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MINISTRIES

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Speaking in Tongues Part 2: Have Tongues Ceased?

The spiritual gift of “speaking in tongues” is a controversial and highly debated topic. In this series, we are examining what the Bible says about this phenomenon.

In the first teaching, we covered the nature of tongues. Today, we continue our study by looking into what the Bible says about the relevance of tongues-speaking for modern times. Does this spiritual gift continue to play a role in the church today, and if so, how should believers operate in this gift? The next teaching in this series will be an FAQ, where we will do our best to tie up any loose ends and share some concluding thoughts.

But before we begin our study today, here is a summary of what we discovered last time regarding the nature of tongues-speaking:

- The Greek word for “tongues,” γλῶσσα, usually refers to human languages.
- The idea that speaking in tongues means speaking human languages coheres well with the Book of Acts. Acts 2 presents tongues-speaking as the Spirit-enabled ability to speak previously unlearned human languages.
- Some argue that the miracle in Acts 2 is that the people heard the disciple’s words in a different language, not that the disciples were speaking a different language. But the text explicitly says that the disciples “began to speak in other tongues.”
- The accusation that the disciples were drunk in Acts 2 is likely a reference to their enthusiasm, not a reference to their speech. Acts 2 never says that the people who mocked them could not understand what they were saying.
- Since Acts 2 is an example of a clear passage describing the phenomenon of tongues-speaking, the passages that are less clear in 1 Corinthians 13-14 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 of this gift 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.” According to the context, Paul is using hyperbole to make a point. It’s possible that “tongues of angels” might mean the ability to speak *all human* languages.
- In 1 Corinthians 14:2, Paul does not imply that tongues are ecstatic utterances when he says that tongues are mysterious and that nobody understands what is being said. Paul is addressing *uninterpreted* tongues. If someone is speaking a language that none of the hearers can understand, they are essentially speaking only to God and themselves. But if there is an interpretation (translation) of the language so that others in the community besides the speaker can understand what is being said, the tongues are no longer mysterious.

After examining the relevant biblical passages, we conclude that tongues-speaking refers to the Spirit-enabled ability to speak human languages that the speaker had not previously studied. Based on this conclusion regarding what tongues-speaking actually *is*, we can now explore *how* this spiritual gift should operate.

But before we get there, we need to consider the idea that tongues-speaking may not be relevant today at all. Some argue that tongues-speaking was intended only for a specific time in history for a particular purpose. They say that tongues-speaking was necessary to launch the great commission and establish the Christian church, but now it is no longer necessary, so it no longer happens. Because this is a popular view, we will spend some time addressing it.

Have Tongues Ceased?

The idea that tongues-speaking is no longer for today is part of a broader theological doctrine known as cessationism. This doctrine teaches that certain spiritual gifts have “ceased” after the time of the original apostles, hence the name cessationism. Tongues-speaking is among the gifts that have supposedly ceased. Cessationists believe that the gifts of prophecy and healing have also ceased and are no longer practiced today. On the other side, you have continuationism, which teaches that these gifts continue today.

Cessationists usually give two reasons for why they believe that tongues and the other gifts have ceased. First, many have argued that tongues have ceased because “the perfect” has come, which they take to be referring to the completion of the New Testament canon. This is based on 1 Corinthians 13:8, which says that tongues will cease “[when the perfect comes](#).”

Second, many believe certain gifts were given only for the time of the original apostles, and so they passed away along with the apostles. Tongues served a purpose related to the original apostles’ ministry. Now, since there is no purpose for speaking in tongues, nobody speaks in tongues anymore.

Let’s consider the first argument that tongues have ceased because “the perfect” has come. Again, this argument is based on the following passage:

1 Corinthians 13:8-12

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So, Paul is clear that gifts such as tongues and prophecy will someday cease. The question before us is this: *when* will they cease? Have they already passed away, or will they pass away sometime in the future? The answer to that question comes down to how we interpret the phrase “[when the perfect comes](#)” (1 Corinthians 13:8). What does Paul mean by “the perfect”?

