In common Charismatic theology, speaking in tongues follows the special filling or baptism of the Holy Spirit. They base this belief on the examples in Acts 2, 10 and 19. They believe that the practice of tongues speaking brings great benefits for the Christian's spiritual life and vitalizes one's prayer life.

Because so many Christians are unfamiliar with the biblical teaching on the gift of tongues, they are being misled by the charismatic redefinition of tongues. This problem is compounded by a prevailing attitude that our personal experience is an authoritative source of truth, even equal to God's Word. Often, if a person thinks he has spoken in tongues the discussion is over. In addition, those who question the modern practices among Charismatic Christians are considered critical and divisive. Nevertheless, we are compelled to explain and defend the biblical gift of tongues, including its nature, purpose and duration.

2. The gift of tongues was not an ecstatic utterance

The typical Charismatic view of the gift of tongues is that it is the God given ability to speak in an earthly or heavenly language without prior knowledge of that language. While Charismatics usually acknowledge that Acts 2 shows that tongues is an earthly language, many of them believe from 1 Corinthians 13:1 and 1 Corinthians 14 that Paul spoke in a heavenly tongue or ecstatic utterance also.

While early Pentecostals of the first half of the twentieth century often viewed tongues speaking as human languages, this over time gave way to a view that all tongues speaking was an ecstatic utterance of an unknown language. Today, Pentecostalism often views a difference between the tongues of Acts and the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14. Under this teaching, when a Christian is baptized with the Holy Spirit, the tongues that necessarily result are an actual human language as seen in Acts 2. This type of tongues should be evidenced by all and is not the gift of tongues of 1 Corinthians which is not bestowed on all (1 Corinthians 12:30). In this view the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians is not an earthly, foreign language but is an ecstatic utterance. Charismatics have described this type of gibberish as a "heavenly language," or "the tongues of angels" from 1 Corinthians 13:1.

However, the gift of tongues should be understood as always referring to a miraculously given ability to speak in an actual human language that was foreign to the speaker.

Paul in other verses uses the term “tongue” as a figure of speech for a statement made in a human language (Romans 3:13; 14:11; Philippians 2:11). Other New Testament writers use the term “tongue” as a figure of speech for a statement made in a human language (Acts 2:11; Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). Also, the Greek translation of the Old Testament has thirty references to tongue that refer to normal speech and none that refer to unintelligible speech. There is no place in the Bible where the word “tongue” means ecstatic speech.

Also, the verb “speak” in 1 Corinthians 13:1 is in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood in Greek assumes an unreality, or something not presently the case. Paul was not speaking in tongues of angels, but only used that phrase to make a hypothetical case based on a hyperbole. Furthermore, there is no evidence that angels use a heavenly language, for when they communicate in Scripture they use normal human language (Luke 1:11-37, 2:8-14).

Acts 2 gives a description of the gift of tongues in practice at the founding of the church. In this incident it is very clear that tongues was an actual human language (Acts 2:6). This weighs strongly in favor of the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians also being an actual human language. It is also important to note that Paul, the author of 1 Corinthians, and Luke, the author of Acts, were close companions. Neither of them give any indication that the tongues that were present in Acts 2 differed in any way from the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14. There must be compelling evidence before we adopt a change in definition and in this case none exists.

Tongues need to be interpreted (1 Corinthians 14:5, 13), which normally has the sense of “translation” (cf. John 9:7; Acts 9:36 and Hebrews 7:2), which indicates that there is to be a translation of a foreign language. You cannot translate ecstatic speech or gibberish. While 1 Corinthians 14 describes the problem of the speech being unintelligible (vv. 9, 14) it is unintelligible because there is no one with the gift of interpretation, not because it is in essence ecstatic and unknowable. Furthermore, it is obvious that the gift of tongues was not an uncontrollable ecstatic utterance since Paul gives instructions on the control of the gift (1 Corinthians 14:27-28).

In addition, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12 in 1 Corinthians 14:21, which is referring to the strange tongues of the Assyrians, an actual foreign language.

The New Testament presents the purpose of tongues speaking as primarily a sign or convincing miracle (1 Corinthians 14:22), and only secondarily as the communication of a message. In Acts and in 1 Corinthians communication alone could have been conducted without the use of tongues. Mere ecstatic utterances will not be convincing since anyone can babble and pagan religions practice the same activity.

