

The Gift of Tongues

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place, and suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs - we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God" (Acts 2:1-11).

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with understanding ... I thank my God I speak in tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue (I Corinthians 14:14-19).

Enough has been written on the controversial gift of tongues (Acts 2, I Corinthians 12-14) to fill multiple library shelves. We find godly men wholeheartedly endorsing this gift for today and other men of like godliness wholeheartedly rejecting this gift for today. Those endorsing this gift tend to fall into the error of experientialism (a form of mysticism or existentialism). Those rejecting this gift tend to fall into the error of intellectualism (doctrine without life). Some are in the middle ground (they seek sound doctrine in the context of the Word of God and an obedient life in the power of the Spirit of God) and I will confess that I am of such a tribe.

I will proceed to add my few "pennies" to the debate. I recognize that I do not have the last word on this subject and I probably never will, but I think a fresh revisit to the birth of the Holy Spirit in the Church (Acts 2) would do all of us well.

At the command of their Lord (Luke 24:46-53), one hundred and twenty believers waited in Jerusalem for the "promise of the Father" - a promise that the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms all proclaimed in terms of a renewed Israel in the Holy Spirit. These believers gathered together (as obedient Jews) daily in the Temple at Jerusalem. This physical temple, a symbol of the glory of God, was at this time a "twilight zone" between the Old Covenant and the New. The promised kingdom of God, the Age of Messiah, was soon to arrive in the once and for giving of the Holy Spirit to the body of Christ (John 14-16).

Fifty days after Passover came the feast of Pentecost (a celebration of the end of the agricultural harvest). On this day, a representation of the faithful would come to Jerusalem to thank God in an offering of two loaves of bread made with grain from that harvest (Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:15; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:10). The loaves were made with leaven (often a Biblical symbol of sin) and were dripping

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with oil (often a Biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit). Here is a picture in visual form of the union of the Holy Spirit with fallen man through the grace of God. Is not this the definitive characteristic of the body of Christ? This day was also the anniversary of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. Did not the prophets speak of a coming day in which God would write His holy laws on the hearts of His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34)?

On this final day of Pentecost (its fulfillment is in the Holy Spirit), Jews from the Dispersion (every synagogue sent a representative) were in Jerusalem. These men were distinguished in two matters: (1) They were devout followers of the Law of God and (2) they were multi-lingual - they not only spoke the language of their native land, but they were also conversant in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew.

By commandment of the Law, the one hundred and twenty fledgling believers were in the temple too (the services started at 6:00 AM). Around 9:00 AM, they went to Solomon's porch during a break in the liturgy. In our modern parlance, they were taking a "coffee break." Suddenly, all Jerusalem heard what would have sounded to us like the roar of an express train. Then what appeared to be a sheet of flame came from the heavens and landed individually on the one hundred and twenty. This activity of God should remind the Biblically literate of the thunder and lightnings that surrounded Mt. Sinai at the giving of the Law (Exodus 19:16). Those in Jerusalem who heard the noise and saw the flaming light rushed to the temple in fear of their lives. All of the one hundred and twenty were filled with the Holy Spirit of God and began speaking in languages that they had never learned.

What was happening at this moment of history? What was happening was a space-time event that will never happen again - it was the unique "birthday" of the Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father, who immersed the body of Christ in a new dimension of power and authority.¹ From this moment on, no believer in Christ would have to wait for the Holy Spirit to come (like the one hundred and twenty did). Everyone was expected to walk right into the realm of the Kingdom of God. This is what Peter proclaimed in Acts 2:38 - to enter into the kingdom of God, i.e., to receive the Holy Spirit, one must first repent and second be baptized. Biblically, repentance, water baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit are all *one* space-time event in the transference of the dead in sin who dwell in the kingdom of darkness into the new man in Christ via entrance into the kingdom of God (John 3:1-8; Colossians 1:13).²

Contra to the popular pontifications of my charismatic and pentecostal brethren, it was the Holy Spirit (not tongues) who came to earth on the day of Pentecost. With the gift of the Holy Spirit came the ability to express the deep yearnings of their spirit in a language they had never learned (NB. the one hundred and twenty were not looking for this gift or expecting it). To them, this language was as natural as saying "Praise the Lord." What were they speaking forth in these new tongues? New revelation from God? No.³ What they spoke forth was the "wonderful works of God" (cf. Psalms). All the Jews of the Dispersion, to their amazement, heard these wonderful works of God in their native tongue. They heard the message of the Scriptures, of the Creator God and His great works of creation. They heard of the covenant-keeping God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They heard of the God of Moses, who delivered His people from the bonds of Egypt and brought them into the land of Canaan. They heard of the God of holiness, who gave His law on Mt. Sinai. They heard of the God of justice, who judged the unfaithfulness of His people by dispersing them to the far lands. They heard of the God of restoration, who promised by the prophets a return to the land and the coming of the promised Messiah by the Spirit of God.

