

# THE TRUE GIFT OF TONGUES

by Ray C. Stedman

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We are experiencing a revived interest in tongues these days. Even the daily newspapers are giving reports on the outbreak of glossolalia in various churches, especially in the Episcopalian Church, which many felt would be the last place a gift of this unusual character would be found.

But this is not the first time that tongues has broken out in a widespread way in this country. I have read a great deal concerning the outbreak of tongues and accompanying phenomena in 1906 in Los Angeles and along the West coast. I was not present personally, but I have read a great deal about it, and I was involved in the results of the movement that began in 1906. As I observe the reports of the most recent outbreaking of tongues in various places, I sometimes feel as if someone is playing a record I have heard many times before. It is exactly the same story as that of the outbreak in 1906 and following years. It is following the same pattern, and people are saying the same things about it.

If you read church history you will find there have been repeated outbreaks of this all the way back through church history, even to the very beginning. For instance, there was the Millerite outbreak in England in the 18th century. This, then, is nothing new or particularly strange; it follows pretty much the same pattern whenever it occurs. But the presence of such an outbreak is one thing; the explanation of it is another. It is our task then in these two Sunday nights to attempt an evaluation of what we are seeing, what has occurred in the past, and what is occurring now.

I would like to begin where, perhaps, you would least expect me to begin, with Paul's words in the closing verses of Chapter 14 of First Corinthians, where he says, specifically,

**"Forbid not to speak in tongues," {cf, 1 Cor 14:39 KJV}.**

Now that is the word of an inspired apostle reflecting the right relation and right attitude toward the outbreak of tongues. Even an Episcopalian bishop has no power to countermand a word like that!

I start there because it is important to recognize there is a true gift of tongues as there is also a counterfeit gift of tongues. Our problem becomes: "Is the present outbreak a true gift of the Holy Spirit or is it a manifestation of the false gift of the tongues?" We shall attempt the answer to that question in these studies.

It is important that we do this.

Personally, I do not feel overly perturbed by what is going on today, largely because I can see that it occurs repeatedly, and after a set pattern, all the way back through church history. It has happened before, and it is going to happen again, if we live long enough to see it. But each time it occurs it needs to be evaluated. It is the mark of Christian maturity to distinguish between good and evil, the true and the false. But that is a lot harder than it sounds.

Usually, when we hear someone say that we need to distinguish between good and evil, we think that is very easy. Evil looks evil and good looks good, and anyone can tell the difference. But it is not so simple. The whole danger about the work of Satan is his ability to deceive, his ability to act with subtlety, to set snares and traps. Anyone who knows anything about the use of snares and traps knows that you do not set a snare that looks like a snare, nor do you lay a trap out in the open where everyone can see it. You disguise it so it does not look like a snare, or you put it in a hidden place where it will be chanced upon and not openly recognized.

This is the chief characteristic of the devil. He can appear as an angel of light and deceive, "if it were possible," as Jesus said, "the very elect," {Matt 24:24}. He is characterized by the same thing. Therefore, there is a vital need for distinguishing the spirits, for recognizing true and false, for knowing the difference between good

and evil, and the entire New Testament continually exhorts us to this end. "Grow up," the apostle says, "don't be tossed about by every wind of doctrine that comes along, {Eph 4:14 KJV}. Learn to distinguish the spirits. Pray and seek the mind of God as to what is right and what is wrong. And as you read and study, exercise your senses so that you learn, by practice, to distinguish between good and evil."

Now the test of what is good or evil is never experience, but Scripture. I would like to emphasize that note. It is no good for someone to say, "This happened to me, therefore, I know it must be of the Lord." Or, "A friend of mine went through such and such an experience and it was so wonderful that he tells me the result in his life has been great blessing, therefore it must be of the Lord." Now, if you judge things on that basis you are certain to fall into the trap of Satan, because that is exactly the basis he uses to deceive. He is always trying to get us to transfer the basis of our action from faith to experience.