Like the gift of healing appears to foreshadow the redemption of the body from the judgment of God in Genesis 3, the gift of tongues appears to foreshadow the reconciliation of the languages from the judgment of God in Genesis 11 at the Tower of Babel. Just as the judgment of Genesis 11 created actual languages, the gift of tongues enabled communication through actual languages. Babbling does not foreshadow the reconciliation of the judgment of Genesis 11.

Understanding tongues as an actual human language rather than as a babbling utterance is extremely important for evaluating the Charismatic practice of ecstatic utterances. It is essential for Charismatics to redefine the biblical gift of tongues as an ecstatic utterance in order to validate their practice of babbling. If the gift of tongues is understood in the biblical sense of a supernatural ability to speak in a language that has never been learned, then it is clear that the current Charismatic practices are not biblical tongues speaking.

Some have sought to overcome this critical problem by claiming that they really are speaking in a language that can be interpreted even though there is no evidence. They believe that simply because no one can understand their tongues speaking does not mean they are not speaking in an actual language. However, this claim however is void of any supporting evidence.

If a person is really speaking a real language then a listener ought to be edified by the words. Paul's whole point in 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 is to teach that tongues are of no value if no one understands what is being said. If someone today does understand the Charismatic utterance, then what language is being spoken? When someone claims to understand, they do so based on a supposed gift of interpretation, not because they are understanding the tongues speaker in their native language (as was the case in Acts 2). This speaking that no one can understand validates nothing and is useless.

3. The gift of tongues was a miracle of the speaking, not of the hearing

On occasion, the belief is propagated by Charismatics and non-Charismatics alike that Acts 2 describes the apostles speak their own language but those hearing from various locations were able to understand the words in their native language. So then the miracle was in the hearing, not the speaking. Several reasons show this belief to be flawed:

- a. Those who would be validated as having supernatural ability would be the unbelievers and not the apostles. This undermines the purpose of the signs and wonders attesting to the apostles (cf. Acts 2:22).
- b. There were many speaking in tongues in Acts 2. This is why the plural is used to refer to the speakers (Acts 2:3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 13). It was not one person speaking and many who were listening. Rather, it was many who were speaking and many who were listening. This is how so many people could hear an individual who had the supernatural ability to speak to them in their native language even though they were from Galilee and would not have had this ability naturally.

c. The hearers were shocked that the speakers were from Galilee (Acts 2:7). Why would they be astonished at the Galileans when it those from different places who could each hear them in their own language? It is shocking when someone you know has no ability to speak your native language and then does so. It is not shocking to hear a person speak in the language they have been speaking their entire life, as was the case with Peter in Acts 2:14-30.

d. If this gift of tongues in Acts 2 was a miracle of the hearing then it would be present in unbelievers who had not even received the Holy Spirit. The Jews who were living in Jerusalem came together because they heard a sound like rushing wind (Acts 2:6). They were from various places in the Ancient Near East who had come to Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost. Three thousand would be converted to faith in Christ, meaning they were unbelievers before Peter spoke in Acts 2:14-30. This would mean the Holy Spirit was empowering unbelievers with the spiritual gift of tongues. Yet unbelievers cannot receive the Holy Spirit (John 14:17).

e. Why would there be an accusation of the apostles being drunk (Acts 2:13) if they were speaking in their normal language and it was being heard by others in their native language? The only explanation for this accusation is that people were hearing the apostles speak in a language that was foreign to Israel and foreign to the accuser as well. There were many people native to one of the areas listed in Acts 2:9-10 who heard the tongues speaking by the apostles and would not have known the specific language and would have been considered the speaking to be bizarre.

4. The gift of tongues was not the sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit

The traditional view of Pentecostal denominations such as the Assembly of God and the Foursquare Church is that tongues speaking is the initial evidence of a person who is baptized with the Holy Spirit. This is not only the view of Pentecostalism but many other Charismatics either believe this or at least believe this is an expected occurrence.

However, the Scripture clearly tells us that not all Christians speak in tongues when 1 Corinthians 12:30 asks rhetorically, “All do not speak with tongues, do they?” Yet all Christians have the Holy Spirit as Romans 8:9 states, “But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.” 1 Corinthians 12:12 speaks specifically of Spirit baptism when Paul writes, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” There are no second class Christians who do not have the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, this belief that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit. While there are cases in the New Testament where a person who believes in Christ and speaks in tongues (Acts 11:44-45), this is descriptive of an event, not normative for all time. It is mistaken to consider what happened in certain cases is the pattern for all cases. It is far more erroneous to pass off meaningless babbling as the evidence of the Holy Spirit and teach believers who are unwilling or unable to utter such gibberish that they do not have the Spirit of God indwelling them.

