

The Gift of Tongues

Finding a Biblical Balance in Teaching & Practice

This paper was approved in general by the Theological Commission with an appreciation for its pastoral concern and sound Biblical basis. The Commission however recognized that there might be some members of the Community who would need more discussion and explanation of the issue. **(Theological Commission meeting-September 16, 1998)**

I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Why choose this topic?

- a. In ministry, people who respond to the Lord and want to be a part of the church fall (approximately) into the two kinds – the more conservatively-oriented and more charismatically-oriented. It is more important to be able to stay together in one congregation with the more moderate majority of both kinds for several reasons:
 - i. It is not Biblical that churches divide over preferences in worship-style **(Philippians 1:27)**
 - ii. The church needs to balance in order to be strong in ministry to different kinds of people, especially in evangelism.
- b. In the body of Christ as a whole in Metro Manila there is a fairly clear division between the more conservative-oriented groups and the more charismatically-oriented groups. In many instances the division is accompanied by competition, mutual mistrust, and even accusations.
- c. Among the topics discussed by conservatives and charismatics the gift of tongues appears to be one of the more difficult to resolve.
- d. The Biblical material on the gift of tongues is abundant.

2. Cessation or Continuation?

a. the cessationist view, i.e., that the gift of "tongues" (along with some other gifts) ceased with the apostolic age, is based mainly on **1 Corinthians 13:8-12**. ⁸ *love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there is knowledge, they will pass away.* ⁹ *For we know in part and we prophecy in part,* ¹⁰ *but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.* ¹¹ *When I was a child, I talk like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish way behind me.* ¹² *Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."*

b. On this view, "perfection" refers to the completion of the written New Testament, or to the fuller establishment of the church. Thus the "disappearing" "tongues" (**v.8**) is considered to have already happened in first century AD.

c. Weakness of this interpretation should be noted:

- i. In **verse 8-12** two time-periods are being contrasted, a present one and a future one. **V.12** is clearly contrasting the age to come, after the Lord's return, with the present age. So the most natural way of interpreting **v.10** is that is also contrast the present age with the age to come. In this case "perfection" refers to something that will come in the age to come.
- ii. The passage could summarized as follows: "*We had prophecies and tongues because of our incomplete knowledge. But when we know God fully they will not be necessary anymore.*" In this case "perfection" refers to the "complete knowledge of God".
- iii. The Greek word "**teleios**" (complete, perfect) and its derivatives are not used in any other context of the fuller establishment of the Church.

d. In view of:

- i. The weaknesses of the above interpretation of **1 Corinthians 13**
- ii. The general principle that all aspects of Church life mentioned a New testament continue until the present, unless specifically stated in Scripture that they should terminate.

- iii. The evident blessing of God resting upon current manifestations of the gifts of the spirit, seen in the strengthening of the individual Christians and in the building of the Church it seems reasonable to remain open to the possibility that God is still giving these gifts today, and to discern, as necessary, on a case-by-case basis, using the Biblical criteria, which of the current manifestation by God and which are not.

3. To speak or not to speak in tongues?

1 Corinthians 12:29-31. *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts.*

- a. From this verse, and its context; i.e ministry gifts used in the church, it is clear not all Christians will speak in tongues.
- b. Since it is the work of the Spirit to distribute the gifts of healing as he determines (**1 Corinthians 12:11**) there is no special honor either in speaking in tongues, or in not doing so. Hence there is no ground for superiority or inferiority in speaking or not speaking in tongues.
- c. There is teaching that one who speaks in tongues has special power (e.g., more powerful intercessions) not available to a non-tongues speaker. There is no Scriptural support for this teaching.
- d. While it is true that Christians have first spoken in tongues at the time of the first explicit asking to be filled (or baptized) with the spirit, it cannot be deduced that this pattern is applicable to all Christians.
- e. Seeking the gift. There is in Scripture no specific command to seek the gift of tongues. However, there is generally command to "*follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy*" (**Corinthians 14:1**) Hence the following position seems to be faithful to the balance of scripture.:
 - i. The Christian who is led to seek the gift of tongues is not to be censured or belittled. He should be affirmed.
 - ii. The Christian who is led to seek the gift is not to be censured or kept at a distance. He should be encouraged.

