

Speaking in Tongues in the Church

A Look at the Purpose of Spiritual Utterances

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented as a response to those who say that speaking in tongues is inappropriate and/or to those who confuse “the gift of the Holy Spirit” with “the gifts of the Spirit.”

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me.” Acts 1:8

THE NIGHT BEFORE HIS CRUCIFIXION, the Lord Jesus told His apostles, It is to your advantage that I go away (John 16:7a). These men had been walking with the Savior for several years at this point and to hear these words must have certainly been disconcerting. They had learned to look to Jesus for everything. So how was it possible that His departure would be to their advantage?

The Lord went on to explain, For if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you (John 16:7b). The Helper Jesus promised to send was the Holy Spirit (ref. John 14:26). The idea He was trying to get His apostles to grasp was that it was better for them that He be with them in spirit than in the flesh. To understand why this was true, we must look further into the Scriptures.

Within a few days after He ascended to heaven, the promise Jesus had made to His apostles came to pass. On the feast day called Pentecost, the Spirit of God came pouring out of heaven upon 120 disciples, and they began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:4). This, according to the Bible, was the first time such a spiritual manifestation had ever occurred. God had brought a new thing into the world.

The sound of these disciples speaking with other tongues caused a large crowd to gather, primarily of devout Jews who had traveled to Jerusalem for the Pentecost observance. As they listened, many of them marveled at what they were hearing, saying, We hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God (Acts 2:11). This statement reveals a definite connection between speaking in tongues and praising God.

The Bible goes on to say that Peter stood to his feet and proclaimed, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:16-17). This passage reveals a definite connection between speaking in tongues and prophesying.

A close examination of church history indicates that speaking in tongues has continued, without significant interruption, from the day of Pentecost all the way up to our present hour.¹ In this century in particular, there has been a remarkable increase in this spiritual outpouring. Just as Joel predicted, in the "last days" the Spirit is being poured out upon "all flesh."

Biblical Purposes

Today, millions worldwide claim to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance. This being the case, two important questions arise:

1. What is the purpose of this spiritual manifestation?

2. Is it proper to speak in tongues in church?

In order to answer these questions, we need to examine all of the biblical passages that deal with the subject of speaking in tongues. Let's begin by looking at the teachings of Jesus.

Only once did Jesus specifically mention speaking in tongues, and that was in connection with the signs that would follow those who believe the gospel and are baptized. He said, "They will speak with new tongues" (Mark 16:17). He did not specify why, where, or under what circumstances they would do this—only that they would.

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, never mentioned speaking in tongues at all, but He did say on several occasions, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (ref. Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33).

After the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter explained, "Jesus...poured out this which you now see and hear" (Acts 2:32-33). What the people were seeing was the disciples acting as though they were drunk. What they were hearing was the disciples speaking in other tongues (ref. Acts 2:12-15).

It is apparent from these passages that Jesus Christ is the One who pours out the Spirit and that speaking in tongues is a divine sign that He has done so. This conclusion is corroborated in Acts, Chapter 10, where Peter preaches to the family of the Roman centurion Cornelius. The Bible says, "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word" (v.44). It then says that those who came with Peter were astonished, because the Spirit was being poured out, not just on the Jews, but also on the Gentiles.

How did they know the Spirit was being poured upon these people? For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God (v.46).

In Acts, Chapter 19, Paul encounters 12 men from Ephesus who had been baptized according to the teachings of John the Baptist. The first question he asked them was, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (v.2). As soon as he discovered that they did not even know about the gift of the Holy Spirit, Paul told these sincere men that they must believe on the One who came after John, that is, on Jesus Christ.

The Bible says that when these men heard this, they were rebaptized by Paul in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then, when he laid his hands upon them, "the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (v.6). In the case of Cornelius, speaking in tongues was connected to praise. In the case of the Ephesians, it was linked to prophesying. In both of these situations, and on the day of Pentecost, speaking in tongues served as an easily discernable sign that a person had believed in Christ and been filled with the Spirit. In all three cases, those who spoke in tongues were part of a group, and the tongues were a sign, not just to those who had received the Spirit, but also to those who were observing. At no time did any of the apostles attempt to discourage this manifestation.

Praying in Tongues

As we have seen, one of the purposes of speaking in tongues is that it serves as a sign that a person has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul describes a second purpose in his letter to the Romans. After saying that at times we all struggle in prayer, not even knowing what we ought to be praying about, he writes, "But the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered...according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27).

This passage describes a deep dimension of prayer called intercession, which on occasion goes beyond intelligible words and comes forth as inarticulate groanings. But according to Paul, these groanings are not the groanings of the believer: it is the Spirit of God Himself dwelling in the believer who is groaning on the believer's

behalf. Yet the believer is also involved in this spiritual manifestation, for the purpose is to help in our weak moments when we don't know what we ought to be praying about.

