

CESSATION OF TONGUES—Part 2

Tongues as used in 1 Corinthians

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

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 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 ON THE ABUSE OF GIFTS.

1 Corinthians 12: The Purposes 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 giving 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 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 of gifts.
 - b. The unity within the Godhead is the obvious emphasis. The contrast as expressed in the use of the “diversities of gifts” (v. 4, “differences of administrations” (v. 5), and “diversities of operations” (v. 6) with the use of “same Spirit,” “same Lord,” and “same God.”
 - c. The varieties of gifts that God has given to his church must not be construed as disharmony within the Godhead. There is no greater comparison than the unity within the Godhead. They are 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 “Christianizing” of a secular talent which is given to all by way of the general grace of God.

- b. The gift or gifts of God is 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 he has no excuse not to serve. His duty is to find out from God what his gift is and use it for the glory of God.
- c. The purpose of the gift is NOT FOR PERSONAL BENEFIT. The purpose of gifts is for the “profit withal.” Literally it means “to carry with” or “bear up with”. Barnes explained it well when he said, “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 if you are gifted in teaching, you must use your gift to teach and bless others.

(3) **The Holy Spirit is sovereign over who gets 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 give gifts to every Christian. The gifts are very different but they all came from the SAME Holy Spirit. In other words do not use your gifts 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 God who gives gifts to whomever He sovereignly determines and dictates. This truth will eradicate all jealousy from the hearts of those who are envious of others who might have a gift that he does not have but wants very badly. For example a person who likes to preach and thinks that he can preach because he likes to be in the limelight, may be envious of another person who has this gift. If he realizes that it is God who gives and determines who get what gift then as a child of God he will submit to God’s sovereign will.
- c. On the other hand the person who has a gift must realize the need for humility as he has been given the gift due to God’s sovereign will. He must not boast and strut like a peacock thinking that he deserve his gift and the gift was his to own because of who he is as if he is someone more blessed than others. There is no favoritism

in God's eyes and practice. A gift simply means something given to you which you do not deserve. Do not boast. Be humble.

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

a. **Every Christian needs one another** in the body of Christ so that there must be no jealousy which will cause schism. 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 One Spirit not many. Jews or Gentiles, bond or free, without exception all of us were made to drink into One Spirit i.e. to be baptized with the same Spirit of God who indwells all believers. [vv. 12-13]

b. **It is a oneness in diversity.** The physical body with its multifaceted function is a very apt illustration to explain and depict the invisible Body of Jesus Christ. No part of the body will ever say I do not need you or since you are not me then you are dispensable. The foot, hand, ear, and eye are used to drive home this important point [vv. 14-16]. Each of them has a different function to perform within the body. The foot is used for walking cannot say to the hand I do not need you, for the hand is used for eating and other functions. The ear is used for listening cannot say to the hand that you are useless because you are not like me for the eye has the function of sight.

Imagine a body with only the eye or the ear or just the nose, what would happen to the rest of the bodily functions? What you have would be a grotesque creature that comes out of the cartoon world.

c. **Every part of the body has a purpose according** as it pleases God. There is no part that has not been placed there which is not according to God's sovereign will. Every part depends on the 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 (i.e. feeble) are most necessary.** This probably refers to our heart and lungs and other internal organs of the body. They are weak compared to the other parts but they are indispensable to the body for it to be kept alive. [v. 22] On the other hand there are other parts of the body which may appear less honourable are given greater honour. This might refer to parts of our body which require clothing to

cover them for the sake of decency. There are other parts like our feet which require shoes due to their “uncomeliness.” The comely parts which require no covering would be our hands and face. There have their distinctive functions and purpose which require exposure. God has tempered (i.e. 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 one another and must care and look after one another.** 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 part that is wounded. 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 that the Bible teaches us that it is God’s sovereign will that determines who gets what gift. No one is to be jealous of one another. God knows best who should get which gift. Having said that God here tells the believer to desire the best gift. To desire the best gift means to desire the gift that will benefit the congregation best. Remember the purpose of gifts is for the benefit of other and not yourself. Just because a believer desire a particular 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 reveals to them that there is a more excellent way than to just desire the best gift for the benefit of other believers. It is the motive behind the exercise of all gifts, the motive of love. With this the apostle Paul begins the next chapter. [vv. 27-31]

