

# Tongues And Their Interpretation

“To another divers kinds of tongues; and to another the interpretation of tongues ...” (1 Cor. 12:10b).

This is the fourth of four couplets in this list of spiritual gifts. It is number eight and nine and while there may be no significance in the order in which they appear, we shall, from the apostle’s comments and instructions in following chapters discern that the tongue gift was of less value, over all that the gift of prophecy. Nevertheless, the gift seemed to be the one most desired by brethren; yet the improper exercising of the gift had created no little problems in Corinth — jealousy on the part of those who did not have the gift, confusion and disorder from those who tried to speak at the same time, as well as a very negative reaction among unbelievers when it was exercised improperly.

We would be “jumping ahead” of ourselves were we to expand greatly with explanation about the gift; that dissertation properly belongs to chapter 14. Having said that, it is appropriate that something about the gift be said here because they are introduced at this juncture.

In the great commission to the apostles Jesus had promised that among the signs which would follow those who believed would be “they shall speak with new tongues” (Mk. 16:17-20). And, so they did — on Pentecost, Caesarea, Ephesus, and certainly at Corinth (Acts 2:1-4; 10:46; 19:6; 1 Cor. 14). So the promise of speaking in new tongues, while given to the apostles, was by no means confined to them because neither Cornelius’s household; the 12 at Ephesus nor Corinthian Christians were apostles and yet the evidence is compelling that in all three incidents tongues were spoken.

Through the ages people have been intrigued with the gift. The practice of “tongue speaking” is a hallmark in identifying those in the Pentecostal movement, although the practice among Pentecostals today would hardly be recognized in the first century church as true “tongue speaking”. None today (to my knowledge) claim to exercise the gift as it was first exercised: speaking in a language unknown to the speaker but known to his listeners. It is clear that men present at Pentecost understood the languages being spoken for when the apostles began to speak in “other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” men were astonished that unlearned and ignorant men should speak in a language they had not learned yet languages they, the listeners, could understand (Acts 2:1-4)! The astonishment of those Jews and devout men from every nation under heaven is expressed by these statements: “Behold, are not all these that speak, Galileans (i.e., unlearned,

ignorant men)? And how hear we every man in our own language wherein we were born? ... we hear them speaking in our tongues the might works of God. And they were all amazed, and were perplexed saying, what meaneth this?" (Acts 2:7-12).

As already noted; the general purpose of every spiritual gift was to "profit" withal, while there was a distinctive purpose for each gift. The tongue gift was to benefit everyone, yet specifically "tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to the unbelieving ..." (1 Cor. 14:22). The inappropriate use of the gift to speak in a language unlearned to an audience and to leave it uninterpreted would not convict unbelievers, it would rather cause them to conclude "ye are mad" (1 Cor. 14:23). Scoffers expressed their unbelief and disdain when the tongue gift was properly used at Pentecost (i.e., "they are filled with new wine," Acts 2:13). How much more would the cause be denigrated and mocked when those who spoke in a tongue no one understood did not take the trouble to interpret what they had said?

The gift "interpretation of tongues" needs little comment. The gift was exactly that: it interpreted to an audience what the tongue speaker had said when he had spoken in a language no one present understood. This was a marvel within itself, yet obviously did not have the "flare" that the tongue speaker had.

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