What About The Gift Of Tongues? (Part 1)

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Like 14

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We have taken up in this brief series a number of topics relevant to the issue of spiritual gifts. Some of the posts are here;

- Why I Changed My Mind About Miraculous Spiritual Gifts
- Three Arguments For Cessation That I No Longer Find Convincing
- Helpful Resources On Spiritual Gifts
- One More Bad Argument For Cessation
- A Plea For Spiritual Hunger
- Love That Endures

But for many, the most perplexing questions relate to the gift of tongues, and what we are to make of both the biblical data about this gift, and the diverse claimed experiences of millions of Christians relating to it.

What Is The Gift Of Tongues In The Bible?

Few issues are more controversial or raise more contention than the question of tongues. What is tongues? Let us say at the outset, that tongues, biblically speaking, is not gibberish, even if deriders or even many modern tongues-speakers have assumed this. It always has *cognitive content*. In the biblical texts, it is *language* whatever else. This doesn't by any means suggests that all who have made this claim or have this understanding don't have a genuine gift. It could simply be that their understanding of what has taken place is wrong or mistaken. But in any case, as we will see in this and the next post, tongues in the biblical material is *language*, whatever else.

But one can't from this assume that therefore one particular understanding of the gift is the only option. As if, "total gibberish" and "a language I recognize" were the only two options. This is a false dichotomy. Sam Storms explains that,

> ...the single most oft-cited argument against tongues in the present day is the insistence that all legitimate, biblical tongues-speech was a human language, spoken somewhere in the world, but previously unknown to the person to whom the gift was given. The second stage in this argument comes from the observations of linguistic experts who tell us that their study of contemporary tongues-speech proves that none of it is a known human language. So there is the argument: all New Testament tongues-speech was human languages, contemporary tongues-speech is not; therefore, all contemporary tongues-speech is not biblical but some form of psychological emotivism or nonsense gibberish.
> (*The Language of Heaven*, pp. 60-61)

This argument, as we will see, is both logistically and biblically illegitimate.

What Are The Options?

There are several different ways the gift could be construed;

A. Some think the gift of tongues is the ability for one person to speak in their native language, which all hearers then miraculously understand in their own native languages.

So I may (as can English speaker) get up to speak in English, and a German speaker present understands me in German, while a French speaker present understands me in French, etc. This could more accurately be called "the gift of hearing" and one wonders on this understanding why Luke called it the gift of tongues. If the only biblical passage I had was Acts 2, that's quite possibly the view of the gift I would hold (I did for years). But I don't think this understanding fits with *any* of the rest of the biblical data.

The early Pentecostal movement under Parham, as I understand it, was convinced that something like this was essentially what they were experiencing, and built their theology mostly from Acts 2. They launched into mission fields convinced that they didn't need language school, and were sadly disappointed when they couldn't communicate to natives. I think Carson is right to say they were men with a genuine experience of the Spirit in search of a theology to explain that experience, and they unfortunately formed that theology based only on *part* of the biblical data. But this understanding of Acts 2 faces several problems.

- First, Luke makes clear that God wants to show his Spirit at work in the community of Jesus followers, yet in this understanding, the real miracle is one which takes place primarily in *unbelievers*.
- Second, when one considers the rest of the biblical data, this view becomes utterly impossible. Why would Paul demand an interpreter be present in the assembly if every occurrence was automatically understood by all others present? (I Cor. 14). Why would God even create such a thing as the gift of interpretation?! This simply doesn't work with all of the biblical data.
- Third, this makes no sense of the claim by some that the disciples were drunk (Acts 2:13). To be sure, this reaction is not always easy to explain on any view, but surely no one witnessing this happen, who miraculously understands everything that is said, concludes, "Wow. That was astounding. What an amazing miracle. These guys must all be drunk."

And even were that understanding possible in Acts 2, it clearly isn't what is taking place in any of the other biblical mentions of the gift.

B. Some think that the gift of tongues is the ability to communicate with others in a foreign language the speaker has not learned.

