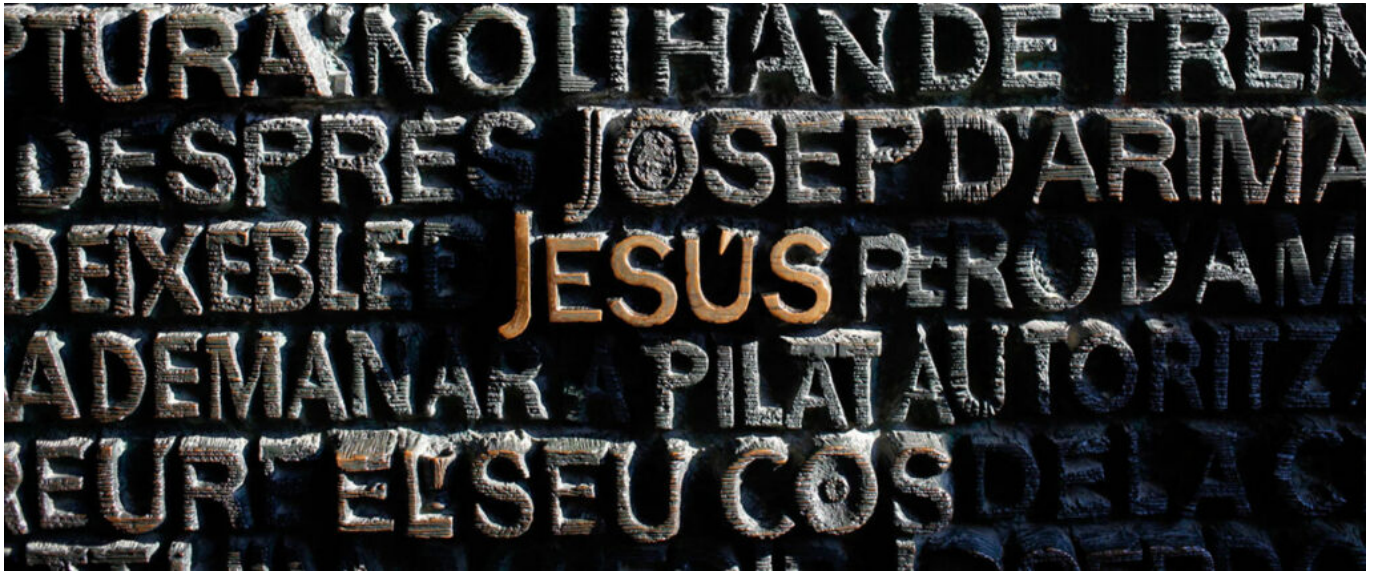


Lost in Translation

28 September 2017



The gift of tongues is one of the most misunderstood and misused spiritual gifts in church life today. In this article, I will ask a series of questions and attempt to provide some answers so we can understand this wonderful gift better.

Is The Gift of Tongues Initial Evidence to Show You are Spirit-filled?

Jesus said that the mouth speaks what the heart is full of (Luke 6:45) and so there is a principle that those who are full of God have their speech affected. We see people in the Bible who were filled with the Spirit as those: praising God loudly (Luke 1:41); prophesying (Luke 1:67, Acts 2:17); speaking in tongues (Acts 2:4, Acts 10:46) and preaching with boldness (Acts 4:31). The clear evidence of being Spirit filled is that it affects our speech in some radical way but not always through the gift of tongues.

I have some friends who clearly move in spiritual gifts and power, but they do not yet speak in tongues. However, every person should desire it as it is such a vital personal gift to build oneself up (1 Corinthians 14:4). So is tongues the initial evidence that you are filled with the Holy Spirit? I don't believe so.

Do You Get Different Types?

Yes, it is possible to speak in various kinds of tongues. The word 'tongues' essentially means 'languages'. Paul writes about speaking '*in the tongues of men and of angels*' (1 Corinthians 13:1). Tongues can include understandable foreign languages (as in Acts 2:6-8) but can also be spiritual utterances not known to man but known only by God (1 Corinthians 14:2).

