

## LESSONS FROM THE GIFT OF TONGUES

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### Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 14

Shaking, convulsing, laughing for an extended period of time (otherwise known as holy laughter), screaming, falling down flat on one's back and becoming completely limp (otherwise known as being slain in the Spirit), making animal sounds (such as barking like a dog), plus a variety of other body motions and sounds that draw the attention of a crowd...All these things are happening every day in church meetings around the world.

And when these things happen, it is common for someone to declare that the thing happening is the work of the Holy Spirit. A group of college students once came to my church to share during a Sunday morning service. After the service people declared that they must have been a Spirit-filled group, because, while they were praying, they were shaking.

But even though people will declare that all the things I just mentioned are an evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit, other people will say that all such happenings are bazaar and come from the devil.

And then there are other people who will take the list and classify some things as Holy Spirit induced while other things they will classify as coming from Satan or a demon. For instance, Some people will say that laughing comes from the Holy Spirit but animal sounds come from demons. A teacher once told me that vomiting is a sign that someone is being released from a demon. However, a sister once informed me that the people from a certain church considered the vomiting taking place during their meetings as the work of the Holy Spirit. They called it holy vomit.

Having attended meetings where I have witnessed everything I mentioned (with the exception of the vomiting) I have often wondered what it all means. After such meetings, people have turned to me and asked, what do you think was going on in there? Was it the devil? Was it the Holy Spirit? Or was it all psychologically induced, having nothing to do with either the Holy Spirit or Satan? I now believe that, in a large group meeting where such things are taking place, the answer to that kind of multiple-choice question is probably "all of the above." Perhaps the Holy Spirit is touching a certain person while that person experiences one of the things I mentioned. Perhaps others are under the influence of evil, and still others are being carried away by their emotion. Only God can really judge for sure what happens in the life of a certain individual who experiences such things happening in his life.

It is my observation that all kinds of things happen. A certain person's body will begin to shake while he is attending a meeting. After the experience, his life will change for the better. He will become more serious about the things of God and start witnessing to everyone around him. Another person will have a similar experience, but with opposite

results. Spiritually speaking, he will actually be worse off than he was before the experience. Other people seem to have a spiritually neutral experience. They don't improve. But neither do they regress. I have interviewed people who have had the experience of being slain in the Spirit. A common response I get from those being interviewed is that they had no special thoughts or feelings about God or Satan either before, after, or during the experience. It's just something that happened.

With such a wide variety of experiences and testimonies, how can we know what it all means? The Bible doesn't talk about being slain in the Spirit. We cannot deny that it happens, and we cannot deny the testimonies. If someone tells me that the experience helped to draw him closer to God, how can I say, "no it didn't?"

Fortunately, we are not completely without Biblical guidance as we try to address the happenings that seem so bazaar to so many people and so wonderful to so many others. Even though the Bible has little to say about some of the things I mentioned, it does have some teaching on the gift of tongues. And what the Bible teaches about the gift of tongues can give us some principles that will help answer some of our questions. In addition to answering some questions, I'm sure teaching on the gift of tongues will also raise new questions.

My goal this morning is not to answer all the questions, because I don't believe I have the answers to all the questions. However, I believe that by addressing a few of the controversial questions regarding the work of the Holy Spirit, I might be able to help some of you develop a balanced approach to ministry. And that is what I really want to do.

Last week we looked at some historical accounts from the book of Acts that included references to people speaking in tongues. Today we are going to look at what the Bible teaches about the gift of tongues, and we are going to discover that the lessons learned can help us gain an overall understanding about what should or should not take place when Christians gather together.

Let's begin by reading 1 Corinthians 14:1-5.

*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. <sup>2</sup>For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. <sup>3</sup>But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. <sup>4</sup>He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup>I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.*

I want to use this paragraph to draw your attention to the purpose of all the gifts of the Spirit; namely, the purpose of edification. Our scripture reading from last week made the same point. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (or edified) until we all

reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

The main goal of all the gifts of the Spirit is edification. And when a person is edified, that person is built up in his relationship with Jesus Christ. Edification affects the whole person, body and soul and spirit. When a certain person is edified, that person is built up spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.

