

Author: Patrick J. Griffiths ©
 Title: What are Biblical Tongues, and How Are They to be Expressed and Received in the Local Church?
 Text: 1 Cor. 14:6-13 (Misc.)
 Theme: Biblical tongues are a grace gift to the local church for the building up of itself in love.

Introduction:

Unlike last week's study, we will gather material from other portions of the New Testament, although the bulk of the study will be in 1 Corinthians 14.

There are limitations to our current study. I will not be exhaustive or conclusive. My desire is to begin a journey that does not have a destination in mind other than attempting to be true to the evidence under consideration at this time.

“This chapter is very difficult to understand because it deals with a phenomenon which, for most of us, is outside our experience. Throughout Paul sets two spiritual gifts in comparison with each other.” (William Barclay, 1 Corinthians, 127).

A historical/cultural context:

The historical/cultural context in which they lived found ecstatic utterances and uncontrollable torrents of sounds in religious ceremonies more common and thus acceptable. Our immediate culture does not have this. The idea of biblical tongues and what existed in these more base expressions have parallels, but their distinctions are fundamentally adverse.

Because their culture saw such expressions as common and acceptable the door was opened for abuses of the gift that would only be corrected through discernment and instruction.

Why is this important to study?

Biblical tongues are one of those topics where people are often confused. The Corinthian fellowship was in ministry disarray. Paul chides them for their childish behavior in the exercising of their gifting and in the ministry of serving one another (v. 20). They were like children, self-serving and self-absorbed.

“Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature” (1 Cor. 14:20).

He exhorts them to maturity. Mature behavior is “others-focused.” Mature behavior has the mind of Christ. This much is clear from Philippians 2:1-5.

¹ “Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³ **Do nothing from selfishness or**

empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:1-5).

Whatever our thoughts might be concerning biblical tongues, let us in our ministry be marked by spiritual maturity and not egocentricity.

Our intent in this study is to bring some clarity to the subject. What are biblical tongues? How are they to be expressed and received in the local church?

Like all gifts they are a sign of the Holy Spirit working, so that Jesus Christ is manifested. Their purpose is to build up the members within the local body. When properly exercised they have a unifying effect on a local assembly. Our study is biblical in so far that we will attempt to let the Holy Spirit speak through the text of Scripture. It is systematic in that we will attempt to use all the evidence in the New Testament.

Biblical tongues are an easily abused gift. It seems to be able to go from order to disorder rather quickly. As a grace gift, a spiritual gift, it is desirable, profitable, communal, and instrumental (just like biblical prophecy).

There are three thoughts I would like us to initiate our study. First, biblical tongues are knowable.

I. Biblical tongues are knowable (1 Cor. 14:1-5; Acts 2:3, 4, 11).

¹ “Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. ² For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. ³ But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. ⁴ One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying” (1 Cor. 14:1-5).

Unless biblical tongues are interpreted, it is of no value to the audience, only the individual, since “in his spirit he speaks mysteries” (vv. 2, 14). Knowing the gift was exercised brings the benefit, but what was said is a mystery since no one was present to interpret the utterance. Thus tongues is . . .

“Not **intended** for self-edification (1 Corinthians 14:4; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:24; 12:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:11).” http://www.bibchr.com/tongue_summary.html

And it is . . .

“Not a ‘prayer-language.’ (There is no positive statement that this is tongues’ design, it does not fit the stated design, and the passages . . . do not teach that this is tongues’ purpose.)” http://www.bibchr.com/tongue_summary.html

When the idea of tongues is exercised for self-edification or as a “prayer-language,” it runs counter to why grace gifts are given, which is for the building up of the body in love.

There are three qualifying ideas.

A. Biblical tongues and language

There are perhaps more than three ideas as to what are biblical tongues, but I would like to mention only three. **First**, the gift is in the speaker having ability to speak a language that was previously unknown to him. **Second**, the gift is in the hearer hearing the message in his mother tongue. **Finally**, the gift is in the preaching of the message with boldness and confidence.

This third idea is presented by Robert Zerhusen in his articles “A New Look at Tongues” and “The Problem of Tongues in I Corinthians 14.” Both are available at http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID560462%7CIIID1415642,00.html. The essay presented here was first published in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (© 1997, vol. 27).

Regardless as to what anyone might think, biblical tongues are a language. As a language it has non-disputable characteristics. **First**, there is an idea communicated. **Second**, the idea must be capable of being received by a recipient. **Third**, an element of structure must exist.

The idea that biblical tongues is an angelic language that is non-structural and sounds gibberish in nature to the human ear is an insult to the intelligence of angels and of God.

Biblical tongues is “not ecstatic (i.e. gibberish, or “exalted non-language”; Greek *glossa* never once means gibberish, which the dictionary defines as “rapid and incoherent talk; unintelligible chatter”; it consistently has the well-attested and common meaning of language. Gibberish is not a language.)” http://www.bibchr.com/tongue_summary.html

“If I speak in *human and angelic tongues* but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1).

