

PAUL AND TONGUE-SPEAKING

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Introduction

Our present day has been characterized by a resurgence of interest in "spiritual" things. Oriental mystical religions are "on the upswing" on college campuses. The practice of witchcraft and other pagan practices is increasing alarmingly. Pentecostal (perfectionist) groups are multiplying, and traditional "up-town" churches have been rocked by "Neo-Pentecostalism," the practice of *glossolalia* "speaking in tongues." Moreover, numerous movies and television programs have revolved around "demon possession" and "exorcism"--the casting out of demons.

In the present article we will examine briefly the Apostle Paul's teachings about "speaking in tongues." In subsequent articles attention will be given to "baptism in the Holy Spirit" and "exorcism." Unless stipulated otherwise, all citations from Scripture are the author's own translation.

This analysis is based upon Paul's discussion of tongue-speaking and the gift of tongues in I Corinthians 12-14. It is assumed that the well-known canon--that one should interpret obscure or difficult passages in the light of plain and clear Bible teachings--is appropriate here. Since only Acts and Mark--historical books--make the only other references to speaking in tongues, unquestionably Paul's developed discussion in a doctrinal epistle is the place to begin such a study. Although the Gospels and Acts were written with theological purposes, they are not doctrinal per se.

Working Hypothesis

Many Bible students (e.g., D. N. Jackson and W. J. Burgess) see in these passages references to foreign languages only. Others believe that tongue-speaking in I Corinthians is "ecstatic speaking" (e.g., *New English Bible* and probably *King James Version*). The hypothesis followed here, however, takes the "best" of both approaches: the New Testament gift of tongues was indeed foreign languages (Acts 2 :8, 11), but some Corinthians were practicing ecstatic speaking--a counterfeit gift of tongues. Those Corinthians were not **abusing** a spiritual gift; they did not have it! Paul was, therefore, combating a false practice. Apparently, that is the key to unlocking most of the problems inherent in interpreting Paul's argument. The following analysis, therefore, will proceed on that hypothesis. If the hypothesis agrees with Paul's statements--to the exclusion of the other two hypotheses--it should be considered true.

Spiritual Gifts and the Body

(I Corinthians 12)

Throughout the first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul is concerned with combating and correcting unethical practices. In dealing with those **practical** matters, he bases his arguments on scriptural and **theological** premises. Today, as then, much sinful living is the result of heretical beliefs. One of the greatest problems at Corinth was the lack of unity in the membership; division was characteristic of this church (see 1:10ff., 11:17ff.). With that schism in the background, Paul begins his discussion of spiritual gifts and the body.

Paul emphasizes in chapter 12 that God, through the Holy Spirit, places members in the body (church). and gives them various gifts (functions; see Romans 12:4) according to His will and purpose (I Corinthians 12:4, 11, 18, 28). He states that these gifts (functions) are "for the common good" (12:7; see also Ephesians 4:12, where Paul states that the gifts in the church are "for edification of the body of Christ"). No function of a human body (or gift in the church) is for the sole benefit of the individual member; it is "for the common good" (I Corinthians 12:12-27).

Following the analogy of a human body, Paul stresses that not everyone has the same gift or function:

Not all are teachers, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? . . . Not all speak in tongues, do they? (verses 29-30; compare with verses 19-26).

Significantly, tongue-speaking is given least emphasis on Paul's lists of gifts. (Only in I Corinthians does he refer to tongue-speaking as a gift; he omits it in his lists in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4). Indeed, Paul minimizes it as a gift.

In short, tongue-speaking is not a gift for everybody but only for those whom God intends! The Corinthians, however, had been "desiring" ("being zealous" or "being jealous") of "the greater gifts" (I Corinthians 12 :31). They were not happy with the way God had "set them in the body." They wanted a different function! The verb in verse 31 which is translated as a **command** in most versions (e.g., **King James**--"covet earnestly") apparently should be translated as a **declarative** sentence (present active indicative; the imperative and indicative forms are the same), and the **meaning** should be seen in a **bad** sense ("being jealous") rather than a **good** sense ("being zealous"). That verb is capable of either meaning. (See I Corinthians 13:4 and 14:12 for clear examples of the former meaning; admittedly, 14:1 and 39 use the word as commands.) Paul is **describing** what the Corinthians are doing; he is **not telling** them to do it (verse 31). He indeed says that he intends to show "a much more excellent way" (verse 31).

