



Resourcing for Prayer Network Guidelines

SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE (7)

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SPEAKING IN TONGUES AND THE INTERPRETATION OF TONGUES

Spiritual gifts can be divided into 'speaking' and 'doing' expressions and tongues and their interpretation are counted as Speaking Gifts. They are very special gifts of the Spirit which are often misunderstood and have led to many problems for the church over the centuries. They can still cause problems today if not used wisely and well.

Use of the tongue

There are many references to the tongue as a way of communicating with others wisely or unwisely throughout the Bible. Just reading the Psalms highlights the good ways in which the tongue is used to praise the Lord but Proverbs also gives many warnings on the deceitfulness of the way we speak. James warns us to '*keep a tight rein on our tongue*' (James 1.26) and encourages us in chapter 3 to '*tame the tongue*' lest it corrupts us.

Something happened at Pentecost to the early Christians that was not merely speaking with words. The gift of '*speaking in tongues*' was given to all who were present in the Assembly in the Upper Room in such a way that they could be understood by many others. Even at that time, to those who were opposed to Judaism or who did not understand the coming of the Holy Spirit, it appeared that they were drunk. But the effects of receiving this gift gave boldness to Peter to speak out and to remind everyone of Joel's words that God said '*even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit and they will prophesy*'.

'*To prophesy*' here means to proclaim the goodness and deeds of the Lord with the end purpose being that '*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*'. This proclamation of the Gospel will be from a position of knowledge and certainty of God and his purposes; and this boldness to declare the Word of God, can be given to all who have drawn close to the Lord and understand the way in which he is calling and commissioning them.

Prophecy is Not Tongues and Tongues is NOT Prophecy

In 1 Corinthians 14.2 we read '*For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God*'. So we need to understand that Tongues is speaking TO God; whereas Prophecy is speaking FROM God declaring his word TO humans through humans. Tongues is prayer not prophecy. So prophesying in any of its forms, is NOT speaking in tongues (whatever point would there be in God putting what he wants to say to us in an unknown language and then getting it interpreted into words we understand?) - but, as in Peter's case following Pentecost, it resulted in his ability to communicate with the Lord so that he could communicate with the world more effectively.

Continuing Misunderstandings

The rediscovery of the Spiritual Gifts and the emergence of both the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements as major forces in the 20th century led to confusion among many Christians. When 'interpretations of tongues' are given as 'Prophecy' (ie words FROM God) and was not weighed against scripture or for its origin or soundness by the hearer, the church was sometimes misled.

Because everyone in the Upper Room received the gift of tongues, it was presumed and practiced by some denominations that this was, and should be, an initial experience for all, whereas others believe that it is a second gift after conversion which brings you closer to God.

Throughout the ages there have been problems - often coming mainly from believers. It is only recently that the Lutheran Church in Europe repented of their stand that Pentecostalism was heresy.

The church in Corinth also obviously got into problems and Paul devoted a whole section of his first letter to them trying to sort them out (1 Corinthians 14). Here there are warnings not to speak in tongues if there is no-one present with the gift of interpretation. Paul maintains that he would rather they gave 5 intelligible words than 10,000 words in a tongue; he wants them to think like adults (18-20). His instructions to leaders are to bring order into worship so that all are blessed so '*If anyone speaks in a tongue, two - or at the most three - should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret*'; but he is also strong in saying '*do not forbid speaking in tongues*'.

Importance of Building up the Body

Another misunderstanding has been in the meaning of the phrase '*building up the body*'. This term is used, or referred to, in all four of the lists of spiritual gifts (1 Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4) and the Body of Christ (or community of believers) needs to keep this aim constantly to the fore in their thinking. But whereas prophecy is explicitly mentioned in the first three, speaking in different kinds of tongues and the interpretation of tongues is only listed among what are known as the Nine Manifestations of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12.

When we are called to '*excel in gifts that build up the church*' (14.12), Paul reminds us that he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, while prophecy edifies the church (1 Corinthians 14.4). Tongues builds up individuals so that THEY can build up the body of believers.

Keeping Close to God

This gift enables believers to be able to communicate with and worship God in praise, prayer and thanksgiving, extolling the magnificence and splendour of God without the use of carefully thought out words. It is God's wish that edified and mature individuals should be his advocates of the Gospel, but in order to do this he intends to use those who are growing personally in their spiritual understanding and who have a close spiritual relationship with him. This does not devalue learning, education or personal ability. These things are good and have their place, but on their own they are completely inadequate for the demands of Christ's ministry in and through the church today.

We need to seek this close relationship with God in order to know him more clearly and to be able to do his will. Praying to God in the Spirit, whether on our own or with others; with words or without; with the Spirit or with the mind, is a way of coming close to him and allowing him to build us up as individual ambassadors for him. There is something really beautiful and harmonious when a group of believers spontaneously break into '*singing in tongues*' - when all are of one mind and spirit in praising the Lord. When this happened in meetings being led by our team in the past, Edmund Heddle, our late colleague, would always interpret; which greatly added to the beauty of worship. Paul advocates that we pray both in the spirit and with our minds - but with the mind especially when there are unbelievers present.

In Summary

The gift of tongues is a very special gift that is given for building up the body, both individual believers and small groups of believers. It is essentially a prayer language that enables the intercessor to express the inexpressible. When you are caught up in the Spirit into the presence of the Lord the experience takes you outside the normal realm of every day materialistic experience and in communicating with the Lord you are lost for words. It is at this point that the gift of tongues enables you to pray in the Spirit in a prayer language which is meaningful to the speaker but not necessarily to others. The gift is much better exercised in private prayer and should not be exercised in public where unbelievers are present. If it is exercised in a small group of believers, the intercessor should either interpret, or someone else in the group should interpret, the prayer so that everyone can say, "*Amen*". This is Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 14.

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