1 Corinthians 13: The Motive Behind the Use of the 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** is that even if the apostle Paul speaks the tongues of men i.e. all the languages of the world and including that of angels but does not have love he is like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. [v. 1] Tinkling cymbal and sounding brass make empty noises that are piercing and loud and jarring to the ears. One may assume that if a person can speak all languages he would 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 is not saying that he speaks the language of angel for this is a hyperbole. Thus far in all the appearances of angelic beings who spoke to the servants of God or praising God in Heaven itself 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 had the gift of prophecy and is able to understand all mysteries and knowledge including all faith so that he could remove mountain but have no love, he is nothing i.e. he is absolutely a nobody. [v. 2]

One would assume that if a believer would have all the knowledge in the world including the gift of telling future events and have the faith to move mountains he would be highly regarded as a mature and supremely 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 devoted and consecrated life of the believer. Paul says that even if he sells all his worldly possessions and give all to the poor including giving his body to be burned but without the motive of love in his heart, all his good deeds would benefit him absolutely nothing. [v. 3]
- d. The word for love in this entire chapter is “*agape*”. This is the unconditional, sacrificial and the highest form of love given only to God’s children. This took place at the time of the person’s conversion (cf. Romans 5:5). In other words, every believer has been given this special divine love from God. He has no excuse not to exercise this love. This love is defined for us in verses 4 to 6.

(2) **Love will last whereas the gifts will cease** (vv. 7-12).

- a. **The gift of knowledge and prophecy will cease when the Bible is 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

tongue refers to the Word of God given to man 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. For example if I need someone to speak to my grandmother who speaks only Teochew, God does not need to give me the gift of speaking Teochew. I simply invite a church member who speaks Teochew to speak to my grandmother the gospel of Christ. Missionaries today have to spend years learning the languages of the people they are ministering to and then translate for them the Word of God in that language. It could take their entire life to accomplish this. The gift of tongues was a temporary gift compared to the other two gifts mentioned here.

The gift of prophecies refers to the Word of God declared in the language of the hearers. Knowledge here points to the Word of God that has yet to be completely revealed as more than half of the New Testament Scripture has yet to be written. For example, much of the knowledge and prophecies of the last things has not been revealed at the time of the writing of First Corinthians. Hence Paul says in verse 9, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part.” For at this point in time the disciples know in part through the continual use of the gifts of knowledge and prophecy which was still needed until the New Testament is completed. But the moment the Bible is completed these two gifts will be done away with. They will not be needed. [v. 8]

- ii. **The Grammar used for the three gifts argue for cessation** -- The gifts that will cease are mentioned here. They are prophecies, tongues, and knowledge. Prophecies and knowledge are in the “passive voice.” This means that they will be caused to cease by something outside of itself (use of the passive voice in “shall fail” and “shall vanish away”--v. 8). Whereas the gift of tongues is in the middle voice. That means tongues will cease by itself i.e. cease on its own. This is the significance of the use of the middle voice in verse 8. Therefore tongues-speaking is already omitted in verse 9. [v. 9]
- iii. **The use of the word in Greek is “*teleios*.”** -- This word has been used in James 1:25 to refer 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 use “*telos*” and not “*teleios*.” “*Telos*” is used in 1 Corinthians 15:24 and is translated as “the end.” [v. 10]