- iii. It is also recognized that some Christians have started speaking in tongues spontaneously, without desiring to do so (and in some instances without even knowing about speaking in tongues).
[see also part 4 on discerning the sources of the language.]

f. Testimony

Christians should not be discouraged from testifying about speaking in tongues, with the following guidelines:

- i. Avoid unbiblical statements or implications, e.g., that everyone should speak in tongues (see paragraphs a-d above).
- ii. Speaking in tongues should not be given a higher profile in the local church life than it deserves Biblically, in relation to other aspects of Christian life. (e.g this could be happening by testimony on this subject week after week)

If young Christians, in their enthusiasm, inadvertently over step these guidelines, it is usually unnecessary to correct them in public, which may be a cause of stumbling for them. A better way is to have a clear teaching on the subject schedule from time to time, and if necessary speak to the individual concerned in private.

4. Discovering whether a "tongue" is true or false?

- a. If a church member begins to exercise the gift in public worship, or in a cell group, in such a way that others can hear, then it is important for leaders to discern whether it is true or false. **(1 Corinthians 12:3)**
- b. Pastorally it is normally advisable that those who would exercise the gift in the public to worship so first do so in a small group. If it is discerned to be false, or questionable, then the process of correction (and adjustment if appropriate) is easier in a small group. The same applies to the exercise of the gift of interpretation of tongues.
- c. A church member who begins to exercise the gift, which is recognized to be true gift, may none the less take some time to learn how to exercise it properly, and some mistakes of judgement may be made. It is important pastorally to make allowance for this learning process and to be involved in it.

d. In the situation where particular gifts of the Spirit are appearing in the church, leaders can expect that God will give them the discernment that is necessary. Though discernment is not mechanical, the following are indications that the tongue is false (not an exhaustive list)

- I. The speaker cannot stop speaking at will.
- II. The tone is loud and raucous, or domineering
- III. The speaker is in a frenzy
- IV. The tone sounds ugly
- V. The voice is not the natural voice of the speaker

The fruit of the Spirit is peace, gentleness and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**) and so it is to be expected that the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit should be manifest these qualities. Hence there is Scripture support for citing the above as indications of all false tongue.

e. As far as discerning the source of “tongues” used in private devotions only, the person concerned is responsible to do this, based on teaching given to the whole church.

II. EXERCISING GIFT

A. Two extremes to avoid

1 Corinthians 14 is largely devoted to how the gift of tongues should be regulated when used in public. It closes with the following exhortation in regard to extremes:

- i. Do not forbid speaking in tongues (**1 Corinthians 12:39**). The preceding verses all address the topic of public worship, so **v. 39** also applies to public worship.
- ii. Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. (**1 Corinthians 14:40**). Allowing the possibility of the exercise of tongues in public worship is not license for everything unfitting or disorderly.

B. Regulating the gift in different context

In **1 Corinthians 14** a distinction is made between using the gift of tongues for personal edification (**v.4**), and using the gift for the edification of the church (**v.5**). Further, the gift may be used for personal edification, either in private, or in public worship. In each case the manner of regulation of the gift is appropriate to the purpose and context.

1. Exercise the gift for the edification of the church (**v. 5-12, 26-33**)

a. Reasons for regulating the gift context:

- i. To avoid disorder (**v. 33**)
- ii. To ensure the church is strengthened (**v.26**)
- iii. To avoid allowing exercise of this gift to take up an excessive proportion of the service time, in relation to other more important elements of the service (**v. 19** and by implication **v. 17**).

b. Manner of regulation of the gift:

- i. Two, or at most three, should use the gift (**v.27**)
- ii. One at a time (**v.27**)
- iii. Someone (not necessarily the one who spoke in tongues) should interpret (**v.27**)
- iv. Presumably the church should wait expectantly after the message in tongues until the interpretation is given, rather than move on to something else. (by implication **vs. 27** and **28**)
- v. Leaders should help the church to weigh the interpretation and comment appropriately (this seems to be reasonable extension of **v.29** in applying it to interpretation of tongues as well as to prophecy, given the strong connection between prophecy and interpretation of tongues, e.g **vs. 4-5** [see also section 1.4 on discernment of tongue and interpretation])
- vi. If the gifts is likely to be exercised in this context then leaders should be sure there is someone present whom God has used to interpret acceptably on a regular basis (**v.28**)
- vii. Scriptures must not prescribe it, but it seems wise that if the one leading the proceeding interpret the message in tongues, then another leader should lead the congregation in weighing the interpretation.