Paul elaborates on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in helping the believer pray in 1 Corinthians 14. He begins by saying that all believers should pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. Let us remember, however, that the people Paul was writing to had already received the gift of the Holy Spirit in the same way that Cornelius and the 12 Ephesians had. We know this because in 1 Corinthians 12:13, he told them, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and have all been made to drink into one Spirit."

Paul's purpose in writing to these believers was not to encourage them to desire the gift of the Holy Spirit, but to encourage them to desire the gifts that the indwelling Spirit produces. In the first instance the word "gift" is the Greek word *dorea*, meaning a free gift; in the second it is the word *charismata*, a word that means literally the results of grace.

In other words, a person may prophesy as the Ephesians did as a sign that he has received the Holy Spirit, but this does not necessarily mean the person has been given the gift of prophecy. Similarly, a person may have faith at the moment of his salvation, but this does not mean he has been given the gift of faith (ref. 1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

Paul goes on to say in the 14th chapter, "For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries" (v.2). Here we can see the usefulness of speaking in tongues as a prayer language. In our human limitations, we may not always know what we need to pray about—but God always knows. When we pray in another tongue as the Spirit gives utterance, we can be assured that we are speaking to God and that He understands what we are saying, even though we may not understand.

This operation of the Spirit is undoubtedly what Jude had in mind when he counseled, "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God" (vv.20-21).

Paul affirmed that praying in tongues builds up the spiritual strength of the one praying when he wrote, "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself" (v.4). But he then added, "He who prophesies edifies the church. This is because when we pray in tongues we are speaking to God, but he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men" (v.3). So we see here that Paul considered speaking in tongues to be beneficial to the individual, but speaking in an understandable language to be beneficial to the assembly.

Paul further explained, "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful" (v.14). Some might attempt to argue from this verse that it is more proper to understand what we are saying when we pray. But Paul, after considering this point, drew this conclusion: "I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding" (v.15). Both types of prayer are important to the believer.

Speaking in Tongues in Church

In order to adequately answer the question about speaking in tongues during a church service, we must first define what constitutes a church in a biblical sense. *Vine's Dictionary of Greek New Testament Words* says that the word "church" is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which refers to "a company of professed believers." There is no indication from the word itself as to how large or how small the company must be to be considered a church, or where the company must be assembled together.

In the present era, most people think of being in church as being in a church building during a regularly scheduled church service. But the early believers were more spontaneous and far less formal than most congregations of believers today. As far as the Bible is concerned, whenever two or three gather together in the name of Jesus Christ, that is a church, regardless of location.

Therefore, when the 120 believers spoke in tongues on the day of Pentecost, they were speaking in tongues in church. When the household of Cornelius spoke in tongues, they were speaking in tongues in church. And when the 12 men of Ephesus spoke in tongues, they were also speaking in tongues in church, even though the Bible doesn't even record whether they were indoors or out.

Moreover, since it is certainly proper to magnify God in English in church, it must also be proper to magnify God speaking in other tongues. To His ears there is no difference. Likewise, since it is obviously proper to prophesy in church, it must also be proper to speak in tongues, for how could it be right to strengthen others but not strengthen oneself? Don't many of us come to church to be spiritually strengthened?

The point of the 14th chapter of 1 Corinthians was not to forbid speaking in tongues in church, but to help the people understand the purpose of speaking in tongues, especially in relationship to prophecy. In fact Paul specifically stated, "Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues" (v.39).

Irrespective of all that has just been said, let it now be stressed that in general it is inappropriate for the operation of a spiritual gift to cause a disruption or interfere with the speaking of another person. As Paul also admonished, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (v.40). We must remember that the Spirit of God is like a dove—meek and quiet by nature. It is difficult to imagine Jesus Christ interrupting someone or seeking to draw attention to Himself by dominating a meeting.

Some have attempted to excuse their inappropriate behavior in church by saying that they could not help what the Spirit caused them to do. But this is contradictory to the teachings of Paul, for he wrote, "And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (vv.32-33). In other words, each person is responsible for operating their spiritual gifts in an appropriate and orderly manner.

To summarize, the Bible teaches that there is a time and a place for everything under heaven. When the people are praising God together, it is proper to praise God, in English or in another tongue. When the people are praying, it is proper to pray, in English or in another tongue. When God desires to speak to His people, it is proper for two or three to speak in turn, each waiting patiently for the right moment, and for the others to sit quietly or to pray quietly to themselves (ref. vv.26-31).

Answers to Objections

Didn't Paul say, "I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:5)? Yes, that is exactly what Paul said. But in what sense is the one who prophesies greater than the one who speaks in tongues? In the sense that the former performs a greater service to the church.

But let us look at the rest of this verse. Paul also said, "Unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification. In other words, if the tongues are interpreted, it is just as great as prophecy. This passage can hardly be considered a denunciation of speaking in tongues. Remember, Paul's main point is that, even though speaking in tongues is a blessing to the one who is speaking, it is not a blessing to the church at large unless there is interpretation in an understandable tongue.

