

“SPEAKING IN ‘TONGUES’: is it a gift for today?”

by Alan Morrison

The influence of experience-based religion has been especially prominent in regard to the 'Crisis Experience' effected at many Charismatic or Pentecostal gatherings today through the inducement of speaking in 'tongues'. Indeed, it has almost become the benchmark for genuine Christian experience in these circles. But what does the Bible reveal?

The spiritual gift referred to in the New Testament which people call 'tongues' can be translated literally as '*varieties of languages*'. [1] In the time when the KJV was written, the word 'tongue' - the word which has come most to be associated with this gift - meant an identifiable human language. And an in-depth study of the Greek word *glossa*, translated as 'tongue' in many versions, shows that it must refer to an identifiable human language of ethnic origin (see, e.g., Rev.5:9; 9:11). When we look for clear texts elsewhere in the New Testament which will provide us with examples of this gift in action, we see that it indeed functioned as *the supernatural ability to speak in previously unlearned, identifiable human languages*. And in our search for such a text, we find that Acts 2:1-13, for example, gives us a superb practical model of the biblical gift of 'varieties of languages'.

However, there is not a scrap of evidence in Scripture which would support the notion that the biblical gift of tongues involved the commonplace ecstatic babbling which one can witness across the world, in Christian and non-Christian circles alike. Such babbling has been a hallmark of heathen religion from the beginning of time. It is an intrinsic part of human psycho-physiology to be able to enter such a state of mind. Christians, as partakers in the same flesh, are not exempt from the ability to reproduce this experience. It is actually an incipient trance-like condition brought on through powerful suggestion or auto-suggestion, in which there is increased Alpha-Wave activity of the brain (which is why tongues-speakers feel so good), coupled with a stimulation of the part of the brain which governs articulate speech, known as 'Broca's area'. Such an experience has been generated in pagan religions throughout history through the use of repetitive prayer (mantras), powerful suggestion from a dominant teacher (Shamanism), wild dancing (Dervishism), meditation (varieties of Yoga) and drugs (the word 'pharmacology' is actually derived from the Greek word for sorcerer, *pharmakos*). All this is entirely different from the phenomenon described in Acts 2, 8, 10, & 19, and bears no relation to the spiritual gift of '*languages*' mentioned in 1 Cor.12.

Revelation and Sign Gifts

Here it would be relevant to show that the spiritual gift of 'varieties of languages' was given by the Lord in order to function as a 'sign'. The epoch of Church history known as the Apostolic era was an extraordinary time of development. The Mosaic order was giving way to the age of the New Covenant; the God-ordained, theocratic nation-state of Israel was being wound up for the final time; the Gentile nations were being opened up to the Gospel in an unprecedented fashion; and there was a need for fresh revelation after four hundred years of silence in the Inter-Testamental period.

At this point in history, God gave four spiritual gifts which served a unique purpose during a time of great change in the Church. First, there was the gift of prophecy, by which Divine revelation was given 'piecemeal' to the primitive Church at a time when the written New Testament revelation was still incomplete. Then there were 'gifts of healings', 'workings of miracles', and 'varieties of languages' - all of which are said to have functioned as '*signs*'. The word sign in Scripture is a translation of the Greek word *semeion*, from which our English words 'semeiology' (study of symptoms) and semaphore (signalling apparatus) are derived. A 'sign' in Scripture refers to something which is signalling a matter of *significance* to whoever witnesses it. For example, in the course of the Gospel of John, the Apostle presents to his readers seven 'signs' which were performed by Jesus to convince them '*that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*' (Jn.20:31).

Signs always have a vital function. In the Apostolic era, 'signs' were either for the purposes of *authentication* of the fact that the Messiah had come, or they were *judicial* in character - a fact which we shall shortly develop more fully in relation to 'tongues'. Such 'signs' were predominantly directed at the Jews, whose nation-state, together with its ceremonial and legal system, was about to be wound up - the final hammer-blow being the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD.70.