And what is the main way to measure whether or not edification has taken place? I am personally convinced that love is the standard we should use to measure whether or not edification has taken place in the life of an individual or the life of a church. Where there is no evidence of love, you can be sure that no edification has taken place. 1 Corinthians 8:1 says, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (or love edifies).” That verse emphasizes the intimate relationship between love and edification. Where there is true love, there has been edification. Where there has been edification, you will find love. So the main purpose of the gifts is to edify, that is to cause people to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. And the main way to tell whether or not a certain person has grown in his relationship with Jesus is whether or not that person is growing in his ability to love.

This logic helps us to understand the relationship between 1 Corinthians 12, 13, and 14. 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14 talk about the gifts of the Spirit, and 1 Corinthians 13 talks about love. Sandwiched right in the middle of the teachings about the gifts is a whole chapter on love.

1 Corinthians 14:1 says, “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts.” These things must never be separated. We want the spiritual gifts so edification can take place so that we can follow the way of love. We should never desire the spiritual gifts just because we want to receive power.

With that in mind, we must now strive to understand the difference between the gift of tongues and all the other gifts. Please follow along as I read 1 Corinthians 14:6-12.

*Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

The last verse in twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians says, “But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.” The more excellent way, of course, is the way of love. But what are the greater gifts? Does greater mean better? Does it mean

more powerful?

When we come to 1 Corinthians 14 we find the gift of tongues compared with the gift of prophecy. But what is the meaning of the comparison? Is it that one gift is better than the other, or is it that one gift is more powerful than the other? The answer is neither. In 1 Corinthians 14:4 we read these words, "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church." Both tongues and prophecy are used to edify, so both are good and both are powerful. The difference between the two is that one edifies self while the other edifies the church.

Then, in the paragraph we just read, we see the gift that edifies the church is just a representative of many gifts that do the same thing. Verse 6 lists prophecy along with utterance of knowledge and teaching. The thing that all these gifts have in common is that they all edify the church. And the reason they are able to edify the church is because they are intelligible. In other words, you can understand what is being said.

1 Corinthians 12:31 tells us to pursue the greater gifts. Then, in 1 Corinthians 14:12 we are told to excel in the gifts that build up the church. Thus, I must conclude that the greater gifts in this context are the ones that are able to edify other people. They are the intelligible gifts. They are the gifts that we can use to edify other people in a group setting, because when we use them, other people will understand what we are saying and what we are doing. Out of all the gifts of the Spirit, there is only one gift that cannot be used to edify other people, and that is the gift of tongues. It is not a bad gift. Like all the other gifts, its main purpose is to edify; however, without interpretation, it can only be used to edify oneself. It cannot be used to edify other people, because it cannot be understood.

Now there is a very important lesson that will be repeated throughout the remainder of 1 Corinthians 14. It is that, when we come together, our main focus should not be to edify ourselves; rather, it should be to edify other people. In your fellowship groups, in our Sunday school classes, in our worship service, in our cell groups or 4w groups we should come with the desire to edify other people. And when we come together, we should desire to use the gifts that can edify other people. Unfortunately, the brothers and sisters at the church in Corinth were failing to realize this important point.

Consider what happens when people come together and fail to use gifts that edify other people. Let's read verses 13-19.

*For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

In this paragraph of scripture we see a struggle going on in the heart of the apostle Paul. He realizes that tongues without interpretation cannot edify another person. He knows that the main thing Christians should do when they get together is to edify other people and not themselves. He also realizes that he has the gift of tongues, and he desires to use it. So what should he do? That is the question asked in verse 15, and the answer is, "I will do both." "I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind." Now, to conclude that he wants to do both in the context of a meeting would be a contradiction of everything he has said and will continue to say. Thus, I must conclude that what the apostle Paul means in verse 15 is this: "When I am by myself, I will pray and sing in tongues. And when I am with other people, I will pray and sing in a way that can be understood by other people, because I want them to be edified.