That is what he was doing with the Lord Jesus in the wilderness when he said, "If you are the Son of God, change these stones into bread," {cf, Matt 4:3}. That is, "Do not any longer continue to walk by faith in God, by whose word man lives, but rather show something, demonstrate something, experience something." This is the continual effort of Satan -- to transfer us from faith to experience. Therefore, never take anyone's experience. It may be valid; it may be true. Facts are always facts, and you do not need to deny what happens to someone. However, what happens is one thing; the explanation of it is quite another thing. This is where people get confused. They judge their experience by some preconceived notion or some presupposition, some pre-set attitude of mind. They explain it in terms of what they want it to be. They believe what they want to believe about it and then they use their experience to prove their claims. That does not prove anything, of course. The facts of the experience may be undeniable, but the explanation of why it occurred must only come from Scripture. That is Scripture's purpose. It is given to us that we might be illuminated and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, as we read and search, to know the truth and to distinguish between good and evil.

Now if we come to this subject of tongues on this basis, we find that, first of all, there is relatively little said in Scripture about tongues. Compared with the tremendous amount of words that are being poured out today about this subject of tongues, it becomes very obvious that this is very much out of proportion. It is quite obvious from that fact alone that it has been blown up to an unwarranted degree and has been treated far more exhaustively than it deserves.

For instance, there is no mention of tongues at all in the four Gospels, except in one disputed passage at the end of Mark. Most of the ancient authorities leave out the closing verses of Mark, so it is questionable whether they were really a part of the original document. Now that is remarkable, isn't it? In those four Gospels we have the seed plot of every important doctrine of the New Testament, but we have no mention of tongues, except in a strongly disputed passage.

Furthermore, in all the Epistles of the New Testament, in only one letter is the subject of tongues even mentioned at all. In all the other letters of Paul, Peter, and John, there is no mention of tongues -- not even a passing reference. But in one letter, where they had a problem in the church over this matter, you find the only treatment in the writings of the apostles on this subject -- the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

Now, I think that is putting this subject in its proper perspective. Tongues is not by any means the important element in the Christian experience that it sometimes is made to appear.

We find also that tongues is mentioned four times in the book of Acts; three times definitely, with a possibility of it occurring on one other occasion. We all know, of course, the account of the day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. Then, in the house of Cornelius, when Peter preached the gospel to the Gentiles and the Holy Spirit fell upon them, they too spoke in tongues. Also, in the 19th chapter of Acts we have the account of Paul meeting with certain disciples of John the Baptist. He prayed with them and laid hands on them, having learned that they did not even know the Holy Spirit had yet come, and they too spoke in tongues. And then, though it is not mentioned directly, and there is much debate on this subject, in the account in the 8th chapter of Acts: Peter and John went down to Samaria and laid hands on the believers there and there is an inference that they too spoke in tongues, because Simon the sorcerer, the magician, when he saw by the laying on of hands that they received the Holy Spirit, asked for this power and tried to buy it from Peter. Pentecostals, in general, argue that what he saw or heard was a manifestation of tongues. This may be. It is impossible to

prove either way. But we do have three definite experiences of the early church speaking in tongues, and these are the only three accounts of tongues in the book of Acts. Then there is the lengthy treatment that Paul gives, along with reference to other spiritual gifts, in First Corinthians, the 12th, 13th, and 14th chapters of that interesting letter.

I would like to look at these instances from the book of Acts and also from Paul's letter to Corinthians that we might have fixed in our minds, from the Scriptures, the teaching of the Word of God, and the Spirit of God, concerning the true gift of tongues.

Taking these passages as definitive of the true gift, we learn several things:

First, in the book of Acts, the second chapter, we have the experience of the disciples at Pentecost.

**When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." {Acts 2:1-13 RSV}**

Now several things are immediately evident from this account:

It is clearly evident that tongues, in this initial experience in the Bible, are definite, known languages. Not gibberish or repeated syllables or babblings that no one understands, but definite, known languages, conveyed in words. Now I recognize that to someone hearing a person speak a language he had never learned it may sound like gibberish. But anyone who has traveled widely knows that even though you do not understand the language, know even a word of it, it is not difficult to tell the difference between a language and gibberish because in a language there is a repetition of sounds in a pattern that is evident and which can be recognized as words. It is quite different from gibberish. I have a little one-and-a-half year old daughter at home who speaks in gibberish. She is always pouring out a lot of disconnected syllables, but none of us would ever try to make them into a language. We have never called in a Wycliffe translator and asked him to try to reduce it to writing. It simply is not possible; it is gibberish. But languages have structure, and pattern, and tone.