Angelic speech is capable of being understood by humans. When they spoke, humans understood.

Paul’s entire argument (vv. 1-19) is focused on the singular idea that in order for tongues to be of benefit to the body, they must be interpreted. Without the interpreter, the gift is not to be exercised publicly.

Nations can be defined by the languages they speak. Such nations are made up of people groups. The book of Revelation says that people groups represented by the figure of “tongues” will be gathered to worship Him.

“After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and **tongue**. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands” (Rev. 7:9).

Note also Isaiah 66:18.

“I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory” (Isa. 66:18).

God’s redemptive purpose reaches to every nation, race, people and tongue. The gift of tongues has a redemptive function in the proclamation of kingdom truth.

Such tongues as described in Acts 2:3, 4, and 11 were of a known language. It might not have been known to the speaker, but it was known to the hearer.

“both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God” (Acts 2:11).

This same event happened in Caesarea with Cornelius in Acts 10:46, 47.

“for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded” (Acts 10:46).

The second qualifying idea is that unintelligible tongues are a sign of judgment.

- B. Unintelligible tongues are a sign of judgment (1 Cor. 14:20-25, c.f. Isa 28:11, 12).

Unintelligible gibberish is a sign of God’s judgment, not blessing. Biblical tongues are not unintelligible. So when someone proposes to have the gift of tongues, but is unintelligible in their communication, this is not a sign of God’s presence, but of His absence.

In 1 Corinthians 14:20-25, Paul

“goes back to Isaiah 28:9-12. God, through his prophet, is threatening the people. Isaiah has preached to them in their own Hebrew language and they have not listened. Because of their disobedience, the Assyrians will come and conquer them and occupy their cities and then they will have to listen to language which they cannot understand. They will have to listen to the foreign tongues of their conquerors speaking unintelligible things; and not even that terrible experience will make an unbelieving people turn to God. So Paul uses the argument that tongues were meant for a hard-hearted and unbelieving people and were, in the end, ineffective to them.” (William Barclay, 1 Corinthians, 133).

“Paul reminds his readers that whenever God's people have turned from him in the past he has withdrawn his clear prophetic word and replaced it with riddles. Jumbled words from God are therefore a sign of judgment upon an unfaithful people. Thus beware of tongues. They are a sign of judgment rather than blessing. On the other hand, a clear word of prophecy is for a faithful people. If a seeker comes into a Christian congregation where the word is in tongues, they will be denied a clear word from God and only think "you are out of your mind." Prophecy, on the other hand, will strike at the heart, convicting and converting.
<http://www.lectionarystudies.com/sunday2epfe.html>

The third qualifying idea is that biblical tongues were initially accompanying Holy Spirit baptism.

C. Biblical tongues and the baptism by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3; 10:46, 47; 19:6).

When biblical tongues occurred in Acts 10 with Cornelius in the city of Caesarea, Gentile believers were baptized by the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues (10:47) just as it happened in Acts 2.

At this point in redemptive history, Holy Spirit baptism was accompanied by the gift of tongues as a sign of something different and new. This appears to be unique to this period of time. Let us note the following passages: Acts 2:3, 4; 19:6.

³ “Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim” (Acts 2:3, 4).

“And when Paul laid (his) hands on them, the holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19:6).

If a part of biblical tongues was for a sign against unbelief, then perhaps its presence in Acts 2 shows that God is moving from dealing with Israel to dealing with the world.

That its union with Spirit baptism is transitional can be seen in such passages like 1 Corinthians 12:10, 13, 28, and 30. All believers do not enjoy the gift of tongues, but all believers (now) are Spirit baptized. In 1 Corinthians 14, Spirit baptism is assumed, but the gift of tongues is not.

Along the way the church of Christ has made tongue speaking a sign of spiritual maturity. This is unfortunate for the church and the individual.

Daniel J. Phillips notes how tongues is . . .

“Not a merit badge signifying superior spiritual maturity or status. (Simply ask yourself: which assembly is the only church in the New Testament that was said to feature tongue-speaking on a regular basis? It was the church in Corinth. Then ask further: what was characteristic of the spirituality of that church? They were as men of flesh, infants in Christ [1 Corinthians 3:1]; it was a church featuring schisms, outrageous heresy, stunning immorality, and petulant stubbornness. None of this constitutes a glowing testimony as to the tongue-speaking Corinthians' superior spirituality.)”

http://www.bibchr.com/tongue_summary.html

This brings us to our second point.

II. Biblical tongues are conditional (1 Cor. 12:10, 28, 30).

In the early church, biblical tongues was a grace gift (1 Cor. 12:10). Such gifting is implied in Mark 16:17. **Paul's entire argument in 14:1-19 is that biblical tongues must be understandable if it is to be of any value to the fellowship.** This is explained with three thoughts.

A. Biblical tongues are dependent on the accompanying gift of interpretation (1 Cor. 14:5, 13, 28).

This did not appear to be the situation in Acts 2, but it does occur in 1 Corinthians 14.