But didn't Paul say, "Unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air" (1 Corinthians 14:9). Yes, Paul said this. But it would be foolish to conclude that he

was suggesting that speaking in tongues is speaking into the air, especially since he had just said in verse 2 that when a person speaks in tongues he is speaking to God. Paul was simply making the point that people cannot be blessed by words they cannot understand.

But didn't Paul also say, "If the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:19). Yes, these are the exact words of the great apostle. But he also said, "I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all" (v.18).

The point is, both speaking in tongues and speaking in an understandable language have a purpose. The fact that Paul underscored the priority of one over the other under certain circumstances in no way suggests that the other is unimportant or should be condemned. Paul was simply attempting to bring a group of immature believers who were untaught in the operation of spiritual gifts into proper spiritual balance.

Well, didn't Paul say, "But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church" (v.28a). Once again, this is exactly what Paul said. But how would a person know whether or not an interpreter was present until after he had uttered his message to the church in tongues? Paul never condemned the person for speaking out; he simply instructed that the person should not continue for a long time in tongues once it becomes apparent that no interpretation is forthcoming.

Paul went on to say, "And let him speak to himself and to God" (v.28b). In other words, not only did Paul not forbid the person from speaking in tongues in church, he encouraged him to continue—only not to the assembly at large, but quietly to himself and God.

A Mature Understanding

Paul's purpose in writing to the Corinthians about spiritual gifts was that they not be ignorant (v.12:1). He wrote, "Brethren, do not be children in understanding... be mature" (v.14:20). God wants His people to grow up in their understanding of spiritual things.

One of the marks of spiritual immaturity is the tendency to judge spiritual manifestations too quickly. The Pharisees did this, and Jesus warned them about committing an unpardonable sin (ref. Matthew 12:22-32). We must carefully hold all seemingly divine utterances up to the light of God's Word.

The principle we must operate by is this: **Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise**

prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). We are not told to forbid spiritual manifestations, but to test them by wisdom and the Word. Every spiritual manifestation ought to be subjected to the following threefold test:

- 1. Was it in harmony with the Word of God?**
- 2. Was it motivated by love?**
- 3. Was it edifying? That is, did it build up God's people? Did it produce good spiritual fruit?**

Who is charged with doing this testing? Paul wrote that after the prophets have spoken, let the others judge (v.29). In other words, the one doing the speaking must be willing to submit what he has spoken to the judgment of others, particularly those with experience in spiritual manifestations. This is an important protection God has established. Let every utterance directed toward the church be judged by the standard of Scripture, love, and edification.

Three Gifts of Utterance

God desires to speak to His people through the operation of spiritual gifts. In this context, three gifts of spiritual utterance are specified: prophecy, different kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:10). In order to have a mature understanding of these gifts, we must understand their specific purposes.

It is important to understand that the gift of interpretation of tongues is virtually the same operation of the Spirit as the gift of prophecy. The only difference is that interpretation of tongues is preceded by a message to the church in tongues. Of course, such a message cannot be understood, hence the need for interpretation.

But if the message in tongues cannot be understood, then why have it? Paul explained the purpose to the Corinthians when he wrote, Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe (v.14:22).

In other words, if God desires to speak in a congregational meeting and there are unbelievers present, He may first give an utterance to the church in an unknown tongue as a sign to the unbelievers that what follows is a message from God. If everyone present is a believer, such a sign should not be necessary.

Paul continued, Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or

unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? (v.23). If the only thing uttered is in a tongue that cannot be understood, then those who are not used to such things will wonder why people are sitting around listening to words that have no discernable meaning. Paul was not saying that there should be no tongues, only that there should be words of understanding, too.

Paul concluded with this: But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you (vv.24-25).

Is this not a fine summary of the evangelical purposes of a church? Is it not our heart's desire that those who visit our church meetings would be convinced that God truly dwells among His people? In this we see the acute need for spiritual manifestations in church.

Concluding Thoughts

By examining the appropriate Scriptures, we have discovered three well-defined purposes for speaking in tongues. The first is that it provides an observable sign that a person has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The second is that it serves as a prayer and praise language whereby the one who is speaking builds himself up spiritually. The third is that it serves as a means by which an unbeliever is made aware that God is about to speak forth in divine utterance to His people.

All three of these purposes are valid in a gathering of believers, regardless of the size or location of the assembled group. Is it proper to speak in tongues during a church service? The answer is plainly yes, provided the following governing principle is adhered to —Let all things be done for edification (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Endnote:

1. For further information on occurrences of speaking in tongues throughout the history of the church, see the following references:

S.M. Burgess and G.B.McGee, *The Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), pp.339-340.

David K. Bernard, *The New Birth* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1984), pp.282-303.

John L. Sherrill, *They Speak With Other Tongues* (Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen Books, 1985), pp.116-131.