I know, too, there is a claim made from the occurrence of the word "unknown" in First Corinthians 14 that these are not known languages. But that word "unknown," which appears in the King James Version, does not belong there. It has no basis in the Greek. It was supplied by the translators to explain the text. What they meant by it was that no one present understood what the language was, and, therefore, it was unknown to those present. It has been taken to mean, however, that it was a language never known anywhere on earth. But that idea has no basis whatsoever in Scripture. These were definitely known languages, as we see here on the day of Pentecost.

Furthermore, reading on in this section of Chapter 2, we find that these languages were a fulfillment of prophecy. Both the prophet Joel and, as Paul quotes in First Corinthians 14, the prophet Isaiah predicted that there would be tongues spoken, that men would speak in a strange tongue. Peter picks up the prophecy of Joel and says, "this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" {Acts 2:16}, and quotes the prophecy. This is very interesting, for it suggests that Pentecost was in a very real sense the answer to Babel. Remember, in Genesis, how, after the flood, all men spoke one language? Then their pride began to assert itself and they insisted upon making a tower that would reach up to heaven, that would symbolize the exaltation of man. As

they built this tower, God came down among them and confused their tongues so that they began to speak in other languages. Now Pentecost is a removal of the barriers to understanding, making it possible for men to speak in other languages so as to be understood by anyone. It is a reversal, therefore, of the activity of sin, which resulted in the tower of Babel.

This may explain the third feature that is evident to us in this account, and that is that tongues were directed to God, not to man. You find this in Verse 11 of the second chapter:

**" ... Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." {Acts 2:11 RSV}**

They were praising God; they were not preaching the gospel. For many years, I felt that perhaps tongues fulfilled a designed purpose in the preaching of the gospel in languages that had never been learned by the early Christians. But the more I study the Bible, the more I am convinced this is not true. There is no indication anywhere in Scripture that any of the early apostles ever preached the gospel in a language they did not learn. But the gift of tongues was always employed in praising, in declaring the mighty works of God. This is confirmed for us in First Corinthians 14 where the Apostle Paul specifically says, in verse 2,

**For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God. {1 Cor 14:2a RSV}**

Therefore, tongues are not preaching. They are praise, and are directed to God, not to men.

On the day of Pentecost the early disciples, the Christians, were all speaking in various languages. As the crowd gathered into the temple court where this was taking place, having heard the mighty sound of the rushing wind, they heard them speaking in languages and realized that they were not speaking to them, but they were speaking to God, praising him. But these men from various parts of the world were listening and hearing them in their own language. Thus, it was a sign to them of God at work among men. Just as the miracles of our Lord in the days of his life were foregleams of what would be commonplace in the millennium, so the experience of Pentecost was a foreview or a foregleam of the day when God would completely solve the problems that bring about human disunity and completely reverse, all over the world, the effects of Babel. That is what we have here, a prophetic foregleam of something that will find its complete fulfillment when the church is finished and the kingdom of God is ushered in.

Remember, in the book of Hebrews, the writer there refers to the miracles of our Lord and those who saw them as those who have "tasted of the powers of the coming age," {cf, Heb 6:5}. Thus our Lord is simply doing in the brief space of his earthly ministry the activities that would be characteristic, widespread, on the earth in the days of the millennium. And here, in this event in Jerusalem, and the other accounts, you have a duplication, a foregleam again, of the experiences of the kingdom age.

If this is true, this explains the other occurrences in the book of Acts. As the body of Christ is being formed in the Acts period, and each distinct group hears the gospel for the first time and is added to that body, then the gift of tongues is given to it as a sign that they are, indeed, a part of the one body which originally took form on the day of Pentecost. This is additional confirmation that this is what God has in mind for the entire world in the day when he completes his ministry with the church. There were none but Jews speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost. In the account in Acts 8, if they spoke in tongues in Samaria, then it was only Samaritans who were doing it. At the beginning of the book of Acts, Jesus had given a pattern for the out-thrust of the church, "Beginning at Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth," {cf, Acts 1:8}. In Acts 8 we find the Samaritans added. They were not Jews; they were not Gentiles. They were a separate, distinct body or group. But they are added to the church and have the manifestation of tongues as a sign of the Spirit, accomplishing before men and the very thing God has promised.