According to many cessationists, “the perfect” refers to the point in time when the canonization of Scripture was finalized. The canonization of the New Testament is seen as marking the arrival of God’s perfect and complete revelation of himself. Since the biblical canon is now complete and “the perfect” has come, some spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues have ceased. Now that we have God’s perfect revelation in the Scriptures, we no longer need to get God’s revelation through things like tongues or prophecy.

However, this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8 is unpersuasive. It seems highly unlikely that Paul conceived of a “New Testament canon” that would be established centuries later. Although other New Testament authors do equate Paul’s writings with “Scripture” (2 Peter 3:16), it is unclear that Paul himself thought of his own writings that way. To be sure, Paul believed that his message was revelation from God and authoritative (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 3:14). But did he ever imagine that his personal letter to, say, his friend Philemon, would be gathered together with other writings and canonized alongside what we call the Old Testament? There’s no indication that he did. The suggestion that Paul has in mind the close of the New Testament canon here seems fanciful.

But let’s suppose for the sake of argument that Paul *is* referring to the completion of the New Testament canon. Still, it is impossible to imagine that his original readers would have understood this. It seems that Paul would have needed to be much more explicit and provide additional explanation so his original readers could even begin to grasp what he is talking about. The text gives no indication that Paul’s readers had any frame of reference for a “New Testament canon,” and it strains credulity to think that they would interpret the vague expression “the perfect” as referring to such a thing. The Scriptures do not elsewhere equate “the perfect” to the biblical canon, so how could Paul’s original readers even conceive of such a notion without any explanation? And why would Paul casually reference something in his letter that his original readers would not have been able to understand?

Another problem with this interpretation is that it appears at odds with Paul’s statements regarding a “face-to-face” encounter and knowledge. According to Paul, we currently possess only partial knowledge, but when “the perfect comes,” we will know fully. The gift of tongues will cease at the same time that our partial knowledge does, at which point we will see God face-to-face and have full knowledge. The first problem with the cessationist view is that Scripture nowhere equates seeing God “face-to-face” with reading the Scriptures. Meeting God face-to-face always means encountering him directly, not through a written text (Genesis 32:30; Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 5:4; 34:10; Judges 6:22; Ezekiel 20:35).

Second, if the time “[when the perfect comes](#)” refers to the completion of the New Testament canon, that

would mean that every believer today who has access to a Bible no longer has only partial knowledge. However, the idea that every believer today already knows God fully as we are fully known seems obviously false. Nobody has complete knowledge of God, even though we have the biblical canon. As Craig Blomberg puts it:

After the Bible was completed, Christians did not see God “face to face” (only “face to book”!) or know him to the degree that he knew them.

—Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 260

So, if Paul is not referring to the completion of the biblical canon, what is the alternative? Well, Paul seems to be referencing the *eschaton*—that is, the time of Yeshua’s return, when God’s kingdom is fully established. *That* is what he means by “**when the perfect comes.**” It is then that we will see him face-to-face:

1 John 3:2

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that **when he appears** we shall be like him, because **we shall see him as he is.**

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. **They will see his face,** and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

In the world to come, when “the perfect” arrives, we will know fully and have a face-to-face encounter. Currently, our understanding is still incomplete. We are like children compared to who we will be and what we will know in the world to come. One day we will know. One day we will see. But that time has yet to arrive.

Now, if “the perfect” refers to the future coming of Messiah, and tongues will not cease until that future time, doesn’t this strongly imply that tongues have *not yet* ceased? If the gift of speaking in tongues will not end until the *eschaton*, then it stands to reason that it is still relevant in our present time.

Toward the beginning of his letter, it appears that Paul fully expected the “gifts” to continue to be relevant until the Messiah returned:

1 Corinthians 1:4-8

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua], that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—**so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua],** who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua].

