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Bridgeway Church
Life in the Spirit #12

Sermon Summary #12

Tongues: Praying and Praising in the Spirit (1) Acts 2:1-8,11b; 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

My first encounter with the gifts of the Spirit came when I was nineteen years old. In the summer of 1970, after my freshman year at the University of Oklahoma I was living in Lake Tahoe, Nevada, serving with Campus Crusade for Christ on an evangelistic project. We spent the summer witnessing to those who visited the beaches and casinos.

I pumped gas in a Shell station. There wasn't much excitement in that, except for Fridays, when the motorcycle gangs from Sacramento and San Francisco would descend upon that resort city. Their first stop upon entering the outskirts of Tahoe was to fill up at my service station. I thank God for the courage and opportunity to share the gospel with a few of them before the summer ended.

My perspective on the church and Christians as a whole was soundly shaken that summer. This was due, in no small measure, to a visit I made to the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. You must remember that this was the late spring, early summer of 1970. It was a time of hippies, the Viet Nam War and its protestors, hallucinogenic drugs, and the emergence of what came to be known as the Jesus movement. While in Berkeley I spent a couple of days with those who called themselves the Christian World Liberation Front, or CWLF. Let me assure you that nothing in my nineteen years as a Southern Baptist from Oklahoma prepared me for the radical, off-beat approach to Christianity that I encountered there! Although my exposure to the CWLF was brief, I was challenged in a positive way to be a bit more open and tolerant of those who worshiped and lived out their life in Jesus in ways that differed from my own.

Toward the end of that summer I attended a meeting at which Harald Bredesen, one of the early leaders of the charismatic movement, was scheduled to speak. In the course of the evening he mentioned a book by John Sherrill entitled *They Speak with Other Tongues*. The story he told of Sherrill's experience wasn't even remotely similar to my life in God. But he had my attention. I obtained a copy and read it immediately.

The issue of speaking in tongues soon became a focus of study for me. As my time of ministry in the beautiful Rocky Mountains concluded, I returned to the University of Oklahoma to continue my studies as a sophomore. During this time I began to pray earnestly that, if the gift were real, God would give it to me. I wasn't exactly sure what I was praying for. Nevertheless, for several weeks I spent each night in a secluded area near my fraternity house pleading with God for some indication of his will for me concerning this gift.

I can't say that I ever expected anything to happen. My skepticism toward spiritual gifts like tongues was deep-seated and pervasive. Having been raised for twenty years in Southern Baptist churches, speaking in tongues was rarely mentioned, and only then with scorn and disdain. One thing is certain: I was not "primed", so to speak, either psychologically or spiritually, for what eventually happened.

One night in October of 1970, quite without warning, my normal, somewhat routine, prayer was radically interrupted. I suddenly began speaking forth words of uncertain sound and form. I didn't start out by consciously muttering a few senseless syllables which then gave way to a more coherent linguistic experience. It was more like a spiritual invasion in which the Spirit intruded on my life, interrupted my speech patterns and "gave utterance" (Acts 2:4).

There was a profound intensification of my sense of God's nearness and power. I distinctly remember feeling a somewhat detached sensation, as if I were separate from the one speaking. I had never experienced anything remotely similar to that in all my life. While this linguistic flood continued to pour forth I kept thinking to myself, "Sam, what are you saying? Are you speaking in tongues?" It was the first time I had ever experienced the sensation of *thinking* in one language while *speaking* in another.

My reaction to something so unfamiliar and new was a strange mixture of both fear and exhilaration. I don't recall precisely how long it lasted, but it couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes. I was confused, but at the same time felt closer to God than ever before. At the time I didn't have theological categories to describe what happened. In hindsight, I'm more inclined to view it as a powerful filling of the Holy Spirit rather than Spirit baptism (although I'm open to being convinced otherwise). Having said that, I must confess that when I look for words to describe it the only thing that comes to mind is immersion and saturation, a sense of being inundated or flooded with the presence of God.

Those who've had a similar experience know why I struggle to describe what happened. My relationship with God to that point had been largely, if not entirely, intellectual. I'm not questioning the reality of my salvation. I'm simply saying that aside from a few emotional moments in church as a young boy, I had no tangible awareness of a dimension of reality beyond what I could encounter through the five senses. But on the night in question it was as though the veil that separated my being from the being of God was lifted. My spirit was engulfed by the Spirit of God. Neither before nor since that day have I felt so directly, empirically, and undeniably in touch with the realm of the supernatural.

I returned to my fraternity house filled with excitement and called a friend who was on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ. I didn't tell him what had happened; only that I needed to speak with him immediately. Thirty minutes later I sat down in his car and said, "You'll never guess what happened tonight."

