

TONGUES, THEN AND NOW
1 Corinthians 14

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My eyes were bigger than the saucers that go beneath a jumbo cup of coffee. I mean, how is a little guy supposed to take it all in? It was finally here – the circus had come to town. In school, they gave us free tickets (of course, they were hoping you would bring your paying parents). It was going to be what had been heralded as “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

It wasn't one ring, or two rings. This was a three ring circus. The ring master would come out and announce, “In the center ring....” “In the first ring....” “In the third ring....” And, I mean, it was all happening at the same time.

In the center ring, you had the hair-raising human cannonballs being shot out like rockets being launched from the pad. If they don't hit the net, then splat. To the left of the center ring there was the three Espania brothers, spinning inside a steel sphere. Three of them – riding motorcycles, up to seventy miles per hour. Around and around and around – 360, 360, 360. I would be a drunk as a skunk if I tried to go around and around like that one time, much less multiple times, while trying to avoid two other motorcycles crossing paths. How do they keep their orientation? How do they know where they are, much less where the other two motorcycles are located? Practice, I guess.

Then, finally, the third ring had the Mighty Hercules, who could bend 3/4-inch steel rods as if they were water hoses. He could lift up to 3/4 of a ton, over 1700 pounds. He actually allowed a 2-ton Jeep to ride across his midsection.

I must have looked like I was a spectator at a tennis match – back and forth between the rings. It's all going on at once. The motorcycles were going around and around, and the strong man was bending the bar. And the cannon is about to shoot. Now, I know what my mother meant when she said, “This house is more chaotic than a three ring circus!”

All happening under the big tent – the cathedral of the clowns.

Wait a minute, I remember another time I went to a three ring circus. Except this time it wasn't the cathedral of the clowns. It was supposed to be the cathedral of the Christ. It was supposed to be a church. Quite frankly, I guess we did kind of go as spectators. Shame on us. I was in seminary, and I was trying to experience every brand of Baptist that one could experience. And there was a so-called charismatic Baptist church located not too far from the seminary which was really beginning to draw in the crowds. It was different, I had heard. It was creative. It was promoting the gifts of the Spirit.

So, another fellow seminarian and his family went, and we went. We sat on the pew waiting for the service to begin. Strange, there was no printed order of service. That's okay – someone has an order in their mind, surely. Maybe there is, what we call sometimes a “blind order.” That means Dan and I know the order; we just don't let you in on it.

It seemed to begin with a familiar flair, but it wasn't long until chaos broke out. The family we were visiting with had two small boys, and, amidst the chaos, one of them was scared to death and the other one was laughing to the point that we were having to hush him. I wanted to laugh, too, but I was supposed to know better. I was in church, so I tried not to laugh. But I had never before, or since, experienced anything quite like this worship service.

As we were singing a particular hymn, a lady got the “holy leaps.” She took off her shoes and commenced running down the center aisle, making four foot leaps – ballerina-type leaps – down the aisle. Boy, did I watch that gal go – down the center aisle and up the left, back around to the front and down to the right. It was attention she was wanting, I'm sure, and it was attention she was getting, at least from us. We had never seen anybody get the “holy leaps.”

And about the time she was wearing a thin spot in the carpet, four or five more joined her. Some just walking in circles and clapping, and others doing their own type of dance, while the pastor slayed two others in the Spirit.

Convulsing and rolling and jumping and leaping and dancing and shouting. I thought to myself, “This is better entertainment than the circus.” The only other thing I could have hoped for was for somebody to jump up and run the pews. I have heard of that. You get that holy unction from on high and just jump up on top of the pews and run the tops of them, back and forth. It didn't happen, and no one got out the snakes – for which I and the six-year-old boy (the one laughing, not the one afraid) were sorely disappointed. For the circus seemed incomplete without snakes. If this were the mountains of Tennessee, they'd get out the snakes. But it wasn't. It was Fort Worth – so, no snakes.

Is that the way God wants church to be? Like a three ring circus? This one preaching a sermon here, that one doing a dance there, and a third rolling in the floor? Not according to the apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40

The church in Corinth was running a three ring circus in worship. And Paul tells them to stop it. It was a circus that was infiltrated with the gift of speaking in tongues, speaking a Holy Ghost language.

When I was growing up in high school, I had some friends in a Pentecostal church, and they would be asked the question as they reached somewhere around middle school or early high school, “Have you received the gift yet?” What gift? Or they would come up to me and ask, “Do you have the gift?” Being a Baptist, I really didn't know what they were talking about. What gift was I supposed to have? No one had given me a gift. “No, no. Do you have the gift of speaking in tongues,” they wanted to know. For in their church, if you had the gift of speaking in tongues,

then, and only then, did you have the Holy Spirit. That's the way their theology had developed. If you don't have the gift of speaking in tongues you don't have the gift of the Holy Spirit in your life. That's what the Pentecostals were teaching.