The nature and purpose of the 'sign-gifts' can be gleaned from a few places in Scripture. One such passage is Mk.16:17-18. Some expositors, in a well-meaning bid to negate the common Pentecostal teaching that **all** believers will speak in tongues, cast out demons and practise healing, have held that this final passage of Mark's Gospel (Mk.16:9-20) is not authentic. But there is no need to resort to such radical surgery with God's Word in order to prove this point. Almost every available manuscript contains this passage, whereas it is lacking only in the more suspect codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Furthermore, John Burgon has adequately proven the authenticity of this passage in a work that has never

been answered.[2]

The main problem with Mk.16:17 has been its consistent mistranslation and the misinterpretation which results from that. When the majority of translations say, '*And these signs will follow those who believe...*' (Mk.16:17), we are led to assume that the verse is referring to all believers of whatever era. But the tense of the verb '*believe*' here is aorist, which indicates that the phrase is really saying, '*these signs will follow those who **have already** believed*' - in this context, the Apostles. This verse looks back to earlier verses, where reference is made to a contrasting **unbelief** on the part of the Apostles (see vv.11,13,14). Verses 15 and 16 are a parenthetical statement of the Great Commission. In any case, the signs referred to here cannot possibly be applicable to *every* believer as there is a reference to an immunity from normally-fatal snake bites and the ability to drink poison unharmed - qualities which are hardly universal in their ecclesiastical application! We do know for certain of at least one instance where a genuine Apostle of Christ was unharmed by the bite of a deadly snake (Acts 28:3-6).

Signs of an Apostle

In fact, the signs being referred to in the passage in Mark are some of the '*signs of an Apostle*' to which Paul refers in 2 Cor.12:12. Just as God had set out certain infallible ways in O.T. times for testing whether or not a prophet was true or false (Dt.13:1-3; 18:20-22), so He also declared certain 'signs' which would enable N.T. believers to distinguish between a true and a false apostle. These signs of an Apostle of Christ consisted of those things listed in Mk.3:14-15 and Mk.16:17-18 (healing, tongues-speaking, casting out of demons, etc.), plus the working of miracles (2 Cor.12:12; Rom.15:19), prophecy (Mt.10:40-41; Acts 5:3-9; 13:6-12; 14:8-10), and - most important to our present study - *the unique ability to distribute these revelation and sign gifts to others* (Heb.2:4).

The only means that God has used for distributing the 'revelation' or 'sign' gifts to others in the New Testament era is through the mediation of the unique Apostles of Jesus Christ. These gifts and abilities - tongues, prophecy, the casting out of demons, healing and miracle-working - were imparted to believers by the laying on of hands of the Apostles. There is no account in Scripture of anyone receiving a 'revelation' or 'sign' gift other than through the distribution of an Apostle; (The Gentile, Cornelius, was a special case - although an Apostle was certainly present, having been specially sent to preach the Gospel to him. Some cite Timothy as an exception (cf. 1 Tim.4:14).

However, this does not refer to Timothy himself receiving the gift of prophecy, but to the office of Pastor being conferred upon him by the laying on of hands of the eldership, as the result of a prophetic revelation) whereas a number of people are spoken of as having received these gifts through this unique Apostolic ministry. Stephen and Philip had both had Apostolic hands laid on them and thereby were given the gift of miracle-working (Acts 6:5-8; 8:6). Barnabas, who had been renamed by Apostolic decree (Acts 4:36) and probably had Apostolic hands laid on him when he was sent to Antioch (Acts 11:22), was given the gift of prophecy (13:1). Furthermore, Paul spent eighteen months establishing the Corinthian church (Acts 18:11), during which he authenticated his Apostleship with signs and wonders (1 Cor.2:4-5; 2 Cor.12:12), and distributed gifts to others there as part of his Apostolic office (1 Cor.1:6-7). So it is hardly surprising that there was such a broad manifestation of these gifts in Corinth.

