

THIS "TONGUES" QUESTION

by Ray C. Stedman

This message centers around the question of tongues, and is but a part of the larger subject of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. I hope that you have come to appreciate and appropriate the Holy Spirit in your life. Many Christians live for years without a clear-cut awareness of their need of the Holy Spirit's ministry. I find that there are many Christians who feel they can get along all right without the Holy Spirit, or, at least, only need him in times of crisis or special pressure -- but this is not true. We need the Holy Spirit every single moment.

A magazine quotation stating this truth struck me so forcibly that I clipped it out and brought it along. It is from writings on the Holy Spirit centering on the text, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost." The writer says that one of the most difficult lessons, and yet perhaps the most important one, that we Christians have to learn is that we need the Holy Spirit. I would like to begin by reading this quotation:

Only when we realize how deep-seated is our need of him will we desire to know him better and have greater devotion to him. We need the Holy Spirit to understand Christ. We need the Holy Spirit to love Christ. We need the Holy Spirit to make us realize that the only role that the Christian has to play in this today's topsy-turvy world is the role of leading all men to Christ -- more indeed by what he is than by what he does. We need the Holy Spirit to understand so many of the things that we know -- sorrow, sadness, fear, regret, and simple things like the fact that before God the only measure of our success is holiness, and that before God it is our intentions and our effort that will bear scrutiny, not our results. Only the Holy Spirit can make us understand the power of charity, the beauty of chastity, the necessity of bearing witness to Christ in our daily lives. Only the Holy Spirit can make us understand how suffering, unlovely in itself, becomes not only bearable but beautiful when it is joined to Christ's sufferings to share with him in the redemption of a weary world. Only the Holy Spirit can fill our hearts with the fire of love -- that fire alone can inspire us to do something about giving Christ to the world. Come Holy Spirit; fill the hearts of thy faithful, we pray; kindle in us the fire of thy love. Humbly we ask that you take us at our word.

This is a wonderful expression of our need of the Holy Spirit, and anything that I say in this message I certainly do not want to be taken in any way as minimizing the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We need him, and thank God we have him! This is the good news we have received: The Spirit comes to those who believe in Jesus Christ. This is the unquestionable testimony of Scripture. There is no need for praying; there is no need for tarrying, and waiting; there is no special indication of him coming; he is given simply by the exercise of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Out of our Lord's own mouth we can prove this. In John 7 we are told that on the great day of the feast Jesus stood in the temple court and said to the people,

"If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37b-39 {RSV})

Today we are discovering a revival of interest in the special gifts of the Spirit. Many of you have been acquainted with the publications on signs and tongues and other manifestations that have recently taken place in rather unusual, unexpected places. It is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to do what he wills; he is the sovereign God, and he gives gifts to men as he wills.

One of the key things we need to understand about him is that the Holy Spirit distributes his gifts according to his will -- not according to our desire or our asking. If you would like to see that in Scripture, you will find it clearly stated in First Corinthians 12. From Verse 4 on you see listed the utterance of wisdom, utterance of knowledge, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Then the apostle says,

All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Cor 12:11 {RSV})

Obviously, how he distributes these gifts is his divine prerogative. You will find the same thing stated in Hebrews:

... how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will. (Heb. 2:3-4 {RSV})

So it is doubly emphasized that the gifts of the Spirit are not according to the desire, or the seeking, or the urging of men, but according to the will of the Spirit.

This means that it is simply impossible to take a stand and say that there are any gifts of the Spirit that have passed away and will never be evident in the church again. I know that among Dispensationalists (to which group I am happy to belong) it is considered quite the thing to do to say that the "sign" gifts of the Spirit passed away in the first two or three centuries and that we cannot expect any manifestations of these today. But regardless how attractive that may sound to some, nevertheless, there is nothing in the Bible that really supports this. For, if we have a sovereign God, he is not bound by anything that man does; and he can distribute the gifts of the Spirit any time and place he pleases. I would like to be clear on that -- I fully understand and believe that the Holy Spirit can give any of the gifts today that he gave in the early church, and it is his prerogative to do so. Therefore, if there are manifestations along this line, I think that we, in all fairness, ought to give due consideration as to whether they are a genuine manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit or not.