“Charismatics and Pentecostals realize that there is a difference between the tongues of Acts 2 and what is going on in 1 Corinthians 14, and they explain the difference by saying that there are two kinds of tongues. They say that the tongues of Acts 2 are real languages and the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14 refer to an ecstatic, private, devotional speech which one speaks in an unknown tongue to God personally and privately for self- edification. They recognize a difference and resolve the difference by saying there are two gifts of tongues.

I also recognize a difference, but I resolve it by seeing the true use of it in Acts 2 and the false use of it in 1 Corinthians 14. First Corinthians 14 doesn't talk about another gift; it talks about a perversion of the intended gift and its mixture with the heathen counterfeit. The same term describes the gift in Acts 2 and in 1 Corinthians 14. It is the normal Greek word for language.” *Speaking in Tongues: The Truth about Tongues -- Part 2* by John MacArthur All Rights Reserved (A copy of this message on cassette tape may be obtained by calling 1-800-55-GRACE) 1 Corinthians 14:6-19 Tape GC 1872 <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/sg1872.htm>

This is Paul's big idea. In the absence of the gift of interpretation, the gift of tongues is not to be exercised publicly.

“Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, **unless he interprets**, so that the church may receive edifying” (1 Cor. 14:5).

John MacArthur notes how Paul uses hyperbole in 1 Corinthians 14:5.

“He's saying, "Hey, I'm not downplaying the gift of tongues. I wish that everybody could have the real gift. But we know, of course, that that isn't possible." You see, Paul is using hyperbole as an emphasis. He's balancing off his strong words denying the primacy of tongues to emphasize the fact that there is a true gift.” <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/sg1871.htm>

“Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue **pray that he may interpret**” (1 Cor. 14:13).

“but **if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church**; and let him speak to himself and to God” (1 Cor. 14:28).

“to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; **to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues**” (1 Cor. 12:10).

“Do all have gifts of healing? **Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?**” (1 Cor. 12:30).

B. Biblical tongues are subordinate to other gifts in their function within the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:28).

“Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then, gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and *varieties of tongues*” (1 Cor. 12:28).

In comparison to love, biblical tongues have a relative value (1 Cor. 13:8; 14:1).

Like many of the gifts, Paul saw tongues as a desired ministry to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:5), but its role is subservient to other gifts (1 Cor. 14:5, 6).

¹⁸ “I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; ¹⁹ however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Cor. 14:18, 19).

C. Biblical tongues are controlled (14:26-33, 36-40).

When biblical tongues are supposedly occurring a tell-tale sign of their authenticity is whether or not it is with order. If confusion and anarchy exists in the exercising of the gift, then it is not done biblically. If there is no interpretation, then it is not to be done publicly. I suppose this would eliminate much of what passes for biblical tongues. As such Daniel J. Phillips concludes that tongues is . . .

“Not a large-group activity (1 Corinthians 14:27). (If five hundred people are speaking in tongues in church assembly, at least four hundred and ninety-seven are sinning against God's declared will.)”

http://www.bibchr.com/tongue_summary.html

If such order is not followed, then the leadership is responsible and accountable. The issue of decorum in a service is the responsibility of the leadership and whether or not it is capable of ruling the house of God (1 Tim. 3:4, 5; 5:17).

This brings us to our third point.

III. Biblical tongues are creditable (1 Cor. 14:39).

Although they appear to have a lesser value than other sign gifts, they could still be expressed without censorship (1 Cor. 14:39).

“So, (my) brothers, strive eagerly to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39).

Paul spoke in tongues:

¹⁸ “I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; ¹⁹ however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Cor. 14:18, 19)

“Paul does not deny that the gift of tongues exists. . . . But he insists that any gift to be of value must benefit the whole congregation, and therefore, if the gift of tongues is used, it is useless unless it is interpreted.” (William Barclay, 1 Corinthians, 128, 129).

APPLICATION: (What’s the NEXT STEP?)

First, the issue is not what gifts exist, but rather how they are to be presented in the context of body life.

Second, are we serving one another in love? This is a litmus test for all grace gifting. When grace gifts are exercised 1 Corinthians 14:3 tells us . . .

- They Build up
- They Encourage
- They Comfort

“So Paul draws to an end (vv. 34-40). He makes it clear that he has no wish to quench anyone’s gift; the one thing he strives for is the good order of the Church. The great rule which he in effect lays down is that a man has received from God whatever gift he may possess, not for his own sake, but for the sake of the Church.” William Barclay, 1 Corinthians, 136, 137).

Third, grace gifts fuel worship; as such . . .

- Worship must never be selfish and
- Worship must be intelligible

“There comes a time when a man has to ask, ‘What is the meaning of these facts?’ Simply because we are thinking creatures, religion implies theology.” (William Barclay, 1 Corinthians, 130).

Finally, let us stop dividing the body of Christ over the issue of spiritual gifts, and let us embrace the diversity of Christ in the midst of a unified body by holding each other in love. Let us ask “How can we best serve one another?”