There is a particular proof that these gifts could only be received through the agency of an Apostle of Christ. When we are shown that Paul authenticated his Apostleship to the Corinthians by appealing to his '*signs and wonders and mighty deeds*' (2 Cor.12:12), we can also deduce that none of the Corinthian believers could have received any of the revelatory/sign gifts other than by the distribution of an Apostle. For, if they had the ability to prophesy, to execute miracles or healings, or to speak in tongues, without Apostolic mediation, then the performance of such signs and wonders and mighty works would be no proof of Apostleship.

That such gifts were distributed by the exclusive mediation of the Apostles was certainly not lost on Simon the Sorcerer. This was why he preferred to 'buy' the Apostolic ability to impart the revelatory/sign gifts of the Spirit to others rather than the mere capacity to work miracles (Acts 8:17-19). To be a false apostle would amass far more power and authority than merely being a false miracle-worker! It is precisely for this reason that a right understanding of the unique nature of the Apostleship is fundamental to 'getting it right' about the claims of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement regarding healings, prophecies, miracle-working and tongues.[3] In view of the fact that the spiritual gift of 'languages' depended so much on Apostolic ministry, let us see how the New Testament identifies apostles. What are the distinguishing marks of an apostle? If we can identify these, then we will see if they can be applied to anyone alive today.

Qualifications of an Apostle

The word *apostle* comes from the Greek *apostolos*, which means, literally, one who is sent. Our word 'posted' is derived from it. So, loosely speaking, the word apostle can apply to anyone given a special commission or posting in the Church in any era of its existence. Occasionally in the New Testament the word is used in this broader sense to refer to those

who have been specially commissioned for missionary work by the churches (e.g., 2 Cor.8:23; Phil.2:25). But such general, church-commissioned, sent-ones were not the same as those entrusted with the unique spiritual gift of Apostleship, who were '*Apostles of Jesus Christ*' (see Gal.1:1) - sent **personally** by Him, and who had unique qualifications for receiving that gift and distributing spiritual gifts to others. The sole qualifications which the Bible gives for being a spiritually-gifted Apostle are as follows:

1. He must have accompanied Jesus during His earthly ministry, which was from His baptism until His Ascension (Acts 1:21-23).
2. He must have been a *personal* witness of the resurrected Lord Jesus (1 Cor.15:7; 1 Cor.9:1; Acts 1:22; 4:33; 10:39-42).
3. He must have received a personal call from Christ to Apostleship and a commission to fulfil its duties (Lk.6:13; Mk.3:14-15).
4. He must have had, as his field of labour, *the whole world*, rather than a local church or group of churches (Mt.28:19; Mk.16:15).

On this basis, and in the power of Jesus Christ ('*in His name*', Mk.9:38-41), such a one was given a commission (Mt.28:18-20) to herald out the *kerygma* - the essential message of the Gospel on which the Church was founded - the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul refers directly to this special apostolic commission in Tit.1:1-3. Furthermore, there were distinctive '*signs of an Apostle*' of Jesus Christ. When certain people in the church at Corinth suggested that Paul was not really an Apostle, he answered by referring specifically to these signs as proof of his Apostleship (2 Cor.12:12; cf. Heb.2:3-4).

In carrying out this personal commission from the Lord Jesus Christ, these Apostles (along with the N.T. Prophets) were in the process of *laying the foundations of the Church* - a historical architectural procedure which is a once-for-all exercise and which cannot be repeated throughout every era of Church history (read Eph.2:20; Rev.21:14). This is precisely the context in which the Lord Jesus told the Apostle Peter that he and his testimony to the Messiahship of Christ were **the rock** upon which He would build His Church (Mt.16:18). This is a further confirmation that one of the prime characteristics of genuine Apostles was that they (and their teachings) were the foundations of the Church - the solid bedrock - and we are the building that rests upon that which they established. Once a foundation is laid, the building proper begins. That foundation consisted of the setting up of the primitive Church on a correct doctrinal footing ('*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*'... '*Remember me...keep the traditions*', 1 Cor.11:1-2; cf. 2 Tim.1:13-14; Tit.1:9), authenticating the Messianic coming with miraculous works (Heb.2:3-4; Acts 2:43; 5:12), and writing the Scriptures for a testimony of these things to later generations of Christians (Eph.3:3-5). The gifts are given for the 'edification' of the Church as a whole. Edification means building up. *The Apostles' primary contribution to the building up of the Universal Church was to lay the rock on which it would be built.*