- b. **Maturity will come to the Christian** through the study of the completed Bible. We know partially now like a child, before the completion of the Bible but we will know even as also we are known (cf. v. 12). Who is the one who knows us? It is God. He knows about our end and eternity which we will also know when the books of the New Testament are 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, eternal destination of the believers and unbelievers, the new heaven and new earth, the wrath of God, etc.
- c. Of the three gifts from God, **love is greater than faith and hope** (v. 13). Faith and hope will not be needed in heaven but love remains. When we finally arrive in heaven, faith and hope will turn to sight. They will be needed no more. But love (*agape* love which is unconditional and sacrificial love) will remain in our hearts for all eternity. The thrust of Paul’s argument is that these gifts concerning the Word of God are important but they are temporal. The greater gift of love which is 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 the exercise of his gift, whatever that gift might be.

1 Corinthians 14: The 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 now continues his argument and will deal with the problem in the church in Corinth. 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.** It is never given to show off oneself (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 the believers. The mind has to be involved. It is not a warm feeling or sensation as the Charismatic has 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 except the person speaking it. It was basically for the purpose of “showing-off” my gift and telling others that you do not have this gift but I do. This was categorically castigated by the apostle Paul. [v. 2]

The “unknown tongue” mentioned in verse 2 does not refer to ecstatic utterances. It must not be understood as no one “in the whole world” understands him. It refers to an unknown language which **no one in the church understands**. Remember the context is within the church worship service, the church in Corinth. The only person who understands the speaker who speaks in another language is God Himself. Therefore, he speaks only to God and not to any man at all. As far as the people are concerned, he is speaking mysterious things. For example when I listened to the students of the Bible College of East Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, sing or share their testimony in Swahili, it was a mystery to me. To those who understood they were edified. But I was not for I did not understand a word.

The person who speaks the language understands it himself. There is grammar and syntax in every language. But if there is no one present who speaks that language why do you want to speak it?

- b. **Prophecy is better than tongues if the latter has no interpretation** -- The Apostle Paul then used the gift of prophecy to demonstrate why the gift of tongues must not be abused in this way. Paul points out that it is important that the congregation understands the revelation that is given in tongues (cf. vv 3-6). The person who prophesies speaks the Word of God and every one understands as he will be speaking in the language of the congregation. They would be edified and exhorted and comforted (cf. v. 3). Edification always includes understanding. The word “edifies” in Greek literally means “to build up.”

On the other hand, the person who speaks in tongues (i.e. speaking the Word of God in different language) which no one understands edifies only himself, since 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 has asserted earlier in chapters 12 and 13. There he has stated very clearly that all gifts are the same and are useful for everyone. We 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 is being abused here when one uses it only for personal edification and not for the edification of others which is the primary goal of the spiritual gift. [3-5]

- c. **Speak in tongues for the benefit of others** – The use of tongue is for the benefit of others. To benefit you Paul says, I speak by revelation (i.e. to speak intelligibly), by knowledge (i.e. to make it understandable), by prophesying (i.e. to communicate through interpretation), and by doctrine (i.e. 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 illustrated this verse very clearly by way of two examples. Things without sound like the pipe and harp give a distinctive sound or else no one will note the difference between a harp and a pipe (v. 7). In a battle field the sound of the trumpet is a matter of life and death. If the trumpet blown is unclear and the people do not know if it is to retreat or to charge forward, how will they prepare themselves for battle? [vv. 7-8]

- d. **All languages have significance** – Therefore if the tongue (language) spoken is not easily understood, no one would know what is spoken. You only speak into the air! There are so many voices (languages) in the world and none of them is without signification (lit. “without no meaning”). The conclusion is that the person who hears you speaking in that unknown language will regard you like a barbarian. [vv. 9-11]

- (2) **Gifts can be abused** as seen in the abuse of the gift of tongues here in the church in Corinth. Tongues-speaking was a popular gift as it was a prominent gift. The problem was that many of these Corinthians were speaking in languages that no one understands except the user himself. That was why Paul argues by saying that it was better to speak five words with understanding than ten thousand words without understanding (cf. vv. 12-19).

