

CESSATION OF TONGUES – PART TWO

TONGUES AS USED IN 1 CORINTHIANS

Other than the book of Acts, the gift of tongues is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians. Before we look into 1 Corinthians 14, we need to understand the context, purpose and motive behind tongues-speaking in this book.

News had come to the Apostle Paul that there was abuse in the use of gifts in the church in Corinth. His common approach in dealing with all church problems was to first teach the right doctrine.

1 Corinthians 12 teaches the use and purpose of gifts. 1 Corinthians 13 teaches the motive behind the use of gifts. 1 Corinthians 14 deals with the problem of the abuse of gifts.

1 CORINTHIANS 12: THE PURPOSE OF GOD GIVING GIFTS TO MEN

From 1 Corinthians 12, we observe the following points concerning spiritual gifts:

1. Different gifts but the same Holy Spirit (v 4)
 - a. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit participate in the granting of gifts. The Christian cannot pit one against another. There is blessed and perfect unity in the Godhead in all things, including the impartation of a gift or gifts to the believer. Verses 4 to 6 reveal to the believer that all three persons of the Godhead are involved in the giving.
 - b. The unity within the Godhead is the obvious emphasis. Paul also highlights a contrast, between “diversities of gifts” (v 4), “differences of administration” (v 5), “diversities of operation” (v 6) and the “same Spirit,” “same Lord,” “same God.”
 - c. The variety of gifts that God has given to His church must not be construed as disharmony within the Godhead. The Godhead is one in all things. There is no disharmony; there is always perfect unity in operation, motivation and action.
2. All gifts of the Holy Spirit are for the blessing of others (v 7)
 - a. The exercise of every gift means “the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.” When a Christian uses his gift, he is manifesting the work of the Holy Spirit in his life. That is why the gifts of the Holy Spirit must not be seen as a “Christianized” secular talent which is given to all by way of the general grace of God.
 - b. Gifts of God are given to all believers. This means that every Christian is given at least one gift. There is no Christian who does not possess a spiritual gift from God. The significance is that every Christian must serve and has no excuse not

to. His duty is to find out from God what his gift is, and use it for the glory of God.

- c. The purpose of gifts is not for personal benefit. It is for the “profit withal.” Literally, it means “to carry with” or “bear up with”. Barnes explained it well: “they are bestowed not on all equally, but in such a manner as shall best subserve the interests of piety and the church, and as shall tend harmoniously to carry on the great interests of religion, and further the welfare of the whole Christian body.” For example, a Christian who is gifted in teaching must use his gift to teach and bless others.

3. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in who receives which gift or gifts (v 11)

- a. The list of gifts here is not meant to be exhaustive. The focus is not on the many different types of gifts but on the word “same”. The Holy Spirit is the One who gives gifts to every Christian. The gifts are very different but they all come from the same Holy Spirit. In other words, gifts are not to be used to war or compete with one another.
- b. The Christian may ask and pray for a particular gift. But he must understand that it is our sovereign God who determines and dictates who receives which gifts. This truth should eradicate all jealousy from those who might covet gifts others have. For example, a person who loves the limelight wants to sing, and may be envious of another who has this gift. If he realizes that it is God who gives and determines who receives what gifts, then as a child of God he must submit to God’s sovereign will.
- c. On the other hand, the Christian who has a gift must realize the need for humility, as he has been gifted by God’s sovereign will. He must not boast, or think that the gift is his because he is more blessed than others. God does not practise favouritism. A gift is simply something given to a Christian who does not deserve it. Do not boast; be humble.

2. All gifts are of equal importance and necessity (vv 12-26)

- a. All Christians need one another in the body of Christ; there must be no jealousy which will cause schisms. The oneness of the Body of Christ is signified here in very clear terms. This oneness is crucial in the exercise of every gift. The example par excellence of this oneness is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Christ baptized us into His Body with only One Spirit. Jews or Gentiles, bond or free, all of us, without exception, were made to drink into One Spirit, ie. to be baptized with the same Spirit of God who indwells all believers. (vv 12-13)
- b. It is oneness in diversity. The physical body, with its multifaceted functions, is a very apt illustration to explain and depict the invisible Body of Jesus Christ. No

part of the body will ever say to another, “I do not need you”, or “since you are not me, then you are dispensable”. The foot, hand, ear and eye are mentioned to drive home this important point (vv 14-16). Each of them has a different function to perform. The foot is used for walking and cannot say to the hand “I do not need you”, because the hand is needed for other functions. The ear is for listening and cannot say to the eye “you are useless because you are not like me”, because only the eye has the function of sight. Imagine a body with only eyes or ears or just the nose - what would happen to the rest of the bodily functions?