These unique Apostles - God's foundation gift to the church (1 Cor.12:28) - were also *directly* commissioned and *personally* sent by Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church. That is why they are called '*Apostles of Christ*' and '*Apostles of Jesus Christ*' (see the first verse of 1 Cor., 2 Cor., Eph., Col., 1 Tim., 2 Tim., Tit., 1 Pet., 2 Pet.; and especially Gal.1:1; 1 Th.2:6; Jude 17). This is why false apostles are those *who transform themselves* into the Apostles of Christ, (2 Cor.11:13). A further aspect of the foundation-laying of the Apostles of Christ is that they laid down the New Testament Scriptures on which the truth of the Gospel is grounded and authenticated (Jn.17:20; Eph.3:3-5; cf. Jn.20:30-31).

There were just two exceptions to the above qualifications for the Apostleship. One was Matthias, who had not been directly commissioned by Christ but was chosen as a replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:21ff.). The other was Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul. Although Paul had not been with Jesus during His earthly ministry, he received an extraordinary manifestation of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus and was given a special commission to minister to the Gentiles (1 Cor.9:1; 15:8; Acts 26:15-18). Thus, the hallowed Twelve Apostles became thirteen - one having been '*born out of due time*' (1 Cor.15:8). There is a remarkable touch of typology here in the way that the twelve tribes of Israel (of which the twelve Apostles were a New Testament echo) also became thirteen with the elevation of two of Joseph's sons to the rank of tribal heads (Gen.48:5).

What significance does all this have for us in the twentieth century? Can anyone alive today make the bold claim that they have the spiritual gift of Apostleship - that they are therefore an Apostle of Jesus Christ? A consideration of the above facts must surely necessitate a negative answer, for the following reasons:

None of us alive today has spent any time with the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry.

None of us has ever been *material* witnesses of His Resurrection. In fact, our evidence for the Resurrection rests solely on the foundation which was laid by the true Apostles, who were commissioned to write these things down for us in the Scriptures (1 Cor.15:1-9).

None of us today has been *personally* commissioned by Christ to be witnesses to the fact of His Resurrection in the way in which the original Apostles were.

None of us can possibly be called the *founders* of the Church.

Neither have we ever been *personally* commissioned by Christ to perform those signs which were exclusively those of an Apostle of His (Mt.10:1-4; Mark 3:13-15; 16:17-18; 2 Cor.12:12).

For these compelling reasons, there can be no genuine Apostles of Jesus Christ today. The spiritual gift of Apostleship lasted only for the infancy of the Church, during its foundation-laying period, for the duration of the lives of the Apostles, and has no functional relevance today. Anyone claiming to be an Apostle now is a false apostle - of which there were many even in the early church (Acts 15; Gal.1:7-9; 2 Cor.10 & 11; Col.2), whose end shall be according to their works (2 Cor.11:13-15; cf. Rev.2:2).

It represents an attempt to move the goalposts to say, as many do today, that the Spiritual gift of Apostleship is a secondary form of apostleship, lacking the authority that we see exercised by the Apostles in Scripture. The whole notion of spiritually gifted 'secondary' apostles and prophets has only served to create fear, confusion and false authority in the churches, while giving Satan a supreme foothold in a place where he should really fear to tread.

Since it is plain that there can be no genuine Apostles of Jesus Christ today, therefore there can be no one around to distribute the revelatory/sign-gifts. Not only is there no one to impart them, but they have served their purpose in the development of the Church - a fact which we will now prove in relation to the gift of 'tongues'. Once the N.T. canon was completed and all the Apostles were dead, the gifts which served for a sign and for revelation were finished. There was no further need for *piecemeal* prophetic revelation to be given now that God's Word was *complete*. There was no further need for signs to be given to Israel for authenticating or judicial reasons, as that national state had been wound up by the Lord. Neither was there anyone available to impart or distribute these gifts, because the Apostolate was no longer in existence.