Having said that, let me share with you some of the literature that is being published concerning this renewal of the appearance of the gift of tongues in our country today. I quote from the little pamphlet that was distributed locally with reference to breakfast meetings that are being held in this area. This brochure says, "God is at work in unusual ways and in unexpected places. Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and others from most of the traditional denominations claim to have experienced the special outpouring of God's Holy Spirit, accompanied by the sign of glossolalia, which is speaking in tongues." (That word is Latin for speaking in tongues.) The Episcopalian weekly *The Living Church* said, "It is no longer a phenomenon of some odd sect across the street: it is in our midst. It is being practiced by clergy and laity who have stature and good reputation in the church!" George Cornell, Associated Press writer, says, "There has been a widely skeptical, even derisive attitude toward speaking in tongues in modern times. Consequently much of the recent activity has gone on quietly, but in one instance it touched off a furor." He referred to the instance in St. Marks in Van Nuys, California, when the Rector, Reverend Dennis Bennett, resigned under pressure after he and other parishioners gave evidence of the supernatural gift. So you see there is a good deal being said about the expectation of the gift of tongues by Christian people today.

The Scripture is the testing ground for all manifestations. We are told that we are to "try the spirits, whether they be of God" {1 Jn 4:1 KJV} -- and the only ground upon which we can try them is the Word of God. The experience that we have recorded of the early church is said to be distinctly designed to be our guide in these matters (1 John 4:1). When you consider the fact that there are manifestations of tongues in such religions as Hinduism and Islam (Mohammedism as we call it), and also in cults such as Mormonism, then this in itself ought to make us a bit wary of the manifestation and desire indeed to test it as to whether it is genuine or not. That is our purpose in this message; we simply want to test that which has been manifested.

Anyone who reads the fourteenth chapter of First Corinthians soon becomes aware that this was a great problem in the Corinthian church. It is interesting, however, that apart from this passage there is very little relative emphasis upon tongues in the New Testament. The word occurs only once in all four of the Gospels. There are only three incidences connected with it referred to in the book of Acts. In all of Paul's letters it is only referred to in one letter and that is in the letter of First Corinthians that we are going to look at. In many of the other letters to churches dealing with many other problems and attitudes, Paul never mentions tongues. There is no reference to tongues by any of the other New Testament writers or in the book of Revelation. So,

you see, there is relatively little emphasis on tongues in the New Testament.

In the church at Corinth tongues had become a very serious problem. Anyone who is acquainted with this first letter that Paul wrote to this church knows that he takes a considerable section of it to deal with this problem that had arisen. There were other problems, of course -- some of these early Christians were going to law against each other; there were others who had fallen out with one another and were separating into little groups and divisions and schisms and were at odds with each other; there were some who were getting drunk when the Lord's table was celebrated; and there were some who were living in idolatry. These were some of their many problems, and among them was this problem of tongues, so Paul devotes a large part of this letter (especially chapter 14) to settling this problem. Of course, this was given by the Holy Spirit, and certainly is a helpful passage as we consider this present outbreak of tongues.

As you read through this chapter, you discover that there is a true gift of tongues. It is mentioned in Chapter 12, and it was very much in evidence in the church at Corinth. If we ask what was the nature of this gift, we discover that it was a gift of languages -- known languages. This is made clear by the fact that on the first occasion where we have a manifestation of tongues in the New Testament (that is, on the day of Pentecost) this is clearly evident. They did not speak in any unknown tongues on the day of Pentecost, that is, unknown in the sense that no one on earth ever knew that language. The word "unknown" that you find in Chapter 14 of First Corinthians does not belong in the text. It is an italicized word in the King James Version, and the revisers have very wisely left it out. So it is clear from this (and I will show some more proof for it in a moment) that the "gift of tongues" really should be called the "gift of languages," because that is what it is. It is not uttering some ecstatic utterance which makes no sense, it is not jibberish, it is not a jargon, it is a known language that is spoken somewhere on earth and can be reduced to writing. It is a known language, that is the point.