"You spoke in tongues, didn't you?" he asked, almost deadpan.

"Yes! How did you know? It was great. But I don't understand what it means."

This man cared deeply for me and had no intention of offending me or obstructing my Christian growth. But what he said next affected me for years to come.

"Sam, you do realize, don't you, that you will have to resign your position as student leader and give up any hope of joining staff when you graduate. Campus Crusade doesn't permit people who speak in tongues to hold positions of authority. Of course, if you don't do it again, there's no need for us to tell anyone. Everything can be the same as it was before." [My understanding is that Campus Crusade for Christ reversed their policy on spiritual gifts several years ago.]

I was crushed. I remember feebly and fearfully trying to speak in tongues the next night, but nothing happened. Not wanting to forfeit my position in the ministry on campus, I concluded that it must have been something other than the Holy Spirit. I never thought it was demonic, although many of my friends did. I explained it away as a momentary emotional outburst that I'd be better off forgetting. I rarely spoke of the incident in the years following, fearful of the disdain of my friends who looked with suspicion on anyone remotely associated with or showing interest in the gift of tongues. Needless to say, I didn't speak in tongues again for twenty years!

I think it's important to point out that deep within I always knew that the experience was a genuine encounter with the Spirit of God. My agreement with those who explained it (away) by appealing to psychological factors was prompted less by conviction than by my fear of incurring their ridicule or, worse still, losing their friendship. I also believe that my attempt to write it off as a momentary, one-time phenomenon, better left in the past, was offensive to God and a clear instance of quenching the Holy Spirit.

More than twenty years later, in November of 1990 I attended a theology conference in New Orleans and spent time with Jack Deere, a close friend and former classmate at Dallas Seminary. Jack is the author of *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* and *Surprised by the Voice of God* (Zondervan), both excellent biblical

refutations of cessationism. Jack taught Old Testament and Hebrew at Dallas for twelve years before being dismissed because of his embrace of continuationism. At the time of our visit in New Orleans he was serving as an associate of John Wimber at the Anaheim Vineyard in California.

I shared with him my journey and told him about what had happened back in the fall of 1970, hoping to gain additional insight into the nature of my experience and what God's will for me might be. He then reminded me of something the apostle Paul said to young Timothy: "***For this reason I remind you to fan into flame ["kindle afresh"; NASB] the gift of God which is in you through the laying on my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6)***. Jack then laid hands on me and asked the Lord to kindle afresh in me this gift he had bestowed so many years before.

This verse in 2 Timothy is important. It tells us that one may receive a spiritual gift only to neglect and ignore it. The imagery Paul uses is helpful. He describes a spiritual gift in terms of a flame that needs to be continually fanned. If it is not understood and nurtured and utilized in the way God intended, the once brightly burning flame can be reduced to a smoldering ember. "Take whatever steps you must: study, pray, seek God's face, put it into practice, but by all means stoke the fire until that gift returns to its original intensity."

I took Paul's advice to Timothy and applied it to my own case. Every day, if only for a few minutes, I prayed that God would renew what he had given but I had quenched. I prayed that, if it were his will, I would once more be able to pray in the Spirit, to speak that heavenly language that would praise and thank and bless him (1 Cor. 14:2,16,17). I didn't wait for some sort of divine seizure, but in faith began simply to speak forth the syllables and words that he brought to mind.

Some 21 years have now passed since God renewed his precious gift in my life. Praying in the Spirit is by no means the most important gift. Neither is it a sign of a spirituality or maturity greater than that of those who don't have this particular gift. But if no less a man than the Apostle Paul can say, "I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all" (1 Cor. 14:18), who am I to despise this blessed gift of God?

Contrary to the caricatures that many have of this gift, it has served only to enhance and deepen my relationship with the Lord Jesus. Believe it or not, I can still tie my shoelaces, balance my checkbook, drive a car, hold down a job, and I rarely ever drool! I don't mean to be sarcastic, but this particular gift of the Spirit has a terrible public image. For me to reveal to you that I speak in tongues is to run the risk of being perceived as a mindless, spiritually flabby fanatic who periodically mumbles while in a convulsive or hypnotic trance. I can't do much about that, except to encourage you to search the Scriptures, seek the face of God, and join with me in this message and the next one as we explore this controversial topic.

This is a massive subject that can't be covered in one sermon. What I propose to do is approach the topic by asking several questions that people typically pose and then providing what I hope are biblical answers. So let's get started.