- c. Every part of the body has a purpose as it pleases God. No part has been placed that is not according to God’s sovereign will. Each part depends on other parts to function in unison. There is unity rather than conflict. There is diversity of function but unity of purpose. The purpose is to edify and help the body as one. (vv 17-21)
- d. The bodily parts which appear to be more sickly (ie. feeble) are most necessary. This probably refers to the heart, lungs and other internal organs of the body. They are weak, compared with the other parts as they need to be protected by our external physical structure but they are indispensable to keeping the body alive. (v 22) Then there are the other parts of the body which may appear less honourable but are given greater honour. This might refer to parts of our body which need to be covered up for the sake of decency. Our feet require shoes due to their “uncomeliness” and for practical reasons. The comely parts which require no covering would be our hands and face. They have their distinctive functions and purposes. God has tempered (ie. harmoniously blended) the body together, giving different parts of the body different functions and comeliness as He wills. (vv 23-24)
- e. Every part of the body needs, and must care and look after other parts. The wound in one part of the body is felt by the whole body. The rest of the parts will come to the aid of the wounded part. This must be the case in the body of Christ. (vv 25-26)
- f. The believer should have a strong desire for the best gift. There is no contradiction here. It is true the Bible teaches that it is God’s sovereign will that determines who receives what gift. No one is to be jealous of the other. Having said that, God also tells the believer to desire the best gift. To desire the best gift means to desire the gift that will benefit others best. Remember that the purpose of gifts is for the benefit of others and not self. A believer may desire a particular gift but this does not mean that God will give it to him. He must pray and seek and submit to God’s will for his life even as he cries out to God in prayer for a particular gift. Having said this, the Apostle then reveals “a more excellent way” than a desire for the best gift to benefit other believers. It is to have the right motive behind the exercise of all gifts - the motive of love. With this Paul begins the next chapter. (vv 27-31)

1 CORINTHIANS 13: THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE USE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

From 1 Corinthians 13, we note the following points:

1. The love of Christ, which is an unconditional love, must be the motive behind the exercise of our gifts (vv 1-3). Three hyperboles are used to drive home this point.
 - a. The first hyperbole - Paul says that even if he speaks the tongues of men, ie. all the languages of the world and including that of angels, but he does not have love, he would be like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. (v 1) Tinkling cymbal and sounding brass are empty noises that may be jarringly piercing to the ears. One may assume that if a person can speak all languages, he would be highly revered as a great genius. But Paul says that all the languages spoken by such a person, whose motive is not love, would be like the empty piercing noise of a cymbal or a sounding brass. The word “tongue” used here is “languages.” Paul does not say that he can speak the language of angels, for this is a hyperbole. Thus far in all the appearances of angelic beings, whether they spoke to the servants of God or praised God in Heaven, they spoke either Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic, the languages of the Bible. There is no justification here for ecstatic utterances.
 - b. In the second hyperbole, Paul says that even if he has the gift of prophecy and is able to understand all mysteries and knowledge, including all faith, so that he could remove mountains, but he has no love, he would be nothing, ie. he would be an absolute nobody. (v 2) One would assume that if a believer has all the knowledge in the world, including the gift of telling future events, and has the faith to move mountains, he would be highly regarded as a mature and even supreme believer. But in Paul’s estimation, if the motive behind the exercise of his gift is not love, then he is a nobody.
 - c. The third hyperbole touches on the extremity of external acts of the believer. Paul says that even if he sells all his worldly possessions, gives all to the poor, and gives his body to be burned, without the motive of love in his heart, all his good deeds would benefit him absolutely nothing. (v 3)
 - d. The word “love” in this entire chapter is “agape”. This is the unconditional, sacrificial and highest form of love given only to God’s children. This takes place at the time of the person’s conversion (Rom 5:5). In other words, every believer is given this special divine love from God. He has no excuse not to exercise this love. This love is defined for us from verses 4 to 6.
2. Love will last whereas the gifts will cease (vv 7-12)