So there were really, according to them, two levels of believers. There were believers who had the gift – those right there on the top shelf, the best kind of believers, those who could speak in tongues. When somebody keeps asking, “Do you have the gift yet, son?” you're eventually going to get the gift. It's expected. Your granddaddy had the gift. Your daddy had the gift. And if you don't get the gift, then something is not quite right. And you'll end up on the second tier or the second shelf for believers.

Have you heard of this kind of theology? It's a bad theology. It's so foreign to what Paul is saying to those who lived in the city of Corinth.

I want to say several things about tongues.

I. Speaking in tongues is described in 1 Corinthians as a spontaneous, unlearned form of communication to God made in the Spirit.

It's not like in the Acts of the Apostles where the Spirit comes and everybody hears in their own known language. That's a different kind of speaking in tongues. The gift of speaking in tongues from the Corinthian passage is a gift of speaking in a Holy Ghost language, not codified anywhere. You're not speaking Spanish or Japanese or German. You can't get an alphabet for the language you're speaking. You can't recognize the difference between a verb or a noun in form. It's an unknown language. Well, you can't unless, of course, you have the gift of interpretation. It's a spontaneous, unlearned form of communication.

So, realize in this passage there did exist, and I believe does exist, a gift of speaking in a Holy Ghost tongue.

II. The gift of tongues is a gift that is to be used mostly for personal edification. A prayer language.

Look at 1 Corinthians 14:2-4.

The one who speaks in tongues edifies himself. The one who prophesies or speaks a clear word edifies the church.

V. 2. Tongues = prayer, speaking to God.

I know some people who have the gift of speaking in tongues. They have great communion with God through this gift. You know where they practice that gift? They do it at home. To them, it's edifying. But it's not edifying for the church. It is something they use for personal edification. So speaking in tongues does offer a benefit, but mostly to the individual.

III. The speaker has control.

Look at 1 Corinthians 14:27ff. “If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be two or three at the most. If you’re the fourth one, don’t do it.” It’s not something beyond control. And if there is no interpreter (v. 28), don’t even speak. Keep silent. “For the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (v. 32). Don’t say you can’t help but speak in tongues.

I had a pastor friend who had a lady in his church who was beginning to get out of line. She was changing the church’s worship services into the three ring circus. Her gift of the Spirit was really loud, and it was getting louder every Sunday. That’s always a good question to ask yourself. “Does my gift draw eyes to me or does it draw eyes to God?” That’s what Paul is saying. If your gift draws eyes to you, it’s not of the Spirit. It is of pride.

This lady would sit on the front row, and she would go out into the aisle. Some people really thought she was super spiritual, thought she put on the biggest show. She was bothering the pastor while he was preaching. She was bothering the soloist. She would get out in the aisle and scream, “Sing it, sister. Sing it, sister,” to the soloist as she tried to remember her words and notes.

Finally he told her, in the kindest way he knew how, “You know, I realize you mean the very best. But you’re going to have to tone it down just a bit. You’re causing distractions and confusion in worship.” She told the pastor she would have to think about it, because it wasn’t she who was doing it. It was the Holy Spirit of God.

Paul would have said to her (I don’t know whether my friend did or not), “The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. You do have control over yourself. Paul says, “If you’re sitting there and the Spirit says, ‘Speak,’ no, don’t do it.” Wait. Go one at a time. And if too many have gone, don’t elongate the service by demanding that you are heard.

It’s very interesting. Paul says you do control the Spirit.

IV. Some Christians don’t have the gift at all (12:30-31).

It doesn’t make you an inferior Christian if you do not have the gift. Look at 1 Corinthians 12. Here we are told about the variety of gifts, and how people have various gifts but all gifts are important. And notice what Paul says in verse 30. “All do not speak with tongues, do they? And all do not interpret tongues, do they? No. But I want you to seek the greater gifts. I’m going to show you a better way.” And he says in chapter 13 that the greatest gift is love.

I do not have the gift of speaking in tongues. Never have. Have not sought it. It’s fine with me if you do have that gift. But it’s not mine, nor will I pretend to have it. Everyone does not have the gift, and those who do not have the gift are in no way inferior, nor do they have less of God’s Holy Spirit because they do not have the gift of speaking in tongues.

V. I'm going to step out a limb a little bit more, but Paul says it's not one of the greater gifts to be sought.

He tells them at the end of chapter 12, "I want you seek the greater gifts." Then what does he say? That beautiful poem that we looked at last week about love. "If I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge and have faith, but if I do not have love, it is nothing." He goes through the list, and the greatest gifts are at the end. "Now remain these three, faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love."

In that passage he said if you have glossolalia, if you speak with the tongues of angels, if you have this Holy Ghost language but don't have love – well, it's no good. You are never told in scripture to seek the gift of speaking in tongues if you don't have it. It's not a greater gift. It's a minor gift (see 14:1).

