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MINISTRIES

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Speaking in Tongues Part 1: Human Languages or Ecstatic Utterances?

The spiritual gift of “speaking in tongues” is a controversial and highly debated topic. Although the Bible mentions the phenomenon of speaking in tongues only a few times, opinions among Christians about the nature and purpose of this gift are numerous. In this series, we will examine what the Bible says about speaking in tongues and how it ought to function today.

This teaching is the first in a three-part series. In it, we will consider the *nature* of tongues. What does it *actually mean* to speak in tongues? Does the Bible describe speaking in tongues as “ecstatic utterances”? By this we mean the speaking of sounds that have no linguistic pattern or correspondence to any genuine human language. Or does speaking in tongues refer to the Spirit-enabled ability to speak human languages that the speaker had not previously learned? For example, this would mean that the Spirit empowers someone who only knows English to miraculously speak Japanese without ever having studied the language.

In the second teaching, we will consider the *function* of tongues. Is the gift of tongues still relevant today? Or was this gift intended *only* for a specific time in history for a particular purpose—namely, the initial launch of the Great Commission during the apostolic era? What is the purpose of speaking in tongues, and how should this spiritual gift operate—if it should operate at all?

Finally, in the third teaching, we will go through several frequently asked questions about speaking in tongues and share some thoughts in light of our conclusions from the first and second teachings. We will address questions like, “Is tongues-speaking a necessary sign of salvation?” “Is the miracle of tongues in Acts 2 meant to be understood as a reversal of the Tower of Babel incident?” And so forth.

Before we begin, we must stress that *the Scriptures* are to be our final authority for understanding the nature and function of tongues-speaking. Why bring this up? Because our denominational backgrounds, experiences, and traditions often shape how we view certain events and concepts in the Bible. We need to be careful not to read our religious traditions or personal experiences *into* the Scriptures. Instead, as best as we can, we must allow the biblical text to speak for itself.

The Meaning of “Tongues” (γλῶσσα)

A full lexicographical study of the term γλῶσσα (“tongues”) is beyond the scope of this teaching. However, it is worth noting at the outset that, according to scholars, this term by itself does not seem to indicate ecstatic utterances. Robert Gundry explains:

[T]hroughout the New Testament and Greek literature generally, *tongue* frequently refers to meaningful human speech, that is, language currently used by part of the human race. Although γλῶσσα could mean archaic or mysterious (e.g., oracular) expressions, to say that the word became a technical term for such expressions is an overstatement. The use of the term for understandable language far exceeds its use for obscure speech, especially in biblical Greek. According to the concordance of Hatch and Redpath, γλῶσσα occurs about thirty times in scattered places throughout the Septuagint in the sense of normal language. There are similar references in the New Testament. Outside of the passages in question (Acts, 1 Cor.) biblical Greek contains only two examples of γλῶσσα with the meaning of unintelligible speech—and in neither instance is ecstasy involved, but rather stammering (Isa. xxix. 24, xxxii. 4 LXX).

—Robert H. Gundry, “‘Ecstatic Utterance’ (N. E. B.)?” JTS 17 (1966), 299-300

What does this mean? Basically, there needs to be strong evidence if we are to believe that “tongues” in passages like 1 Corinthians 14 means something different from how the term is naturally understood everywhere else. It is not impossible that it means something different, but it seems unlikely. As Craig Keener writes:

Luke or Paul could have coined some term to describe an excited expression of language, or nonlinguistic, ecstatic babbling; but ‘languages’ (γλῶσσαί) would hardly be the appropriate one!

—Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 820-821

Again, although such lexicographical evidence might not be compelling in itself, at the least it is suggestive that Luke and Paul understood speaking in tongues to mean speaking human languages. Now we will explore if this understanding accurately fits what the Bible describes.

