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| Chapter 3

3.1 Tongues and Interpretation

We will approach these gifts in two parts. Firstly we will look at the gift of tongues as it stands by itself and then we will look at the gifts of tongues and interpretation working together. We will begin by reading 1 Corinthians 14 as our text for this session.

Tongues

Life in the Spirit

Speaking in tongues is intended to be a vital, consistent, ongoing part of the life of all Christians. Jesus said,

And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues...

Mark 16:17 ESV

Throughout the NT whenever people are saved they are immediately prayed for to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit and immediately speak in tongues¹. Tongues, then, are the first gift of the Spirit that believers experience, and it breaks them into a whole new realm – the realm of the Spirit. It is a gateway gift to the realm of the Spirit and opens up the way for other gifts to follow.

Life “in Christ” is life in the Spirit, and right from the point of conversion we are given one of the key means to being “in the Spirit”².

Speaking in tongues is such an important part of the Christian life because it allows godly order to be manifest in our lives. Until you first spoke in tongues, everything that came out of your mouth was controlled by your mind; but for the believer, the mind comes under the control of the Spirit:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on

¹ For greater detail on this see EQUIP “The Holy Spirit” section 4. There are occasions when conversions are recorded without mention of baptism in the Spirit and (a very few occasions) when speaking in tongues is not mentioned. However, this is easy to understand in the light of baptism in the Spirit and speaking in tongues being portrayed as the norm of conversion throughout the NT.

² Speaking in tongues is referred to as being “in the Spirit” in 1 Corinthians 14:6. We will consider more of what it means to be “in the Spirit” in week 5.

the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Romans 8:5-7 ESV

For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

Romans 8:6 ESV

The mind is a wonderful thing, but it is intended to be controlled by the Spirit, not vice versa. Speaking in tongues allows us to get this order right and for the Spirit of God to be in control of our lives. Those whose mind is controlled by the Spirit, or who have set their minds on the Spirit, live by the Spirit; that is, they live by the "*law of the Spirit of life*"³.

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.

1 Corinthians 14:14 ESV

What is an unfruitful mind? It is not a blank mind! It is a mind that is not filled with its own fruit, but rather the fruit of the Spirit. When we speak in tongues we should expect our minds to be filled with the things of the Spirit.

What are Tongues?

Tongues are a language (or languages) given as a gift by the Holy Spirit in order to communicate in the Spirit with God who is Spirit: we are speaking God's language! Tongues are meaningful⁴, and may be earthly or heavenly languages⁵.

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 14:2 ESV

³ Romans 8:2

⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:10

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:1. The term for speaking by the Spirit known earthly languages is *xenolalia*, lit. "foreign speech"; for unknown (heavenly) languages the term used is *glossolalia*, lit. "other speech".



Tongues and Edification

Speaking in tongues builds up the person speaking; this is because we are engaging with God and his purposes – which causes us to transcend the mundane and be lifted into the eternal!

The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself.

1 Corinthians 14:4a ESV

Tongues and Thanksgiving

When we speak or sing in tongues we are praising and giving thanks to God.

What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. 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?

1 Corinthians 14:15–16 ESV

When our minds cannot rightly express our praise and thanksgiving through confusion, tiredness or distractions, our spirit has no such problem! Tongues allow us to praise and give thanks to God.

Tongues and Revelation

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 14:2 ESV

Mysteries are things hidden from men by God, but to be revealed in the Kingdom (which is in the Spirit⁶). When we speak in tongues we are speaking the hidden things of the Kingdom to God. Our spirit knows these mysteries because of the saturating presence of the Holy Spirit:

But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" -

⁶ Romans 14:17

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 2:9-11 ESV

Again tongues is an intercession in the Spirit, allowing us to pray effectively the will of God when our minds do not know what to pray:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Romans 8:26-27 ESV

3.2 Tongues & Interpretation

What is interpretation?

Do not interpretations belong to God? (Genesis 40:8)

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it. "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

Genesis 41:15-16 NIV

No wise men, enchanter, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries

Daniel 2:27b-28a ESV

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.