These sign-gifts were specifically intended to aid the establishment of the Church through the ministry of the Apostles. The pattern is clearly shown in Heb.2:3-4. Read it through. First came the word of the Gospel spoken by the Lord Jesus (v.3b), which is then confirmed to 'us' (believers in general, v.3c) as a result of the special ministry of '*those who heard Him*' (the Apostles, v.3c). This special Apostolic ministry is spoken of as '*God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and distributions of the Holy Spirit*' (i.e., spiritual gifts, v.4). This use of the word '*distributions*' is especially significant, because it shows that the gifts of the Spirit which were the special province of Apostolic ministry - i.e., those which involved revelation (prophecy) and authentication (signs) - were distributed by the Apostles. The need for such revelation and authentication was a hallmark of the foundation-laying period of Church History; but, as we shall see, there was no further need for such 'signs' after the conclusion of the Apostolic era. In fact, the Scriptures give a clear indication that as the Gospel Age progresses there will be an increasing manifestation of 'revelation' and 'signs' which are the special work of false christs and false prophets (Mt.24:24; Mk.13:22). The biblical teaching on 'signs and wonders' is that the beginning of this Age was characterised by the signs of the Apostles of Christ and genuine wonders worked by those empowered by them; whereas the end of the Age will be characterised by the signs of Antichrist and '*lying wonders*' worked by those empowered by him (2 Th.2:9; Rev.13:13-14; cf. 1 Tim.4:1).

Having now established the true identity of an Apostle of Jesus Christ and ascertained the nature of those gifts which were given to the Church for a sign and for revelation, let us return to consider the true purposes of the gift of 'tongues'.

The Undergirding Purpose of 'Tongues'

There were three fundamental purposes of the gift of tongues:

First, it demonstrated the universal nature of the Gospel. Having been predominantly confined to the nation Israel, the Gospel of God, as manifested in the finished work of Christ, would now be sent throughout the whole world. The manifestation of these languages at Pentecost was designed to show the universal nature of the Gospel drawing people of EVERY tribe, nation and 'tongue' (cf. Rev.5; 7:9-10; 14:6-7).

Second, every man hearing the wonderful works of God proclaimed in his own language at Pentecost heralded a reversal of the judgement at Babel, when there was a confounding of human language from being one tongue to many tongues. It was a sounding forth of that great truth that there is neither *'Jew nor Greek...in Christ Jesus'*. It is only in Christ Jesus that people can become one.

There was a third, even deeper, purpose to the gift of tongues being given to the Early Church. A primary hallmark of the biblical gift of tongues is that it was practised either spontaneously by the Apostles of Christ, or by those who had received the gift through the laying on of hands by these self-same Apostles (e.g., Acts 19:6). As with the other revelatory/sign-gifts, it is impossible for anyone to exhibit the genuine version of this gift unless they have had Apostolic hands laid on them. The only exception to this was the 'mini-Pentecost' at Caesarea, when Cornelius and his household were empowered by God to demonstrate definitely to the Jewish believers present that the Gentiles had been grafted into the Church (Acts 10). Here, the gift of tongues was being used in its biblical manifestation; for when the Gentiles were admitted into the People of God, this would truly be a 'sign' to unbelieving Jews that the judgement of the Lord was falling on Israel. And this brings us to the fundamental purpose behind the gift of tongues.

There is an undergirding purpose for the biblical gift of tongues which seems to have escaped the attention of many believers today: namely, its function as a 'sign'. There were two kinds of 'signs' in Early Church phenomena: *authenticating signs* and *judicial signs*. Miracles, healings, the casting out of demons, and prophecy all fall into the former category. Their purpose was to be a witness to the presence of the promised Messiah. This can be proven from the fact that, when John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask the question: *'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?'*, the Scripture explicitly states:

'At that very hour He cured many people of their infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many who were blind He gave sight. Then Jesus answered and said to them: "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them"' (Lk. 7:20-22).