The Nature of Tongues-Speaking in Acts 2

Besides a brief mention in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:17), the Books of Acts and 1 Corinthians are the only places where the Bible describes “speaking in tongues.” A proper hermeneutical principle is to interpret obscure passages in light of clearer passages. As we will see, speaking in tongues is described very clearly in Acts 2, but it is not described so clearly in 1 Corinthians. Given the ambiguity of the passages in 1 Corinthians, we should use the clear description of speaking in tongues in Acts to shed light on what it means to speak in tongues in 1 Corinthians.

With that said, let’s begin our investigation in Acts 2:

Acts 2:1-11

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were

sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to **speak in other tongues** as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because **each one was hearing them speak in his own language**. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

In this passage, it is evident that the disciples were empowered by the Spirit to speak genuine human languages. As we can see, when the disciples were gathered to celebrate Pentecost—that is, Shavuot—the Holy Spirit enabled them to “speak in other tongues” (Acts 2:4). The narrative goes on to say that Jews from different parts of the world heard the disciples speak in their own languages (Acts 2:6, 8). The most straightforward reading of the text is that the disciples were supernaturally empowered to speak foreign languages without first having ever learned the languages. As Robert Gundry writes:

It could not be clearer that Luke here uses γλῶσσα [tongues] and διάλεκτος [languages] synonymously for the languages spoken in the countries from which the listeners had come—and the audience was amazed that uneducated Galilean Jews could speak languages foreign to themselves but understandable to non-Palestinians.

—Robert H. Gundry, “Ecstatic Utterance” (N.E.B.)?” *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., Vol. XVII, Pt. 2 (October 1966), 300

One might argue that these Jews from different parts of the world only *heard* in their own language what the disciples spoke. That is, the miracle in Acts 2 was not that of speaking but of *hearing*. Supposedly, as the argument goes, the disciples spoke in ecstatic utterances, not necessarily in any human language, but the Jews from all over the world *heard* them speaking in their own languages.

Although this is a popular argument, this reading of the text seems contrived since the passage plainly states that the disciples were empowered to “**speak in other tongues**” (Acts 2:4) and then goes on to say that the crowd heard them “speak” in their own languages (Acts 2:6). Moreover, verse 11 explicitly identifies “tongues” with human languages (Acts 2:11). The most natural way to read these verses is that the disciples were empowered to speak genuine human languages, which is what the crowd heard.

Additionally, the text is clear that the Holy Spirit’s power descended upon *the disciples*, not the crowd. Only the disciples are said to have been given some miraculous ability by the Spirit. As Shane Kraeger writes:

Some have argued that 2:6 should be interpreted as an audible miracle...however, to interpret the text in this way ignores Luke’s purpose in this narrative, namely, that *the disciples* will receive power from the Holy Spirit. One is hard-pressed to believe that the unbelievers would receive power, given Acts’ general context (the disciples receive power from the Holy Spirit to testify about Jesus Christ).

—Shane M. Kraeger, “Toward a Mediating Understanding of Tongues: A Historical and Exegetical Examination of Early Literature,” *Eleutheria* 1, [1] (October 2010), 50

It seems clear, then, that the miracle is that the disciples were empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak in languages that they had never learned. The text explicitly says they were “speaking” in other tongues, not just being heard in them. This is the most natural and straightforward way to read the text, while the alternative view seems forced.

However, some have argued that the mockers’ accusation of drunkenness in verse 13 supports the view that tongues are ecstatic utterances. Let’s take a look at the verse.

Acts 2:12-13

And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

As the argument goes, the mockers’ reaction makes sense if the disciples spoke in ecstatic utterances. Supposedly, unlike the Jews in verse 12, these mockers could only hear the ecstatic utterances, which sounded like gibberish to them. They were not empowered by the Spirit to hear the apostles’ words in their own language. That is why they accused the people speaking in tongues of being drunk.