1 Corinthians 14:13 ESV

It is important to realise that both the message in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues are gifts of the Spirit. It is one and the same Holy Spirit who gives one the *supernatural* ability to give an articulated meaning to the words in tongues that he prompted in another. It is not possible to translate a message in tongues. If it were, there would be no need for the supernatural enabling of the Spirit, it would just be an activity of the intellect.

It is this utter dependence on the Spirit to bring the interpretation, and the imperative to be alert to him, that makes the message in tongues such an important gift. It can transform a meeting from one that is predictable and comfortable where everyone is operating within the ease of their natural abilities, to one where suddenly the Spirit is put definitively back in the driving seat.

For this reason the most important aspect of bringing an interpretation to a message in tongues is an alertness, not so much to the words of the message, but to the Spirit himself who is behind the message - as it is he who will give the interpretation. Interpreting a tongue is thus very much like bringing a prophecy, except that the revelation comes to our spirit via the spirit of another. When we

hear a message in tongues, we are not just listening to strange words, we are hearing the sound of a man's spirit as moved by the Spirit of God. Just as the skillful playing of a musician is more than just a mechanical sequence of notes, it is an expression of something from deep within the musician himself. When we hear such playing, whether we understand music or not, we are brought to mind of some situation, emotion, or feeling - we interpret the music.

Just as it is possible for two people to catch different aspects of what the musician was communicating, so it is possible for more than one interpretation to come for the same tongue. This does not mean that "anything goes" and that a message in tongues is purely subjective, but it does mean that there is not only one possible correct expression to the tongue. If more than one interpretation comes, they will be complementary and not contradictory. They will combine to fill out the overall picture.

Prayer or Prophecy?

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 14:2 ESV

We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.

Acts 2:11b ESV

When a message in tongues comes it may come either as a prayer - an overflowing expression of a man's spirit to God, or as a prophecy - a telling forth of God's works, an expression of God's heart towards his people.

The first step to interpreting a tongue is discerning in which direction the tongue was directed: to God from man, or to man from God.

Quite often a message in tongues will provoke both prayer and prophecy - either directly through the interpretation or indirectly through other gifts and contributions that are sparked as a result. Since every message in tongues involves both the Spirit of God communicating to man and the spirit of man communicating back to God it should not surprise us if sometimes the lines between prayer and prophecy seem a bit blurred. Some messages in tongues could equally be interpreted as a prophetic prayer as much as a prophecy.

3.3 The Corporate Dynamic

The Reversal of Babel

The story of the Bible is in one sense the tale of two cities: Zion and Babylon. One represents the city of God, the people who belong to God and are submitted to his kingdom rule, who shine out with the knowledge of his glory - a city on a hill. The other represents all that is opposed to God and resists his will, it is the pride and foolish arrogance of man in opposition to God.

The first time we come across the city of Babylon in the Bible it is called Babel. Sinful men gathered together and decided to build a city and make a name for themselves by taking the order of earth up to heaven. This was diametrically opposed to what God had told his people to do - spread out and fill all the earth, making known his name and his will, and bringing heaven down to the earth, looking for the city whose architect and builder is God.

To put a stop to this God caused the people who all spoke one language to be divided and scattered to every corner of the earth, he confused their speech so they could no longer understand one another.

What happened at Pentecost was a reversal of Babel. Men who had come from every corner of the earth and all spoke different languages, came together and were able to understand the message of God as if it was in their own native tongue.

Tongues and interpretation are thus a corporate anointing that marks God's people as the true city of God, Zion, in stark contrast to the falsehood of Babel. It's distinct corporate nature is also seen by the fact that it is the one gift of the Spirit that Jesus did not move in. It was reserved for the birth of the corporate expression of the people of God filled with the Holy Spirit - the church.

Whilst it is possible, and legitimate on occasion, to interpret one's own message in tongues, the way this gift was designed to work is within the corporate expression of the body. The fact that one man brings the message and another brings the meaning demonstrates the corporate anointing of the Spirit in the church probably better than any other gift. There is a dependence and a necessity of faith not just in the Spirit who gives the message in tongues, but also in your fellow members of the body that someone will step up and interpret.