5. The gift of tongues was not to preach the gospel to other language groups

A very common belief about tongues speaking is that it is for the purpose of communicating to people who would not otherwise be able to understand what is being said. Therefore, the application would be in the missionary realm, where the good news of Jesus is being preached to those who speak a different language.

When we look at the incidents of tongues speaking in the Book of Acts, this did not occur. In Acts 2, we find those who heard the tongues speaking had the gospel preached to them by Peter in a language they all knew, most likely Greek, in Acts 2:14-30. The tongues speaking was necessary for the validation of the apostles as messengers from God, not for communication. The only other occasions of tongues speaking in the book (Acts 10:46 and 19:6) occurred after people had believed, not in order for them to understand and have faith.

The other mention of tongues speaking in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 12-14 where Paul gives instruction to correct the practice of the Corinthian Church. In this passage we find tongues speaking in the church, not to evangelize the world. The mention of tongues being for unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:22) is for the comparison with prophecy being for believers. Unbelievers saw this miraculous activity and they should have been willing to recognize it as a supernatural attestation to the message. The prophecy was God's revelation for those who already have ears to hear. This is why Paul states that it was a more significant gift in 1 Corinthians 14:1. Prophecy carried the message of God, whereas tongues supported that message.

Everyone in the Corinthian Church understood Greek and communicated as such. Thus the tongues speaking were not necessary for communication. It is unsurprising that no Charismatic believer has ever been able to use their alleged gift of tongues to visit a tribal group to communicate the gospel since this was never the purpose of the gift of tongues.

6. The gift of tongues was not a prayer language to speak to God

The purpose of tongues according to Charismatic theology is to edify the individual and, if interpreted, to also edify the church. Tongues speaking is typically considered to be a particularly useful in communication with God through prayer. However, this understanding is in direct conflict with the biblical purpose of the gift of tongues.

1 Corinthians 14 teaches there is one unified purpose for all spiritual gifts, namely edification. 1 Corinthians 14:22 describes the specific groups of people that were to be edified by tongues and prophecy. Prophecy was direct revelation from God and was necessarily intended for those who already believe and are expected to respond to the revelation. Tongues on the other hand was a sign for unbelievers, giving supernatural evidence of God's miraculous authority. As unbelievers heard the tongues speaking in their own language, by people whom they do not expect to be able to communicate in such a way, they ought to recognize the ability to speak such words comes from God.

The appearances of tongues in the Book of Acts supports the statement by Paul that tongues are a sign for unbelievers. In Acts 2 tongues were used to validate the message of the gospel to the unsaved Jews. In the other two instances of tongues speaking in the book of Acts, Acts 10:44-48 and 19:1-7, the context includes people who have just come to faith in Christ.

Therefore, tongues are intended to provide evidence in the context of the messages concerning salvation. The problem with teaching that tongues are for praying to God is that 1 Corinthians 14:22 explains that the purpose of tongues is as an affirming sign for unbelievers, not for prayer to God. To say that tongues has an additional purpose of praying to God is unfounded.

There are several verses that are misused by those who argue that tongues is a prayer language for Christians today. These verses are listed below, along with an explanation of them:

- a. 1 Corinthians 14:2, “one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God”

He speaks to God because no one else understands him. This is not an exhortation to speak in tongues in order to communicate to God. It is rather a rebuke for speaking publicly in a language that no one understands, for the context of 1 Corinthians 14 is public speaking. God, being multilingual, is the only one able to understand.

- b. 1 Corinthians 14:4, “one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself”

This is because, in contrast to prophecy (14:3-4), he is not edifying anyone else in the church. This is not an encouragement to speak in tongues privately in order to edify ourselves. It is rather a rebuke for speaking in a language that no one understands and thus does not edify anyone.

The Scripture does not instruct us to edify ourselves. Indeed, the Scripture considers the practice of self-edification to be a negative thing (Romans 15:2-3; 1 Corinthians 10:23-24; 10:33; 13:5). Spiritual gifts are by their very nature designed for serving others and are never for private use to serve ourselves (1 Corinthians 12:5-7). Paul’s reason for writing chapter 14 is to stop this practice of self-serving by the Corinthians.

Some claim Jude 20 commands self-edification, however not only is the verb “building yourselves up” not a Greek imperative (a command), it is actually speaking in the second person plural — that is, we, the church, are building up ourselves, the church. The individual is not being commanded to build up himself.