The speaker understands what he is saying, (I may understand in English, while what comes out is French), and the hearer understands the actual words spoken in French, *provided they know French*. They communicate well. But others who overhear who do *not* speak French hear only nonsense, because they don't know that language. This is known as *xenolalia*, and it's a much more defensible understanding of the gift than the above. Further, it seems clearly to be what was taking place in Acts 2. But as we will see in this and the next post, if we demand that this is *always* what tongues looks like in the Bible, some of the biblical data simply will not fit.

C. We could understand tongues to be the inspired ability to speak a language enabling communication to others which the speaker himself does not understand, but the hearer does.

For example, I as an English speaker speak a "word in tongues" in German, and if a German speaker is present, they understand me, but if not, no one understands me, (unless there is an interpreter) and I do not myself know what I said. This makes sense of even more parts of the biblical data, but, as we will wee, still encounters problems with some of it.

D. Many others understand tongues to be the inspired ability to speak non-linguistic syllables, with no cognitive content.

There is no actual cognitive content to the sounds, which amount to little more than gibberish. The speaker does not understand what he says. The hearers do not understand what is said, unless God grants the gift of interpretation, which then puts that non-linguistic utterance into words, resulting in an inspired message from God.

I think this understanding, as common as it may be, flies in the face of practically everything the Bible teaches about the gift. This is not necessarily to invalidate the *exercise* of the gift of those who view the gift this way, or of scholars who so construe the gift (usually arguing that the gift of interpretation means, "to put into words"); it is only to challenge their *understanding* of what is taking place. There is a more nuanced and academic form of this understanding that I will not interact with here (e.g., Dunn, Thiselton), which views tongues as non-linguistic, unintelligible, and not bearing cognitive content, but being the "sigh of the unconscious." This is much more respectable than accepting it as simply "gibberish," but I think still falls prey to various problems.

What Do We Make Of These Options?

All of these understandings I think have the same problem. They take *part* of the biblical data, and form their understanding on that part, but end up with an understanding that doesn't fit with *other* parts of the biblical data. I bounced around between those views a lot over the years, always ending up with pieces of the puzzle that didn't fit, and passages that simply didn't make sense with whichever understanding I was working with.

Some Unbiblical Assumptions

I now realize that one of the biggest reasons was that I had brought some assumptions to my understandings that simply weren't biblical. Let me mention two which I think vital to this discussion of this gift (there are some others I may spell out at a later time);

1. I presumed that the basic purpose of tongues was *evangelization* of the lost.
2. I even more firmly presumed that tongues was basically a *horizontal* phenomenon, where a person spoke to other humans.

As I have gone back over the data, I have become increasingly convinced that these are unbiblical assumptions which make the biblical data all but impossible to harmonize. With such presuppositions, one will always be left with pieces that don't fit.

Bad Presumption 1 - Tongues Is A Tool To Evangelize The Lost Or A Sign Of Judgment On The Jews

This may well be the single most common understanding of the gift among cessationists, and is part of an oft-cited argument for cessation. To take one example, John MacArthur assumes that while a secondary purpose of tongues might be to edify the church, its primary purpose was as a sign to unbelieving Isreal. He writes;

> Primarily, it demonstrated that a transition was taking place from the old covenant to the new, and as such, it served as a sign to unbelieving Israel. The apostle Paul made that point explicit in 1 Corinthians 14:21–22; and Luke echoed that same purpose in his description of Pentecost in Acts 2:5–21. The ending of Mark's gospel similarly explains that the disciples of Christ would speak in languages that were new to them (16:17), which would be one of the signs that authenticated them as messengers of the true gospel (v. 20).
> (*Strange Fire*, pg. 143)