If we have prophecies why do we need tongues and interpretation?

The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, **unless** someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.



1 Corinthians 14:5b ESV

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

1 Corinthians 14:26 ESV

Tongue and interpretation may at first glance seem like a round-the-houses way of arriving at the same result as if you had just prayed or prophesied in the first place. But there is a dynamic in the process that is not present in prophecy or prayer alone. It is an expression not just of an individual's gift, but the corporate anointing that is on the body. It switches people on to the Spirit, and shifts focus away from the natural and back to the supernatural, it releases other gifts, especially prophecy, to flow more freely and it raises the atmosphere of faith in a meeting. In short - we need it! None of God's gifts are anything less than good and perfect - this alone would be enough to tell us that it is to be desired and sought after, but the Apostle Paul spells it out plainly - all the gifts must be present for the body to be built up the way God intends.

3.4 Use of the gift

Ask God for the interpretation

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.

1 Corinthians 14:13 ESV

The instruction in the word is that all who speak in tongues should be seeking for the gift of interpretation.

- Start with your own tongue. Pray in the Spirit, then pray with your mind. (1 Corinthians 14:15)
- Even if you don't bring the interpretation, seek God and try to discern every message in tongues that is brought. When the interpretation comes you will probably find that you did catch some if not all of it. Part of the importance of the message in tongues is that it is supposed to throw everyone onto God in this way.
- Bring a message in tongues yourself - it's sowing and reaping. How can you bring an interpretation if no one brings a message in tongues. If you bring a tongue for someone else to interpret you will be better prepared and more likely to have an opportunity to interpret a message in tongues from someone else.

A sign for unbelievers

Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers

1 Corinthians 14:22a ESV

This is a confusing passage of scripture, but Paul is saying that even though if we were to hold a whole meeting speaking nothing but tongues it would accomplish nothing and drive unbelievers away, the gift of tongues itself if applied correctly is a powerful sign for unbelievers. We should not be coy with our spiritual gifts when there are unsaved visitors around, they might be just the sign of God's presence that they are looking for.

Not to be abused



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?

1 Corinthians 14:23 ESV

The Corinthians had a problem with the gift of tongues. But it was not that they used it too much - Paul said he spoke in tongues more than all of them! It was that they used it inappropriately. Because they thought speaking in tongues was more spiritual than speaking in their native language they would conduct the whole meeting in tongues - everyone would speak in tongues - the guy giving the notices, the preacher, the lot. It's no wonder Paul said that unbelievers would think they were crazy - I'm sure a few believers did too! There is an appropriate setting for all the Spiritual gifts. The Spirit of prophets is subject to prophets (1 Corinthians 14:32).

Although we are far from such abuse, we need to remember that the purpose of all the gifts is to build up the body - thus anything that hinders or counteracts this objective is an abuse. For example consider a prayer meeting where someone is praying - if you decide to speak in tongues loudly over the top of the person praying, you may think you are being spiritual, building yourself up, moving in a gift, but if the others in the room are distracted from the one who is praying and so cannot give their "Yes, and Amen" to what they pray - the body is not built up. Paul when he spoke about the abuse of the Lord's table said - "Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" Speaking in tongues to build ourselves up we can (and should!) do in our own time - when we come together though, every spiritual gift must function for the building up of the whole body.

In order and in turn

If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.

1 Corinthians 14:27-28 ESV

The order that is required for an appropriate use of tongues and interpretation is clear - there should be two or at most three messages in tongues in the meeting (It doesn't say none or at most one, so we still have some way to go!) And it must be interpreted. When a message in tongues comes the next thing to happen should be the interpretation. If you have another gift or contribution, you should hold it. The meeting should not go on until the interpretation has been brought. Also as a practical step, because the one who brought a tongue is responsible to bring the interpretation if no one else does, it helps if those who bring a message in tongues do not walk away again until the interpretation is brought - this helps



people to understand that what they are hearing is two sides to the same message - and also reduces the risk of someone else over eagerly jumping in and taking the meeting off in another direction before the interpretation comes.