A Much More Excellent Way

(I Corinthians 13)

The "much more excellent way" which Paul stresses pertains to traits which every Christian should have: "faith, hope, love--these three; but love is **greatest** of these" (13 :13). See Galatians 5:22ff., where Paul lists a nine-fold "fruit" [singular] "of the spirit"--a fruit which every Christian must have.

"Tongues of the men" (foreign languages--the gift of tongues?) or "tongues of the angels" (ecstatic speaking?) are no good without love (I Corinthians 13:1). Apparently; the Corinthians in their schismatic state did not exercise love. Other gifts or deeds are worthless if love is absent (verses 2-3). "Love . . . is not jealous" (verse 4) ; **they** were, however (12 : 31 a, 14:12). "Love. . . does not seek its own things" (13 :5); but **they** had been. Love is a permanent trait (see Galatians 5:22-23), but prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are not (I Corinthians 13:8).

Indeed, maturity ("the perfect") does away with partiality of knowledge ("incompleteness," "immaturity," verse 10). Paul compares those gifts to immaturity (verses 9-12). "But faith, hope, love abide" (exist) "now" (emphatic, *nuni*) and will always exist (verse 13). Love is eternal; prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are not (verse 8). So, the "much more excellent way" pertains to permanent attributes which are already present--not to gifts which are temporal! Only the immature will miss the distinction. Paul says, "pursue love and be zealous of spiritual gifts" if you wish, but major on the best one--prophecy (14:1).

The Best Spiritual Gift

(I Corinthians 14)

In all of Paul's discussion in chapter 14, he seems to be describing language which was unintelligible to both **hearers** and **speakers**--i.e., ecstatic speaking. (See also 12:3; 13:1.) He sarcastically and satirically exposes the childishness of the Corinthian practice.

In the first section of chapter 14, Paul contrasts the Corinthian practice (ecstatic speaking) with the true gift of foreign languages, which actually became prophecy (verses 1-19). He argues that ecstatic speaking is to God--not to men (verses 2-4). As such, it edifies ("builds up") the speaker rather than the hearer (verse 4; see 13:4-5). Prophecy, however, does the opposite; it edifies the church (verses 4-6). The purpose of spiritual gifts is to edify the church (see 12:7; Ephesians 4 :12). If all spoke in tongues, Paul says, the problem would be settled. (Sarcasm? See 1:14 and 14:18, where he speaks in a similar tone!)

He follows this tack by illustrating with musical instruments (14:7-12). Just as the sound of musical instruments produces cacophony if a tune is not being played, "if I do not know not the meaning of the language (literally, "sound"), "I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me" (verse 12). Communication must take place. Paul concludes from this, therefore, that "thus even you [emphatic], since you are zealous [or jealous] of spiritual things [or gifts], seek [continually] for the edification of the church" (verse 12). That can be accomplished in two ways; (1) Let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret" (verse 13) so that his mind will not be "unfruitful" (verse 14). (2) **Paul** prays and sings "in the spirit" and "in the mind" (verse 15). In ecstatic speaking the mind is unfruitful. When the speaker uses mind and spirit, everyone else can say "amen" at the end of his blessing or prayer of thanksgiving (verses 16-19). This will edify others (verse 17). The true gift of tongues, therefore, becomes prophecy which edifies others.

"Grow Up, Corinthians"

Reflecting upon his earlier statements in chapter 13 about maturity (13:8-12), Paul instructs his readers to grow up: "Do not continue being children in your thinking, . . . but in thinking be mature people" (14:20). Ecstatic speaking is, therefore, immature--at least what the Corinthians had been doing was immature! Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12 (verse 21) to conclude that "the tongues are for a sign not to the ones who believe, but to the unbelievers" (verse 22). There he gives the purpose of tongues--they are for unbelieving **Jews**: "this people" who "will not listen to me" were Jews (verse 21). Prophecy is for believers.

There is an interesting background to the citation from Isaiah. Drunken priests had been filling God's tables with "filthy vomit" (Isaiah 28:1, 7-8) and had been uttering God's message in a drunken gibberish (verse 10). The Hebrew text of Isaiah 28:10 even sounds like drunken gibberish! Isaiah states, however, that God will use this as a sign of foreign-speaking invaders who would come as agents of God's wrath to punish His people. Is it not possible--if not probable--that those at Corinth who had been getting drunk at the

Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:21-22) were also speaking in a drunken gibberish and asserting that they had the gift of tongues?