a. The gift of knowledge and prophecy would cease when the Bible has been completed. The word “perfect” refers to the completion of the Bible. The reasons to support this understanding include:

i. The immediate context – All the three gifts cited here in the context have to do with the Word of God. The gift of tongues refers to the ability to share the Word of God in another language. This would cease long before the “perfect” comes. As more and more Christians are converted, there is no need for God to give this gift to man. Take the example of a Christian who desires to evangelize to his grandmother who speaks only Teochew. However, he has not been blessed with facility in Teochew. God does not need to give him the gift of speaking in tongues - in the Teochew dialect. He could simply invite a Teochew-speaking church member to share Christ with his grandmother. The gift of tongues has ceased. That is why missionaries today have to spend years learning the languages of the people they are ministering to, and then translate the Word of God into that language. It could take their entire lives to accomplish this. Of the three gifts, the gift of tongues would be the first to cease.

The gift of prophecies refers to the ability to declare the Word of God in the language of the hearers. The word “knowledge” refers to the Word of God that had yet to be completely revealed; more than half of the New Testament Scripture had yet to be written at the time of Paul penning 1 Corinthians. Thus, much of the knowledge and prophecies of the last things had not been revealed when 1 Corinthians was written. Hence, Paul says in verse 9, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part.” At that point in time, the disciples knew only in part, through the continual use of the gifts of knowledge and prophecy which were needed until the New Testament was completed. But the moment the Bible has been completed, these two gifts would be done away with. They would not be needed. (v 8)

ii. The grammar used for the three gifts argue for cessation – “prophecies” and “knowledge” are in the “passive voice.” This means that they will be caused to cease by something outside of themselves (use of the passive voice in “shall fail” and “shall vanish away” v 8). However, the gift of tongues is in the middle voice. That means tongues will cease by itself, ie. cease on its own. This is the significance of the use of the middle voice in verse 8. That is why tongues-speaking was not even mentioned in verse 9.

iii. The word “perfect” in Greek is “teleios” – This word is also used in James 1:25 and refers to the perfect Word of God. James 1:25, “But whoso looketh into the perfect (teleios) law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.” The Greek word for “second coming” is “telos”. If Paul had wanted to refer to the second coming, he would have used “telos”, and not “teleios”

given how careful a man he was. “Telos” is used in 1 Corinthians 15:24 and is translated as “the end”. (v 10)

- b. The Christian would gain maturity through the study of the completed Bible. He had partial knowledge like a child, before the completion of the Bible, but he will know even as also he is known (v 12). Who is the one who knows him? It is God who knows the Christian’s end and eternity, which the Christian will also know when the books of the New Testament have been completed. For example, in the book of Revelation, the Christian will know the final end of sin, Satan, death, Hell, present-day earth and heaven, the eternal destination of believers and unbelievers, the new heaven and new earth, the wrath of God, etc.
- c. Of the other three gifts from God, love is greater than faith and hope (v 13). Faith and hope will not be needed in heaven but love will remain. When the Christian finally arrives in heaven, faith and hope will turn to sight - they will not be needed anymore. But love (agape love, which is unconditional and sacrificial) will remain in his heart for all eternity. The thrust of Paul’s argument is that the earlier three gifts (tongues, prophecies, and knowledge) concerning the Word of God are important but they are temporal. The greater gift of love, which includes the motivation behind the exercise of the gift, will last forever. Pursue after this gift called love. Have it as the driving force behind the exercise of all gifts. With love as the motivation, the believer can never go wrong in using his gift, whatever the gift might be.

1 CORINTHIANS 14: GIFTS MUST NOT BE ABUSED IN THE CHURCH

Having explained the theology behind the giving and purpose of gifts in chapter 12, and the motivation behind the use of gifts in chapter 13, Paul then deals with the problem in the Corinthian church. There must be no schism in the use of gifts. Points to note include:

1. All gifts are for the edification of the church, including the gift of tongues. Gifts are never given to show off (vv 1-11). Edification is defined as “promoting the spiritual growth and development of the character of believers, by teaching or by example.” [Vine’s Expository Dictionary, page 18]. In short, edification means to build up the faith of believers. The mind has to be involved in faith, which is not a warm feeling or sensation as the Charismatics have intimated.
 - a. The gift of tongues was abused by the church in Corinth. People spoke in tongues without any interpretation and nobody in the church of Corinth knew what they were talking about. They were essentially showing off their “gift” and telling others that only they had this gift. They were categorically castigated by the Apostle Paul. (v 2)