However, this seems like a case of making too much out of too little. The mockers’ reaction does not necessarily mean that the disciples spoke in ecstatic utterances. More likely, they accused the disciples of being drunk because of how the disciples *were behaving* in that moment. Since the disciples were experiencing a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit and witnessing an incredible miracle, it is not unreasonable that they would be acting quite enthusiastically and joyfully. This behavior would invite mockery from those wishing to dismiss them. Philo, a first-century Jewish philosopher, describes believers being filled with religious exuberance and acting excitedly. Philo indicates that it was apparently common for mockers to accuse such believers of drunkenness:

But whatever soul is filled with grace is at once in a state of exultation, and delight, and dancing; for it becomes full of triumph, **so that it would appear to many of the uninitiated to be intoxicated, and agitated, and to be beside itself.** On which account it was said to it by a young boy, and that not by one only but by every one who was old enough for juvenile sauciness and for a readiness to mock at what is good, “**How long will you be drunk? Put an end to your wine-bibbing.**”

—Philo, *On Drunkenness* 146 (Translation by C. D. Yonge)

Additionally, the text does not say that the mockers could not hear what the disciples were saying. Their mockery could have been because they *did* hear what they were saying and thought it was crazy. This accusation in Acts 2:13 is similar to when Festus later accuses Paul of being “out of his mind” for his passionate speech before King Agrippa (Acts 26:24). Do we assume that Paul was speaking in ecstatic utterances because a mocker accused him of being out of his mind? Of course not. Nothing in the text itself suggests that Paul was speaking anything other than an ordinary human language. Why assume, then, that the disciples in Acts 2 were speaking in ecstatic utterances on the basis that mockers accused them of drunkenness? Again, since the surrounding context is clear that they were speaking real foreign languages, the accusation of drunkenness in Acts 2:13 is not enough to call into question what the rest of the passage explicitly states.

Thus, in Acts 2, speaking in tongues should be understood as the Spirit-enabled ability to speak other human languages without first having learned them.

The Nature of Tongues-Speaking in 1 Corinthians

The Book of Acts clearly describes speaking in tongues as the Spirit-enabled ability to speak languages that the speaker had not previously studied. However, 1 Corinthians does not give us such a clear description; it speaks of having an “interpreter” and of people speaking in tongues in order to “edify themselves,” and so forth. These apparent differences have led some to argue that Luke and Paul describe two different phenomena. They say that the Book of Acts describes human languages, but that 1 Corinthians describes ecstatic utterances.

However, does it really make sense that Luke and Paul describe two different things when they refer to speaking in tongues? Luke was Paul’s traveling companion, spent much time with Paul, and would have been familiar with Paul’s experiences and theology. It stands to reason that if these two writers are using the same terminology, then they are referring to the same experience. As Craig Keener remarks:

[I]t is virtually inconceivable that the two writers would independently coin the same obscure phrase for two entirely different phenomena.

—Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 813

Additionally, although there are apparent differences in how the gift functions in the two accounts, there are also many similar features. According to both Luke and Paul, the one who speaks in tongues is empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so (Acts 2:4; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Moreover, both accounts characterize tongues as a type of praise (Acts 10:46; 1 Corinthians 14:14-17). Finally, both accounts closely associate tongues with prophecy (Acts 19:6; 1 Corinthians 14). These similarities are not what we would expect if Luke and Paul were talking about different things.

Nevertheless, two passages in 1 Corinthians are often interpreted as describing tongues as ecstatic utterances. Those are 1 Corinthians 13:1, where Paul mentions the “tongues of angels,” and 1 Corinthians 14:2, where Paul characterizes tongues as uttering “mysteries in the Spirit” between the speaker and God.

Is there a way to harmonize these passages with the Book of Acts? Instead of ecstatic utterances, could Paul be describing tongues as the Spirit-enabled ability to speak other human languages in these passages as well? Let’s consider 1 Corinthians 13:1 first:

1 Corinthians 13:1

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

In this verse, some see Paul’s mention of the “tongues of angels” as a supposed reference to a heavenly, angelic language unknown to humans, but which manifests as ecstatic utterances when spoken by humans.