As you read the account in Acts 2, there is no question about this, because there were sixteen languages mentioned there and people who spoke those languages were present. They heard these men speaking in tongues, that is, speaking in languages as the Spirit gave them utterance; and they said to each other, "How is this? Why, these men are Galileans; we can tell by their dress that they are just ignorant fishermen. How is it that all of us have heard them speak in our own tongue -- in our own language?" {cf, Acts 2:6-8}. Then the Spirit of God lists the languages, and there are sixteen of them from all parts of the earth. I, personally, believe that this took place in the temple courts, and therefore it was in a public place. The word was noised abroad rapidly throughout the city and a great crowd was gathered together. It was during the time when the feasts were being celebrated, so there were thousands of stranger in Jerusalem at that time, and these men heard these languages.

Now, I do not think it means that every disciple of Jesus Christ spoke in many different languages; I think the inference is clear that here was a group of men and they were speaking the praises of God, and as other men stood around hearing them, each one heard someone in that group speaking in his language -- this is the miracle. But the fact is very plain and clear that on the day of Pentecost it was specifically a known language.

There are those who say, "But when you come over to Chapter 14 of First Corinthians, this isn't the case. This is a different kind of a gift of languages or gift of tongues. The tongues of First Corinthians are not known languages." I do not think that is true. It is very clear that in First Corinthians 14 these are still known languages, and I submit as proof of that fact the verse where Paul says,

In the law it is written, "By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." (1 Cor 14:21 {RSV})

Now he is quoting from Chapter 28 of Isaiah, where Isaiah the prophet had predicted that God would speak through men of various languages to the nations, and still they would not believe. And Paul draws this conclusion from it:

Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers. (1 Cor 14:22a {RSV})

Now that is very clear, isn't it? Languages were to be spoken to men who would understand and hear the gospel in their own language. Paul said that this would be a sign to them because they were unbelievers and that tongues are not designed to be a sign for believers -- he specifically said so. This needs to be clearly borne in mind -- in Corinth men spoke in languages, and this was exactly what took place on the day of Pentecost. These people spoke in languages, there were unbelievers around, they heard them speak in their own language, and they said, "What is this? What an amazing thing!" And it was a sign to them, just exactly as we have it recorded here. This is what Paul, therefore, refers to in Chapter 14, and this is evidence that it is the same manifestation exactly.

More than that, speaking in tongues is evidently designed to be exhibited in a public place -- it is not primarily for private worship. This is so different from what people claim today. I have talked to many people who claim to have this manifestation of tongues. They say that it is given to them in order to help them in their private prayer, that they spend sometimes long hours in private prayer in tongues, and that this is a special gift for the release of the emotional life that they might praise God in their private prayer. Well, I find nothing in the Word of God to confirm that -- in fact, I find quite the contrary. On the day of Pentecost it was clearly not a private matter, and here in First Corinthians 14, if we read this carefully, we will see the same.

Let us begin this chapter, holding in mind what we have learned about the gift of languages on the day of Pentecost:

Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. (1 Cor 14:1 {RSV})

This chapter is simply a comparison of the value of prophesying, that is, preaching in the Spirit, with the gift of tongues or languages. Now Paul says,

For one who speaks in a tongue [language] speaks not to men but to God; (1 Cor 14:2a {RSV})

"Oh," you say, "that proves that this was not intended for preaching." No, it does not. On the day of Pentecost they were not speaking to the men, they were speaking to God. If you read Chapter 2 of Acts you will see the very ones declared that and that men who were dwelling in Jerusalem from many nations said,

"We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." {cf, Acts 2:11}

They were praising God; they were speaking to God in ecstatic praise, but it was heard by these unbelievers around, and this was the sign to them. Now, here is a group of Christians gathered together in Corinth, and Paul says, "If one of you speaks in a language in your midst, he is not speaking to the crowd around (this is the thing that he finds fault with), he is speaking only to God. They hear it, but they do not know what he means."

... for no one understands him, [he says] but he is utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. He who speaks in a tongue [or another language] edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Cor 14:2b-4 {RSV})

That is, the one who is speaking knows the thought that is behind it, so that he is helped by it, but no one else is because no one else understands it there in that church. It does not mean that it is not a language that is understood somewhere, but, in that crowd, there is no one there to understand it. And so he says,

I want you all to speak in languages. {cf, 1 Cor 14:5a RSV}

That is fine. And at the end of the chapter he says, "Forbid not to speak in tongues" {cf, 1 Cor 14:39b}, that is, "this is a gift of the Spirit and if he wants to exercise it, I will not say "nay." Why should I?"

