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Bridgeway Church
Life in the Spirit #13

Sermon Summary #13

Tongues: Praying and Praising in the Spirit (2) 1 Corinthians 14:20-25

Questions we asked and answered last week:

- (1) Are the tongues in Acts 2 genuine human languages previously unknown to the speakers?
- (2) Are tongues evangelistic?
- (3) Are all tongues legitimate human languages?
- (4) What is the purpose of the gift of tongues?
- (5) Is the gift of tongues to be used in one's private devotional life?

(6) Are tongues a "sign"? According to 1 Corinthians 14:22, the answer would appear to be "Yes." This follows Paul's quotation of Isaiah 28:11, the meaning of which is found in a prior warning of God to Israel in Deuteronomy 28:49. If Israel violates the covenant, God will chastise them by sending a foreign enemy, speaking a foreign tongue. Thus, confusing and confounding speech was a sign of God's judgment against a rebellious people. This is the judgment that Isaiah says has come upon Israel in the 8th century BC when the Assyrians invaded and conquered the Jews (cf. also what happened in the 6th c. BC, Jer. 5:15).

Many cessationists argue that God is judging unbelieving Jews in the first century, the sign of which is language they can't understand (i.e., tongues). The purpose of tongues, therefore, is to signify God's judgment against Israel for rejecting the Messiah and thereby to shock them into repentance and faith. Tongues, so goes the argument, are an "evangelistic sign gift." Since tongues ceased to function in this capacity when Israel was dispersed in 70 AD, the gift was valid only for the first century.

But there are numerous problems with this view. First, even if tongues served as an evangelistic sign gift, nowhere does the NT restrict or reduce that gift to this one purpose. Simply because tongues is said to function in one capacity does not mean it cannot function in others. Tongues also serve the "common good" of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). In 1 Corinthians 14:4, the gift of tongues edifies the individual in private prayer. We must avoid the error of *reductionism* (this is the error of identifying one valid use of a gift and then reducing it to that alone, to the exclusion of all other possible uses).

Second, if tongues-speech was not a spiritual gift for the church at all, why did Paul ever allow it to be exercised and used in the church? If interpreted, tongues-speech was entirely permissible. But this seems difficult to explain if its only or primary purpose was to declare judgment against unbelieving Jews.

Third, if uninterpreted tongues were designed to stir unbelievers to repentance, God would not need to provide the accompanying gift of interpretation. This latter gift makes sense only if tongues-speech is profitable and beneficial to Christians in the assembly.

Fourth, if God intended tongues-speech to serve as a sign for unbelieving Jews, Paul would not have counseled *against* its use when unbelievers are present (v. 23).

Finally, the contrasts in this context are between believer and nonbeliever, not Jew and Gentile. Indeed, most commentators concur that the non-believer (vv. 23-24) is probably a Gentile, not a Jew.

For all these reasons, I conclude that the view that tongues is only (or even primarily) a sign of judgment on first-century unbelieving Jews is unconvincing.

What, then, is the principle that Paul finds in Isaiah 28:11 that applies to Corinth (and to us)? It is this: when God speaks to people in a language they cannot understand, it is a form of punishment for unbelief. It signifies his anger. Incomprehensible speech will not guide or instruct or lead to faith and repentance, but only confuse and destroy. Thus, if outsiders or unbelievers come in and you speak in a language they cannot understand, you will simply drive them away. You will be giving a "sign" to unbelievers that is entirely wrong, because their hardness of heart has not reached the point where they deserve that severe sign of judgment.

So when you come together (1 Cor. 14:26), if anyone speaks in a tongue, be sure there is an interpretation (v. 27). Otherwise the tongue-speaker should be quiet in the church (v. 29). Prophecy, on the other hand, is a sign of God's presence with believers (v. 22b), and so Paul encourages its use when unbelievers are present in order that they may see this sign and thereby come to Christian faith (vv. 24-25).

Therefore, Paul is *not* talking about the function of the gift of tongues in general, but only about the *negative* result of one particular *abuse* of tongues-speech (namely, its use without interpretation in the public assembly). So, do not permit uninterpreted tongues-speech in church, for in doing so, you run the risk of communicating a negative sign to people that will only drive them away (for a more extensive explanation, see Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 145-54).

(7) *Should all Christians speak in tongues?* In my opinion, No.