And later notes,

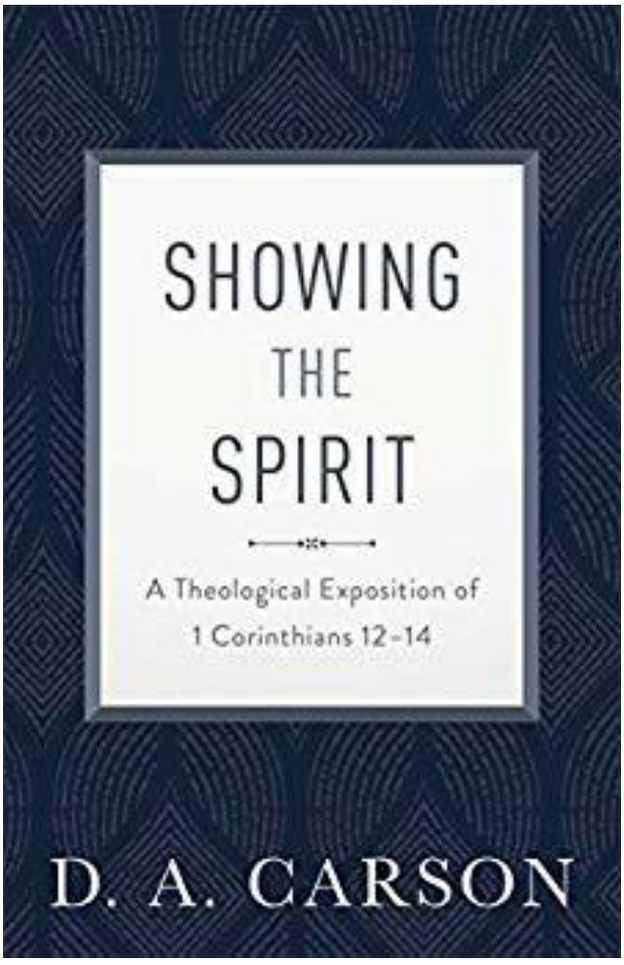
> In the book of Acts, we see the apostles speaking in other languages as part of their evangelistic ministry to unbelievers (Acts 2: 5–11). Based on that precedent, it is best to conclude that Paul used his gift in the same missionary way—as a sign that authenticated his apostolic ministry (cf. Mark 16:20; 2 Cor. 12:12).
> (*Strange Fire*, pg. 151)

But in the actual biblical data, the gift of tongues is *never* said to be given for an evangelistic purpose. We can treat the data briefly here.

The Data From Acts

In Acts chapter 2, it is not *tongues speech* which converts 3,000, it is *the preaching of the gospel by Peter* in the known *linguaga franca*. The tongues speech not only wasn't aimed at the unbelievers, it had already started *before they even got there* (Acts 2:4). And no unbelievers became believers immediately after hearing the tongues speech. The noise only generated questions. No conversions take place in the narrative until after Peter preachers the gospel at length. As Carson explains;

> Although these tongues were real, human languages and communicated cognitive messages, it is by no means clear that such messages were essentially evangelistic. We are told the crowds heard the tongues-speakers declaring "the wonders of God" (2:11; τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ, ta megaleia tou theou). The verbal form of the same expression occurs in 10:46 (καὶ μεγαλυνόντων τὸν θεόν, kai megalynontōn ton theon) and 19:17 (καὶ ἐμεγαλύνετο τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, kai emegalyneto to onoma tou kuriou Iēsou), where praise is in view, not evangelism per se. Similarly in chapter 2 the people hear praise, and in their own languages, but this generates questions (sympathetic and otherwise), not conversions. It is Peter's preaching, presumably in Aramaic, that brings about the thousands of conversions; the tongues themselves, I suppose, constitute what modern jargon would call preevangelism...What is clear, I think, is that noncharismatics who attempt to make the evangelistic use of tongues their normative and exclusive purpose are doubly wrong: tongues are not primarily evangelistic even in Acts 2, and in any case this is the only passage where uninterpreted tongues are even understood by unbelievers. (*Showing the Spirit*, 142–143.)



In Acts 8:14-17 (where tongues isn't specifically mentioned, but some interpreters think it was present), those who are granted the Spirit are *believers*.

In Acts 10, *while Peter is preaching the gospel* (in normal language) the entire crowd believes, and before he even finishes preaching, the Spirit falls on all of them. There is literally no longer a single unbeliever present when tongues actually occur. Acts 10:44-48. There is no use of tongues to evangelize the lost here. Only tongues bestowed on believers, for believers.