The “unknown tongue” mentioned in verse 2 does not refer to ecstatic utterances. It is not that no one “in the whole world” understood what the person was saying. “Unknown tongue” refers to an unknown language which no

one in the church then understood. Remember that the context is within the local church worship service in Corinth. The only one who understands this “unknown tongue” is God. Therefore, the person was speaking only to God and not to any man at all. As far as the people were concerned, he was uttering mysterious things. For example, when I heard the students of the Bible College of East Africa in Nairobi, Kenya sing or share their testimonies in Swahili, it was a mystery to me. To those who understood, they were edified. I was not edified because I did not understand a word. The person who speaks the language understands it himself. But if there is none present who also understands that language, why would he want to speak it?

- b. Prophecy is better than tongues if the latter has no interpretation. The Apostle Paul then uses the gift of prophecy to demonstrate why the gift of tongues is not to be abused. Paul points out that it is important that the congregation understands the revelation that is given in tongues (vv 3-6). The person who prophesies speaks the Word of God and everyone understands because he speaks in a language the congregation understands. They would be edified, exhorted and comforted (v 3). Edification always embraces understanding. The word “edifies” in Greek literally means “to build up.”

On the other hand, the person who speaks in a tongue (ie. speaks the Word of God in a different language) which no one understands, edifies only himself. He is the only one who understands. In this sense, the gift of prophecy is better than the gift of tongues-speaking. The Apostle Paul is not contradicting what he had asserted very clearly earlier, in chapters 12 and 13, that all gifts are of equal value and are useful for everyone. Believers need each other as the body of Christ; no part of the body can say that he does not need the other members of the body. There is no elevation of one gift above another. Therefore, what Paul is saying in Chapter 14 is that the gift of tongues was being abused in the church, in that it was used only for personal edification, and not for the edification of others which is the primary goal of the spiritual gift. (vv 3-5)

- c. Speak in tongues for the benefit of others. The use of tongues is for the benefit of others. To benefit others, Paul says he would speak by revelation (ie. to speak intelligibly), by knowledge (ie. to make it understandable), by prophesying (ie. to communicate through interpretation), and by doctrine (ie. by teaching). Barnes summed up this verse as, “The sense of this passage, therefore, is clear. Though Paul should utter among them, as he had abundant ability to do, the most weighty and important truths, yet, unless he interpreted what he said in a manner clear from obscurity, like revelation; or intelligibly, and so as to constitute knowledge; or in the manner that the prophets spoke, in a plain and intelligible manner; or in the manner usual in simple and plain instruction, it would be useless to them.”

Paul then illustrates this verse very clearly by way of two musical instruments: “things without life-giving sound”, like the pipe and harp. Each gives a distinctive sound, otherwise no one will know the difference between a pipe and a harp (v 7). In battlefields then, the sound of the trumpet is a matter of life and death. If the trumpet sound is unclear, soldiers would not know whether to retreat or to charge forward; how would they prepare themselves for battle? (v 8)

- d. All languages have significance. Therefore, if the tongue (language) spoken is not known, no one would understand its significance. The one who spoke it would be akin to one speaking into the air! There are so many voices (languages) in the world and none of them is without signification (“without no meaning”). The conclusion is that the person who spoke in that unknown language would be regarded as a barbarian. (vv 9-11)
2. Gifts can be abused, as seen in the abuse of the gift of tongues in the Corinthian church. Tongues-speaking was a popular gift because it was prominent. The problem was that many of the Corinthians were speaking in languages that no one else could understand. That is why Paul says that it is better to speak five words with understanding than 10,000 words without understanding (vv 12-19).
 - a. In verse 12, he qualifies what he said in 1 Corinthians 12:31, that even as one desires spiritual gifts, seek to super-abound in the edification of the church. Paul draws their attention back to the fundamental and original purpose of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The one who speaks in an unknown tongue must pray that there is one who can interpret. The question is: “why must he pray for someone to interpret when he himself can understand?” The problem is that he probably does not speak the language of the people. Let us assume that person is bilingual in both the unknown tongue and the tongue of the people present. There is then no need for him to speak in the unknown tongue for he could simply speak in the language of the people. On the other hand, if he were monolingual, when he speaks in an unknown tongue, he would need an interpreter. There is no point for him to speak the Word of God in a language that no one in the church understands unless there is an interpreter present.