(1) Was tongues-speech at Pentecost (Acts 2) the supernatural ability to utter real human languages not previously known or studied by the speaker? In my opinion, Yes, as we are told that the visitors in Jerusalem (for Passover) heard these uneducated Galileans speaking in their own native language (vv. 5-8). Also observe the terms used: *glossa* (either the physical organ of the "tongue" or "language") and *dialekto* (vv. 6, 8; cf. Acts 1:19; 21:40; 22:2; 26:14).

Others insist that this was "not the hearing *of* one's own language but the hearing *in* one's own language. Such being the case, at the same moment that 'other tongues' were spoken through the Holy Spirit, they were immediately translated by the same Holy Spirit into the many languages of the multitude" (J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 2:215). Thus, Williams argues that there is *both* a miracle of "speech"—other, different, spiritual tongues—and a miracle of "understanding," each facilitated by the Holy Spirit.

If this view is correct, a miraculous *charisma* of the Holy Spirit (namely, the gift of interpretation) was given to every *unbeliever* present on the day of Pentecost. But as D.A. Carson points out, it is Luke's

purpose “to associate the descent of the Spirit with the Spirit’s activity *among the believers*, not to postulate a miracle of the Spirit *among those who were still unbelievers*” (*Showing the Spirit*, 138). Or, as Max Turner puts it, surely Luke “would not wish to suggest that the apostolic band merely prattled incomprehensibly, while God worked the yet greater miracle of interpretation of tongues in the unbelievers” (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now*, 223).

(2) Are tongues evangelistic? Here’s what I mean by that question. Many cessationists argue that tongues were given so that Christians might speak the gospel in the language of the unsaved. Tongues, therefore, is primarily an evangelistic tool.

However, there is no evidence that tongues-speech in Acts 2 (or elsewhere) served an evangelistic purpose. According to Acts 2:11, the content of tongues-speech was “*the mighty works of God*” (observe the same phrase in Acts 10:46 and 19:17). The people don’t hear an evangelistic message but **doxology**. It is only Peter’s *preaching* that brings salvation. Thus, here as elsewhere, we see that the primary purpose of tongues-speech is **address to God** (whether it be in praise or prayer; cf. 1 Cor. 14:2, 14).

What about Acts 10 where the Gentile Cornelius and his companions speak in tongues? Here once again (see also 11:15-17 and Acts 19) tongues-speech does not communicate the gospel to unbelievers. In fact, there weren’t any unbelievers present! Rather, tongues in Acts 10 accomplished two purposes. First, it attested or bore witness to the Jerusalem church (and thus to Jewish believers) that Gentiles may be admitted to the church without first becoming Jews and placing themselves under the Mosaic Law. Second, we note again that speaking in tongues here is a form of **praise** (v. 46), exalting and magnifying God. Far from questioning the sanity or stability of these believing Gentiles, Peter concludes from what happened that they are saved and thus eligible to be baptized in water no less than had it been a Jew who accepted Jesus (v. 47).

The only other occurrence of tongues in Acts is found in Acts 19 where disciples of John the Baptist praise God in tongues following their conversion and baptism in water.

Thus, in Acts, **some but not all** who receive Christ as savior speak in tongues immediately upon their conversion. There are several instances of conversion in Acts where no mention is made of speaking in tongues (see Acts 2:37-42; 8:26-40; 9:1-19; 13:44-52; 16:11-15; 16:25-34; 17:1-33; 18:1-11). This doesn’t prove they didn’t. But neither should one conclude that they did.

Moreover, only in Acts 2 are tongues explicitly said to be human languages not previously learned by the speaker (more on this later). Furthermore, nowhere in Acts did speaking in tongues function directly as an evangelistic tool, nor do we ever find an apostolic exhortation that it be used for that purpose. At most, tongues *may* be viewed as a form of pre-evangelism.

It is not tongues, however, but **preaching** that brings the gospel to those who are saved. *Significantly, in the three explicit references to tongues in Acts, only once (Acts 2) are unbelievers present. If, as the cessationist argues, tongues were primarily an evangelistic sign-gift for unbelieving Jews, why is it that in two of its three occurrences in Acts only believers are present?* I’ll return to this point below.

(3) Are tongues always human languages? Cessationists typically say Yes. They point to the fact that several scientific studies have been conducted in which the tongues speech of charismatics has been analyzed. The conclusion of such studies is that rarely if ever is tongues speech on the part of modern day charismatics human languages, such as Russian or Mandarin or Swahili.

Since the tongues speech in Acts 2 was certainly genuine human languages and since the tongues speech of today appears not to be, their conclusion is that tongues is no longer a valid gift for the church and what charismatics claim to experience is a delusion, perhaps even demonic.