All this was a clear reference back to the prophecy given in Isa.35:5-6, so that they would see the authenticity of the 'signs' being performed. However, the gift of tongues is unique among the gifts in that it was given primarily as a *judicial* sign. Let us expand this concept, which is vital to our understanding of the use of this gift, and whether or not its alleged manifestations today are compatible with Holy Scripture.

From the beginning of Jehovah's relationship with the children of Israel, His primary way of judgement was to bring a foreign language-speaking nation down upon them. This was the ultimate penalty for breaking the Covenant with Him. This was clearly spelled out to them, along with other curses, in Dt.28:33,36. Here, God told them that if they break the Covenant:

'The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation *whose language you will not understand*' (Dt.28:49). [emphasis added]

The essential element of this Covenant curse is that it comes *through a Gentile nation speaking in a language which is not understood* by the People of God. This is one of the curses which would ensue if they broke the covenant, and is specifically referred to as a *'sign'* of God's judgement in the passage concerned (see Dt.28:46). Further on in time, this judgemental 'sign' did indeed fall upon the rebellious nation of Israel under their idolatrous (but later repentant) king, Manasseh (2 Chr.33:10-13). The prophet Isaiah predicted this with the words: *'For with unintelligible speech and another tongue He will speak to this people... yet they would not hear'* (Isa.28:11-12). That was the 'sign' of God's judgement: An invading Gentile nation (in this case, the Assyrians) speaking in a foreign language. The same incident is referred to by Isaiah elsewhere, when he describes these Assyrians as *'a fierce people, a people of obscure speech, beyond perception, of unintelligible speech that you cannot understand'* (Isa.33:19). The prophet Jeremiah also shows that same 'sign' of the covenantal curse on rebellious Israel as being fulfilled in the fact that the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem and carry away its people:

"Behold, I will bring a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel," says the Lord. "It is a mighty nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation *whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say*" (Jer.5:15). [emphasis added]

And when we come to Paul speaking about the gift of tongues to the Church in his first Letter to the Corinthians, he quotes a couple of the verses from Isaiah that we have given above (1 Cor.14:21; cf. Isa.28:11-12) and then concludes: *'Therefore [the gift of varieties of] languages are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers'* (1 Cor.14:22). Here he shows the Corinthians (and us) the undergirding purpose of the gift of tongues. It was given to the Church by God in order to function primarily as a 'sign' to unbelievers - but not just any unbelievers: for the context plainly shows

that Paul meant unbelieving Jews.

A number of elements can be shown from this sequence of passages. First, it shows that *the gift of what people call 'tongues' consisted of real human languages* - the languages of the Gentile nations - rather than the ecstatic babble that is spoken by believers and unbelievers alike today. Second, it shows that the gift of tongues discussed in 1 Cor. 12-14 was given primarily to act as a 'sign' to unbelieving Jews that, because of their rejection of the Messiah who had been sent to them by God, they would shortly be coming under the Covenant curse, through which a Gentile nation who spoke a foreign language (the Romans) would destroy Jerusalem and the Temple - an event which actually came to pass in A.D. 70. Therefore, no matter how the miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages manifested itself - whether as revelation, teaching, or just simply praising and glorifying God - *its underlying purpose was to function as the final manifestation of the original Covenant curse on the people of Israel*. That being the case, there can no longer be any purpose in the practice of the gift of tongues since the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Any alleged manifestations of the gift since that time are entirely spurious. This does not 'limit God in His works', as some would claim. Of course, God can do whatever He wants to do whenever He chooses to do it. But that is hardly the point in the case of this gift. When God has clearly stated the purpose of something, if that purpose no longer exists, then we must count it as finished.

