

Sermon 148: Romans 12:6-8: The gift of Tongues: Part Three

OUTLINE

Were tongues understood?

Were tongues a sign?

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The next question that comes to us arises from 1 Cor. 14:4, 'The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.' Here we are faced with a statement, the one who prophesies brings edification to others because they understand what is said as opposed to tongues. Yet we are told that the only person who the person who speaks in tongues edifies is himself. This is no small point. Let me highlight its importance. If Paul is recommending prophecy to tongues on the basis of it being understood in order to edify, and the person who speaks in tongues is able to edify himself, does this mean that the person who speaks in tongues understands what he is saying? If yes, then this would destroy all notions of tongues which suspend the mind, if no, how can Paul say the person edifies himself if in this chapter edification by understanding is the main reason why prophecy is to be preferred to tongues? The question we are attempting to answer is: did the person who prayed in tongues know what they were saying? There are three main answers to this question. The first is the Charismatic answer, that the edification spoken of is the benefit gleaned by the prayer being answered. In the circles I used to move in the notion was of a tank that you fill up each morning. They agreed that we needed to be filled with the Spirit, and instead of viewing this as a putting down of the flesh in order to submit to the path of the Spirit of holiness, it was viewed as a filling by a tongues tank up. Each morning you get out of bed and pray till you are filled, it often included some soaking sessions as well, and then you could go into your day with power. This is the least likely interpretation if context means anything. In the context Paul is not assuming a weird view of edification but is speaking about the merits of prophecy over tongues because it is understood and therefore able to edify. The second view is the view held by Charles Hodge and others, that in contrast to the ecstatic speech of the pagan religions tongues is not a type of demonic possession where the person is a neutral vessel, but rather that the person praying does understand what they say. The edification is limited to themselves because only they are understanding. The immediate objection is this: if they understand then why do they need to pray in order to interpret. The answer is that interpretation is not merely a matter of understanding but transmission as well. I hold to a third view which sees the statement about edifying themselves in v4 as a thought that must be read in light of all Paul is about to say. It is not an unqualified statement but one that will soon be clarified.

The key text to answer us is 1 Cor. 14:13-19, so let's move from v6 and set it up that we can look at it.

Paul is going to lay out some proofs for his point that prophecy is a gift more in line with love because it edifies, over tongues, unless tongues is interpreted. He is going to illustrate the need for interpretation in order for tongues to benefit others and be in line with the nature of love which seeks to serve others. V6, 'Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?' Here Paul shows how revelation, knowledge, prophecy and teaching are all better than an uninterpreted tongue. He illustrates this from the world of music, v7, 'If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?' Remember that Paul is using this illustration to serve the

point he is trying to make, that tongues without interpretation is not useful. Some have tried to make the case for tongues as gabbering because of the lack of distinct notes mentioned, but this is to reemploy Paul illustration for a purpose he did not make it serve. The next illustration is from battle, v8, 'And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?' The point Paul is making is not about indistinct sounds but misunderstood sounds. Paul makes clear his point in v9, 'So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air.' Paul's words, 'so with yourselves' draws attention to the fact that if the Corinthians have tongues with no interpretation they are not speaking to the people, but the air, though also to God. But Paul's point is that the point of love which is to serve the body is not met. Paul goes on to show that although one can speak in many languages if there is no interpretation we are no better than strangers and foreigners to each other, and instead of our union in Christ being given expression it is hindered, v10-11, 'There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, 11 but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.' He sees they are eager for gifts and does not discourage them, but rather to want them rightly, v12, 'So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.'

This is a very practical point that Paul. Our gifts are not for ourselves but for others. We should never seek to use our gift for self-promotion, for recognition, to serve a political agenda like feminism, but in the spirit of love as God has outlined. Is this how you view your gifts? Are you in it for others or not?

We come now to the key text which deals with whether the one who speaks in tongues does in fact understand what they pray. Paul begins this section in v13 with the logical conclusion from the discussion so far. If you are eager for the spiritual gifts, good, then be eager for the gifts that build up the body, and if you are eager for tongues pray for the ability to interpret so that the body will be built up. V13, 'Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.'