I’m not persuaded by this. As noted above, Acts 2 is the only text in the NT where tongues-speech consists of foreign languages not previously known by the speaker. But there is no reason to think Acts 2, rather

than, say, 1 Corinthians 14, is the standard by which all occurrences of tongues-speech must be judged. Other factors suggest that tongues could also be heavenly or angelic speech.

To begin, if tongues-speech is always in a foreign language intended as a sign for unbelievers, why are the tongues in Acts 10 and Acts 19 spoken in the presence of *only believers*?

Note also that Paul describes various "kinds [or "species"] of tongues" (*gene glosson*) in 1 Cor. 12:10. It is unlikely that he means a variety of different human languages, for who would have argued that all tongues were only one human language, such as Greek or Hebrew or German? His words suggest that there are differing categories of tongues-speech, perhaps human languages and heavenly languages.

In 1 Cor. 14:2, Paul asserts that whoever speaks in a tongue speaks "***not to men but to God.***" But if tongues are always human languages, Paul is in error, for "speaking to men" is precisely what human language does! Again, in 1 Cor. 14:2, he says that when one speaks in a tongue "***no one understands him.***" But if tongues-speech is invariably a human language, *many* would understand, as they did on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:8-11). This would especially be true in Corinth, a multi-lingual cosmopolitan port city that was frequented by people of numerous dialects.

Moreover, if tongues-speech is always a human language, then the gift of interpretation would be one for which no special work or enablement or manifestation of the Spirit would be required. Anyone who was multi-lingual, such as Paul, could interpret tongues-speech simply by virtue of his educational talent.

Furthermore, in 1 Cor. 13:1, Paul refers to "***the tongues of men and of angels.***" While he may be using hyperbole, he just as likely may be referring to heavenly or angelic dialects for which the Holy Spirit gives utterance.

Some say the reference in 1 Cor. 14:10-11 to earthly, foreign languages proves that all tongues-speech is also human languages. But the point of the analogy is that tongues function *like* foreign languages, *not* that tongues *are* foreign languages. Paul's point is that the hearer cannot understand uninterpreted tongues any more than he can understand the one speaking a foreign language. If tongues *were* a foreign language, there would be no need for an *analogy*.

Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 14:18 that he "speaks in tongues more than you all" is evidence that tongues are not foreign languages. As Grudem notes, "If they were known foreign languages that foreigners could understand, as at Pentecost, why would Paul speak more than all the Corinthians in private, where no one would understand, rather than in church where foreign visitors could understand?" (*Systematic Theology*, 1072).

Finally, if tongues-speech is always human language, Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 14:23 wouldn't necessarily hold true. Any unbeliever who would know the language being spoken would more likely conclude the person speaking was highly educated rather than "out of your minds."

Therefore, given the fact that Paul envisioned "***various kinds***" of tongues (1 Cor. 12:10), together with the other evidence cited, I conclude that tongues *may* be human languages never before learned by the speaker, but need not be. They may also be angelic dialects or unique linguistic utterances shaped specially by the Spirit and distributed to believers according to the will of God.

(4) What does Paul say is the purpose of tongues? Paul's description of tongues-speech in 1 Corinthians identifies it primarily as a form of *prayer* (1 Cor. 14:2, 14-15, 28). It is a means of communicating with God in supplication, petition, and intercession. According to 14:16, prayer in tongues is a perfectly legitimate way in which to express heartfelt gratitude to God.

Speaking in tongues is also a means for *edifying* oneself (1 Cor. 14:4), which contrary to what some say, is not a bad thing. We study the Bible and pray to edify ourselves. Countless Christian activities are an effective means of self-edification. My guess is that you are listening to this sermon to edify yourself.

Should I rebuke you for being self-centered? And in Jude 20 we are *commanded* to edify ourselves by praying in the Spirit!

Every gift of the Spirit either directly or indirectly edifies its user. This is not evil unless self-edification becomes an end in itself. If I am strengthened by my gift in such a way that I increase in moral purity, sensitivity, understanding, zeal, and love for God, and thus am better equipped to minister to others (1 Cor. 12:7), this is hardly grounds for complaint. The fact that the *ultimate* purpose of gifts is the common good does not preclude other, *secondary* effects, of each manifestation. Furthermore, self-edification from tongues-speech can't be wrong, or Paul would not have encouraged its use in 1 Cor. 14:5a. And it is uninterpreted tongues that he has in mind, for he contrasts it with prophecy, insisting that the latter is better suited to edify others (unless, of course, the tongues-speech is interpreted, v. 5b).

