

The Gifts of Tongues and Interpretation

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Last modified: July 2, 2017

Introduction: Prayer Meeting in Israel

I want to tell you about the first time I prayed in tongues. It was in Israel, in a brief moment of peace in between two sets of SCUD missile attacks fired by Saddam Hussein into the country. That detail is important, and I'll explain why in just a moment. It was in December of 1998, and I was on a business trip in Israel. At the time, I was working for Intel Corporation based in Northern California. There was also an Intel plant in Haifa, Israel. My team and I were scheduled to go there. But just before that, Saddam Hussein, then military dictator of Iraq, started firing SCUD missiles into Israel. The U.S. government put up a travel advisory against any U.S. citizens going there. We almost cancelled our trip. But fortunately, there was a cease fire. So we went, and I got my first and so far, only, trip to the land of Israel. The first thing that struck me was the young men and women of the Israeli Defense Force walking around with M-16's. After a few days, I spent a weekend by myself in the city of Jerusalem. The name Jerusalem means, 'city of peace.' But ironically, in the limestone walls, there are bullet holes which had been there for decades. But I did find one place where I felt peace. I came across a sign for a Christian prayer meeting. I walked in. I was struck by how many people were there, and how diverse it was. When it was time to pray, they broke people up into small groups by language. There were at least four languages spoken there that I remember: Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, and English. It struck me that in the world, countries which spoke these four languages had a lot of tension with each other. But here, in this room, people were calling on the name of Jesus, or Yeshua in Hebrew, or Issa in Arabic, or Jesus in Russian. And it reminded me of Pentecost in Acts 2, which was when the first followers of Jesus were met together in Jerusalem which was occupied militarily by the Roman Empire. It was filled with tensions. In fact, within one generation, there would commence the Jewish-Roman War where the Romans leveled Jerusalem. But on that day, the Christians spoke in all kinds of tongues to proclaim that in Jesus, there is unity, there is peace, there is a new kingdom community pledging allegiance to a Prince of Peace. As everyone prayed, I wanted to say more than I could say in the words that I knew. So under my breath, I hoped that I could express something in words that I didn't know. That's what praying in tongues meant for me then. My co-workers and I flew back to the States one morning. Later that day, Saddam Hussein started firing missiles into Israel again.

Relevance

Now some of you are thinking, 'Cool, we're finally tackling this topic, the gift of tongues.' A few of you may not care. Others of you feel skeptical or concerned. Maybe you've had some bad experiences with it. Wherever you are, let it be known that we don't shy away from controversial topics. Nor do we try to practice things without talking about them first. So let's go deeper into what Scripture says about this. It is important.

Let's start with the foundations. What is this gift of 'speaking in tongues?' And what is the gift of interpretation that goes along with it? According to the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians 12 – 14, the definition of 'the gift of tongues' is 'speaking out loud in another human language, or an unrecognizable, perhaps angelic, language, where you as the speaker don't know the language you're speaking.' That last part is important. Because when you speak in a language you know, it means you've learned that language. You learned it or studied it naturally. But when you speak in a language you don't know, that is supernatural. The definition of 'the gift of interpretation' is 'the supernatural ability to understand someone speaking in tongues, and understanding it, without having studied it naturally.'

For different reasons, tongues has become one of the most controversial gifts of the Spirit. The Pentecostal experience starting from Azusa Street, in Los Angeles, came with people speaking in tongues. Similar things happened in India just before that (see Pandita Ramabai). So those folks took the name Pentecostal because they read the Book of Acts, chapter 2, and what happened on the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit of God came swooping down and filled the Christians, and they spoke in tongues. They experienced something uncommon which they thought should be more common, so common that they thought every Christian should speak in tongues.

So now, there are stereotypes about speaking in tongues. You might associate it with faking an experience. Sometimes, churches put pressure on kids to speak in tongues, so they fake it. Maybe you associate speaking in tongues with a service being chaotic, or a group of people being chaotic. Maybe you associate it with being

hyperspiritual. Like when you ask someone, 'How are you doing?' And they say, 'I'm blessed; I'm walking in the anointing...' And you feel like saying, 'Just calm down!'