How can I say this when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:5: "Now I want you *all* to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy"? The reason for Paul's preference of prophecy over tongues isn't because the latter is less spiritual or perhaps even dangerous. Rather, prophecy is to be preferred over *uninterpreted* tongues in the corporate gathering of the church because it is intelligible and thus can serve better than unintelligible tongues speech to build up, edify, and encourage the people of God. Paul is quick to qualify his elevation of prophecy over tongues by saying that this obtains only in the absence of an interpretation for the latter. If "someone interprets" (1 Cor. 14:5b), then tongues can also serve to strengthen and instruct God's people.

But let's not get derailed from our primary concern, which is whether or not Paul's declared "wish" in this text means that all believers ought to expect God to bestow this gift upon them.

Those, like me, who answer "No" to our question, point to several important facts.

First, they appeal to 1 Corinthians 7:7 where Paul uses identical language to what is found in 14:5. With regard to his own state of celibacy, Paul writes: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." No one will argue that Paul intends for all Christians to remain single as he is. His "wish", therefore, should not be taken as the expression of an unqualified and universal desire. Surely, then, we should not expect all to speak in tongues either.

Secondly, according to 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, tongues, like the other gifts mentioned, is bestowed to individuals as the Holy Spirit wills. If Paul meant that "all" were to experience this gift, why did he employ the terminology of "to one is given . . . and to another . . . to another," etc.? In other words, Paul seems to suggest that the Spirit sovereignly differentiates among Christians and distributes one or more gifts to this person and yet another, a different gift to this person and yet another gift to that one, and so on.

The final and most oft-cited argument for this view is 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 where Paul quite explicitly states that "all do not speak with tongues" any more than all are apostles or all are teachers or all have gifts of healings and so on. His question is stated thusly:

"Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:29-31).

In English, we have a particular way of asking a question for which we already know the answer. Think for a moment about the way you emphasize certain words, elevate your voice, and perhaps even utilize facial

expressions when you intend for the person listening to know that the answer to your question is decidedly, No.

But in Greek there is a specific grammatical structure that is designed to elicit a negative response to the question being asked. Such is precisely what Paul employs here in 1 Corinthians 12. The translation provided by the NASB makes this slightly more explicit than does the ESV.

“All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?”

You can clearly see from the way the questions are phrased that the author wants you to respond by saying, “No, of course not.”

Many think this forever settles the argument. But the debate doesn't end there.

Those answering “Yes” to our question begin by pointing out that 1 Corinthians 7:7 isn't the only place where Paul uses the “I want” or “I wish” terminology. One must also address passages such as 1 Cor. 10:1a; 11:3; and 12:1. In each of these the same Greek verb is used that we find in 1 Cor. 14:5 (“I want” or “I wish”), and in all of them what the apostle wants applies equally and universally to every believer.

Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul goes on to tell us explicitly why his “wish” for universal celibacy cannot and should not be fulfilled. It is because “each has his own gift from God” (1 Cor. 7:7b). But in 1 Corinthians 14 no such contextual clues are found that suggest Paul's “wish” or “desire” for all to speak in tongues cannot be fulfilled.

Those who believe the answer to our question is Yes, also wonder why God would *not* want each believer to operate in this particular gift. In other words, they ask: “Why would God withhold from any of his children a gift which enables them to pray and to praise him so effectively, a gift which also functions to edify them in their faith?”

An appeal is also often made to 1 Corinthians 14:23. There Paul says: “If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?” Paul envisions a scenario, perhaps not uncommon in Corinth in the first century, in which (nearly) everyone in the congregation speaks in uninterpreted tongues simultaneously, or at least consecutively. This will be of no benefit to unbelievers who may be visiting because they will have no idea what is being said. Their only conclusion will be that these people have lost their minds! This is why Paul later in the chapter insists that only two or three speak in tongues and that there always be an interpretation to follow. But aside from that issue, is it the case that Paul at least envisions the hypothetical possibility that every Christian in Corinth *could* speak in tongues, even if he advises against it in the corporate meeting of the church. Or could it simply be that he is speaking in deliberately exaggerated language when he says “all speak in tongues”?

Some also insist that 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 and 12:28-30 refer to the gift of tongues in *public ministry*, whereas 1 Corinthians 14:5 is describing the gift in *private devotion*. In 12:28 Paul specifically says he is describing what happens “in the church” or “in the assembly” (cf. 11:18; 14:19,23,28,33,35). Not everyone is gifted by the Spirit to speak in tongues during the corporate gathering of the church. But the potential does exist for every believer to pray in tongues in private. These are not two different gifts, however, but two different contexts in which the one gift might be employed. A person who ministers to the entire church in tongues is someone who already uses tongues in his/her prayer life.

