

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

TONGUES

One of the mistakes we can make in our understanding of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is that it is influenced more by experience than Biblical teaching. We have, I think already seen this with our understanding of the gifts of knowledge and prophecy and it is probably true of the gift of speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. We need to be careful to understand what the Bible actually says of these gifts, rather than what we would like it to say. Of all the gifts listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, the gift of speaking in tongues is probably the one that has caused most controversy. This was probably true in the church in Corinth too! Let me say at the beginning of this talk, that we do not need to be afraid of this gift. In fact, it can be a great blessing. Remember that all these gifts are given by God to his people, to help us in the “in between times.” They are all imperfect ways of knowing God, but they are given so that we might know him better.

So, what does Paul say about the gift of speaking in tongues. Well first, it is a divine gift – we must not forget that. It is therefore something that is supernatural. The word Paul uses that is translated “tongues” actually means language. So speaking in tongues is inspired language, and there are different kinds of tongues – different languages. So the gift of tongues is a divine ability which enables a person to speak in an unlearned and unintelligible language. Now there are different examples of this and we need to be clear what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians. You will remember that on the day of Pentecost, the disciples were suddenly able to speak in different languages or tongues. What we read in the text in Acts 2 is that they actually spoke in foreign languages. Those listening were able to hear the disciples speaking in their native language. What they spoke was unintelligible to the disciples who spoke it, but what they spoke was perfectly intelligible to those who were listening.

This is a wonderful example of the gift of speaking in tongues, but it is almost certainly not what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians, and here’s why!

Paul makes it clear that if someone speaks in tongues someone else must interpret it! (1 Corinthians 12 v 27) In Acts no interpretation was necessary – they all heard the disciples in their native language. Paul says he would rather speak five intelligible words, than ten thousand in tongues. Why? Because words spoken in tongues are useless if nobody understands them! Paul also says that if any non-believers hears people speaking in tongues, they’ll think everyone is mad (1 Corinthians 14 v 23). Why? Because they won’t be able to understand what is being said! So, what is Paul talking about in 1 Corinthians 12 since the gift of tongues is different to what happened in Acts?

For Paul the gift of tongues is the language of the angels. 1 Corinthians 13 v 1 says: “If I speak in human or angelic tongues.....” Human tongues – the example from Acts 2; angelic tongues – what Paul seems to be referring to in 1 Corinthians 12.

So for Paul the gift of speaking in different kinds of tongues is the divine ability to speak in the language of the angels. Friends, pause here for a moment and wonder at the thought of being able to join with the language of the angels! What a priceless gift! The priceless gift of participating on earth, here and now, in the heavenly worship of the angelic host. Perhaps here we get a glimpse of why Paul's desire is that everyone speaks in tongues. This means that, more than anything else, the gift of speaking in tongues is a gift of adoration.

1 Corinthians 14 v 2 says: "For those who speak in tongues do not speak to people, but to God. Indeed no-one understands them; they utter mysteries with their spirits." So the gift of tongues is essentially about worship. This is what distinguishes it from prophecy; the gift of prophecy is for, or to, the people. God speaks to his people through a prophecy. With the gift of tongues the people speak to God in worship and adoration. Now I'm not going to say a whole lot about the gift of interpretation of tongues, but very briefly there are some things that need to be said.

First – it is a gift that is very important. It is the only gift that cannot stand alone – it must go with the gift of tongues, and it therefore emphasises the importance of fellowship or interdependence. Interestingly, in 1 Corinthians 14 v 28, Paul says that if no-one with the gift of interpretation is present, those who speak in tongues should stay quiet! It is a very valuable gift. What is also important is the form any interpretation of a tongue will take. Since speaking in tongues is to God in worship and adoration, any interpretation will reflect that – it will be worship and adoration. Quite often when a public tongue has been spoken, the interpretation will come as an exhortation to the church – the people listening. But really that is prophecy! The interpretation of a tongue will be praise - usually heartfelt praise 'to God.' We should encourage those with the gift of interpretation, so that we can fully use the gifts God has graciously given to the church.

Now friends, handling the gift of tongues is crucial if we are to be blessed by it in the way God intended. Paul says he wishes that all of us speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14 v 5), but at the same time he seems almost ambivalent about it. It seems that in the Corinthian church there were those who thought that because they could speak in tongues they were more important than those who could not. Notice that this gift comes at the end of Paul's list – both at the beginning of chapter 12 and at the end of the chapter. This gift is simply not more important than any of the others, and friends if you think that it is somehow evidence of greater spirituality, or being closer to God, you are simply wrong. Paul is also very aware that this gift is open to ridicule from those visiting the Church. Interestingly in 1 Corinthians 14 v 20-25, he argues that witnessing others speaking tongues will not prove to them the presence of God in worship. Prophecy does that! It's more likely to leave them thinking we're nuts!

For Paul the gift of tongues is limited in public worship. It needs to have an interpretation – and if that is absent the gift has little value or benefit. This gift cannot, on its own, build up the church. One of the problems associated with this gift that Paul was very aware of, was that it could lead to chaotic worship if not handled maturely. This was a real problem in Corinth and needed to be addressed. The worship was in fact dishonouring to God because there appeared to be very little order, and God is a God of order! Many commentators think Paul was actually trying to suppress the use of this gift by what he wrote to the Corinthians. I don't think that's true. He certainly understood its value for the people of

God and the blessings it could bring, I think he was saying – you have this gift among you, use it – but use it well. Remember the primary function of all the gifts is the edifying of the church. In church then, Paul says, exercise this gift with care – just two or three people speak in tongues and have someone interpret so that everyone can share the blessing and join in the praise and worship.

Paul says there is another context for this gift and that is in private. Speaking in tongues can be a great blessing in your own times of worship and prayer. It helps develop a greater intimacy with God. Sometimes our own prayer and worship seem inadequate and our words are not enough to express our hearts. It may help give us a greater sense of the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and lives, and sometimes even singing in tongues can help us in our prayer life. 1 Corinthians 14 v 4 says: “Those who speak in tongues edify themselves” This gift can be of great benefit to you in your own growing walk with God. Paul implies that he often speaks in tongues himself and he encourages us to do the same.

Friends, I think there are two challenges: to those of us who are confident in exercising this gift our challenge is to be sensitive, in the context of the gathered community, to others around us who are not. If we use this gift well here, as we gather, it will be a powerful blessing to us. To those of us who don't speak in tongues, or perhaps don't want to, the challenge I think is not to dismiss the gift. It is after all a divine gift – given to be a blessing to the church and the individual. So, whatever your experience of this gift has been, I encourage you to seek God. Does everyone have the gift of tongues? – NO! But Paul does seem to encourage us all to ask for this gift.

Now, this series has the title ‘The Extraordinary in the Ordinary,’ God's extraordinary gifts to ordinary people. My desire through this series, has and is, that we will see more of the extraordinary in the ordinary in this gathered community. That as we take hold of all that God has given to us, in and through one another, we might be built up; built up into a community that reflects more and more who God is, so that others will be drawn to Christ through his people. Amen.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 27th July 2008 by Rev. Ian Phillips.