I want you all to speak in languages, but even more to prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in languages, unless someone interprets, so that the church

may be edified. {cf, 1 Cor. 14:5 RSV}

Now I do not think this means, necessarily, that the interpretation be done supernaturally. To illustrate, someone might get up in this church and speak in Russian. Now, according to the Scriptures this would require an interpretation, because in a group of Christians it is not right, it is not fair, as Paul says, for one simply to be edified at the expense of everybody else. And if it is interpreted -- fine! Now, it may be that there is nobody here that speaks Russian and therefore, as Paul will say in a moment, pray that God will give the gift of interpreting to someone so that they can do this. But if someone were here who could speak Russian, then all that he would have to do is get up and simply interpret the language. It does not necessarily require a supernatural interpretation. And this would again be indication that it was intended to be foreign languages as Paul quotes from Isaiah later.

Now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in languages, how shall I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? {cf, 1 Cor 14:6 RSV}

This morning we heard Ells Culber sing, and he sang in tongues. Not in the gift of tongues, but he sang in another language -- he sang in Spanish. He had given us a bit of the background of the song, and this was very interesting, but it would have fallen so flat had he not interpreted. But he did, and it was a blessing to us because he sang the verse again in English and let us know what the Spanish said. Now, this is what Paul says, "I don't intend to come and speak to you in another language, because if I did you wouldn't understand what I meant, and what blessing could I be to you then? I would have to bring some kind of a blessing in the way of a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching if I want to bless you. But just languages -- that doesn't bless you, that doesn't help you" Then he illustrates this:

If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? (1 Cor 14:7 {RSV})

I am glad he chose these instruments -- there are others that he could have used that give very distinct notes and everybody would know that something is being played even though they do not know what it is. But the flute or the harp are rather delicate instruments, and he says that if they are not played clearly, how are you to know what is being played?

And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? (1 Cor 14:8 {RSV})

In other words, the value of these things is that they are understood.

So with yourselves; if you in a language utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world [and "languages" is the correct word -- that is exactly what the Greek says], and none is without meaning; but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves; since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, [do not strive for tongues but] strive to excel in building up the church [with that which blesses people and ministers to them]. {cf, 1 Cor 14:9-12 RSV}

And now he goes on to give the rules for speaking in a language:

Therefore, he who speaks in a language should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a language, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; [that is, if necessary I will exercise this gift, but not in a place where others are gathered because it is necessary that they be blessed] I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may give

thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. I thank God that I speak in languages more than you all; {cf, 1 Cor 14:13-18a RSV}

When did he do this? Well, we would judge from what he says that he probably did this in his ministry. He says, "If I come to you speaking in languages," that is, Paul could have done that as a sign, arresting the unbelievers around him when he went into a new area. It is not recorded elsewhere that this is the case, but we would judge this from what he says here.

I thank God that I speak in languages more than you all; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a language. {cf, 1 Cor 14:18-19 RSV}

This is common sense, isn't it? An I think this puts the right emphasis on the matter of languages, or the gift of tongues.

It is also evident that at Corinth not only the true gift of languages was in evidence but there was also a false manifestation -- there were those who heard some of the Christians speak in another language by the impulse and power of the Holy Spirit, and they coveted the same for themselves. Because the language sounded unintelligible to them and just a babble of incoherent sounds, there were some who just simply took upon themselves, in the effort of the flesh, to imitate this. They were not deliberately deceiving themselves, but out of a desire to be blessed with this particular manifestation they became self-deceived and psychologically prepared for this kind of thing -- and they began to babble incoherently. As a result, there was a confusion reigning in the assembly, and this is why Paul is taking them to task on this and straightening them out on this disorder.