- a. In verse 12, he qualifies what he said in 12:31 that even as one desires spiritual gifts, **seek to super-abound in the edification of the church**. Paul drew 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. If the person can speak in an unknown tongue the Word of God and he knows the interpretation of that language for the edification of the people present then there is no need for him to speak in tongues for he could just simply speak in the language of the people. On the other hand when he speaks in an unknown tongue and he understands what he is saying but he does not know the language of the people that he is addressing, then he needs 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 who can translate his message for him.

For example, when I preached in Kenya at the Swahili Church, I spoke in English. I needed an interpreter to interpret my message for me into Swahili. But if I can speak Swahili then I do not need to speak in English but in Swahili. If there is no one who can interpret for me into Swahili then it defeats the purpose for me speaking to the congregation as they would not understand what I am saying. So Paul says in verse 13, pray that there will be an interpreter or he may interpret it himself. [vv. 12-13]

- b. Even **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. Others around him who hear him pray but do not understand what he is praying will not be edified. Hence the phrase “but my understanding is unfruitful” which here means “my ability to understand produces no fruit in others, “which is not 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.”¹

There is no point speaking in an unknown tongue where no one understands as this would bring no blessing to others. Tongues as a gift from God is for the blessing of others. If there is no one who understands that language, why speak the Word of God or even pray to God in that language? It is therefore futile to speak in an unknown

¹1 Corinthians 14:15-17.

tongue which you understand but no one else in the congregation understands. It is fruitless. They cannot even thank God together with you (cf. v. 17)! [vv. 14-17]

- c. **Five words to teach others than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue** – Paul affirms that he speaks more tongues (i.e. languages) than all of them and yet he would rather speak only five words with what he understands than would teach others than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue which no one understand. [vv. 18-19] Do not lose sight of the purpose of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, IT IS 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 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 was why Daniel chapters 2:4b to 7:28 were written in Aramaic.

If everyone speaks in tongues i.e. different and unknown languages and an outsider enters into the church, he will think that the people are mad. Imagine a Japanese speaking congregation listening to a man preaching in Swahili without interpretation and a Japanese speaking visitor walks into the church. He would say that this church is "mad." But if all were to prophesy, i.e. speak the Word of God in the same known language, then there will be no confusion; everyone understands the word of prophecy as spoken in the common language. The outsider who enters into the church will understand and know what the speaker is saying. And when he is convicted of his sins and believes in God he will say that indeed God is with the church in this place (cf. vv. 20-25).

- (4) **All gifts must be carefully regulated in the church** (cf. vv. 26-33). The usage of gifts must be carefully controlled. In the case of tongues-speaking it must be no more than three different languages at the same time 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 allowed to speak to the Mandarin congregation if I go there and speak only in English. It is a waste of

time and the unbeliever who goes there to hear God's Word will think that the speaker is indeed mad!

The practice of prophecies and tongues were not forbidden by the apostle at that time because such gifts have not ceased yet. Scripture was not completed yet. But these gifts ceased upon the completion of the Holy Scripture. For anyone who claims that he receives prophecies or new knowledge from God today 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 are proper languages with syntax and grammar and not the babbling that you find in the Charismatic churches today. What they speak is babbling where no one understands. Warm feeling is not to be equated with edification. Edification is to build up the faith and life of the believers
2. All gifts including the gift of tongue speaking are given by God for the edification of other believers and not the user of the gift.
3. God the Father and the Son all participate in the giving of gifts. The Holy Spirit is the One who determine who gets which gift. Every believer is given at least one gift.
4. All gifts are of equal importance and no one can say that his gift is better than another person's.
5. The motive behind the use of all gifts is agape love which is an 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. The unbeliever does not have this kind of love.
6. Tongues will ceased by itself even before the completion of Scriptures. Prophecies and knowledge will cease 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.
7. The use of all gifts must be carefully regulated and be 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.