There are actually a great many similarities between the function of tongues and that of the parables of Jesus (read Mt. 13:9-17; Mk. 4:9-13, 33-34). It is in this respect that we can speak of tongues as being a *judicial* rather than an authenticating sign. *'Those who have ears to hear, let them hear'*. Just as it was with the Parables of Jesus, the specific purpose of the Holy Spirit gifting Christians to speaking in unlearned languages was to 'signal' God's alienation from Israel. Every occurrence of tongues recorded in Acts was clearly acting in this way as a 'signal' to the Jews that, as a nation, they would be coming under the judgement of God. Acts 2:4-11 corroborates this fact, where they are shown to function as a *sign*, which could then be followed by successful evangelism in a language they *could* understand! The other examples also show the gift of tongues functioning as a 'sign' to Israel (Acts 8:14-17; 10:44-47; 19:1-6).[4]

Abuses of the Gift of 'Tongues' by the Corinthians

A common assertion in Christian literature about the spiritual gift of tongues is that it is given to be used for personal communication with God and is for the benefit of the individual rather than the whole church.[5] This has led many believers into the false notion that this gift is for devotional prayer or for the purposes of engaging in spiritual warfare. But these notions are based on a misinterpretation of Paul's words in 1 Cor. 14:1-5. In these few verses, Paul is not delivering a lecture on 'how-to-speak-in-tongues'. In common with the rest of this letter, he is addressing severe pastoral problems which needed the input of Apostolic authority.

In chapters 12-14, Paul is actually chiding the Corinthians for the way that they were misusing spiritual gifts - especially the gift of tongues, which they performed in their own strength when the Holy Spirit had not given the gift of interpretation to the hearers. The pivotal verse concerning tongues is when the Apostle makes the statement, *'he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church'* (1 Cor. 14:4). That is not a statement about the *true* nature of tongues; it is Paul's criticism of the Corinthians for the way that they used the gift. Paul cannot be saying that the *normative* use of tongues is for personal edification, for that would be to contradict his statements in this letter regarding the general purpose of all the gifts - which is for the enhancement of the whole Church (1 Cor. 12:7, 24-25; 14:4-5, 12) - and the specific purpose of the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 14:22). It seems highly likely that Paul is using the word 'edify' in 1 Cor. 14:4 in a derogatory sense. For there is not a single instance elsewhere of Paul using the term to refer to somebody edifying *themselves*. The whole concept of 'edification' in Scripture refers to something one does *for others*. When he says: *'Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies'* (1 Cor. 8:1), he does not mean that love edifies the one doing the loving! It edifies others. In 1 Cor. 14, it is as if Paul was saying:

'When you speak in tongues as you do, without anyone knowing what you are saying, you are simply making yourself feel good; whereas prophecy can never be used in this way because others benefit from it'.

All the gifts are for service and ministry to others, therefore there can be no purpose whatsoever in speaking gobbledygook, other than the enhancement of oneself.

Furthermore, 1 Cor. 13:1 completely confounds the idea of devotional tongues. First, if I speak in tongues outside of the context of love (Greek, *agape*, caring for others), I am merely making a worthless noise. Second, if tongues are to be exercised in the context of such love for others, then they cannot be for personal use. This is why Paul says that there must be a purpose to tongues-speaking which brings it into the realm of service to others (1 Cor. 14:5-6). It is more than likely that the Corinthians were speaking tongues in the same manner as that of the heathen religions - ecstatic babbling without interpretation - for that certainly appears to fit the information we can glean from Paul's criticisms (1 Cor. 14:2, 4, 12-19). Such bogus 'tongues-speaking' was the norm among the mystery-cults which thrived in the Mediterranean countries at this time, and it accounts for all the babbling tongues-speaking of today, which may give people a nice 'buzz' and generate a sense of piety, but it is not the biblical gift of languages.

This entire section of the letter is actually a very complex passage, and we cannot fully understand all that Paul is saying to the Corinthians here. This is why we must be so careful in our analysis of what he is saying. For instance, a number of misunderstandings have arisen because many believers overlook the fact that every time the word '*spirit*' is used in 1 Cor.14 (vv.2,14-16), it is not referring to the Holy Spirit but to the person's own spirit (as in Jn.4:24). It is not our purpose to give a detailed exegesis of this passage, but once it is realised that Paul is not writing a 'How-To' manual on tongues-speaking, but is very graciously criticising the Corinthians for their misuse of this gift as a means of self-edification, then things will begin to fall into place.