Some struggle to grasp how something not understood even by the speaker can edify. The answer in part lies in 1 Corinthians 14:14-15 (so, too, in Rom. 8:26). Notwithstanding an inability to comprehend his own tongues-speech, Paul is determined both to pray and sing "with/in the spirit" (v. 15). As Gordon Fee has said, "contrary to the opinion of many, spiritual edification can take place in ways other than through the cortex of the brain. Paul believed in an immediate communing with God by means of the *S/spirit* that sometimes bypassed the mind; and in verses 14-15 he argues that for his own edification he will have both" (*1 Corinthians*, 657).

Some cessationists refuse to concede that someone can be edified apart from rational understanding. They therefore insist that God not only enables a person to speak in a language not previously learned, but also enables him to understand what he is speaking (contrary to 1 Cor. 14:14). But why, then, would there be a need for the distinct gift of interpretation? Each person speaking in tongues would already know what he is saying and, in turn, could communicate such to the congregation. Why forbid a person to speak in tongues in the absence of an interpreter (vv. 27-28) if every tongues-speaker is his *own* interpreter? And if the tongues-speaker can understand what he is saying, why encourage him to pray that he might interpret (v. 13)?

It will not do for the cessationist to say that the one gifted with interpretation has an exactness which goes beyond the understanding of the sense of the revelation possessed by the tongues-speaker, because he believes that anytime God reveals truth to the human mind there is an *a priori* guarantee that *both* the *reception* of what is revealed and its *transmission* are perfectly accurate. In other words, for the cessationist, *all* revelation comes with a guarantee of perfection and divine exactness in both comprehension and communication.

This cessationist argument is clearly based on the assumption that tongues are *revelatory*, a view for which I find little, if any, biblical support. Most cessationists contend that tongues are revelatory and appeal to Paul's use of "mysteries" in 1 Corinthians 14:2, a term, they argue, that refers to the redemptive-historical content of revelation. But if this were true, why would Paul proceed to define the content of tongues as simple human prayer, blessing, and gratitude (14:14-17), terms that have little if any relation to the divine communication of redemptive-historical verities? And why would Paul differentiate between tongues and revelation as he does in 14:6, asserting his preference for the latter above the former (see also v. 26)? And why, in his description of the exercise of gifts in the local assembly, would he restrict the impartation of revelation to those who prophesy and not extend it also to those who minister in tongues (14:27-30)? There is no indication here that Paul believed speaking in tongues depends upon a spontaneous divine revelation, as is clearly the case with prophecy.

Tongues-speech is also a form of *praise* (especially "singing in the Spirit"), insofar as Paul envisions using this gift to *bless* the person and works of God (1 Cor. 14:16; cf. Acts 2, 10, 19). Praying in tongues may also be an effective instrument in *spiritual warfare*. As noted above, Paul describes tongues in 1 Cor. 14:16 as praying or blessing "in (the) spirit" (*en pneumatī*). In Eph. 6:18 he encourages us to pray "in (the) spirit" (*en pneumatī*), using the same terminology. Thus, Paul's exhortation in this passage addressing our struggle with principalities and powers, although not limited to praying in tongues, most likely includes it. Finally, speaking in tongues is a way of *compensating for our weakness and ignorance* in praying for ourselves and others (cf. Rom. 8:26-27; this would be true even if this text is determined not to refer to *glossolalia*).

(5) *Are tongues to be used in one's private devotional prayer life?* Cessationists typically answer "No". It makes sense why they would embrace this view, for if all tongues are revelatory, as most contend, one must explain why God would reveal sacred truths in an unintelligible way to someone who, in turn, proceeds to speak them back to God in private. But, as noted above, tongues are not revelatory.

Furthermore, the fact that praying in tongues was a staple experience in Paul's private devotional life is evident from at least two texts. First, in 1 Cor. 14:18-19, he declares: ***"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue."*** This latter statement is Paul's somewhat exaggerated way of saying he almost never speaks in tongues in a corporate church gathering. In the absence of interpretation, he most definitely won't. Now, if in church Paul virtually never exercises this gift, yet speaks in tongues more frequently and fluently and fervently than anyone, even more so than the tongue-happy Corinthians, where does he do it (indeed, if tongues are revelatory, *why* would he do it)? Surely it must be in private.

Second, this is confirmed by verse 28 where he gives instruction on what to do in the absence of interpretation: let him (the tongues-speaker) "speak to himself and to God." Where? Given the explicit prohibition of uninterpreted tongues-speech "in the church," it seems likely Paul had in mind prayer in tongues in private—in a context other than the corporate gathering.

Conclusion:

2 Timothy 1:6 . . .