Acts 19:1-7 is an admittedly difficult case, since so much of it is outside the norm of Luke and Paul. Groups who build their theology on this passage alone I think get into serious trouble, especially when they want to make this a pattern for receiving the Spirit after salvation. But whatever all is going on here, and why, one thing is clear - by the time tongues appears, the entire group is made up of *believers*. There is simply no evangelistic use of tongues here.

The Data From I Corinthians

I Cor. 12-14 makes this even more clear.

Paul is adamant that this is a gift for believers, in the church (I Cor. 12:7-11), though not a gift given to each believer (12:27-30).

He is passionate that uninterpreted tongues speech in the assembly will in fact destroy the witness to unbelievers. He doesn't say, "Do this more to reach the lost," he instead basically says, "Stop this because of how it's damaging your witness to the lost" (I Cor. 14:23)! Such a spectacle (which he doesn't say isn't legitimately the gift of the Spirit, but clearly thinks is an *abuse* of the gift), will cause the lost who come into the assembly to think Christians are all a bunch of nuts, or possessed. And I think some sectors of the church need to hear his warning carefully. I personally know lost people who wrote off the Christian faith because they saw exactly this abuse of the gift take place. Were Paul here today, I think he would issue exactly this stern warning to much of the church which has sadly ignored his commands. Notably, he doesn't say, "therefore stop this tongues stuff altogether." That would be an easy answer, and one that some then, and many today, gravitate towards in reaction. Paul in fact demands that no one outright forbid the gift (14:39). The answer to widespread abuse of a gift is *correction*, not *censure*. But the point here is that if the gift was meant to have an evangelistic purpose, then Paul is demanding that the gift not be used for its own purpose. He would be ultimately contradicting in this passage what he has been taken to say in the next.

The final relevant passage is I Cor. 14:20-25. This is primarily where the idea that tongues are evangelistic originates. Many think this text is blatant proof that tongues are meant by God to serve an evangelistic purpose. After all, Paul directly says, "tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not" (I Cor. 14:22). That's pretty clear, right? But this is to take one part of one verse, rip it from its context, ignore the context and meaning of the OT passage that Paul cites here, ignore everything else that every other passage on tongues says about this question, and conclude that this one phrase is somehow the determining factor.

Where else in Bible study is that appropriate?

When we look closely at the passage, we find that Paul is citing Is. 28:11-12 here. He does so for an important reason. There is a general principle there. God describes how, when he judges his disobedient people, he will often use foreign forces to do it (just as he promised in Deut. 28). Thus, when God's people find themselves surrounded by languages that they don't understand, this is evidence that God is judging them. As a general principle, such a situation is a sign that God is angry and dealing out judgment. Carson explains Paul's use of Is. 28;

> In the context of Isaiah 28:9–13, the "strange tongues" of foreigners (i.e., the Assyrian troops) represent God's visitation in judgment on his people. They had refused to listen to him and repent when he spoke clearly; now he will visit them through invading hordes by whom he will "speak" in a language (Assyrian) whose content they will not understand, even though in it they will "hear" a message of judgment. The "strange tongues" therefore do not convey content to the unbelieving Israelites, but they do serve as a sign—a negative sign, a sign of judgment. This is the example to which Paul appeals. In the Law it is written (and by "Law" here he means what we would call the Old Testament Scriptures) that at a crucial juncture in the history of the covenant community, God "spoke" to his people through "strange tongues." But when he did so, he was speaking a message of judgment. It appears, then, that when God speaks through strange tongues and the lips of foreigners to unbelievers, at least here it is a sign of his judgment upon them.
> (*Showing the Spirit*, pg. 113–114)

What Paul is saying is that when the Corinthian church lets uninterpreted tongues speech take place in the assembly, the unbelievers thus hear a message that signals the judgement of God against them. But that's not what God wants to say to them! God wants them to hear in the gospel the message that he loves them, and is pursuing them, and that Christ died for them! The Corinthian practice is, unintentionally, turning the message of God to the lost on its head. Paul wants them instead to totally cease uninterpreted tongues in the assembly, and give priority in the assembly instead to the prophetic, since when this gift operates widely, God comes down to address those present in specific and detailed ways. Rather than the lost who might come in hearing a message of judgement, they rather hear God's Spirit speak directly to them, reveal the very secrets of their hearts, and they fall down and worship this God who is so manifestly real and present (I Cor. 14:23-25).