Well known Pentecostal pastor Jack Hayford argues in much the same way, using different terms. He suggests that the *gift* of tongues is (1) limited in distribution (1 Cor. 12:11,30), and (2) its public exercise is to be closely governed (1 Cor. 14:27-28); while the *grace* of tongues is so broadly available that Paul wishes that all enjoyed its blessing (1 Cor. 14:5a), which includes (1) distinctive communication with God (1 Cor. 14:2); (2) edifying of the believer's private life (1 Cor. 14:4); and (3) worship and thanksgiving

with beauty and propriety (1 Cor. 14:15-17)” (*The Beauty of Spiritual Language*, 102-06). The difference between these operations of the Holy Spirit is that *not every* Christian has reason to expect he or she will necessarily exercise the public *gift*; while *any* Christian may expect and welcome the private *grace* of spiritual language in his or her personal time of prayer fellowship *with* God (1 Cor. 14:2), praiseful worship *before* God (1 Cor. 14:15-17), and intercessory prayer *to* God (Rom. 8:26-27).

Paul’s point at the end of 1 Corinthians 12 is that not every believer will contribute to the body in precisely the same way. Not everyone will minister a prophetic word, not everyone will teach, and so on. But whether or not everyone might pray privately in tongues is another matter, not in Paul’s purview until chapter 14.

Consider what Paul says about prophecy. “All are not prophets, are they?” (1 Cor. 12:29). No, of course not. But Paul is quick to say that the potential exists for “all” to prophesy (14:1,31). Why could not the same be true for tongues? Couldn’t Paul be saying that whereas all do not speak in tongues as an expression of corporate, public ministry, it is possible that all may speak in tongues as an expression of private praise and prayer? Just as Paul’s rhetorical question in 12:29 is not designed to rule out the possibility that all may utter a prophetic word, so also his rhetorical question in 12:30 is not designed to exclude anyone from exercising tongues in their private devotional experience.

Clearly, good arguments exist on both sides of the fence when it comes to answering this question. That said, it is important to remember that as far as we can tell there is no other spiritual gift that is ever described, defined, or portrayed in the NT as one that God bestows, or wants to bestow, on every single Christian. In other words, few if any would argue that God wants all to have the gift of teaching, or the gift of mercy, or the gift of leadership, or the gift of evangelism. Why, then, would tongues be unique, the only one among the many charismata that God intends for all believers to exercise?

(8) *Is tongues-speech an ecstatic experience?* It’s important to remember that the NT never uses this term to describe speaking in tongues. It is found in some English translations but is not in the Greek text. Many define “ecstatic” as a mental or emotional state in which the person is more or less oblivious to the external world. The individual is perceived as losing self-control, perhaps lapsing into a frenzied condition in which self-consciousness and the power for rational thinking are eclipsed.

There is no indication anywhere in the Bible that people who speak in tongues lose self-control or become unaware of their surroundings or lapse into a frenzied condition in which self-consciousness and the power for rational thinking are eclipsed. Paul insists that the one speaking in tongues can start and stop at will (1 Cor. 14:15-19; 14:27-28; 14:40; cf. 14:32). There is a vast difference between an experience being “ecstatic” and it being “emotional”. Tongues is often highly emotional and exhilarating, bringing peace, joy, etc., but that does not mean it is “ecstatic”.

(9) *What about corporate singing in the Spirit?* One question I’m often asked, for which I don’t have a definitive answer, is whether it is biblically permissible to *sing* in uninterpreted tongues in a corporate setting? Many would immediately say “No,” and point to Paul’s emphasis throughout 1 Corinthians 14, especially v. 28: “But if there is no interpreter, let him [the tongues-speaker] keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God [presumably, in private].”

Of one thing I’m sure. If the corporate gathering in view is an official church service, the point of which is to edify the body (cf. 1 Cor. 14:26), uninterpreted tongues is not permissible. This is what accounts for Paul’s demand for silence in v. 28.

But what if the gathering is one at which only believers are in attendance? What if the purpose is not instruction or exhortation but praise and intercession? One of Paul’s concerns is that uninterpreted tongues will confuse any unbelievers who may be present (see vv. 22-23). But if the meeting is, if you will, a “believers” meeting, perhaps even a small-group gathering in someone’s home, that possibility no longer exists. In such settings, the unintelligibility of uninterpreted tongues is no obstacle to achieving the purpose for which people have congregated and therefore would not violate Paul’s counsel.

As I said, this isn't a definitive answer. I also realize that it is, in large measure, an argument from silence. I'm only suggesting that we be cautious about enforcing the rules of 1 Corinthians 14 in contexts that Paul didn't envision or in circumstances other than those which evoked his inspired counsel.