In the following two verses Paul appears to contradict himself. Verse 22 says that **tongues** are a sign to **unbelievers** and **prophecy** to **believers**. Verses, 23 and 24, however, say the opposite: (1) Tongue-speaking will be a sign to **unbelievers** all right--a sign that the speakers "are mad" (verse 23)! That is not the purpose of signs. (2) Moreover, **prophecy** will also be a sign to an **unbeliever**, and he will worship God (verses 24-25). The solution to the difficulty probably lies in the suggestion that verse 22 refers to **Jews** (as the quotation from Isaiah shows) and that verses 23 ff. refer to Gentiles (*idiotai*, "unlearned"--KJV; "outsiders"--RSV; "ungifted"--NASB; "laymen," "untrained," "unskilled"--Gingrich). Signs are for Jews (I Corinthians 1:22; see Acts 2; 10:46, 11:18, where tongue-speaking is indeed a sign to Jews)! To Gentiles, however, they produce the wrong effect (I Corinthians 14:23). Since prophecy is for believer (verse 23) and unbeliever alike (verses 24- 25), prophecy is best for all--believer and unbeliever!

Instructions to Eliminate Confusion Caused by Ecstatic Speaking

Paul next gives some instructions about conducting worship in order to eliminate false *glossolalia* (I Corinthians 14:26-40). Under his plan, all will benefit from psalms, teaching, and revelation; and all this will "be for edification" (verse 26). That does not mean that everyone will do all of those things, but that all will be edified. He commands (verse 37) that no more than three should speak in tongues (the true gift) and only in order, or by turn: "**One**" (*heis*--not *tis*) **of these three men** is to interpret to the body. "But if **he** shall not be an interpreter, let him keep silent in church" (verse 28). This admonition appears in his earlier discussion (verses 13-19). Would God lead a man to act and speak contrary to His commandment here (verse 37)? Prophecy should be presented likewise; but the members are not to accept everything that is "palmed off" as prophecy. They are to judge the message (verse 29; see also I John 4:1). Perhaps the allusion at the beginning of chapter 12 to false spirits and what they say is in Paul's mind here (12:1-3). Is it possible that this ecstatic speaking was under the influence of evil spirits?

Paul emphasizes that this procedure will eliminate confusion (verses 33, 40). Indeed, God was not the author of the confusion which existed at Corinth!

Paul furthermore instructs that women are to keep silent at church, probably referring to both tongue-speaking and prophesying (verses 33-35). Possibly that procedure was to avoid any connection with the pagan religious practices at Corinth and other Gentile cities.

Although Paul does not forbid speaking at Corinth--indeed, true tongue-speaking becomes prophecy--apparently he gives rules to protect the church from confusion, factions, and false prophecy and ecstatic speaking (verse 39). He asserts sarcastically that

if anyone thinks that he is a prophet or spiritual, let him know that what things I write to you are a commandment of the Lord; but if anyone is ignorant [about this], let him be ignored [(or disregarded) as a prophet or as being spiritual (verses 37-38)].

Conclusion

The question is: Has the hypothesis of this essay been corroborated? Does Paul indeed describe and combat a pseudo-gift of tongues--ecstatic speaking? The answer seems to be affirmative for several reasons:

- (1) The true gift of tongues was foreign languages (see Acts 2:8, 11).
- (2) At Corinth the regulations stipulated by Paul are to eliminate a speech which no one could understand.
- (3) He is advocating and providing for an activity which would edify the church--the true purpose of spiritual gifts.
- (4) A true spiritual gift edifies the church; anything done to edify oneself (compare I Corinthians 13:5 with 14:4) is not of God.
- (5) God is not the author of confusion--things apparently were in a confused state at Corinth. God, therefore, was not the source or author of what they were doing.
- (6) Such a pseudo-gift would be expected at Corinth, a divided and carnal church.
- (7) Instead of expressly calling their practice a false gift, his sarcastic description of their tongue-speaking very ably exposed it for what it was. This is a very effective method. Besides, a direct charge of a false gift could be countered with the defense that Paul was ignorant of a real language being spoken.
- (8) Paul's instructions would for the most part permit only the real gift to be exercised. A further safe-guard would take place when the others judged critically what was said.

Probably the modern Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal movements are practicing what

Paul was combating at Corinth. In the next issue of *The Pastor's Quest* [i.e., Fall 1974] study will be made of "baptism in the Holy Spirit," especially as it relates to tongue-speaking. The position taken and set forth will be that spiritual gifts ended with the close of the apostolic age.

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