In other words, when Paul says, (concerning a setting where there is widespread uninterpreted tongues taking place in the assembly), "Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not," his point is, "In this situation, you have allowed tongues to become a sign of judgment to the lost - which is exactly the opposite of what God intends to say to them. So don't let this situation happen anymore."

This makes all the biblical data fall into place in harmony, on this issue at least. While tongues might have at times an evangelistic *result* (I think we could say they did in Acts 2), *they were not intended by God to serve an evangelistic function*. To claim this is to ignore huge swaths of the biblical data, and to cause the biblical data ultimately to contradict itself.

Bad Presumption 2 - Tongues is Horizontally Directed Speech (Humans Speaking to Humans)

Now the second presupposition. I have become convinced that if we come to the biblical data on tongues thinking of tongues as primarily a *horizontal* phenomenon (men speaking to men), we will simply never make sense of all of the biblical data. I bounced around between the above views for years, and always had passages of the Bible that simply never fit on this understanding. I remember when I first heard Sam Storms say that tongues in the Bible was the language of prayer to God, I thought, "What unbiblical nonsense." I shared with a friend, and he firmly asserted, "There is absolutely no biblical evidence for that at all." It must be noted, much of both the Pentecostal and the cessationist world is agreed at this point - tongues is horizontal speech. Thus cessationists fear and reject it wholesale, and Pentecostals and charismatics the world over continue to give "messages in tongues" to one another that are often manipulative, spiritually abusive, and bear little resemblance to the God of Scripture and the tone and way in which he speaks.

But I think the data is actually quite clear at this point. Failing to admit this was one of the biggest reasons why I couldn't get all the puzzle pieces to fit together. I was working with a fundamentally unbiblical piece.

Consider the biblical data;

1. In Acts chapter 2, as we noted above, the Holy Spirit had already descended on the crowd and already "given them utterance" before the lost crowd appeared. But to whom were they speaking, and what was the content of their speech? Luke makes it clear, the crowd *overheard* them speaking, (they were not being spoken to), and what they were speaking was, "the wonderful works of God" (Acts 2:11). This sounds strikingly like praise to God.

2. Acts 8, if tongues was present there, gives us no data on this question.

3. In Acts 10, the Jewish believers *overhear the Gentile believers* (they weren't being spoken to). Why would it make sense for a whole crowd of Gentiles to start addressing Jewish believers on the sidelines in the middle of a sermon? Rather, as the Spirit descends (interrupting Peter!), the entire group of Gentiles's believes, and is overwhelmed by the Power of the Spirit being poured out, and so begins to speak *praise to God.* Who among us can't testify to a similar experience where the praise just *had* to come out? What was being spoken? Luke makes it clear, from the vantage point of what the Jewish believers were witness to, "For they heard them speak with tongues, and *magnify God*" (Acts 2:46). This is *praise,* or Godward speech.

4. Acts 19:1-7 simply says that, "the Holy Ghost came on them, and they spoke with tongues, and prophesied" which doesn't mean that tongues = prophecy (in fact, it seems to distinguish them, though they clearly are related), and gives us no real data about this question at all.

5. In I Cor. 14:2-4, Paul contrasts uninterpreted tongues in the assembly with prophecy in the assembly (which he will do throughout the chapter). He prefers intelligible speech in the assembly that all will understand (like prophecy), for if someone speaks in a tongue, they don't speak to others for their edification, but to God alone, which serves only for their own edification. Note his words carefully,

> "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. 3 On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church."
> (1 Co 14:2–4).