What I'm saying is this. If a meeting was of a decidedly different nature and purpose from that which Paul assumes in 1 Corinthians 14, a meeting, for example, the overt aim and advertisement of which was *not* the instructional edification of the body, a meeting at which the presence of unbelievers was neither encouraged nor expected, the effect of uninterpreted tongues, against which Paul warns in this chapter, is a moot point. If there were a gathering of Christians exclusively for the purpose of worship and prayer, a gathering in which the circumstances that evoked Paul's prohibition of uninterpreted tongues did not obtain, would the prohibitions stand? I'm inclined to think not.

(10) Why is tongues-speech often so rapid? People often ask this question. Either they have heard others pray in tongues with great rapidity or they themselves have experienced this phenomenon.

I can't be dogmatic, for the Scriptures don't address the issue. But perhaps it is because it is the Holy Spirit who is praying through us. It is the Spirit who "gives utterance" (cf. Acts 2:4; 1 Cor. 14:14-15), and thus prayer in tongues entails a higher level of spiritual energy. Also, since it is the Holy Spirit who is articulating our prayers, there is no hesitation over which words to speak; no stammering or wondering what to say and how to say it; no "Uh's" punctuating our speech; none of the fear or self-consciousness that characterizes and thus retards normal speaking. When praying in tongues one need never "wait" until he/she can think of something to say.

(11) Why are people so afraid of tongues and so hesitant to pursue and practice it? Again, let me suggest several reasons.

First of all, Christians who were raised and nurtured in strong, bible-based churches are extraordinarily fearful of the slightest artificiality in Christian experience. They demand a virtual guarantee, in advance, that what they do be genuine. Often this caution is borne of a fear that inevitably paralyzes faith, as well as the willingness to try and to risk. After first speaking in what they hope is tongues, the slightest doubt of its authenticity prompts them never to try again. I'm not suggesting that we not be passionate for what is genuine. But we must not let fear control our lives.

Another factor is that often, after first speaking in tongues, people conclude that it doesn't "feel" sufficiently supernatural. It doesn't seem significantly different from what it takes to pray in English. So either it isn't real or it isn't worth the effort.

One's initial experience with tongues can be disconcerting when it doesn't "sound" like a language. It seems like irrational and incoherent gibberish, unlike any speech they've heard before. "How could something so trite and repetitious be of any spiritual value?" Such disillusionment leads to their abandoning the practice altogether.

Finally, many shy away from tongues for fear of "sounding silly". Appearing foolish in the presence of people whose respect and love you cherish can often paralyze one's passion for this spiritual gift.

(12) What advice should we give to those who don't speak in tongues but want to?

First, *you don't have to be afraid*. Many people have been frightened off with warnings of receiving a counterfeit or worse still of opening themselves to demonic influence. Yet the apostle Paul never expressed concern over this matter. The church at Corinth was filled with recently converted men and women whose background was characterized by pagan and demonic rituals. It was to these very people that Paul said, "I want you all to speak in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:5)! Nowhere does Paul say or suggest, "I want you all to be afraid of tongues." Paul's counsel is well-grounded, for it was Jesus who said:

"Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If

you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?*" (Luke 11:11-13)

Second, *you will not lose control*. Some are reluctant to follow the Spirit's prompting to speak in a prayer language for fear that they will lose control of themselves and do something foolish or irreverent. But as we have seen, those who speak in tongues are never described in Scripture as losing control of their faculties or falling under the influence of an irresistible power. The purpose of tongues is not to overwhelm or humiliate you but to bless God, bless others, and edify your own soul. Remember, there is no safer place to be than under the control of the Spirit of God.

Third, *this doesn't mean you are more spiritual than those who don't have this gift*.

Some will undoubtedly say: "Oh, I guess this means you think you're better than we are. You're the 'have' and we're the 'have-nots.'" This is a tragic misunderstanding not only of the gift of tongues but of our relationship to the work of the Spirit in general. Simply reassure them as gently but firmly as possible that the gift of tongues has *not* made you a better Christian than they.

Perhaps the best way to respond is by saying: "I don't believe that I am now a better Christian than you. I simply believe that I am now on my way to being a better Christian than *I* was before I received this gift." God forbids us to compare ourselves with others, as if we, because of a particular gift, were better than they (see 1 Cor. 4:7). But it is an essential part of the Christian life that we grow up in our faith and deepen in our devotion to Jesus through the increase and expansion of the Spirit's work in our lives.