In this series we've been doing, we've pointed out that every spiritual gift is an aspect of Jesus' ministry. They are abilities that Jesus had. So, we should be able to look at Jesus when we are trying to develop whatever gift he gives us by his Spirit. Did Jesus speak in tongues? Jesus did speak at least three languages, and probably four. He spoke and read Hebrew, because that was the sacred tongue of the Jewish people. He spoke Aramaic, which was the common language of the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, and most of the Ancient Near East. Jesus used the Aramaic words 'abba,' 'ephphatha,' and other words which are preserved in the Gospels. When Jesus was on the cross, he said, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' in Aramaic, which is why Matthew and Mark have the words, 'Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?' Did Jesus speak Greek? Almost certainly, since it was a common language in the Galilee region, and even in Jerusalem (e.g. on tombstones and funeral ossuaries or 'bone boxes,' and on the Jerusalem Temple sign warning Gentiles to stay out of Jewish areas). When Jesus talked to the Canaanite woman (in Matthew 15:21 – 28), he makes a joke, which seems to depend on Greek wordplay. Also, Jesus seems to have been familiar with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (since, for example, in Matthew 21:1 – 6, Jesus called for a donkey AND a colt, which is a peculiarity of the Septuagint translation of a Hebrew poetic parallelism which would have been understood in Hebrew as one young donkey, rather than two donkeys). When he spoke with a Roman centurion, they probably spoke in Greek (Matthew 8:5 – 13). When he spoke with the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, they probably spoke in Greek (John 18:33 – 38), because Pilate was not the type of man who would bother learning other languages. And Jesus probably knew some Latin, since the Roman Empire had conquered Israel and the Romans were military occupiers. So if Jesus spoke in more than one language, that means something.

Illus: One of the arguments that Muslims make against Christians is that since the prophet Mohammed spoke Arabic, and wrote the Qur'an in Arabic, everyone should speak Arabic. But Jesus spoke more than one language because, in his humanity and with his human mind, he took it upon himself to speak in other peoples' heart languages. You know what it feels like when you're with other people, and they're speaking other languages? You're looking around, trying to read people's faces, read the cues, get the jokes, and by the end, you're exhausted. Because your brain is working overtime, forming new connections. Your brain is wired to the language you learn when you're a baby. The older you are, the harder it gets, generally. So then, when you meet someone who speaks your heart language after you've tried and tried, it feels so easy. Well Jesus spoke in the heart languages of people around him, because he loved them. He didn't require us to learn Hebrew, or Aramaic, or Greek. He learned our languages. And he empowers us to do the same. Whether that's in the natural or in the supernatural.

There's one professor at Yale University named Lamin Sanneh, who grew up in a Muslim family in Gambia. He memorized the Qur'an by the age of 14. But he gave his life to Jesus, and suffered the cost of that, mainly because Jesus and his followers translated their message into other languages. He thought, if there is a God who wants to be the God of everyone, then this is what He would do! He would speak in every language. He wouldn't make everyone learn Arabic. Now, Dr. Lamin Sanneh is a professor who specializes in world Christianity, and the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Africa. I am amazed by this guy. AMAZED! But I'm even more amazed that Jesus won his heart just because he spoke in other languages. You see, what if Jesus did that through you? Won someone to faith, because you were able to say something in a language that felt like fresh, cool water on a hot day. Isn't this what it means to care for visitors? Refugees? The people displaced by our government's policies and underpaid by our corporations?

The Pentecostal Position: For Everyone?

The Pentecostal tradition argues that every true Christian should speak in tongues. There is another position, on the opposite end of the spectrum, called the 'cessationist' position, which argues that no one should speak in tongues because the Spirit of God has 'ceased' giving that supernatural gifts out anymore. Here at Neighborhood Church, the six leaders (Carla, Jason, Paul, Paulea, Valerie, and myself) hold to the middle position: the charismatic position. That position says the Spirit is still giving out all the gifts, but because of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, no one gift is given to everyone.

^{12:29} All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? ³⁰ All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? (1 Corinthians 12:29 – 30)

These are rhetorical questions, and each time, Paul expects the answer to be an obvious NO. No gift is given by the Spirit to everyone. This is one of the reasons why probably the greatest Pentecostal bible scholar to this day, Gordon Fee, says to his fellow Pentecostals that we shouldn't expect the Spirit to give the gift of tongues to everyone. [Actually, his reasoning is based on trying to ascertain Luke's and Paul's understanding as authors as to whether they would expect everyone to speak in tongues. "To insist that it is the only valid sign seems to place too much weight on the historical precedent of three (perhaps four) instances in Acts."] But it's a gift like any other gift, and we should appreciate it, and try to cultivate it.

Human Tongues as the Reversal of Babel, Sign of Jesus' Claim on Every Person

Here's why: When God speaks someone's language, He enters into their world and makes a claim on them. Let's look first at human tongues, and then angelic tongues. The background to speaking in human tongues is the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 10 and 11. Back at the Tower of Babel, an empire builder named Nimrod (Genesis 10:8 – 14) led people to build a tower to reach up to the heavens, probably so that at least some people – the rich and powerful – could avoid being flooded by another flood, even though God already promised not to send a flood again. The attempt was from earth to heaven. They built a hierarchy, because only some people could be at the top if another flood came, right? And they tried to name themselves. They said, 'We don't want God to name us anymore. We want to make our own name. Meaning we want to construct our own reality.' God said, 'This level of group self-deception and endeavor is evil.' So He scrambled human languages. All of a sudden, you heard, 'Hombre, que pasa? Yo no entiendo lo que dices.' And, 'Mwen pa konprann sa ou di.' And, 'Watashi wa anata no kotoba wakarimasen.' Then, even if you manage to translate for each other, when you go to name a building, or name a street, or name a scholarship, you can't agree on anything. So people stopped what they were doing. They spread out instead, which was what God wanted them to do from creation.