Paul states as plainly as he could here that tongues speech is speech where the speaker, "speaks to God." There's a word for "speaking to God" in English. We call it "prayer." Now, to be sure, some might say, "Well, this is just rhetoric. Paul's just saying that since tongues is gibberish, the tongues speaker addresses no one." But notice what Paul said. He didn't say, "Since it's not interpreted he speaks to *no one*." No, he rather said, since the tongue is not interpreted, "he speaks *to God*." That is, Paul seems to think this is legitimate speech to God. And in any case, the content of the speech is clearly *vertical*, not *horizontal*. Notice how he contrast the one who speaks with uninterpreted tongues as speaking "not to men but to God" with the one who prophecies, who "speaks to people" for their upbuilding. He is contrasting *God-ward* speech which, if uninterpreted, benefits no one but the speaker, with *horizontal* prophecy, which benefits all immediately. The passage patently assumes tongues to be *God-ward speech*. This it not to say that Paul was thus opposed to tongues altogether. As he goes on to explain, he would love for all of them to speak in tongues. It is a legitimate gift. But in the gathered assembly, *uninterpreted* tongues must take a back seat to prophecy, for of the two, the second alone edifies others (I Cor. 2:5).

6. In I Cor. 14:6, some have taken Paul to be saying, "If I come to you speaking in tongues *to you*," but that is not what the text says. He simply says, "come to you speaking with tongues" and then directly contrast this with "revelation" or other forms of horizontal speech. That is, Paul isn't here saying that tongues is horizontal speech - he is *contrasting* uninterpreted tongues with horizontal speech, urging that horizontal speech be given priority when the church is gathered. Contrary to the widespread assumption that tongues is "revelatory," Paul distinctly contrast tongues with revelation here. He urges intelligible speech in the community, using examples from battle bugles and normal foreign languages, to say, "Do what is best for the community when you gather" (c.f. I Cor. 14:12). In other words, no uninterpreted tongues in the assembly.

7. In I Cor. 14:13-19, Paul envisions a setting where someone is praying in a tongue, but there is no gift of interpretation present. He starts with this general setting, and then moves to what this would look like in the assembly. Follow him closely;

> "Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. 15 What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. 16 Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? 17 For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. 18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. 19 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 Co 14:13–19)

Fully unpacking all of this may be for another time (I recommend Carson's treatment especially, the most careful I have ever read). But notice several points at the outset relevant for us;

Paul is patently describing *Praying in a tongue*. "For if I pray in a tongue" he says in 14:4. "My spirit prays" he says in 14:14. "I will pray with my spirit (that is, I will pray in tongues)" 14:15. "I will sing praise with my spirit" (clearly meaning here, singing in tongues, which the context all but demands), I Cor. 14:15. As he describes what this looks like in the assembly with no interpreter, he describes the tongues speaker, and says to them, "you give thanks with your spirit" (I Cor. 14:16), which clearly means, "giving thanks in tongues," as the context demands. Another word in english for "giving thanks" to God is "Prayer."

But the problem is, since this tongue is uninterpreted, those who overhear the public prayer don't understand what has been said. They can't affirm the prayer with an "amen." It is "your thanksgiving" (I Cor. 14:16), but doesn't benefit them. Does this mean Paul is somehow opposing giving thanks (i.e., praying) in tongues? *No*. He is clear that "you may be giving thanks well enough" (I Co 14:17). The problem is that in the assembly, such a situation means that, "the other person is not being built up" (1 Co 14:17). What is Paul's answer? Not to do away with tongues, but to avoid it in the public assembly, unless the gift of interpretation is present. In fact, he speaks tongues more than all of the tongues-happy Corinthians! But not in the gathered assembly of the church (I Cor. 14:18-19).