In Acts 10 we have the account of the Gentiles meeting in the house of Cornelius. These are all Gentiles, and they spoke in tongues. They were not Jews, they were not Samaritans, they were Gentiles. And in Acts 19 we have the only splinter group left, the disciples of John the Baptist. They were not Jews because they were following John, who was proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. They were not Jews, in that religious sense; they were not Gentiles, they were not Samaritans. They were a splinter body and they too were added to the

body of Christ and experienced the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. After that there is no account of any speaking in tongues except that taking place in the problem church at Corinth.

Then the fourth thing that is evident from this account in Acts 2 is that, though tongues are directed to God, they are a sign to the unbelievers who are present. In Verse 12 we read that these men who were come from all nations of the earth were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" {Acts 2:12b}. They were arrested; their curiosity was aroused. They had been suddenly stopped in their normal course of business and this became a sign unto them that God was at work in some unusual way.

Now this is exactly what Paul says in First Corinthians 14, Verse 22:

**Tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, {1 Cor 14:22a RSV}**

And so they were on the day of Pentecost. As we link these things together, we can see the purpose in the mind of God for this gift of tongues. It was to be a public expression of praise to God in earthly languages, not normally learned, as a foregleam of the day when God would complete his work among men and bring in the redeemed humanity which men have longed for, and prayed for, for centuries. Men were to speak supernaturally in a public way, and this would become a sign to any unbelievers present that God was at work.

Now, Paul tells us that he spoke in tongues more than anyone else, and although there is no account in the record of his life that he ever spoke in tongues, there is no doubt he is telling the truth. With this formula in mind as to the purpose for tongues, perhaps we can see some instances where Paul could have spoken in tongues:

Acts 16 may be just such an instance. This is the account of Paul and Silas being cast into prison in Philippi. While they were in prison there, held in the stocks, their backs lacerated by the beatings they have received, we read,

**But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing psalms to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, {Acts 16:25 RSV}**

Here you have a situation that could well have called for the exercise of the gift of tongues. These men are in a strange city, where the Macedonian dialect was spoken, and it is very unlikely that Paul or Silas had ever learned it. They had come from a city quite a distance from there. They are in prison, and they begin to pray, and to sing unto God praise and thanksgiving. The prisoners were listening to the apostles, and apostles understood what they were saying,

**and suddenly there was a great earthquake so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's fetters were unfastened. {Acts 16:26 RSV}**

Here are all the elements suitable for the exercise of tongues. I do not mean to insinuate that the text infers such an exercise. I do not have new revelation on this! But it may well be such an instance, since somewhere in his history we must fit in Paul's words that he spoke in tongues more than all. This would be just the kind of occasion calling for such an addressing of praise unto God.

Now we turn to Paul's account in First Corinthians 14, where is set forth the major passage concerning the true gift of tongues. From this section, Chapters 12-14, we learn that the gift of tongues is the choice of the Spirit alone and is not intended for everyone.

Look at Verse 11 of Chapter 12. Paul is speaking of the gifts of the Spirit, and he 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}**

As the Spirit wills, not as the man wills. This makes it very clear that it is the choice of the Spirit as to who speaks in tongues. Furthermore, not everyone is expected to speak in tongues. In the closing part of this same

chapter, Paul asks the question in Verse 29,

**Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? {1 Cor 12:29-30a RSV}**

The implied answer, from the context, to all these questions is, "No, all do not speak with tongues." Therefore, when the claim is made today that tongues is the sole manifestation of the Spirit, and that unless you have spoken in tongues you do not have the Spirit of God, this is an unscriptural statement. It is contrary to the Word of God. All do not speak in tongues, and those who do speak in tongues do so, not at their own choice or desire, but at the will of the Spirit. He distributes the gifts.

I know we are told in the next verse, "Earnestly desire the higher gifts," {1 Cor 12:31 RSV}. But if that verse is taken literally, then the higher gifts would exclude tongues because Paul has just made a list of the gifts and he puts tongues at the end of it. In Chapter 14 he says specifically that prophecy is a much better gift than tongues. So tongues would be the one gift not to be sought after, since he tells us to seek the higher gifts.

Furthermore, this word, "earnestly desire the higher gifts" is not addressed to an individual, but to the entire church. That is, he is not saying to each one among them, "now each of you seek to have the higher gifts," but he is saying, "now, as a church, ask the Holy Spirit to manifest in your midst, at his own choice and will, the higher gifts." It is a plural imperative, indicating that this is addressed to the entire church.