But does Paul really mean to imply that a person can speak in a literal angelic language? That seems unlikely. Rather, Paul is using hyperbole to make his point that love is to be prioritized above all else. Basically, Paul’s point is that even if he could speak in the greatest languages imaginable, but he lacks love, all his speaking is just obnoxious noise. The following verse confirms this interpretation:

1 Corinthians 13:2

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand **all** mysteries and **all** knowledge, and if I have **all** faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Here, Paul is clearly using hyperbole. Surely, he does not mean to suggest that someone with the gift of prophecy literally understands *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge. Similarly, Paul's reference to speaking in the tongues of angels should be understood as a hyperbolic statement. Eben de Jager provides an excellent summary of this point:

It seems strange that the verse is used as foundational to the establishment of a distinct language spoken by angels due to its hypothetic and hyperbolic nature. When this structure of hypothesis → hyperbole → lack of charity → resulting futility, is recognised, then the concept of tongues of angels can be seen for what it is, hyperbole, utilized to emphasise the supremacy of love, and not evidence of the existence of angelic languages as a gift to men.

—Eben de Jager, “An Evaluation of Speaking in Tongues as Angelic Language from the Judaean and Early Christian Perspectives,” *Conspectus*, Vol. 28 (2019), 52

Additionally, some scholars have argued that the phrase “tongues of angels” is not meant to indicate that the Corinthians believed their tongues-speaking was an unknown heavenly language at all. Instead, this phrase might simply mean the ability of one to speak *all human* languages. As Craig Keener writes:

Some have argued that Paul or the Corinthians believed their tongues-speech angelic (cf. *T. Job* 48-50), hence perhaps a sign of realized eschatology, or of participation in the heavenly liturgy...More likely, angelic speech merely reinforces the hyperbole of one able to speak “all” tongues (like one who knows everything or removes mountains, 13:2).

—Craig Keener, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 108

Now, some have pointed to a few early Jewish writings as evidence that the Judaisms of Paul's day believed in distinct angelic languages. Of particular interest here is the *Testament of Job*. In this writing, Job's daughters are described as receiving sashes from their father, which grants them the power to chant and sing in “an angelic language” (*Testament of Job* 48-50). It is argued that Paul's reference to the tongues of angels must have been influenced by this writing, which would suggest that Paul was referencing a genuine angelic language. However, as de Jager explains, this connection is overstated:

There are a few noteworthy arguments against the *Testament of Job* having had a major influence on the writing of Paul, if it had any influence at all. Firstly, many scholars have shown that the dating of the *Testament of Job* likely excludes it from being a document that could have existed or been in wide circulation at the time of Paul's writing the first epistle to the Corinthians. Forbes (1995:71–72), for example, argues that the *Testament of Job* (as well as the book *Acts of Paul*) used 1 Corinthians 13:1 as a source, which logically would imply that he is convinced that both these works were authored after 1 Corinthians. Secondly, if the *Testament of Job* is proved to have preceded Paul's writing, it must also be shown that Paul knew about its existence, and even then, that his reference to the languages of angels in 1 Corinthians 13:1 was influenced by it. Thirdly, the understanding of ‘angelic language’ as a distinct tongue in its own right does not seem to match the description of the *Testament of Job* which refers to an ‘angelic dialect’ with a ‘hymnic style of the angels’ (*T. Job* 48:3). The expression seems to convey a similarity to the language that Job's daughters spoke, rather than a singular, distinct, unrelated

language. The *Testament of Job* consistently used the term διάλεκτος while Paul uses the term γλῶσσα.

—Eben de Jager, “An Evaluation of Speaking in Tongues as Angelic Language from the Judaean and Early Christian Perspectives,” *Conspectus*, Vol. 28 (2019), 55

As we can see, the evidence is lacking that Paul’s reference to tongues of angels in 1 Corinthians 13:1 was influenced by writings like the *Testament of Job*. As de Jager points out, it is possible that this writing post-dates Paul’s letter. But even if it is earlier, there is no reason to think that Paul would have even known about this writing.