Some years ago, I had the privilege of preaching in the Swahili Church in Kenya, in English. I needed my message interpreted into Swahili. If there was no one to do that, my preaching would have been in vain. Therefore, the one who desires to edify should pray that there will be an interpreter, or that he may interpret his message himself. (vv 12-13)

- b. In the realm of praying in the church, and not speaking the Word of God in an unknown tongue – In verse 14, Paul says that if he prays in a tongue that no one understands (except he himself), then only his own spirit is praying, and himself edified. Others may hear but not understand, and will not be edified. Hence the phrase “but my understanding is unfruitful”, which means “my ability to

understand produces no fruit in others". This would defeat the purpose of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is to edify others. The conclusion is that,

“What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified.”

Tongues as a gift from God is for the blessing of others. If no one present understands that language, why speak the Word of God, or pray to God, or even give thanks (v 17) in that language? It would be fruitless! (vv 14-17)

- c. Five words to teach others than 10,000 words in an unknown tongue – Paul affirms that he speaks more tongues (ie. languages) than all of them, and yet he would rather speak five words in an understandable language than 10,000 words in an unknown tongue. (vv 18- 19) Do not lose sight of the purpose of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; they are given for the edification of others.
3. Be mature in the use of the gifts. When it comes to understanding the Word of God, do not be like children, but be like men. When it comes to evil deeds, be like children. The Christian does not need to experience evil to know that evil is wrong and sinful.

Tongues were given in the Old Testament days as a sign to the rebellious children of Israel when they did not believe God's prophecies. Therefore, tongues became a sign to the Israelites who rejected the Word of God in their own language. They were thrust into exile and had to learn God's Word in another language - the language of the Chaldeans! That is why the verses in chapters 2:4b to 7:28 of the book of Daniel were written in Aramaic.

Imagine this scenario: a Japanese-speaking congregation is listening to a man preaching in Swahili, without interpretation. A Japanese-speaking visitor walks into the church. He would say that the church is “mad.” But if all were to prophesy, ie. speak the Word of God in the same known language, then there would be no confusion; everyone would understand the word of prophecy spoken in a common language. Any visitor to the church would be able to understand what the speaker is saying. And when he is convicted of his sins and believes in God, he would say that, indeed, God is with the church. (vv 20-25)

4. All gifts must be carefully regulated in the church (vv 26- 33). The usage of gifts must be carefully controlled. In the case of tongues-speaking, no more than three different languages may be used sequentially in the service. After each language is spoken, there must be interpretation. If there is no one to interpret, then there should be no tongues-speaking. I would not be asked to speak to the Mandarin congregation if there is no interpreter, because I can preach only in English. It would be a waste of time for

everybody. In most churches today, not more than two languages are used during worship service.

The practice of prophecies and tongues was not forbidden by the Apostle at that time because such gifts had not ceased; canon of Scripture was not complete yet. But these gifts ceased upon the completion of the Holy Scriptures.

Today, if anyone claims that he receives prophecies or new knowledge from God, he is a false prophet. He would be charged with adding to Scriptures. The warning is very clear in Revelation 22:18-19, "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

CONCLUSION

1. Tongues in New Testament times were proper languages with syntax and grammar. They were not the ecstatic babbling found in the Charismatic churches today, utterances no one understands. A "warm feeling all over" is not to be equated with edification. Edification means that the faith and life of the believers are built up.
2. All gifts, including the gift of tongues-speaking, are given by God for the edification of other believers and not the possessor of the gift.
3. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit all participate in the giving of gifts. There is no conflict.
4. The Holy Spirit is the One who determines who receives which gift. Every believer is given at least one gift.
5. All gifts are of equal importance; no one gift is better than another.
6. The motive behind the use of all gifts must be Agape Love, the unconditional and sacrificial love that God gives to all believers at the time of their conversion. The believer has no excuse not to have love as his motivation.
7. The gift of tongues ceased on its own, even before the completion of Scriptures. Prophecies and knowledge ceased at the completion of the Scriptures. All the knowledge that is necessary for the believer's well being, and to live a victorious Christian life is found in the Holy Bible.
8. The use of all gifts must be carefully regulated and used in an orderly manner. Their usage must not bring about confusion, jealousy, resentment and schism. It must be for the edification of the saints and God's glory.