VI. Clear speech is better.

All of what Paul is doing in Corinthians is trying to tell them that they are so busy seeking these so-called super or hyped-up gifts that they are drawing attention to themselves. Paul is trying to calm them down. "Slow down. Wait a minute. I'd rather you not seek the gift of tongues. I'd rather you seek the gift of prophecy."

Look at 1 Corinthians 14:19.

However in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

I think his point is made. A few words of clarity are much better than ten thousand words in the unknown tongue.

By the way, Paul has the gift of speaking in tongues. "I speak in tongues more than you all," he says. "But not in church (14:18-19). In church I like five words of clarity, that I can instruct others, rather than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." Paul seems to be saying, "I have the gift, but I exercise it in my prayer closet. I have the gift more than any of you do. But when I get to church, I want clear words of instruction."

This whole chapter is about edifying the church. Look at verse 3. "The one who prophesies speaks to men for edification...but the one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church."

I've gone through chapter 14 in my Bible and circled every time the words "edify" and "build up" are used. And it's very frequent.

Verse 5, again. The church needs to be edified. "You're so zealous for spiritual gifts," he says in verse 12. "You need to seek to edify the church."

Or verse 17. If someone does not know what you are saying, then they are not edified.

Verse 26. “Let all things be done for edification.”

It’s about building up the church, of bringing clarity of communication in orderly worship.

Someone might say about our worship services, “You know, I wish just one time we’d do something that wasn’t in the order of worship – that the Spirit would move and we would just follow the movement of the Spirit in worship versus following a man-made order of worship.” That’s really faulty thinking. You’re supposing the Spirit can only lead here this morning in worship. What makes you think He can’t lead Dan and Parker as they prepare and plan for the order of the worship service? Do you suppose those who formulate the order don’t pray and prepare and seek the will and the way of the Spirit? Why would you limit the Spirit to exercising Himself only in the midst of worship, when the Spirit by His nature wants that which is orderly, according to the apostle Paul. The Spirit is so powerful He could lead those who plan our worship weeks in advance, for He knows all things.

It’s interesting. Sometimes I’ll plan a sermon topic months in advance, and someone will come up and say, “That’s exactly what I needed to hear. Do you know what happened to me this week?” I didn’t know what was going to happen to them this week, but the Spirit of God did.

Don’t confuse a printed order with a Spirit-absent worship service. Don’t confuse a non-printed order with a Spirit-led service. The two cannot be equated. The logic limits the spirit.

VII. Speaking in tongues can be very confusing to unbelievers.

That’s Paul’s concern. Look at 14:23. If, therefore, the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues, and the ungifted men or the unbelievers enter, they’ll not know what you are saying. They’ll think you’re mad. They’ll think you are crazy. Paul is saying that the gift of speaking in tongues can be very frightful, very confusing to an unbelieving world. They don’t know what’s going on. They don’t understand. They think you’re a mad man.

VIII. Jesus nowhere speaks in tongues.

He never teaches about it. He just doesn’t. As you read the gospels, you realize that Jesus Himself did not have the gift of speaking in tongues. Paul did. Jesus didn’t. In fact, it seems to me that if this were something so terribly important to the disciples, then Jesus would have talked about the gift of speaking in tongues. He simply doesn’t mention a word about it.

“Pastor, do you think the gift exists today – the gift of speaking in this Holy Ghost language?” Honestly, absolutely, I do think that gift exists today. I don’t know by what logic you would begin to take gifts off the list. Outside the gift of apostleship (which I won’t go into, but we could argue has ended), I don’t know how you could remove any of these gifts from the list. By what criteria could you argue that some gifts don’t exist today? I don’t have the authority to take a gift off the list. And just because I don’t have the gift, just because a gift might make me feel uncomfortable, just because that’s not the way I worship, I can’t say it’s not right for someone else, for some other church, for some other worship, or for you in your prayer closet. If you’re serving as a deacon in this church and you come up to me and say, “Pastor, I’m relieved after your sermon. I never told

anyone, but I speak in tongues when I pray in the morning sometimes. I never know when it's going to happen," I'd say, "Great, fine. It's not my gift. What a fellow you are to keep that secret all these years and not draw attention to yourself in the worship or give confusion or cause hardship in this fellowship by exercising that gift." But don't expect the rest of us to have that gift.

Not only do I think the gift exists, I think we'd have a different attitude about it if there wasn't so much abuse among churches today in regard to the gift of tongues. I think if I were to visit that Baptist church in Fort Worth when I was in seminary and seen some orderly fashion to the expression of the more eccentric gifts, perhaps I would not have come away laughing at all.

The real question is this. Not, "Do you have the gift of tongues?" but, rather, "Are you using the gift that God has given you to edify the body of Christ?" You don't have to agree with anything else I've said this morning, but you do have to agree with that. The only question that matters is, "Are you discovering your gift, and are you using your gift to build up and edify the church?"

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:7, "Each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." And then in chapter 14 he says "edify the church" over and over again.