This passage could not speak more clearly to this question. Paul undeniably views tongues speech as *God-directed praise, prayer, and thanksgiving*, but which - in the assembly - must either be interpreted or defer to prophecy. As Carson concludes;

> There is no stronger defense of the private use of tongues, and attempts to avoid this conclusion turn out on inspection to be remarkably flimsy. If Paul speaks in tongues more than all the Corinthians, yet in the church prefers to speak five intelligible words rather than ten thousand words in a tongue (which is a way of saying that under virtually no circumstance will he ever speak in tongues in church, without quite ruling out the possibility), then where does he speak them? It will not do to suppose Paul is counseling private, quiet use of tongues during the assembly when another is ministering. To adapt Paul's argument, where then would be the tongues-speaker's "Amen," if he or she was not paying attention? We have already seen that Paul envisages praying with the spirit as a form of valid prayer and praise; what he will not permit is unintelligibility in the church. The only possible

conclusion is that Paul exercised his remarkable tongues gift in private.
(*Showing the Spirit*, pg. 105)

"[A]ttempts to avoid [the conclusion that Paul endorsed the private use of tongues] turn out on inspection to be remarkably flimsy."
- D. A. Carson
(Tweet This)

8. Finally, in I Cor. 26-33, Paul begins to offer regulations for how the gifts should be allowed to function. While he starts with the broader issue of a host of gifts that come to the assembly (I Cor. 14:26), and ends by speaking about prophecy in particular and how it should be handled (I Cor. 14:29-33), he has a small side-note of sorts along the way about tongues in particular (I Cor. 14:27-28) and how it should function in the assembly. Tongues speakers need to take turns. And they shouldn't allow more than 2-3 in one meeting. (Apparently, even when interpreted, he didn't want tongues speech to dominate the meeting.) But, and here is the key, "let someone interpret." Paul is adamant that tongues speech without interpretation should not be allowed to happen in the gathered assembly. (This alone would curb huge abuses of the gift today, would churches more passionately follow Paul's regulations.)

Note here that Paul envisions multiple people coming to the assembly with a desire to speak in tongues, and he contrasts what takes place in the assembly with how tongues might be used in private. Thus, if there is no one to interpret, "let them keep silence in the church." He does not say, "let them not speak in tongues" but rather that they must not "in the church." That is, they are free to speak in tongues in private, but it will not be allowed, when there is no interpreter, in the gathered assembly. But notice the alternative that he sets out. This group of hopeful tongues speakers that has now been forbidden to use their gift publicly is instead to use their gift in private (notice Paul's switch from the plural to the individual), and as they each use the gift in private, who do they address? "let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God" (1 Co 14:28). Paul couldn't be more clear that tongues speech is God-directed speech which must be interpreted if used in the assembly so that it might benefit more than just the speaker. Sam Storms notes,

> It is quite common in Charismatic churches for people to make use of tongues as a way of communicating, horizontally, a message to other Christians. One will often hear of a "message in tongues" that came during the course of a meeting. But thus far it seems from what we've seen in Acts and 1 Corinthians that tongues is likely always either prayer, praise, or thanksgiving. In saying the person who speaks in a tongue "speaks not to men but to God" (1 Cor. 14:2), Paul is clearly telling us that tongues is a form of prayer. That is what speaking to God is! It is prayer, whether in the form of a request (petition), supplication, or intercession. As we'll see later in the book, speaking in tongues, and in particular singing in tongues, is a form of worship or extolling God and His mighty works. (See 1 Corinthians 14:14–15 and Acts 2:11; 10:46.) Tongues-speech is also a way in which a believer can give expression to his or her heartfelt gratitude or thanksgiving to God for what He has done (1 Cor. 14:16). (*The Language of Heaven*, pg. 93-94)

He further concludes that, "I simply don't see any way around the fact that Paul not only believed in the spiritual value of praying in private in uninterpreted tongues but also himself practiced it. In fact, he happily declares that he prays in private in uninterpreted and therefore unintelligible tongues more than all the tongue-happy Corinthians combined!" (*The Language of Heaven*, p. 116). Gordon Fee summarizes a few things that we can say about Paul's understanding of tongues. "It is speech directed basically toward God (14:2, 14–15, 28); one may assume, therefore, that what is interpreted is not speech directed toward others, but the "mysteries" spoken to God." Further, he notes that, "As a gift for private prayer, Paul held it in the highest regard (14:4, 5, 15, 17–18; cf. Rom 8:26–27; Eph 6:18)" (*God's Empowering Presence*, 889–

890).