We learn, furthermore, that the gift of tongues was exercised in the church in Corinth. But it was evidently never intended to be so exercised because, as we have seen, it was intended to be exercised in a public place, where unbelievers were present, as a sign unto them and as a manifestation of the praise of God in anticipation of his work in the kingdom. Yet, when it is exercised in the church, it must be interpreted. Invariably, it must be interpreted! Paul was very clear on this. This is in line with the function of all the gifts of the Spirit. In First Corinthians 12 we are told that all the gifts of the Spirit are given for the common good, Verse 7,

**To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. {1 Cor 12:7 RSV}**

Thus tongues is not for individual enjoyment or blessing. It is for everyone, if it is going to be exercised at all. He goes on to list the gifts,

**To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. {1 Cor 12:8-10 RSV}**

All of them for the common good. Notice how Paul picks that idea up and stresses it in Chapter 14, dealing specifically with tongues. He says in Verse 5,

**Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified. {1 Cor 14:5 RSV}**

That is the purpose in every case. Again in Verse 9, he says,

**So with yourselves; if you in a tongue utter speech that is not intelligible, how will any one know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, [Notice the stress on languages.] 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, strive to excel in building up the church. {1 Cor 14:9-12 RSV}**

That must be the aim and end of every gift of the Spirit, to build up the church, not the individual Christian.

Even the one who speaks in tongues in a church, Paul says, does not understand what he says unless someone interprets. He does not even know himself what he is saying. Notice, for instance, Verse 2,

**For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. {1 Cor 14:2 RSV}**

And then Verse 13,

**Therefore, he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. {1 Cor 14:13 RSV}**

Why? Well, he says,

**... if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. {1 Cor 14:14 RSV}**

I don't know what I am saying. I know that I am uttering praise to God. I can sense that, in my feelings, but I don't know what it is. Therefore, Paul says, pray that you may interpret. And he goes on,

**What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit [that is all right] and I will pray with the mind also. [That is, I will pray in a tongue but I will interpret it that my mind may understand, as well.] I will sing in the spirit. [It is possible to sing in tongues.] But I will sing with the mind also. [That is, it will be interpreted.] Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how can any one in the position of an outsider say the "Amen" ... ? {1 Cor 14:15-16a RSV}**

So it is absolutely essential that, without exception, if the gift of tongues, which is not designed for the church, be exercised in the church, then it must be interpreted, even for the benefit of the one who is speaking.

Now the last point that we get from this section is that when the gift of tongues is employed in the church without interpretation it utterly defeats its intended purpose. Believers themselves are not edified, and unbelievers misunderstand. Verse 16,

**Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, [that is, in a tongue] 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 tongues 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 tongue. {1 Cor 14:16-19 RSV}**

Now, that is Paul's practice. Never tongues in church, because, if he does, he defeats the purpose of the gift of the Spirit to edify the body of Christ. Furthermore, he says that unbelievers misunderstand when it is used in church without interpretation. Verse 20,

**Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature. {1 Cor 14:20 RSV}**

What a wonderful verse!

There is that exhortation again. Learn to distinguish between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between the counterfeit and the true. Grow up!

**In the law it is written, "By men of strange tongues and by lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues [and no one interprets], and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that**

**you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. {1 Cor 14:21-25 RSV}**

I think this brings before us the essentials of the gift of tongues, the true gift of tongues:

- It is a gift given by the Spirit.
- It is an ability to speak a language known somewhere on earth that was never learned by the normal processes of learning a language.
- It is always an expression of praise and thanksgiving addressed to God.
- It is to be exercised in a public place where unbelievers are present as a sign unto them, and as a demonstration that God is going to fulfill all his marvelous age-long purposes.

That is what tongues were for, and, if the Holy Spirit chooses to give them in this day, it is perfectly proper for him to do so; he is perfectly competent to do so. But we need to distinguish the true from the false.

There is also a false gift of tongues.

The true gift is never privately exercised, I am convinced. There is no indication from the Scripture that it is ever privately exercised, only publicly.

It requires an invariable translation to be of help to the church.

That is the true gift of tongues.

Now how do we evaluate what is taking place today? Is it true? Is it false?

If it is true, it will fit this pattern. If it is false, it will not.

Next Sunday night we will take a good look at what is going on, to distinguish whether these are experiences of the true gift, or whether most, if not all, are the false gift of tongues.

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