Now, how can you tell the difference? Suppose I stood up here and raised my hand and said, "Yougaty lougaty yon sighpa pondio chicka." Do you know what I am saying? I have heard many, many times that very kind of an exhibition called "speaking in tongues." Suppose I said to you, "I have just spoken in tongues by the Holy Spirit." Could you prove me wrong? No, you could not. It is impossible to prove that this is not the true gift. So there were some motivated by desires for spiritual superiority and desirous of possessing this distinguishing gift who simply indulged in this ecstatic utterance that did not make any sense -- a jargon of sounds and syllables thrown together like that. And they called it speaking in tongues and nobody could tell the difference. So Paul says there is only one thing to do. "If I forbid them to do this, this will also set a limit on the Holy Spirit. I can't do that, so the only thing to do is to regulate this, because, if it comes from the flesh, it will be that which seeks to build up the individual and make him look like he has something greater or better or more blessed or more advanced than someone else. But if it really comes from the Spirit, it will be gladly subjected to the regulations that make it a blessing to all, that is, interpretation." And so he sets this out for them:

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, A lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. [That is the great rule.] If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn [no two people doing this at the same time]; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God. (1 Cor 14:26-28 {RSV})

That is, if this cannot be manifested and exercised in a way that can bring blessing to the hearts of all, and does not glorify God, but the individual, then let it be done at home alone where nobody else will be bothered by it. In other words, that is the false gift.

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. (1 Cor 14:29 {RSV})

And so on. He goes on to govern the spirit of prophecy, and then he says in this connection:

If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. (1 Cor 14:37 {RSV})

This gives us a little insight into what was taking place. There were some who thought they were especially spiritual when they spoke in tongues. And this is the problem and the danger I see with the modern outbreak along this line.

It ministers to that ever-present hunger of the human heart to have something more than someone else has, and to have a spiritual gift that will mark them as especially honored by God. It ministers to spiritual pride and causes division in the church. Almost invariably, where tongues break out in a church, there comes division. This was true in the church in Van Nuys. As soon as this manifestation took place, the church was split right down the center. One thing that the Spirit of God puts great emphasis on is the unity of believers and he speaks so strongly against anything that splits the church. It is much, much worse to split a group of believers than to refrain from speaking or exercising a gift that will split a church over that issue. This is one of the major dangers along this line.

The second one is that almost a sure mark of this being false is propagandizing the gift of tongues, that is, going about saying that this is the mark of the Holy Spirit and that this is the thing that we must seek. Anyone who knows their New Testament well knows that when you set people to seeking an experience of any kind, you plunge them into spiritual darkness -- they are going up a blind alley, because it is not the gift but the Giver that is the important thing, and it is not the experience but the One who gives the experience that makes things wonderful. We are not to seek any experience but to seek the One who, in his sovereignty, has the right to choose what experience we may have.

Now, he will give experiences, but that is his job. I said to a man the other day, "I know many godly Pentecostals, but they are not godly because they are Pentecostal -- I know equally godly people who will have nothing to do with the Pentecostal experience."

This is not the door to godliness; this is not the door to spirituality; this is simply a minor side issue. It is at the bottom of the list of the gifts of the Spirit. It is the Spirit's prerogative to give if he chooses; it is to be used as a sign to unbelievers, not for the blessing of any individual himself or even for the edification of believers (except as it is interpreted to them); and it is a sign to arrest the unbeliever who comes in.

When we put it in that category, then we begin to see that very, very little of what is touted abroad today can properly claim to be the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I am not trying to speak against these movements. I thank God for anything that makes people hungry. I know that much of this is simply a manifestation of the deep-seated hunger on the part of many, many Christians who have been in churches where there is little gospel preached, and little manifestation of the work of the spirit in any way, and whose hearts have become parched and dry and dead and they hunger for reality. But the reality is not tongues; the reality is not even the Spirit; the reality is the indwelling Christ whose presence and power the work of the Spirit makes real to us.

Here is where the heart rests, satisfied, and this is what makes the life aflame and fills with joy and gladness and peace and blessing. As we come into that experience (which is not accompanied by any manifestation), simply accepting and believing by faith what God says about an indwelling Christ, then we begin to experience all that satisfying of the heart-hunger that men and women are looking for.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for the Word of God which so clearly helps us in our difficulties, and for the Spirit of God who illuminates these pages and makes clear to us what thy work is. We thank you for what we have learned. We pray that it may ever be exercised not in that spirit of knowledge which puffs up, but rather in that spirit of love which builds up. For we pray in Christ's name, Amen

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