I want to lay out the view that says that the person who prays in tongues does in fact understand what they say, and how they interpret v13-19. I am deeply sympathetic to the view and wish I could believe it. It is one of those views that really would make everything very simple. You see if we could prove that those who prayed in tongues did in fact understand what they were saying, the modern phenomenon of tongues which is a verbal machine gun with a passive mind would be destroyed and everyone would have a clear understanding that modern version of tongues could not possibly be the biblical one.

V14, 'For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.' The keys to this view are the views of man and prayer and edification that puts pressure on this verse to see it a certain way. Firstly, the separation of spirit and mind is not viewed as a biblical distinction. The obvious way to highlight this point is to ask whether the spirits of righteous men made perfect in heaven have minds. Is this a legitimate separation to make, even a possible separation? To which they answer, no. Secondly, the notion of prayer is one of personally engaging with God with heart, and mind. Are we really praying if we are not thinking? Thirdly, when Paul say the person who prays edifies himself, in the context edification only comes by understanding.

So they look at this verse and interpret it this way. 'When I pray in tongues, I under the influence of the Holy Spirit am praying but my mind for the purpose of instructing others is unfruitful.' In other words, my spirit praying is short hand for my understood prayers which can edify me because I understand them; and my mind praying is shorthand for a correctly

translated and relayed communication for the benefit of others. The unfruitfulness of the mind is not his own mind but unfruitful in bringing edification to others.

V15 is seen as giving examples of praying and singing for one's own edification and then another's.

v16 is seen as clarifying Paul's point, 'Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?' Paul does not hint that you don't understand your own thanksgiving, but that another does not.

V19 is seen as really clarifying the way Paul uses praying with the mind, 'Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.' The addition of 'in order to instruct others' is Paul point about interpreting the text for another's edification. As much as I want it to mean this I cannot in conscience see it that way.

My difficulties are these. Firstly, the interpretation of verse 4 where the one who prays edifies himself need not mean that he understands his tongues as he is praying it. Paul may very well be giving a general point that needs further qualification. It appears to me that Paul makes quite clear that the only way tongues will benefit the person is if it is interpreted. Paul does not stress the point of interpretation serving personal edification because he is arguing the need to pursue gifts which edify others.

Secondly, the sense in which Paul says, 'my spirit' and 'my mind' have to be made to mean very different things under this form of interpretation. So much so that 'my mind' means something closer to 'your mind'

Thirdly, in order to sustain this view the gift of interpretation has to be added to in order to be more than merely translating but also a case of inspired transmission which is not implied anywhere but must be added without warrant.

My understanding along with others sticks to the simple understanding of the text, that we do not understand our own tongues, and so need interpretation for them to edify ourselves or others. The value of this discussion is to exclude the notion of edification that views some mechanical view that sees us as a tank needing filling.

Were tongues a sign?

In the next section v20-25 Paul is going to tell the Corinthians not to be childish in their understanding. But in the context of his discussion he mentions that tongues are a sign for unbelievers, in order to better understand the bible's view of tongues in distinction from the modern view we need to put our thoughts to this question, were tongues a sign?

V20, 'Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.' Notice Paul's loving rebuke, he uses a term of endearment, 'brothers,' but then tells them to stop being so childish in their thinking. They have failed to be mature, a sign of maturity is the ability to act responsibly and not to be so self-centred but to serve others. The Corinthians it seems are obsessed with the external show of tongues as children do and have overemphasized it to the detriment of the church. Paul tells them to be adults in their thinking and then gives them a dose of adult education when it comes to tongues.

V21, 'In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord."' In thinking like Adults Paul introduces us to some of the OT teaching on tongues. Now there is no gift of tongues practiced in the OT but there is significance in the presence of other languages in the congregation of God's people. Paul quotes Is. 28:11-12. And this is in turn a fulfilment

of Deut. 28:49 which promises the invasion of nations with unknown speech when Israel breaks the covenant.