But when Jesus came down into Mary's womb, and then ascended back to heaven, he sent his Spirit down at Pentecost, he sent heaven down to earth in a fresh way. The movement wasn't an attempt to go from earth to heaven. It was heaven to earth. Instead of clumping people together, the Spirit spread them out to reach more people. There is no special language for God's people. You're not inferior as a Christian if you don't speak Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek. We can speak English, or Spanish, or Kreyol, and it's fine. You're not a second-class citizen in the Christian body. The Spirit of God flattened hierarchies. He equalized people, because everyone could receive the Spirit by receiving Jesus. Instead of naming themselves, people proclaimed the name of Jesus. And because they were speaking about the reality of Jesus, they could use all their languages to testify to him, to name him.

Here is the text: Acts 2:1 – 13.

^{2:1} When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. ⁵ Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ They were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸ And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs – we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.'

When I read this, I fall in love with Jesus more and more. Because if we were there in that crowd, we would have heard about Jesus in our heart language. But we would also hear other languages, too. That's because this speaking in tongues was a miracle of speaking. It wasn't a miracle of hearing. What if God just gave everyone the ability to hear other languages, and it was already translated for you. That would be awesome, too. But you wouldn't hear the other languages. You would only hear your own language. And you would assume that God only spoke your language. But God doesn't only speak your language. And He doesn't want to give you that impression. God actually speaks every language. And followers of Jesus now take it on themselves to be speak in other people's

languages, to worship in other people's languages, to show that Jesus wants to speak to their hearts. Jesus is claiming them.

Illus: Does God still do this? Yes. Let me tell you one of many stories that come out of a church network called Calvary Chapel. On the West Coast, since the 1970's, the Calvary Chapel churches are famous for welcoming barefoot hippies and gangsters and seeing Jesus deliver them from hard drugs and violence. This story comes from the founding pastor, Chuck Smith. There was a group of about 45 to 50 people who met to talk about Scripture. A woman named Lynn was known to speak in tongues, and in French, which she didn't naturally know. Lynn had been a nightclub singer, and was writing a song to Jesus, and was giving thanks to Jesus for that song. Both Chuck and his wife Kay had the gift of interpretation, and did not naturally know French, either. Kay translated for the group. This is what happened afterwards: A woman who was visiting came up to ask some questions and get some counseling. She asked, 'Who were those women who were speaking French?' Chuck Smith said, "Would you believe that neither of those women know French?" He showed her some Scriptures in 1 Corinthians about these gifts. The woman said, "Well I lived for five years in Paris." She said, "She was speaking the most beautiful French, using an aristocratic pronunciation. It was not just the common French... And the other lady translated it perfectly." Chuck said, "Well, I know that *she* does not know French. That is my wife!" She said, "Well, before we go any further, I have to receive the Lord." (Chuck Smith, "Interpretation of Tongues," Blue Letter Bible; https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/smith_chuck/HolySpirit/hs_24.cfm)

When you ask God to give you the gifts of tongues or interpretation, or for someone else to receive the gift that you don't have, you're not just asking to have good times or some elite experiences. You're asking him to speak his claim on other people, in their heart language. Jesus claims everyone. And when you use the gifts of tongues and interpretation together in a setting where the community of Jesus gathers

In 1 Corinthians 14, in the context of a worship service, speaking in tongues and interpreting go together:

^{14:26} Let all things be done for edification. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; ²⁸ but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.' (1 Corinthians 14:26 – 28)

So practically speaking, if the Spirit were to give those gifts to this body, we would figure out a protocol. We now have a rotation of point persons, who 'host' each Sunday Service. The Advisory Team shares that rotation amongst ourselves. If you had a gift of tongues, you could tap that person on the shoulder and say, 'I could say something if there is someone to interpret.' And we'd have to figure that out. But because these two gifts are meant to go together, out of respect for Scripture and Jesus' purposes to clearly communicate, both gifts would have to be present.

What is the gift of interpretation like? In the New Testament, we do not have any recorded instances of people interpreting tongues. We have Joseph and Daniel interpreting dreams in the Old Testament, but no interpreting of tongues. 'As a person is giving an utterance in tongues, it is as though I understand what they are saying. It is as though they were saying it in English. The thoughts, the praises, and the thanksgiving just come into my mind. And quite often they go on for a few minutes and I cannot always remember immediately. But I start off with the thoughts as they first came. And then they come back again. As I am speaking them, it just begins to flow and it is the interpretation of what was said. Now I do not always get an interpretation every time I hear someone speaking in tongues. And I appreciate that fact because it helps me to realize that it is a gift from God and it is not just something that is there. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit.'