- c. 1 Corinthians 14:14, “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays”

1 Corinthians 14:14 refers to praying in a tongue. However, based on the following context of 1 Corinthians 14:15-17, Paul does not mean private prayer but public prayer. This is then consistent with the earlier rebuke of speaking publicly in a language that was not understood by those who had gathered, which would be unfruitful.

Because of the subjunctive mood of the Greek verb (“pray”) and the conditional clause (“if”), it is apparent that Paul is speaking hypothetically and is not describing his practice. Prayer in a tongue that is not interpreted is a negative event that is being spoken against, not a positive event that is being encouraged. The reason is that others are not being edified because they do not understand (14:15-17).

d. 1 Corinthians 14:18-19, “I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

Charismatics view 1 Corinthians 14:18-19 as saying Paul would rather speak in tongues in private rather than speaking in the church. But Paul is not contrasting speaking “in the church” (14:19) with speaking in private. He is instead contrasting speaking “in the church” with speaking outside the church (in tongues for a sign to unbelievers, according to 14:22). This is not only the more natural contrast but it is the direct teaching of the following verses (4:20-25). In 14:19 Paul is using hyperbole to encourage them to only use words that edify. Uninterpreted tongues fail to edify.

e. 1 Corinthians 14:27-28, “If anyone speaks in a tongue, {it should be} by two or at the most three, and {each} in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.”

1 Corinthians 14:28 is considered by some to be an encouragement to speak in tongues to ourselves and God. Yet here again Paul remains concerned about the gathering of the church and if no one is able to interpret the tongues speaking then the speaker should remain silent. The words “let him speak to himself and to God” is not telling him to pray in tongues in private but is telling him to be quiet and not speak out loud. This is consistent with the teaching of chapter 14 and is supported by the earlier statement that speaking in an uninterpreted tongue is not a fruitful thing for the mind (14:14).

f. Romans 8:26, “And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for {us} with groanings too deep for words.”

Many have tried to stretch Romans 8:26 to support their practice of praying in tongues. Many teach that when they pray a “Spirit-filled prayer” in a tongue, they are praying with “groanings too deep for words.” This is supposedly a prayer in a tongue that has a special degree of effectiveness.

However, the explicit teaching of Romans 8:26 has nothing to do with tongues speaking. First, it is the Holy Spirit who does the praying, not the believer. Second, the passage is speaking of all Christians, not just those who have the gift of tongues. Finally, in contrast to a supernatural ability to speak in a foreign language, the groaning (STENAZO) does not involve words. The Greek word means an unspoken sighing.

The obvious question that is outstanding to anyone who holds that tongues is a means of prayer is, “why would anyone feel the need to communicate to God in a tongue when they can communicate with God in their native language?” God is able to understand all languages and there is simply no need to speak in a tongue to pray directly to God.

Charismatics may respond to this by testifying of the emotional, subjective experience that their utterances bring. While an emotional relationship with God is important, we must worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24). In their attempt to relate to God through tongues we must ask the final question, “does the end justify the means?”

7. Interpretation of tongues

The spiritual gift of interpretation corresponds to the gift of tongues as it is the supernatural ability to understand a language that you have never learned. It is also a sign gift that pointed to the validation of prophetic truth. The gift of interpretation is found only in 1 Corinthians 12-14 but its existence helps us to understand the gift of tongues. The need for interpretation arose because of the public nature of the church service, where one person speaking in a tongue would not be understood by all. This shows the gift of tongues was not a miracle of hearing.

Furthermore, it is consistent with the public setting of 1 Corinthians 14, where some would know the language spoken and others would not. Without interpretation there is no edification of those who do not know the language spoken (14:6-12). Without any interpretation, the tongues speaker should refrain from speaking (14:28), demonstrating control of the gift.

8. Conclusion

Biblical tongues speaking was the ability to speak in a language that a person had never learned. This is not something that is possible apart from God’s supernatural enabling. It was God’s judgment of mankind that created languages (Genesis 11) and it was God’s work to reverse that judgment.

God did not give this gift to serve ourselves. God did not give this gift to evangelize the lost. God did not give this gift to enhance our prayer life. When the Lord taught us to pray it was not in tongues. God understands all languages perfectly. The evidence of the Holy Spirit within us is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), not even the sign gifts (cf. Matthew 7:22-23).

Because of Charismatic theology, confusion abounds regarding tongues speaking. Church services are in chaos. The Bible is being misunderstood. The true understanding of God’s miraculous gift of tongues is lost. Believers are divided and viewed as less spiritual. Unbelievers consider Christians as out of their minds (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:23). This issue is something more than a theological nuance.