Paul illuminates his use of the OT in v22, 'Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.' Here is what he is saying. In the OT when the people of God were disobedient, a sign to the unbelieving Jews that they were under God's judgement for their sin was the presence of people who speak in unknown languages. In the first place the implication is clear for the Corinthians, do you want to create a scenario that repeats the conditions of judgement? You may think it a blessing for everyone to be going crazy speaking in tongues but in the OT this was a sign of judgement not blessing. But we must go further and recognise the redemptive historical significance of Pentecost for Israel if this is the case. If tongues is a sign of God's judgement on Israel what is Pentecost to Israel? It is the greatest sign of pending judgement upon a people who have committed the greatest sin. They have killed and rejected their own Messiah and God will judge Israel; He will destroy the temple, the age of the Gentiles has come and the era of the Theocracy is over. This accounts for that little understood verse in Acts 2:40, 'And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation.'" And then we are told that 3000 got saved. Part of what convinced these unbelievers that they needed salvation was the presence of the tongues as a sign of God's wrath upon Israel. Have we been so childish in our thinking that we have failed to recognise this key aspect of tongues? When we speak to those who seek tongues as a wonder to captivate the unbeliever's mind do they conceive how the unbelievers in Acts 2 understood it and why it was crucial in helping them believe? Is this OT appreciation for tongues as a sign to unbelievers the baseline assumption of the 21st century person that as soon as they see a restoration of tongues we can expect a similar response? Obviously not, we are still childish in our understanding. (In the same way prophecy is a sign for believers, how? It is the sign that the Spirit in fulfilment of Joel is upon us, upon all flesh, the New Covenant has come.)

A big question that needs answering is this: is God sending tongues as a sign of judgement upon Israel today? It is an unasked question because so many are so childish. The answer is no, and this should help us understand the original import of tongues and why such a thing should not be expected to be a widespread phenomenon. Granted it is not only used as a sign of judgement, but it must be understood to also be such a sign.

Paul wants to show that even though tongues are a sign for unbelievers, that without proper interpretation they will be useless, and that tongues which is ordinarily used for the church can save sinners. In other words, if it is all about getting souls saved, prophecy is better than uninterpreted tongues even though tongues is the traditional sign to confront unbelief. V23-25, 'If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.'

It is time for us to draw some conclusions and applications:

My overall point in this discussion of tongues has been to clarify that the modern day phenomenon of tongues is not what Paul means by the gift of tongues.

I have also wanted to make very clear that the theological foundations for the modern day phenomenon are in error. So, there is not second baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues. There is not hard line distinction between public and evangelistic tongues and a private prayer language. There is no weird mechanical view of edification that fills up your spirit tank each day. Tongues were real human languages not gibberish. Tongues along

with prophecy were revelatory and the revelatory gifts are part of the foundation of the church. Pentecost is a unique event that had particular redemptive significance and should not be seen as a model for repeating. The church service described in 1 Cor. 14:26-33 which has prophecy, revelations and tongues is not normative for us today.

If someone were to begin to speak in tongues in the service I would ask them to stop as at least the scripture is clear that without interpretation there should be no tongues.

I would encourage anyone who thinks they have this gift to consider what has been said and test the foundational beliefs that led them into this activity. I have dismantled the beliefs that led me to the practice and have had to be honest about the subjective nature of the emotional experiences. I would urge a testing of all things by scripture. My deepest concern is over the effect this teaching has on prayer. Often instead of recognising that God sees all my prayers as perfected by the righteousness of Christ I would lean on the tongues as a way to pray perfectly. All my prayers are in His name, by His Spirit and through His intercession. Or out of fear of the devil understanding prayer I would pray in tongues, that is living by fear not faith.

The one question I get asked over and over is this one: what about a missionary who gets the gift of preaching the gospel in another language they didn't previously know and have never done since? Is this possible? Let me tell you what I am concerned about in answering. If I say yes, and I do. I believe that God is sovereign and cannot be boxed; He is fully able to do such a thing. I want it to be clear what I am not affirming. I am not affirming that the theology of a second baptism or a repeat of Pentecost is correct. I want it to be clear that there is no universal prayer language for every Christian. I want it to be clear that tongues is languages not gibberish. I want it to be clear that this providential miracle is not normative for worship. If these and many of the other concerns laid out in this series are served I have no fear in saying yes. But I fear to utter an unqualified yes because of all the things people might think I am condoning. I fear that you will not go away and be challenged about the wrong you believe but by my answer give you will yourself permission to go on believing all sorts of wrong things.