(https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/smith_chuck/HolySpirit/hs_24.cfm)

Praying in Tongues

Now that raises the next question, praying in tongues, and especially what is called praying in angelic tongues. Now is there such a thing as angelic tongues? Paul says yes in 1 Corinthians 13:1.

'If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels...' (1 Corinthians 13:1)

So there are tongues of men, and there is at least one tongue of angels. Other Jewish writings at around this time affirm that angels spoke in angelic languages.

If any of you pray in tongues, as I know some of you do, or if you have heard someone else praying in tongues, what this sounds like is repeating a few syllables over and over. This is often what freaks people out if they're not prepared for it, because it is the opposite of speaking someone's heart language. It's speaking without much regard for another person's understanding. Now am I discouraging praying in tongues? Absolutely not. I am encouraging it. Paul again says:

⁴One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself...¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful...¹⁸I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; ¹⁹however, 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...²⁸ [so,] if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.'

Now it's true that in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is contrasting the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. And he says that prophecy is understandable, and tongues are not; therefore prophecy is more important for the community because it engages more of you and more of other people. But he still believes that tongues is important. It's just that if you don't have someone with the gift of interpretation, speaking in a different tongue can only engage your spirit. That's why he says it's appropriate to pray quietly: 'he must keep silent in the church, and let him speak to himself and to God.'

So, praying in tongues quietly or silently is appropriate. Why? What happens when we do? There is one thing we know for sure, from Scripture. And I'm going to suggest three applications of that principle.

The one thing we know for sure is that your spirit is edified, according to 1 Corinthians 14:4. A deep place inside you is encouraged and strengthened. How? Well, it's hard to express in words. If you pray in tongues, you feel the pressure to explain what's happening, or how you're growing. The problem is, most of the time, you can't explain further what's happening. But that's okay. Because human words stop at some point, and we can't go any further. How many of you like the taste of chocolate? Let's pretend that I have never tasted chocolate. Can you explain to me what chocolate tastes like? You can't, can you? Because your words stop. There are no more words you can use to describe it. Chocolate is chocolate, and you can't tell me more about it because I just have to experience it. How about the taste of cinnamon? Can you explain to me what cinnamon tastes like? You can't, can you? Your words stop, and you can only point to an experience. How about coffee? So when Paul says, 'the spirit prays, but the mind is unfruitful,' it's because the mind can go no further. There are no more words. And that's okay. Here are three applications of that principle.

First, praying in tongues has been used by some people to pray through trauma. Why is that helpful? Well, it's similar to a trauma counseling method where you remember traumatic memories while you watch the second hand on a clock, for example. You allow yourself to be engaged with something painful in a gradual way. Part of you is focusing on something else. Praying in tongues can be useful for that. Paul says in Romans 8,

'In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words' (Romans 8:26)

There are prayers too deep for words. Because our weaknesses are too deep for words. Our needs are too deep for words. By praying in tongues, you may be marking out a place of Jesus' peace in yourself.

Second, praying in tongues might be part of calling the angels to worship God. If praying in human tongues is a call to humans, praying in an angelic tongue seems to be a call to angels. Paul says that angels are present when we worship (1 Corinthians 11:10). And Psalm 91 says that angels protect us in some way (Psalm 91:11 – 13). So if you're praying for your children, or praying for your marriage, or praying for people to come to Jesus, praying in tongues might be a way to ask God to send His angels. You might be marking out a place of Jesus' peace in your ministry space.

Third, praying in tongues might be practice. Just like studying the Bible and praying through the Bible is practice for the gift of teaching, praying in tongues might be practice for growing in the gift of speaking in tongues or the gift of interpreting. You can start. You might feel like I felt on my trip to Israel, like there are things you want to say

that can't be expressed in words you know. You might feel one syllable at a time coming into your mind. You might be marking out a place of Jesus' peace in your gifts.

Conclusion

We don't necessarily have all the answers we'd like to about the HOW's of tongues and interpretations. I suspect it just unfolds one syllable at a time, so that's the invitation. But what felt more important was to give the bigger picture WHAT's and WHY's. Once we understand the bigger picture, about God wanting to speak in people's heart languages to love them and claim them, I think we have the right framework. With that, please pray. Pray for Jesus to help you process any negative feelings you have about this issue. Ask him to help you grow in your ability to speak or interpret. Pray for God's wisdom if you feel led to minister in a particular language. We have a God who spoke life into being. He continues to speak life into us. And He speaks peace through us in a world of chaos as we name the name of Jesus. Let's not be afraid of what He will say.