Also, significantly, even if Paul was referring to the same idea as the *Testament of Job*, the *Testament of Job* does not say that the “language of angels” was an ecstatic utterance. That is just an assumption that is made by people who already believe in ecstatic utterances, but there is no real justification for this assumption.

In light of these facts, it seems unlikely that Paul’s reference to the “tongues of angels” in 1 Corinthians 13:1 is meant to imply the existence of a literal angelic language that manifests as ecstatic utterances. In the context of the passage, the phrase might just refer to the ability to speak all human languages. In any case, given the hypothetical and hyperbolic nature of the text, the argument that this phrase supports the biblical legitimacy of ecstatic utterances is tenuous. As Christopher Forbes aptly puts it:

[T]he theory puts altogether too much weight on one flimsy exegetical peg.

—Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 62

Let’s move on to our next passage:

1 Corinthians 14:2

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.

Here, Paul characterizes speaking in tongues as uttering “mysteries in the Spirit.” Moreover, this mysterious speech is to be spoken between a person and God instead of between a person and other humans. The implication is that the tongues-speaker has no idea what he is saying, and neither does anyone else—except for those who are given the interpretation, whether that be the tongues-speaker himself or another interpreter. Thus, according to many, this verse seems to preclude the idea that tongues are genuine human languages but rather must be some kind of unintelligible speech.

However, is it actually the case that *nobody* understands the tongues being spoken in 1 Corinthians 14? That doesn’t seem to be the case since, elsewhere in this same chapter, Paul implies that the tongues-speaker himself *does* understand his own speech:

1 Corinthians 14:27-28

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.

Here, it seems that the tongues-speaker can silently speak in tongues *to himself* just as he can speak *to God*. Thus, it seems that these tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 *can* be spoken to other humans—namely, the tongues-speaker can speak in tongues *to himself*. We would usually assume that a speaker understands what he is saying to himself. We see this, for example, in Matthew 9:

Matthew 9:20-21

And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, **for she said to herself**, “If I only touch his garment, I will be made well.”

Additional evidence that the tongues-speaker understands his own speech can be found in verse 5:

1 Corinthians 14:5

Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, **unless someone interprets**, so that the church may be built up.

In this verse, the “someone” who interprets probably refers to the tongues-speaker himself. As the scholar Lynn Burton observes:

The most common view is that this pronoun refers to an unknown third part gifted in interpreting tongues. However, if this were the case, the Greek demands that a separate interpreter be identified elsewhere in the same text, as in v. 28, for instance, but no such individual is identified. One must therefore assume that the “he” [“someone,” ESV] refers to the tongues-speakers themselves.

—Lynn Burton, “Tongues in Corinth - The Case for Human Languages: A Study of Corinthians 12-14” (2010), *Theses Masters Research*, 247

Now, if the person speaking in tongues did not understand what he said, then how could he interpret it? If he is interpreting his own speech, that seems to indicate that he first spoke in one language, and then interpreted it in a different human language that the rest of the community could understand.

An argument against the idea that the tongues-speaker understands his own speech is the exhortation to pray for an interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:13). What is the point of this exhortation if the tongues-speaker is already speaking in a language he understands? Why does he need help interpreting if he already knows the interpretation?

But remember, the interpretation of tongues is for the benefit of the rest of the community who doesn’t understand what is being spoken (1 Corinthians 14:5). Also, “interpret” here is probably understood more precisely as “translate.” This is the same word used in Acts 9:36, where Luke gives the Greek translation of a name. Why is this significant? Because if someone has been gifted to speak in a language he hasn’t previously studied, even though he knows the language, it could still be a real challenge to meaningfully translate that language into another language so that others can understand. So, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that one would need the Holy Spirit’s help to meaningfully translate from one language into another.

