

Speaking in Tongues

Whenever we study any Bible topic, we must remember a cardinal rule in our research. The rule is called 'the law of first mention'. In order to gain a proper and correct interpretation of any subject, we must find its first reference, glean the meaning conveyed and then interpret all other passages on that topic in the light of its first mention.

This is very important in the light of the subject for this paper on the gift of tongues. The first mention of this phenomenal gift of the Spirit is found in Acts 2. The disciples were predominantly unlearned fishermen. At the Pentecostal season in Jerusalem, there were men from all over the Mediterranean world who spoke a number of different languages. The disciples had been commissioned by God to preach the gospel to every creature! Obviously, and clearly, God had given the command, but how to fulfill it was another thing. How could the disciples preach to people who couldn't understand their language? It was in this context that we first read of the gift of tongues or gift of foreign languages.

“And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.” Acts 2:4-11

The gift of tongues was specifically given to overcome a huge barrier in presenting the gospel. The gift of foreign language was given so that the barrier could be broken down and people could hear the good news about Christ and Him crucified! The Bible tells us how effective this gift of language was “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls.” Acts 2:41

The next major place where tongues are spoken of is in 1 Corinthians 14. Before analyzing this chapter, it must be noted that there were many problems in Corinth. There were those exalting various apostles (chapters 1-3), fornication (chapter 5), taking brethren to court (chapter 6), marital troubles (chapter 7), offering food to idols (chapter 8), and the resurrection (chapter 15). This is just to name some of the problems in Corinth. With the gift of tongues discussed so prominently in chapter 14, this was also a troublesome spot as well. Let us proceed to see what Paul says in this chapter.

“Follow after charity, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but rather that ye may prophesy. For he that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth *him*; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries. But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men *to edification*, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue *edifieth* himself; but he that prophesieth *edifieth* the church. I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater *is* he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive *edifying*.” 1 Corinthians 14: 1-5

Paul’s greatest concern was that church be uplifted or edified. When people come in speaking a foreign language and there is no one there to interpret, no one is helped. How can a person be blessed by the gift of tongues when no one understands the language being spoken? Paul exalts prophesying higher than tongues because people can understand prophecy in their own language!!

“Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them *is* without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh *shall be* a barbarian unto me. Even so ye,

forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual *gifts*, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. Wherefore let him that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue pray that he may interpret.” 1 Corinthians 14:6-13

There were those in Corinth who wanted everyone to see that they had the gift of foreign language. They would come to church and start speaking in foreign languages which no one understood. No one was blessed or edified by the gift because there was no one there to interpret the language. Paul tells those in Corinth, who are speaking in unknown languages, that their communication is like throwing words to the wind. How many times in my travels to the Philippines, South Korea, Egypt, Kenya, and Central America have the speakers sounded like they were babbling until some dear soul interpreted their speech for me!! How thankful I’ve been for interpreters as well who have interpreted my babbling for the natives!!! If no one can understand the language, then I sound like a babbler. If no one there can interpret, then be STILL!

“For if I pray in an *unknown* tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified. I thank my God; I speak with tongues more than ye all: Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that *by my voice* I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an *unknown* tongue.” 1 Corinthians 14:14-19

Paul goes to the simplest of situations- the giving of thanks for the meal. If Paul is offering grace and it is in a foreign language, how can those who don’t understand say Amen at the giving of the blessing? Paul declares his desire to speak five words that are understood in everyone’s language that others might be edified.

Paul sought to help the people in Corinth understand the proper use of the gift of foreign languages. He hoped that order and not confusion; understanding and not foolishness would prevail there. Without an interpreter, a different language helps and edifies no one. Paul hoped that the church of Corinth would use the gifts of the Holy Spirit to up build the church and not tear it down. He longed for harmony, edification, and mutual charity to reign!!