Thus Paul drives home his main point to the Corinthian church. He tells them that they should be more concerned about edifying others than edifying themselves when they come together. And since they are failing to do this, his words will now become stronger in tone. Follow along as I read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25.

Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. In the Law it is written:

"Through men of strange tongues  
and through the lips of foreigners  
I will speak to this people,  
but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord.

Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? <sup>24</sup>But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

In this paragraph, the brothers and sisters at the Corinthian church are rebuked. Basically, Paul tells them that they are thinking like selfish little children. Then he goes on to describe their childish thinking.

First of all, he takes an illustration from history. It was a time when the people of Israel were not believing God like they should. God tried to get through to the people of Israel by using foreigners who spoke a language that the people of Israel could not understand, but the effort failed. The people did not turn from their unbelief. Why didn't the people of Israel turn from their unbelief? Could it have something to do with the fact that no one could understand what was being said by the people who spoke in foreign tongues? The point of the illustration seems to be that unintelligible language does not lead sinners to obedience.

And then we move from an Old Testament illustration to a current illustration. When the church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues and some unbelievers come in,

they will think that those speaking in tongues are out of their minds. The gift of tongues without interpretation will not lead them to repent and obey.

Thus, tongues is a sign to the unbelievers, but it is a negative sign. It is a sign that those who are using the tongues are crazy. Using the gift of tongues in a meeting without interpretation will fail to cause the unbelievers to grow in their knowledge of God. The unbelievers will not be edified.

The Corinthian Church had fallen into the trap that so many people fall into today. They thought that tongues proved a person was filled or anointed with the Holy Spirit. They thought the gift of tongues was a sign to the believer that the power of the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the congregation. But gift of tongues was never meant to prove that person is full of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of a gift is not to verify that the user of the gift is spiritual or filled with the Holy Spirit. The purpose of any gift is to edify.

In contrast to tongues, the gift of prophecy, along with all of the other intelligible gifts, does work to edify the unbeliever. It causes the unbeliever to fall down and worship God. And that becomes a sign to the believer that the gift is really able to edify other people.

I know this paragraph is difficult to understand; however, when taken together with all the other paragraphs in this chapter, we can see the same point being said over and over. The main purpose of our coming together is to edify other people and not to edify ourselves. And for other people to be edified, they must understand what they hear and what they see. If what we are doing cannot be understood, then it is better we do it in such a way that we do not draw attention to ourselves. And if that is not possible, then we should leave the group and get alone until we are able to say or do something that other people can understand so they can be edified.

What does speaking in tongues have in common with shaking and laughing and falling flat on your back and the other things I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon? Those things are not gifts of the Spirit. That is not what they have in common with tongues. What they have in common with tongues is that they cannot be understood. They are not intelligible things that can be easily analyzed. They are things that draw attention to the person who is going through the experience. I do not deny the fact that the experience could result in some self-edification; however, the main purpose of coming together is not self-edification. The main purpose of coming together is to edify other people.

So much of what we do these days is done for the purpose of helping ourselves improve. So little of what we do these days is done for the purpose of helping others. I often hear people say "I want to experience more of God." I rarely hear people say, "The thing that matters the most is that other people experience God, even if it means that I must slow down in my own efforts to experience more of God." Listen to the cry of the apostle Paul in Romans 9:3: "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race." That is the cry of a heart more concerned that others are edified than he is about his own edification. But this kind of attitude is what the church should be all about. Shame on us if, when we come together, we are more

concerned about ourselves than those who are around us. We must not think like selfish children. We must think like mature adults.

Now time is running out and we must bring this discussion to a close. But I do not want to end with a rebuke. I want to end by giving us a picture of what things ought to be like. I believe that is how the apostle Paul ended his discussion in 1 Corinthians 14, and that is also how I would like to end.

Unfortunately, many people have never had the chance to experience what things ought to be like in a church. Many don't know what it is like to be in a group setting where everyone is using their gifts to edify the other people in the group. We are so used to only one or a handful of people doing everything. The truth of the matter is that, in most church meetings, most of the time most of us are spectators.

But let me try to verbally paint a picture of what the apostle Paul had in mind when the Holy Spirit inspired him to write 1 Corinthians 14.