Another challenge to this view is verses 14-15:

1 Corinthians 14:14-15

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

These verses are often seen as suggesting that the tongues-speaker does not know what he is saying because his mind is “unfruitful” as he prays in tongues. However, in the context of this chapter, “fruitfulness” or “unfruitfulness” relates to whether or not the community is built up. Fruitfulness is benefiting the community with one’s words. So, when Paul says “my mind is unfruitful,” what he means is that his mind—his *understanding*—has failed to produce fruit *in others* because nobody in the community knows the language he is speaking. As Bob Zerhusen puts it:

Modern scholars...come to 1 Corinthians 14:14 looking for Paul’s description of the language speaker’s psychological state in modern categories. Paul isn’t concerned about this anywhere in the chapter; his concern is the edification of the group. Therefore, 14:14 should be taken as “My spirit prays but my mind does not produce fruit [in others].” This says nothing about whether or not the speaker understood his own utterance.

—Bob Zerhusen, “The Problem Tongues in 1 Cor 14: A Reexamination,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27:4, 148

This seems to be confirmed in the next couple of verses:

1 Corinthians 14:16-17

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? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.

Again, Paul’s focus is on the community being built up. The tongues-speaker’s understanding will not produce fruit in others if nobody can understand what he is saying. It is the *other person* who does not know what is being said, and the *other person* who is not being built up. Since the speaker is being built up, this implies that the speaker *does* know what is being said.

So, as we see it, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is addressing a tongues-speaker who has been empowered to speak another language that he had not previously studied, like what we see in Acts 2. Unlike in Acts 2, however, there is nobody else present in the Corinthian congregation who understands the particular foreign language he has been empowered to speak. This is why the tongues are characterized as “mysterious.” It is not because they are ecstatic utterances but because nobody else understands the language being spoken.

Since nobody else understands the particular language spoken by the tongues-speaker, the speech does not build up the rest of the community. This is why Paul advises the tongues-speaker in this situation to speak to himself and to God, unless he (or someone else, v. 28) can interpret:

1 Corinthians 14:4-5

The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, **unless someone interprets**, so that the church may be built up.

If there is an interpretation of the tongues, the speech is no longer mysterious. When the tongues are translated, enabling the hearers to understand what is being said, the tongues then function as prophecy and the entire congregation is built up and encouraged by the prophecy. So, the contrast that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 14 is not between tongues and prophecy *per se*, but rather between *uninterpreted* tongues and *interpreted* tongues. Tongues that are interpreted, and which are thus understood by others in the community, function as prophecy. The one who speaks in uninterpreted tongues builds up only himself because he is the only one who understands what he is saying. But the one who speaks in interpreted tongues edifies the rest of the congregation.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, Paul continues to explain why uninterpreted languages are unedifying (1 Corinthians 14:6-19). If nobody else understands the language being spoken, they cannot be strengthened or encouraged by the speech. Thomas Schreiner provides a good summary of Paul's words:

If someone speaks in a language that no-one understands, the hearers are not helped. No-one knows the tune of a musical instrument if the notes are not played correctly (v. 7); and if the trumpet call is not clear, a nation will not prepare for war (v. 8). In the same way, those who speak in languages are just speaking into the air if no-one understands them (v. 9). Those speaking in foreign languages are completely incomprehensible if no-one understands the languages uttered (vv. 10–11). Thus believers should seek gifts that build up others (v. 12). Those who pray in tongues should pray for an interpretation so that others might understand what is being said (vv. 13–15); those listening cannot say 'Amen' to what is being said if they do not understand (vv. 16–17). Paul is thankful he has the gift of tongues, but it is far better to speak a few words that can be understood than thousands of words that are incomprehensible (vv. 18–19).

—Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, (2018), 290

As we can see, 1 Corinthians 14:2 is compatible with the view that speaking in tongues refers to speaking human languages.

