

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

(SB_1Cor12F_Tongues)

As I have noted previously in this series, the subject of “spiritual gifts” is one that is surrounded by a great deal of confusion. In my notes to date, I have proffered my understanding at present of this subject in as clear and succinct of a fashion as I possibly can. There are many questions that surround this subject that, due to time, and out of a desire to accommodate the greater needs of the audience to address a greater swath of Scripture and subject matter, I have not addressed the topic as fully as I might otherwise have done.

Nevertheless, in the way of introduction to the subject of the spiritual “gift” of “tongues,” I will repeat a small portion of the information from prior session notes.¹ The subject of the “transition” period, and one’s understanding of it, is a vital part of the framework for understanding and interpreting Scripture related to the subject of “spiritual gifts.”

As discussed in more detail in a prior session (see “*Temporary Versus Permanent Spiritual Gifts*” – session SB_12B), I believe that the “*transition*” period that we observe when reading the book of Acts reflects a *progressive understanding* on the part of believers (led by new revelation given to the Apostle Paul) of the Truths associated with the new dispensation.² The temporary suspension of God’s Jewish-centric program through the nation of Israel occurred at a definite point even though Jewish people who accepted Jesus as the Messiah continued to practice Jewish tradition and even if, on occasion, we see Paul observing a Jewish ritual such as circumcision or the keeping of a Nazarite vow – acts that Paul certainly did not see as required for salvation nor as being demanded by God as a part of the spiritual walk of the believer. Paul viewed them rightly as a non-essential.

The “Jewish Apostles” did not receive the truths relevant to the present intercalated age – except indirectly as Paul’s teaching and writings eventually circulated back to Jerusalem and to other areas where these Jewish Apostles ministered as well. Even then, Peter who might have spoken representatively for all twelve of the Jewish Apostles, states – “...*just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction*” (2 Pet 3:15b-16). (Notice that among other things, Peter indicates that Paul’s writings are on a par with the “*rest of the Scriptures*” and Peter admits that some of Paul’s teaching contains instruction that is “*hard to understand*”).

So, the position of ***The Church of the Servant King*** (as best as I understand the issues at present) in regards to the relationship between the “Jewish Apostles” and the intercalated Church Age Body of Christ is that these Twelve continued in their ministry based upon a Jewish-centric paradigm of understanding. Accordingly, they were boldly proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah Who had been crucified, but Who would be returning soon to establish His Messianic reign. That message was equally applicable to Gentiles since the Gentiles will be a part of the future, literal kingdom of God on earth. This explains the ministry of some of these men (e.g. Peter) among the Gentiles in a manner that was consistent with the so-called “Great Commission” (Matt 28:18). (The so-called “Great Commission” was specifically communicated to the Twelve by Jesus and had the anticipated Messianic Kingdom in view). As Paul continued his

¹ See the session notes labeled ‘SB_1Cor_chp12B’ through ‘SB_1Cor_chp12E’ for prior studies on this topic.

² See the chart below that illustrates this principle.

ministry and writing, then gradually, these Twelve became more and more exposed to the progressive unfolding of the new truths relevant to the present age. However, it is questionable, based upon the content of the non-Pauline epistles, that they ever fully grasped all of the content of Paul's teaching (e.g. 2 Pet 3:15b-16). Their letters reflect a commonality to principles true of the intercalated Church Age Body of Christ due largely to the fact that there is a commonality between the relationship and ministry of the Holy Spirit to believers of the intercalated age and the kingdom age.

Accordingly, there was a period immediately after the death, burial, resurrection of our Lord Jesus during which miraculous events and manifestations in and through certain believers occurred. Certain "sign gifts" accompanied the proclamation of the "gospel" during this period prior to the calling of the Apostle Paul – a gospel that identified Jesus as the Messiah of Israel Who had been crucified as a propitiatory sacrifice and resurrected and ascended as God the Father's validation of His person, His work, and His claims.