C. Content of message, and interpretation, in this context: it seems that the message can be directed towards God (**v. 16, 28**) as a message of praise and/or prayer, or alternatively it can be directed towards man, as a message of encouragement (**v.5**)

2 Exercise the gift for personal edification, in public worship:

a. There are indications that this use of the gift is addressed in **vs. 13-17**:

- i. The personal, individual flavor of these verses, as shown in the singular pronouns throughout "I will pray.. I will sing.. if you are praising.. can one say.. he does not know.. you may be giving thanks.."
 - ii. The context (certainly of **v. 16,17**) is that of public worship.
 - iii. The emphasis of **v. 13-15** on praying (**v.14**), praising God (**v.16**) and giving thanks (v.16-17) rather than ministering encouragement to believers.
 - iv. The inclusion of singing as an alternative to speaking (**v. 15**)
 - v. The speaker himself should pray so he could interpret, rather than someone else (**v.13**)
 - vi. The concern for the edification of "those who do not understand" i.e inquirers, probably (**v.16**), rather than the whole church.
 - vii. The concern of the fruitfulness of the speaker's own mind (**v.14**)
 - viii. "The other man" (**v.17**) is singular; perhaps suggesting that only someone near the one giving thanks could hear him.
- b. The manner of regulations of the gift according to this section (vs. 13-17):**
- i. The speaker himself should pray that he may interpret (**v.13**)
 - ii. As an alternative to interpreting, (perhaps if he is not able to interpret), the speaker should stop praying in tongues and pray for a while in his own language (**v.15**)
- c. General principles with regard to use of the gift in this context:**
- i. It was normal Jewish and New testament church practice for the congregation all to pray, or praise God, spontaneously at the same time.
 - ii. Today is a normal practice in tribal churches, and in "concerts of prayer" for all to pray audibly at the same time.
 - iii. If the congregation is told all to praise God at the same time and the following situation may arise:
 - Some praise in their own language. Thus they edify themselves and their minds are also benefitted.
 - Some praise in tongues thus they edify themselves (**v.4**). If they also interpret or intersperse sentences of praise and thanksgiving in their own language, then their own mind will be benefitted, and more importantly, an inquirer standing by will be edified.

- Some, e.g. inquirer or unbeliever, are not able to take part actively. They will be edified if they are able to hear words of praise that they understand from those around them **(v.16-17)**

d. It would be too strong to say that the indications in a. above show conclusively that **v.13-17** are about congregation praising God together. However, it is clear that these verses address the name concerns that arise when the congregation praises God together, namely:

- The need for inquirers and unbelievers to be edified through the believers at a time when the believers' need to be edified is being met in their own personal praise to God **(v. 14-17)**
- The need for the mind to be benefitted of the one who praises in tongues **(v. 14,15)**

e. Conclusion:

If the congregation is told all to praise to God at the same time, then it's allowable for some to praise in their own language, some in tongues, and some silently provided that:

- There is no implication that prayer in tongues is better (see 1.3)
- An excessive proportion of the service time should not be devoted to this use of the gift (see 1.a.iii above)
- If someone prays in tongues then he should interpret, or intersperse sentences of praise in his own language, so that an inquirer nearby may be able to feel part of proceedings.

f. Other ways of interpreting **v. 13-17**

- It is natural to take **v. 13-17** together with v. 26-33 as a single block of regulation for the gift of tongues covering the use of the gift in the congregation, whether for personal edification, or for the edification of the church. While this should not be dogmatically dismissed, yet there are difficulties:
 - Point a.i. – a. viii. Above indicate a difference of emphasis between **v. 13-17** and **v. 26-33**.
 - The events of Acts 10:46 and Acts 2:4, 11 involving more than one person praising God in tongues at the same time, were not in order, if "one at a time" **v. 27** is meant to apply to this use of gift.

- The general principles c.i. and c.ii. above cannot be applied to prayer in tongues if “one at a time” (**v. 27**) is relevant in this context.
- ii. It is possible to claim that neither **v. 13 – 17 nor 26 – 33** is directly relevant to this use of the gift that hence Scripture has no clear regulation for this use of the gift.
- iii. **V. 14 – 15** probably relate to the use of the gift of tongues in private devotions. If so, the case is strengthened for interpreting the succeeding verses (**v. 16 – 17**) as relating to the use of the gift for personal edification in public worship.
- iv. Application of **verse. 23** to this use of the gift:
The focus of the words “everyone speaks in tongues” (**v 23**) is not on the simultaneity of their speaking but on the amount of the service time devoted to speaking in tongues, and on the lack of interpretation (or “interspersion”, see e.iii. above). If the main point of **v. 23** is that simultaneous speaking in tongues is harmful per se, then **v. 24** must mean, because of the connection between the verses, that simultaneous prophesying is beneficial. This would be in contradiction to **v. 31**. Accepting this, **v. 23** has no application to this use of the gift beyond points e.i – e.iii. above.