Wayne Grudem offers a definition for tongues, as "Prayer or praise spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker," and then notes the following;

> This definition indicates that speaking in tongues is primarily speech directed toward God (that is, prayer or praise)...What kind of speech is this that is directed toward God? Paul says, "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful" (1 Cor. 14:14; cf. vv. 14–17, where Paul categorizes speech in tongues as praying and giving thanks, and v. 28). Therefore speaking in tongues apparently is prayer or praise directed to God, and it comes from the "spirit" of the person who is speaking. (*Systematic Theology*, pg. 1070–1071)

Max Turner concludes;

> Paul also understood tongues as more usually a gift for use in private prayer, both as inspired charismatic praise, and, perhaps, as the means of communication of inner groanings and longings which the person could not put into words of his or her own. There is no indication that he thought that any of these functions of tongues would be eclipsed by (for example) the establishment of something like a canon of Scripture, and so nothing to suggest he thought tongues should rapidly pass away, or that God would remove them before the Parousia. Paul is the apostle who more than any other New Testament writer seeks fully to articulate his faith, and to undergird it with persuasive argument. Yet it is precisely this same Paul who also celebrates and commends speaking in tongues, thereby bringing it before us as an object for careful and respectful consideration. (*Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*, pg. 33)

In fact, Anthony Thiselton (whose understanding of tongues I would not follow at every point) states the conclusion so strongly as to leave no room for doubt;

> There can be no doubt whatever that whereas prophecy denotes primarily speech-acts *from* God to the *community* or to *individuals* within the assembled church, tongues are addressed *from* believers *to* God (14:2: to God, *not* to human persons), as against prophecy "to human persons" (14:3). (NIGTC, *I Corinthians*, 970)

But How Can God-ward Speech Edify Others?

Someone might say, "Well how could that benefit others?" And that's precisely the point. It's primary purpose isn't to benefit the others, except *indirectly* as it edifies and builds up the individual speaker. However, when it is *interpreted* it can and does benefit the others. How? How can a prayer that is directed to God benefit other people?

First, I would say, we don't have to have an answer to that question to affirm the biblical data and demand obedience to it.

But second, I would also suggest that we intuitively understand how this works. I regularly read from collections of Puritan prayers like "The Valley Of Vision." The writers are addressing God, yet as I read them, I find great benefit in their God-ward speech. One of the most spiritually influential works of all Western history is Augustine's *Confessions*. Yet most of the work is made up of his prayers to God. How could God-directed speech edify others? Well, if you think it couldn't, just pick up *Confessions* and let God change your life! In fact, outside the Bible, the single most important religious work of liturgy in Protestant history has been *The Book of Common Prayer*. Large sections of it are "The Collects," or the collection of carefully crafted prayers by Thomas Cranmer. Not only is it *possible* for such God-directed speech to benefit the assembly, no book outside the Bible has ever more impacted the shape of Protestant public worship (far beyond the Anglican church).

Third, even if none of that resonated with you, who has not known the experience of reading the Psalms and being blessed by the prayers of David and others? We have here inspired speech, from an individual, *to God*. Yet it not only is a help to you, it is God's word inspired for all time. I suspect that when tongues is interpreted, it should sound in fact very much like the Psalms; an outflow of praise, thanksgiving, prayer and intercession to God.

Conclusion - Setting Aside Some Bad Ideas

If we come with these two presuppositions (that tongues was meant as an evangelistic tool, or was meant to facilitate horizontal speech from man to men), we are in fact simply ignoring large chunks of the biblical data. These presuppositions are simply flatly unbiblical. For years I bounced back and forth between different ways of understanding this gift, and always was left with pieces that didn't fit. That wasn't because the biblical data was contradictory. I am now convinced it was because I had read unbiblical presuppositions into the text, and those presuppositions simply made the text not fit.

So if we set these mistaken assumptions aside, and try to take account not just of part but of all of the biblical data on the topic, what can we make of the gift? Tune in next time as we take up these questions in part II on Tongues.

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