First of all, let me tell you what I don't think he had in mind. I don't think he had in mind what we understand to be the Sunday worship service. Sunday worship services are a good thing and I am not suggesting that we do away with them. However, I don't think this is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 14. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul talked about prophecy. Assuming that a prophet is someone who publicly proclaims God's Word within the framework of biblical revelation, the only way the gift of prophecy can be exercised during the Sunday worship service is through expository preaching. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul also talked about tongues. Assuming that tongues and interpretation of tongues are valid gifts, it is hard to imagine how these gifts could ever be exercised during one of our Sunday worship services.

No, the picture painted in 1 Corinthians 14 is entirely different from a Sunday worship service. Those who are exercising the gifts of prophecy and tongues with interpretation are doing so one by one. It is impossible for me to imagine that each person is preaching a 30-minute sermon that he has taken hours to prepare. Instead I picture a rather informal gathering where everyone contributes. The prophecy given is probably a brief, and perhaps unprepared, statement given under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

So the picture I see the apostle Paul painting as he tells the Corinthian Church how to properly use the gifts is one of an informal setting where most if not everyone present is contributing in such a way that others in the group are being edified. I see someone reading scripture. I see someone singing a hymn, and someone giving a word of encouragement or instruction, and perhaps someone sharing a tongue with interpretation and everything being done for the strengthening and edification of others in the group. That is what I see. And I see it as good.

Increasing numbers of Christians are finding great value in meeting together in an informal setting for the kind of interaction that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14. Much of what I have observed, I consider to be good. However, I have observed things I don't consider as

good.

In this past year people have shared their concerns with me, because they know I desire to see picture that the apostle Paul paints in 1 Corinthians 14 become a reality. And they have a right to be concerned. Encouraging a church to experience such body life is a risky thing to do. And I don't think we should do it unless we are willing to observe certain safeguards. When observed, these safeguards will protect us. But when these safeguards are ignored, the very structure that offers so much potential for edification can end up destroying us, and there is nothing more the devil would like to do.

What are the safeguards that must be observed?

First of all, any form of revelation whether it be prophecy, teaching, word of wisdom or knowledge, or anything else must be within the boundaries of Biblical revelation. When exercising a gift, whatever is said must never be put on the same level as Biblical revelation. Prophecy can illuminate the meaning of the Scriptures, but it must never replace them. The Bible clearly teaches that nothing should be added on to what has already been written.

Second, we shouldn't expect the Holy Spirit to spell out everything in detail. Informal groups get into trouble when they try to give very specific instructions such as telling other people what their vocations should be or who their future life-partners will be. Those who lead the meeting should discourage specific instruction of this sort.

The words we speak to one another in a group setting do not have to be specific on order to speak very directly to a specific need of an individual. Whether preaching to a crowd or sharing with a small group, it is probably best to share the truth in a way that is acceptable to everyone in the group. The Holy Spirit can then take truth and apply it to the specific needs of the individuals in the group. Sometimes, after I share a message, more than one person will tell me how the message I shared spoke to their specific need. In such instances, the specific needs that were met by the truth shared are entirely different. When that happens, it is a confirmation to me that the Holy Spirit (and not me) was the author of the truth shared. I am nothing more than a channel, and that is how it should be.

A third safeguard has to do with observing order. Paul greatly emphasizes this point in 1 Corinthians 14. Simultaneous prophesying by more than one person at a time is forbidden. Ecstatic and uncontrolled prophesying is also forbidden. Sometimes it is difficult not to become very emotional; however, 1 Corinthians 14:32 tells us that "the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets." In other words, we must not allow our emotions to take over.

This is also true when using the gift of tongues. When someone tells me that they cannot control themselves, I immediately become concerned. Proper use of the gift of tongues must include control; otherwise, it makes no sense to tell them to be quiet when there is no interpretation.

To experience the kind of group dynamics as described in 1 Corinthians 14:26 is a rare thing. It is also risky, requiring careful observance of certain safeguards. But the risks are worth the effort, because the outcome is edification.