Later in his letter, Paul writes that the spiritual gifts—including tongues—are given to the body “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7-12). He also commands his readers not to forbid speaking in tongues, but to operate in this gift decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:39-40). From Paul’s perspective, the Spirit working within the body and giving various gifts to individual members for the benefit of the church seems to be how he expects the church to function. Nowhere does the text indicate that these manifestations of the Spirit were only for a short time. It seems to be just assumed that they were to continue “as [we] wait for the revealing of our Lord [Messiah Yeshua].” We’re still waiting for that time to come!

Now, before we move on, it is worth noting that although the existence of the biblical canon does not do away with prophecies and tongues, prophecies and tongues are still subject to biblical oversight. That is to say, if Scripture and prophecy disagree, Scripture wins (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:15-22). So, the Scriptures should be held as a higher revelation than prophecy. But the fact that Scripture trumps prophecy does not imply that prophecy has no value, even though Scripture, the higher revelation, is in existence.

Now let’s consider the second reason that many cessationists give for believing that tongues have ceased. One common perspective is that the so-called “miraculous gifts,” which include speaking in tongues, were meant to validate the foundational ministry of the original apostles and help them establish the Christian church. Since the original apostles have completed their mission, these gifts have served their purpose and are no longer necessary. So, when the original apostles passed away, gifts like speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing passed away with them.

There are several problems with this idea. First, Scripture does not limit the use of spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, to only the apostles or those directly associated with them in their ministry. Paul assumes that regular believers can also have this ability and should not be prohibited from using it (1 Corinthians 14:39). Yeshua includes speaking in tongues as one of the signs that would accompany “those who believe,” meaning that *anyone who believes* could be given this ability, not just the apostles (Mark 16:17). This is in the context of the Great Commission. Are we to believe that the Great Commission ended at the time of the apostles, or are all believers to continue “proclaim[ing] the gospel to the whole creation” today (Mark 16:15)? Additionally, nowhere does Scripture say that the use of certain spiritual gifts was for the purpose of validating the apostles’ foundational ministry. This is something that cessationists just assume. In contrast, Paul *does* explicitly say that the gifts, including tongues, are for the general benefit of the believing community (1 Corinthians 12:7-12).

Beyond the biblical evidence, there are historical records that suggest some Christians practiced speaking in tongues well after the time of the original apostles. One example is Irenaeus, who wrote about believers speaking in various languages through the Spirit in the second century. Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. Here is what he writes:

In like manner we do also hear many brethren in the Church who possess prophetic gifts and who **through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages**, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God.

—Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1 (Translated by Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut)

We have a few other sources from the fourth to fifteenth century AD that provide evidence that some Christians were still being given the gift of tongues. One example is Pachomius, a fourth-century Christian monk who prayed for the ability to speak Greek and Latin to share the gospel with a prisoner,

and who reportedly received this ability after praying for 3 hours (“Of the Gift of Tongues which Pachomius received,” *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers, Vol. 1*, edited by E. A. Wallis Budge [London: Chatto & Windus, 1907], 307-308). Additionally, during the Middle Ages, a doctor from the University of Paris records an account of a Dominican monk who had the miraculous ability to speak in languages he did not previously know (Robert G. Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967), 18). If we accept these accounts, then the gift of tongues persisted even after the era of the original apostles and the formation of the New Testament canon.

In summary, Scripture teaches that gifts such as tongues and prophecy will not pass away until the *eschaton*—that is, until Yeshua returns at the end of the age. So, since that time has not yet come, it seems premature to say that the gift of tongues is entirely irrelevant today. Paul clearly assumes that regular believers operate in the gift of tongues and says that they should not be prohibited from doing so.

Historically, there are instances of Christians continuing to speak in tongues after the time of the apostles, so the idea that this gift was intended to pass away with the apostles conflicts with the historical evidence. Given this data, it is reasonable to conclude that tongues have not yet ceased. God can still give believers the gift of tongues to serve his purposes and to edify believers today.