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And then Peter stood up, this time speaking in Aramaic (a language common to all), and explained that what the prophets promised had come to pass in the events of this day. He began by pronouncing “This is that” - i.e., this is what the prophet Joel had talked about - this is not “like” that; neither was this a “spiritual” that. This, the coming of the Holy Spirit to reside in God's people on earth, *is that*. The *last days* have come in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ - His birth of a Virgin, His life, His sufferings, His death, His resurrection, His ascension to the throne of David, His glorification. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit this day is the sign, the evidence, the proof, that Jesus the Messiah has been enthroned as *Lord over all* (Acts 2:33). Peter concluded the first New Covenant sermon with the command to his listeners to enter the kingdom of Messiah, to rise up with Christ into the new age of the Holy Spirit, by calling upon the name of the Lord through repentance and water baptism. Three thousand responded in faith that day, were baptized, and the Body of Christ commenced its victorious march beginning in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and eventually to the uttermost parts of the earth.

From that space-time event forward, the book of Acts records the early believers preaching the kingdom of God in the context of the finished work of Christ. What, then, is the sign that one has the Holy Spirit? Is it tongues? Is it an ecstatic, emotional experience? No. The sign that one has the Holy Spirit is that one proclaims (and cannot stop proclaiming) *the finished work of Christ*. The person of the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ - always has, always will. Anyone who claims to have the Holy Spirit and proceeds to make the edge (e.g., the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, healing, experiences, a certain doctrine or set of doctrines) the center does not properly understand the nature of the ministry of the Holy Spirit (nor the nature of the kingdom of God in Christ). The center, the focal point, the crux of the Holy Spirit's ministry is to magnify the person of Lord Jesus Christ. The proclamation and the application of *the Lordship of Christ* to the whole of life is the fruit that the Holy Spirit generates in a believer (Galatians 5:22-23). It is this focus and the power and authority behind that focus that turned the world of the first century “upside down” (Acts 17:6) or, better yet (to borrow a phrase from my mentor and friend, the late Dr. Glenn R. Martin), *right side up*.

What then of the public gift of tongues? Paul speaks much about it in I Corinthians 14. An exegesis of this passage can be summarized in two words: “Cool it!” Paul, a man who prayed frequently in tongues (in private), advised the church in Corinth to conduct their public worship services in decency and in order. “If you must speak in tongues in a public service,” he said, “then at the most only let two or three do it.” In other words, Paul said that if you want to do it, then follow some order and make sure that everyone can understand what is spoken. However, he preferred that they not do it. To Paul, the gift of tongues was a gift that edifies the believer in terms of the glorious works of God centered in the person and glories of Christ. This gift was a way for Paul to privately express his innermost being to God in worship in terms of the finished work of Christ overflowing through the living waters of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 47:1f; cf. John 7:37-39). It is important to note that Paul endeavored to pray with his understanding also. The context for the gifts of tongues in both Acts 2 and I Corinthians 14 is not new revelation, but the extolling of the mighty works of God in Christ - the works of creation, the works of providence, and the works of redemption.

In conclusion, my advice to the body of Christ concerning this gift is to practice charity (I Corinthians 13). To those who are fully convinced that this gift is not to be practiced, be charitable to those who believe and practice otherwise. Do not establish limits of fellowship (or church membership) on the basis of your doctrine on the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. To do so is to divide the body of Christ and even if you are right, to divide the body in a debate over an edge of truth is sin. To those who are fully

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convinced that this gift is to be practiced today, recognize that some of you have also divided the body of Christ by your tendency to separate believers into first and second-class citizens of the kingdom (i.e., those who “have the Spirit” and those who “apparently do not”). You need to repent of your condescending and judgmental attitude toward those who differ with you on the doctrine of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Never, ever commit the folly of making the manifestation of the Holy Spirit the center of truth. *Jesus is Lord. Amen.*

Endnotes:

¹ To understand what I mean by the unique birthday of the Holy Spirit, I presuppose the eternality of the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet, the Son had a “birthday,” a unique day in which He became incarnate in human flesh (Matthew 1; Luke 2; John 1:14, Galatians 4:4). Likewise, the Holy Spirit had a “birthday,” a unique day in which He, for the first time, came within and upon the body of Christ as proof of the glorification of God the Son (John 7:37-39).

² Throughout Church history, there has been a tendency, for a wide variety of reasons and good intentions, to separate this one event into two or three events. The New Testament states that the entrance into the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17), i.e., receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, comes through a conscious, intelligent, and rational “second thought” about the finished work of Christ (and one's independent “own way” in the context thereof) in conjunction with an immediate baptism in water (an outward testimony of inward repentance). This New Testament model is rarely applied today *no matter where you look* - Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Charismatic, Pentecostal, or Baptist.

³ Many of my reformed brethren tend to place the gift of tongues in the context of “revelation” or verbal gifts. This gift was verbal, no doubt about it. But, I challenge those who assume that this gift was the source of authoritative, canonical revelation from God. Contrariwise, the written apostolic testimony was the source of authoritative, canonical revelation, a final revelation fleshed out in the life and work of the Church in the first century (triumph in tribulation) in terms of the finished work of God in Christ (Hebrews 1:1).