The sole purpose of brothers and sisters in Christ receiving the spiritual gifts is for the building up of the church in history. Tongues were never given as a 'private prayer language'. Since we can easily deduce from Scripture that *not all* believers would have the gift of tongues (1 Cor.12:10,28-31), then if this gift was to provide a special devotional 'hotline' to God solely for a limited, privileged élite, it would go entirely against the many places where we are told that *all* believers have a full personal channel of direct communication which is ever open (e.g., Heb.4:14-16; Jas.5:16b). True prayer is discursive and is based on intelligent and intelligible two-way communication between God and His people. The idea of 'tuning-in' to the Divine Being through ecstatic babbling which is not understood by the one praying, belongs instead to the realms of mysticism and occult meditation.

Yet another misunderstanding about the gift of Languages is that it was given as an aid to Christians in their mission work to foreign-language speaking cultures. But there is no biblical justification for this either. At Pentecost, in the best biblical example of the gift in action, the actual evangelising was done in the native Aramaic (Acts 2:14-39), whereas the tongues-speaking functioned as a preliminary 'sign' to the unbelieving Jews, exactly as described in 1 Cor.14:22.

Having established that the 'tongues' that people are speaking today cannot be squared with the biblical gift of tongues, the discussion should surely be lifted entirely out of the area of 'the gifts' and taken into the realm of the Bible's own testimony concerning how God desires to be worshipped. It should give all would-be tongues-speakers today pause for thought to know that Jesus specifically forbade using unintelligible speech in one's prayers to God. He told His disciples: '*When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do*' (Mt.6:7). The Greek verb translated here as 'use vain repetitions' (*battalgeo*) means literally to 'babble' or to 'speak without thinking', and this is the only occasion that it is used in the New Testament.[6] So it is doubly significant that the Lord went on to recommend the ultimate in intelligible speech - the Lord's Prayer - in opposition to the meaningless babble of heathen devotions. Sadly, the gift that so many people claim is 'tongues' today is precisely the same phenomenon which one can find in many other religious and non-religious groups in the world. It is really a work of the mind-sciences - having far more in common with hypnosis and mysticism than with biblical Christianity.

NOTES & REFERENCES

[1] **As the central purpose of this chapter is to examine the use of the mind-sciences in the churches, we will not be discussing all the spiritual gifts which are mentioned in the New Testament. For a full examination of these and their relevance to today's Church, see J. Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts* (Loizeau Brothers, 1983), 394pp.; Victor Budgen, *The Charismatics and the Word of God: A Biblical & Historical Perspective on the Charismatic Movement* (Evangelical Press, 1985), 281pp.; P. Roberts, *The Gift of Tongues*, Interdisciplinary Bible Research Institute, 1991; Douglas Judisch, *An Evaluation of Claims to the Charismatic Gifts* (Baker Book House, 1979), 96pp.)**

[2] Jay P. Green (ed.), *John W. Burgon: The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel According to Mark*, Vol.I of 'Unholy Hands on the Bible' (Sovereign Grace Trust Fund, 1990; first published in 1871), pp.C1-C177.

[3] **There is considerable confusion today on this question of the Apostleship. When the present writer's wife asked a young woman what she was hoping to do when she completed her studies at a Bible College, she was told: 'I haven't made up my mind yet whether to be an Apostle or a composer'. In the face of such ignorance, a right understanding of these matters is of the utmost importance. Many Bible Colleges have much to answer for in terms of the spawning of false doctrine and superficial Christian thought among impressionable young people throughout the evangelical churches.**

[4] **These have been discussed in a separate paper on 'Spirit Baptism'.**

[5] **See, for example, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1975-6), Vol.V, p.508.**

[6] W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt & F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago, 1979), p.137.