I read this story recently during the charismatic revival in the early 1900's:

'Anna Hall spoke to the Russians in their church in Los Angeles in their own language as the Spirit gave utterance. They were so glad to hear the truth that they wept and even kissed her hands . . . The other night, as a company of Russians were present in the meeting, Bro. Lee, a converted Catholic, was permitted to speak their language. As he spoke and sang, one of the Russians came up and embraced him. It was a holy sign, and the Spirit fell upon the Russians, as well as on others,

and they glorified God.'

I have friends who have experienced this type of public tongue where the speaker in a meeting spoke in a foreign tongue unbeknown to him, as described above. It seems with this 'Acts 2' type tongue, no interpretation was needed as there were some who already understood it. My personal experience, along with most that I know, is of tongues given by the Spirit as a type of spiritual utterance rather than as a known human language.

How Does the Practice of Personal Tongues Work?

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul himself practiced and encouraged the private use of speaking in tongues to spiritually build himself up and to speak to God (1 Corinthians 14:2-5). The gift of tongues was part of his prayer and worship life: *'If I pray in a tongue...'* (1 Corinthians 14:14), *'I will pray with my spirit... I will sing praise with my spirit...'* (1 Corinthians 14:15). This private use of tongues did not require interpretation for he says, *'... if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful'* (1 Corinthians 14:14).

Paul, the great thinker, didn't discount this type of prayer, even though it transcended his understanding. As he says in 1 Corinthians 14:2, *'For one who speaks in a tongue... no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.'* I've found that praying in tongues helps keep me dependent and humble since it aids me when I'm not sure of what to pray, and it has the effect of recharging me spiritually.

Isn't It Better To Allow Prophecy Instead of Public Tongues In a Meeting?

Paul encouraged the gift of prophecy, since it is understandable and spoken in our own language. But tongues spoken publicly with interpretation can carry equal weight with prophecy. *'The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up'* (1 Corinthians 14:5b).

How Does the Practice of Public Tongues Work?

Firstly, we should always be aware of how our practice of tongues affects visitors in our meeting. This was Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25. These believers were trying to chaotically outdo one another by loudly speaking in tongues, with a complete lack of love towards each other. He knew that this would not benefit outsiders or unbelievers since they would not be able to hear the word of God to them.

In light of this, we often have saints in our meetings who feel compelled by the Spirit to speak aloud in tongues with the intention that all might hear. After this public tongue, normally one of the elders explains why this is biblical and the need to wait for an interpretation. Invariably someone always interprets. In this way, we help to educate the saints and to settle outsiders who would not understand this seemingly strange practice. Most importantly, there is an understandable message which can be received with a great sense of awe in the presence of God.

Is it Wrong to Speak in Tongues, for Yourself, in a Church Meeting?

No, I don't believe it necessarily is, even though Paul commands in 1 Corinthians 14:28, *'...if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.'*

If we had to apply this command in a 'strict wooden sense', it would mean applying absolute

silence, but it would be unrealistic to enforce this without church become very controlling. I don't think that is what Paul was implying. Paul was addressing a church that had strayed into serious misuse of tongues. Therefore, the heart of the command of 1 Corinthians 14:28 is for the saints to consider others in love. So it is possible to speak in a tongue to God in a way that does not disturb or distract others.

Interestingly, when Cornelius is filled with the Spirit, Luke exclaims that Peter *'heard them speaking in tongues and praising God'* (Acts 10:46). I don't think Peter stopped the meeting to ask for an interpretation! Our attitude, then, should be to give people freedom to pour out their hearts to God in corporate prayer and worship times (see Acts 4:24), but if we feel a person is very distracting or inconsiderate to others, we should ask them to speak in tongues quietly.

In Conclusion

The gift of tongues is something we must earnestly desire (1 Corinthians 14:1)! We can use tongues to speak to God, build ourselves up and encourage the church. We want to allow God to be God among us in a way that honours Him, blesses people and ushers in the presence of His kingdom among us.