Fourth, *you don't have to put your brain on ice*. Praying and singing in tongues is in no way incompatible with a love for the written Word of God and the deep things of theology. Speaking in tongues does not turn your grey matter to mush nor diminish the importance of solid doctrine in your life.

I can only speak for myself here, but I have only grown in my love for the Scriptures since receiving this gift. If those who pray and praise in tongues find themselves less and less inclined to dig deeply into the theological treasures of the Word, it is not because of the gift of tongues. If there were a necessary connection between glossolalia and disdain for doctrine, surely Paul would have informed (and warned) us of it. And let us never forget that it was the apostle Paul, author of the epistle to the Romans and other doctrinal treatises, who said, "I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all!"

Fifth, *if you don't speak in tongues, but want to, you don't have to prime the pump by repeatedly saying "banana" backwards*. Ignore those who might be tempted to suggest certain words to you if you are having a hard time getting started. It is the Spirit who gives utterance (Acts 2:4), not a well-meaning friend. Speaking in tongues is not an experience of "oral seizure", as if God intends to perform a miraculous jiggling of your mouth and lips. Simply wait upon the Lord and speak forth the words he brings to mind, no matter how incoherent or silly they may sound. They are sweet music to your Father's ear.

Sixth, *persevere in prayer*. When Paul exhorts us to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, he intends us to ask God for what is our heart's desire. Don't be ashamed of wanting this gift. And don't be discouraged if the answer isn't quick in coming. If the ultimate answer is No, then rejoice in the gifts God has already given and use them to His glory and the edification of the church.

Not long ago I received a letter from a highly educated and widely-respected lady concerning her own experience with tongues.

"For what it's worth, let me quickly relate my own tongues experience. Twenty years ago, in high school, my wild and crazy Pentecostal boyfriend and his Pentecostal cohorts tried every which way to get me – a conservative Baptist girl – to speak in tongues. I wasn't opposed to the idea, but try as they did (prayer, moaning, speaking in tongues over me . . . everything short of slashing themselves with knives), nothing happened. They came to the conclusion that I was horribly unspiritual and resistant to God's work in my life. I can't say that I was deeply marred by the experience, but it did leave me feeling somewhat wary of the validity of the gift.

In June of this year [1995], the Spirit put on my heart the desire to enter an extended fast. On the fourth day (a really, really difficult day of battling against the physical and mental desire to eat) while I was pouring my heart out to God, foreign and strange words welled up from deep within and came spilling out of my mouth. It was quite a few moments before it dawned on me that I was speaking in tongues. Over the next days and weeks of the fast, I was able to use this gift to battle against severe temptation. I doubt whether I would have had the physical, mental and spiritual strength to complete the fast without it. I felt as though the Spirit of God within was interceding to the Father on my behalf. The gift remains with me. I feel most moved to use it during times of deep intercession or deep praise. 'Deep' is the best adjective I can think of – it is kind of hard to describe, but I think you know what I mean."

The interesting thing about this lady's experience is that she was not seeking the gift of tongues. She was simply seeking God . . . with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength. I'm not suggesting that you must follow her example, nor that you will necessarily receive a new prayer language simply because you fast and pray. But you might!

Seventh, *devote yourself to extended periods of praise*. Set aside a time and place where you can be alone with the Lord for a few hours of uninterrupted meditation and worship. Whether or not you combine this with fasting is up to you. Put on a worship CD and spend as much time as possible adoring the beauty of Christ and enjoying the joy of being enjoyed by him. Open your heart, open your mouth, and sing forth the love songs he has put within. What happens next is between you and God.

So what conclusions can we draw from these two messages on tongues? Several, no doubt, but I'll keep it to a few.

First, tongues is a good gift from God, never to be despised or mocked or made fun of, but to be received with gratitude and used with wisdom.

Second, to use Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 13:1, without love tongues is a bothersome, annoying, abrasive cacophony of unintelligible sound. But with love, it becomes a beautiful and powerful symphony that speaks of the Spirit's gracious and edifying work in our lives.

Third, as good and helpful as speaking in tongues is, it is not a sign of spirituality; it is not a sign of maturity; it is not a sign of baptism in the Spirit; in fact, it is not a sign of anything, other than that God has graciously chosen to impart this particular spiritual gift to you. The important thing is to make tongues neither more nor less important than it is.

Fourth, and finally, if you have the gift, give thanks; if you don't, but wish you did, persevere in prayer; regardless of what ultimately does or does not happen, and above all else rejoice that your names are written down in heaven!