Now, one could argue that it seems pointless for the Spirit to empower someone to speak in other languages if there is nobody else present who knows the language. However, this same argument can be used against the view that these tongues refers to ecstatic utterances. Why empower someone to speak in ecstatic utterances if there is nobody else present who knows what is being said? It would be no better to speak in an ecstatic utterance that no one understands than to speak in a human language that no one understands. So, the objection cuts both ways.

But, even so, it's still worth asking: what *would* be the point of speaking in a human language that nobody else understands? Why would somebody do this? Why would the Spirit empower somebody to do it? It is hard to say. But as we've argued, the tongues-speaker understands his own speech. Given that point, it may be that Paul is addressing *an abuse* of this gift. Perhaps this person who was spiritually enabled to speak in some language he had never previously studied is intentionally using this gift in an inappropriate context. Namely, he is speaking in this language that nobody else knows in order to show off or appear super spiritual, not to edify others. Perhaps that's what Paul intends when he says, "[The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself](#)" (1 Corinthians 14:4). He is abusing the gift of tongues for the purpose of making himself look awesome, rather than seeking to build up the community.

Consequently, Paul says that this type of speech is not edifying to anyone else, and the tongues-speaker either needs to translate so that others may benefit or keep quiet. This might explain some of the differences we see between Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14, and it would certainly fit the broader context of 1 Corinthians, where Paul emphasizes building up the community. So, that is one possibility to consider.

Another objection to tongues being human languages is that the purpose of speaking tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 is different than in Acts 2. In Acts 2, tongues-speaking is used for the purpose of evangelism. But in 1 Corinthians 14, tongues-speaking is used for praising God and for the edification of the tongues-speaker (and other believers, if there is an interpretation). However, human languages can be used both for evangelism and for praising God. Acts 10:44-48 and 19:1-7 reveal that tongues-speaking also functions as praise among believers. There is no reason to think that believers could not be edified in praising the Lord in a genuine human language that they had not previously studied.

In any case, in light of how tongues is described as human languages in Acts 2, we can reasonably assume that it means the same thing in 1 Corinthians. Admittedly, there are still some challenges to this interpretation—namely, it just seems strange that God would cause someone to speak in a human language that nobody else present knows. What would be the point of doing that? Also, why is an interpreter necessary in 1 Corinthians, but not necessary in Acts 2? We can speculate on these matters in our attempt to harmonize these accounts. But even though these questions may remain, as we have seen, 1 Corinthians 14 is compatible with the idea that tongues are human languages, and there is no compelling reason to doubt this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although not compelling on its own, scholars have noted that the lexicographical evidence demonstrates that γλῶσσα often refers to human languages, which is suggestive that Luke and Paul understood speaking in tongues to mean speaking human languages. This evidence coheres with the Book of Acts, which presents tongues-speaking as the Spirit-enabled ability to speak previously unlearned human languages. Acts 2 is an example of a clear passage describing the phenomenon of tongues-speaking, so other passages that are less clear should be read in light of Acts 2. The idea that the Bible describes two different types of tongues-speaking—one being human languages, and the other ecstatic utterances—is improbable considering the similar terminology and features found in the biblical accounts.

The “tongues of angels” in 1 Corinthians 13:1 is not meant to imply that the tongues-speaking of humans is a type of “heavenly language.” Rather, Paul is using hyperbole to make his point that even the most amazing tongues-speaking is nothing without love. It is possible that “tongues of angels” refers to the ability to speak all human languages. In any case, given the hypothetical and hyperbolic nature of the text, the argument that this phrase supports the biblical legitimacy of ecstatic utterances is tenuous. In 1 Corinthians 14:2, Paul does not imply that tongues are ecstatic utterances when he says that nobody understands what is being said; we would argue that what he means is that nobody else at Corinth understood the particular human languages being spoken. The different functions of tongues-speaking described in Acts and 1 Corinthians do not prove that the *nature* of tongues-speaking is different.

In the next teaching, we will discuss the *function* of tongues. Does this spiritual gift continue to play a role in the church today, and if so, how should believers operate in this gift? We’ll see you there!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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