The signs and miracles documented in the book of Acts were designed to attend the presentation of the kingdom gospel during Israel's "last days" as prophesied in Scripture (Joel 2:28-32 cf. Acts 2:14-43). Eventually, as the rejection by Israel became full (the major theme of the book of Acts) and the gospel of grace was received with gladness by Gentiles, the transition to the new dispensation was completed and the signs and miracles associated with the kingdom-centric gospel ceased.

Paul documents this fact in such passages as 1 Corinthians 13:8. Eventually, during this Transition period, even Gentiles who accepted the grace gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ spoke in tongues (foreign languages) which served as a testimony to Jews that God was going directly to the Gentiles with a message of salvation and hope – a message that a repentant Israel should have been the agents to disseminate. Early in the Transition period, the conversion of the Samaritans by Philip (Acts 8: 8:5-7, 13-17) and the conversion of the Gentile Roman Centurion, Cornelius, by Peter (Acts 10: 3, 10-21, 43-48) would have been (and was) interpreted by the Jews as consistent with Gentile participation in the coming kingdom. Later, during the Transition period as the Jewish rejection was becoming fully realized, the sign gifts began to wane based upon Paul's testimony. So, the continuance of some of the spiritual "gifts" (mentioned by Paul in the passages we have noted) among the Gentiles during the course of his ministry among them would, according to my present understanding, have been for the purpose of using these "gifts" as a means to validate God's working amongst the Gentiles and as a means of conviction for the Jews.

Tongues

The gift of "tongues" was the supernatural ability to speak in language which was previously unknown to or unspoken by the speaker, but understood by the hearer. (I believe that this "sign gift" ceased at least by A.D. 70 if not several years prior).

The Greek word *glossa* refers to the literal tongue in such passages as Acts 2:26 and 1 Corinthians 14:9 among others **and** to a known "language" in such passages as Acts 2:6, 11 and Rom. 14:11 among others.³

26 'THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED;
MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE; (Acts 2:26)

9 So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. (1 Cor 14:9)

³ See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* by Walter Bauer, 162.

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. (Acts 2:6)

11 Cretans and Arabs--we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (Acts 2:11)

11For it is written,

"AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME,
AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD." (Rom 14:11)

Other Comments:

- Outside of Paul's teaching regarding the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28, 30; and 14:1-40, the only passages which document the function of the gift are found in Acts 2:1-13 (Pentecost), Acts 10:46 (cf. 11:15 which follows the conversion of Cornelius in 10:23ff esp. v. 46), and Acts 19:6 (conversion of some of John the Baptist's disciples).
- The passages in Acts do not explain the gift, nor is there any evidence that the experience was repeated by those who had part in these instances.
- Outside of 1 Corinthians, there is no exposition of the doctrine in any of the Epistles.
- Many will agree that the speaking in tongues in Acts consisted of known languages (see Acts 2:6, 8).
- Acts 11:15 expressly states that the phenomenon of speaking in tongues in Caesarea was similar to the experience at Pentecost.
- While no such statement is made regarding Acts 19, it would be arbitrary and strained exegesis to make a distinction between Acts 19 and the other passages when none is made in the text.
- However, there exists confusion as to whether the tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians is more akin to ecstatic utterances in which human language was not used and which would require the gift of interpretation to interpret.
- The use of identical terms in reference to speaking with tongues in Acts and in 1 Corinthians leaves no foundation for a distinction. In all passages, the same vocabulary is used.
- Therefore, to claim a distinction exists between the "tongues" of Acts and the "tongues" of 1 Corinthians must be based upon faulty exegesis and imperfect induction which can only mean *eisegesis*.
- In Acts 2, the 120 disciples gathered in the Upper Room were given the "gift of tongues." This manifestation of the gift of tongues served a dual purpose. It was a "sign" to the Jews (i.e. Peter's use of Joel 2:28-32 to explain the phenomenon as recorded in Acts 2:14ff) and it evidenced the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy regarding the "Comforter" which He prophesied in John 16. (Acts 2 is sometimes referred to as the Jewish Pentecost).
- In Acts 10, the gift of tongues served the purpose of confirming that Gentiles could accept the kingdom focused gospel on the same basis as the Jews and were equal recipients of the Holy Spirit as the Jewish converts – a fact and circumstance that will be fulfilled in finality during the "last days of the Age of Israel."
- In Acts 19, the experience served the purpose of using these "gifts" as a means to validate God's working amongst the Gentiles and as a means of conviction for the Jews (see introduction to this session's notes in the preceding paragraphs).
- In each case in Acts, the phenomenon was present only at the outset of the believer's expression of faith in Jesus as the subject of the gospel being proclaimed.
- The Acts is silent regarding any other similar instances that may have occurred during this transition period.
- In 1 Corinthians 12:10 & 28, speaking in tongues is mentioned last in a list of spiritual gifts.
- In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul discusses the worthlessness of spiritual gifts apart from love as a fruit of the Spirit. Also, tongues will cease per 1 Corinthians 13:8.
- This leaves unanswered the questions which surround the meaning of certain statements Paul makes in 1 Corinthians such as those found in 1 Corinthians 14:2 ("*...for no one*

understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries...) and 14:14 (*“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful”*).

- In these passages, Paul is addressing the use of the gift of tongues within the assembly in Corinth.
- The context highlights the thrust of Paul’s argument – an argument that if a believer were to speak in a language not known to those who were assembled, it would be of little benefit to anyone unless the person possessing the gift of the interpretation of tongues were also present.
- Furthermore, Paul argues that other spiritual gifts (i.e. prophesying or teaching) were to be pursued since they resulted in the edification of all.
- In 1 Corinthians 14, a number of important points are made regarding the use of tongues.
 - Tongues are declared inferior to prophecy as a means of edification, exhortation, and comfort in verses 1-12.
 - Tongues should not be used in an assembly unless an interpreter is present (verses 13-20).
 - Tongues are declared to be a sign to unbelievers (particularly Jews) in verses 21-22. See a further discussion of this point below.
 - However, if not done in order, tongues will fail to convince unbelievers (verse 23).
 - Prophecy is declared to be the greater gift used to edify believers (verses 24-25).
 - Tongues (and the gift of prophecy) should be regulated and used only when it will result in edification of the church in verses 26-38.
 - Speaking in tongues was not to be forbidden, but the gift of prophecy was superior and to be coveted (verse 39).
 - Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 14 is that gifts are for the edification of others. If believers who had speaking gifts such as prophecy and tongues were to speak at will in the local assembly, chaos would result. They could not be understood by others and the person speaking in tongues would only edify themselves (verses 3 & 4) without an interpreter present (verses 27 & 28). Furthermore, tongues were for the purpose of giving a message to unbelievers. If no unbeliever was present who understood the language being uttered, what benefit would the gift of tongues be to the body of believers assembled in the church who did not speak that language (verses 9 & 11)?

Distortions of the Gift:

It is apparent from 1 Corinthians that speaking with tongues by its very nature is susceptible to abuse. Some points in this regard could be beneficial to anyone encountering a tongues speaker today.

- Speaking in tongues was considered by Paul to be the least of all spiritual gifts. The prominence given to it by sects is non-Scriptural.
- It was never a test of salvation. Not all Christians possessed the gift, even in Apostolic times. The total lack of reference to the manifestation of the gift outside of Acts and 1 Corinthians implies that it was nonessential. If tongues were essential even as an outward sign of salvation, then it is inconceivable that it should not be given a prominent place in the plan of salvation. It is significant that neither the gospel of John nor Romans mentions it.
- Tongues was not an indication of spirituality. Of all the churches to whom Paul wrote, the Corinthian church manifested the most carnality, yet speaking in tongues was more evident here than in the other churches.

It is a matter of history that the tongues movement has not led in holiness of living, but rather has been guilty of all manner of excesses. Many godly men and women through the centuries have been entirely aloof from any experience of speaking in tongues.⁴

⁴ John Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 187.

- The baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues are separate phenomena. Every Christian is baptized by the Spirit per 1 Corinthians 12:13; however, not all Christians had the gift of tongues.

13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:13)

Interpretation of Tongues

Note: See the preceding discussion of the gift of Tongues for the purpose and use of this companion gift.