What is the purpose of tongues?

If the gift of tongues is still relevant today, what is the purpose of this gift? There seems to be two main functions for this gift.

First, according to Acts 2, God gives some believers the ability to speak in tongues for the purpose of spreading the gospel. Prior to his ascension, Yeshua told his disciples this:

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Here we see that the purpose of the Spirit being poured out upon the disciples is so that they would be empowered to be witnesses for the Messiah. In Acts 2, this power manifests as the ability to speak in other languages that the disciples did not previously know. As the disciples proclaimed the mighty works of God in these languages, many foreign Jewish hearers who were present and knew those languages were able to hear and receive the gospel.

Second, according to 1 Corinthians 14, God gives some believers the ability to speak in tongues to edify believers. Paul says that tongues can be used to give praise and thanksgiving and provide insights or instruction for the benefit of the community (1 Corinthians 14:5-6, 9, 16-17, 26). As we have argued in part 1 of this study, this means that the hearers understand what is being said because they either know the language being spoken or an interpretation has been given. In this passage, Paul is primarily focused on the edification of the body and how tongues should be used to benefit others. Thus, the tongues-speaker should focus on loving others and sharing God’s word with them in a way that they will understand, not in a way that would make them more confused. If nobody present knows the language being spoken, and no interpretation is provided, then the tongues-speaker must speak to himself and to God for his own personal edification (1 Corinthians 14:2, 28).

So, we have seen that the purpose of tongues was to spread the gospel and edify believers. Since we

should still spread the gospel and seek to edify believers today, and the gift of tongues can help us do those things, then the gift of tongues is still relevant today. In light of this, how should those who have this gift today operate in it?

In light of Acts 2, we would expect that if a person has the gift of tongues today, then God has given them this gift for evangelistic purposes. Suppose a person has been supernaturally given the ability to speak in another language they never previously studied. In that case, they should look for opportunities to use that language to proclaim the mighty works of God to others who know that language. As it was with the disciples, it would be an amazing miracle and testament to God's power, validating the message for those who hear it:

Acts 2:7-8

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?"

Additionally, in accordance with Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14, if a person has the gift of tongues today, he can share the revelation given to him by God to edify others, provided that others present know the language being spoken or someone can interpret. Otherwise, the tongues-speaker can speak privately to himself and to God and be personally edified by God's revelation to him. If nobody else knows the particular language being spoken and there is no interpretation, there is nothing wrong with someone praising God in that language privately. God may miraculously give that person the translation of that language as he prays in private, which could then be shared publicly.

In conclusion, tongues will cease "when the perfect comes." We don't think "the perfect" is referring to the New Testament canon since neither Paul nor his original readers would have had any concept of a New Testament canon. Also, when "the perfect" comes, we will fully know God and see him face-to-face. But nobody fully knows God and sees him "face to face" even though we have the New Testament canon. A more natural interpretation is that "the perfect" refers to the time of Yeshua's return, when God's kingdom is fully established on earth.

Additionally, the idea that the gift of tongues passed away with the original apostles seems unlikely since Scripture assumes that regular believers would operate in this gift, and there is no textual indication that tongues would stop anytime soon. There are also examples in history of Christians speaking in tongues well after the time of the original apostles. Since Scripture indicates that tongues won't cease until the return of Messiah, and Christians continued to operate in this gift during the first century and beyond, it seems premature to say that the gift of tongues is entirely irrelevant today.

Believers who have the gift of tongues today could use this gift for evangelistic purposes. This gift could also be used for the edification of the community if someone else present knows the language or if an interpretation can be given. If nobody knows the language, the tongues-speaker can speak to himself and to God and be personally edified.

The next teaching in this series will focus on responding to your frequently asked questions about the gift of tongues. We will 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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