g. Summary of the argument of part II.B.2

It is possible that **v. 13 – 17** refers to the use of the gift in tongues for personal edification in public worship and that **v. 13** and **v. 15** suggests suitable ways of regulating the gift of this context. If so, the conclusion above (see e.) derives from these verses. However, this is not certain. An alternative approach is to begin from basic Scriptural principles about the congregation praying together (c.i and c.ii.) and about the need for all to be edified (**the principal concern of 1 Corinthians 14**).

By applying these logically to a congregation made up of believers, inquirers, and unbelievers the same conclusion (e. above) is reached. This way of reaching a conclusion is more satisfactory than other approaches (see f.i., f.ii. and f.iv. above).

3. Exercise the gifts for personal edification, in private (**v. 14, 15, 18**).
 - a. Regulation of the gifts in this context:

It is not clear that **v. 14, 15** are intended to regulate the use of the gift in private, since they are included in order to develop a point about the use of the gift in public. Therefore it seems better to conclude that Scripture has no clear regulation of the gift in this context. This makes sense, since the speaker is edifying himself, and since the danger of disorder in the church, or damage to the church, is not present. However:

- i. Discernment of the source of the gift should be sought (see I.4.d.)
- ii. The speaker should consider carefully, on a personal basis, whether **v. 13** and/or **v. 15** concerning the need for interpretation, or interspersion of his own language, should apply in this context.

C. Should the exercise of the gift of tongues in public worship be discouraged, based on **1 Corinthians 14: 18 – 19?**

- a. If **v. 18 – 19** are taken in isolation, and interpreted very literally, then any use of the gift of tongues in the congregation should be discouraged.
- b. However, this interpretation would contradict **v. 26** “all of these (including using tongues) must be done for the strengthening of the church”. In other words, the exercise of the gift of tongues, with interpretation, has a significant (though not indispensable) part in strengthening the church.
- c. Furthermore, consider the following verses where ***“thelo”*** is used in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 14:19 “But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words... than ten thousand words in tongue.” **1 Corinthians 7:7** “I wish that all men were as I am”, (i.e., unmarried)

Does **1 Corinthian 16:5** mean that everyone should speak in tongues?

This would contradict **1 Corinthians 12:30**. Does **1 Corinthians 7:7** mean it is undesirable for men to get married? This would contradict **Matthew 19:10-11**. The wisest way of interpreting these verses would seem to be to recognize an element of hyperbole.

- d. The Corinthians letters were written to church which was misusing and over-emphasizing the gift of tongues.
- e. All things considered, the following position appears to be faithful to the balance of Scripture, in relation to **1 Corinthians 14:13 – 19**.
 - i. The use of the gift of tongues in worship is not per se to be discouraged.
 - ii. Over emphasizing the gift of tongues, by giving it too great an importance, it to be avoided.
 - iii. It is not necessarily God's plan that in every church the gift of tongues should be exercised.

D. The heart of the pastoral problem in relation to speaking in tongues.

When there is discussion on this subject in a group containing both some who speak in tongues and some who do not, the following dynamics are often observable:

- a. Those who speak in tongue can be very enthusiastic about the advantages on speaking in tongues, and this can lead to unbiblical statements or implications. e.g.,
 - i. Exaggeration of the advantages of speaking in tongues (see I.3.b and c)
 - ii. Suggesting that everyone needs to speak in tongues.
- b. The ones who do not speak in tongues sometimes in reaction to the subject coming up but especially in reaction to over claiming on the part of the others, can become defensive about the depth and validity of their own Christian experience, which can then lead to unbiblical statements or implications, e.g.,
 - i. Speaking in tongues has no valid purpose
 - ii. Speaking in tongues (as simple generalization) is unhelpful to the speaker and unhelpful in the church.
- c. Those who speak in tongues, in reaction to the downgrading of the experience of speaking in tongues by the others, can feel disaffirmed or even rejected, which can lead to more generalized unbiblical statements or implications than in a e.g.,
 - i. Those who do not speak in tongues do not have the Spirit.

- ii. Those who do not speak in tongues have no power. Repercussions then continue and the end result is a mutual withdrawal of friendship and real communication.

- d. If the church leaders will address the negative reactions on both sides clearly from the biblical perspective, then good communication and understanding can be maintained in the congregation.