

TONGUES, ECSTATIC UTTERANCES
OR FOREIGN LANGUAGES?
1 Corinthians 14:1-12

INTRO: A good number of years ago I was challenged a number of times in various ways about this matter of speaking in tongues. In several cases members of my family got involved. Out of that I did some very detailed study so that I might come to a conclusion on this matter, and later when I became a pastor I put it into writing in booklet form. And now, for some years I have wanted to booklet available on sermonaudio. Recently I had a request for the booklet and it reminded me that I wanted to make it available to others. And so I thought that the best way to do that would be to do one message and make both the message and the booklet available on sermonaudio. So, this morning I want to do that.

As I thought of this message, I had thought to cover each of the seven points of the booklet in brief, but then realized I might create more confusion than clarification. So I will briefly cover the first 5 points and anyone wishing to pursue it further could do so by studying the booklet. There are many points to this subject that take much time to think through.

The phenomena of tongues speaking has never become a big issue in our area and it may seem unnecessary to deal with it. However, when some of our folk leave here, and they meet this subject elsewhere, then they are totally unprepared for it. So it is well to be advised on the matter. Let me give you an example. I went to a Mission's Fest one time with missionary of Low German background in Russia now living in Germany. The Mission's Fest was in Calgary. I took turns with him to man his booth and he got into discussion with a charismatic Christian from the Ukraine, I believe it was. Both were fluent in Russian. Well, after each session he had with this man, I spent a lot of time explaining to this missionary things he had never even considered before, because it had never been an issue in his life before. And now he was in great turmoil.

This morning, interest in this message may not be very high since the matter is not an issue here at this time. If it were, you would be listening very intently. I might add here that this subject has split many, many churches in the past. In Quesnel, B.C., where we were for several years,

one church split five different ways over this subject. Today this particular movement has led into very, very unbiblical practices such as people barking like dogs and much more. You will have heard of the Toronto Blessing, which was more accurately a curse.

Now I am going to cover this subject very briefly. For those who wish to do a more detailed study, I will gladly give you the booklet I did or you may download it from sermonaudio.com/lhec. So, this morning I want to expose what I believe the problem with the phrase 'speaking in tongues' is. Then I want to give three propositions to determine what that phrase means and just a few more brief points.

I. THE PROBLEM OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Now the major question with regard to the phrase 'speaking in tongues' is this: does it refer to speaking in foreign languages or does it refer to ecstatic utterances. When you settle that question, it should settle *most* other questions.

It is easy to understand what is meant by the position that speaking in tongues refers to foreign languages. It is simply speaking in a language foreign to the people among whom one is at the time. But, the view that speaking in tongues means ecstatic utterances is a little harder to understand. As I understand it, this view says that God gives someone a message in ecstatic utterances that are not a human language, or they are an angelic language. The one who speaks in tongues does not understand what he or she is saying. These utterances are syllables strung together that are not any known human language. To understand what the speaker has said, an interpreter is needed. The interpreter is given the understanding of the ecstatic utterances by God Himself. So God inspired the ecstatic utterances that the speaker did not understand but God supernaturally gave someone else in the audience the interpretation.

Let me just mention here as well that some Christians who feel they cannot speak in tongues still believe it is ecstatic utterances. So they say: "Yes, tongues are ecstatic utterances, but that is not an experience for me." This is the position of the

Alliance Churches historically and you are wiser if you know that.

My personal view is that speaking in tongues in the Bible ALWAYS refers to foreign languages, and that one does not need to go beyond Acts 2 to prove it.

II. THREE PROPOSITIONS FOR INTERPRETING TONGUES

In the booklet I give three propositions for interpreting the meaning of the phrase 'to speak in tongues' in any given text. The view I present stands or falls on these three propositions.

A. Proposition # 1

Proposition # 1 is this: When the Greek word *laleo* (which means to speak) is used in its literal sense it ALWAYS refers to a spoken word or words in a language that is understood by speaker. To speak (*laleo*) is to give a verbal communication or message. This word is used 296 times in the NT and in the booklet I give those. Anyone can easily check the accuracy of this proposition.

B. Proposition # 2

So, here is proposition # 2: When the Greek word *glossa* (tongue) is used alone it always refers to either the tongue as the physical member of the body, the organ of speech or to a language. You can easily check that out and if you wish to do so simply look at Mark 7:33, 35).

So, it is easy to see how the word 'tongue' came to mean a language. You must have this member in order to speak. You can speak without hands or hair or fingers, but you cannot speak without a tongue. Now I define language as a system of verbal or symbolic communication by which persons communicate meaning to others. The universal experience of mankind is that such a system has grammatical laws and rules which govern its usage.

A verbal communication that cannot be analyzed and its meaning objectively tested is no communication at all. It is open to the imagination of the interpreter. If you want to check whether tongues refers to languages you can easily do that. Let me just give you one reference to jot down (Rev. 5:9).

C. Proposition # 3

The third proposition is that when *glossa* (tongue) and *laleo* (to speak) are used together in a clause they always, without exception, refer to a foreign language or languages. A very sharp student in the Greek language might pick up three exceptions to this rule in 1 Corinthians 14:14, 19 and 22. I will not take time to explain those here, but they are explained in the commentary in the booklet. So, for one example of this, look at Acts 2:4.

III. THE TWO ASPECTS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

A. A Language Foreign To The Speaker (Acts)

Now it is important to understand a certain distinction here so we want to look at two different aspects of foreign languages. We begin with someone speaking in a language that is foreign to the speaker. This is the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues.

I have come to the conclusion that there is a difference between the speaking in tongues of the book of Acts and the tongues of 1 Corinthians. Here is my conclusion. In Acts, the tongues were the miraculous gift of speaking in languages foreign to the speaker. In Corinth, the tongues were speaking in languages foreign to the hearer. So, let me show this first from Acts.

When we diagnose a clause in Acts 2 which contains *glossa* and *laleo* we can prove in no uncertain terms that the meaning intended by the usage of those two words used together is "foreign languages." In 2:4, we find that the disciples who were filled with the Holy Spirit

began to speak with other tongues, which I understand to mean foreign languages. In verse 7, these foreigners marveled because those who spoke to them in foreign languages were Galileans. What is the marvel in that? They were Galileans. They were unlearned, unpolished, and uneducated and they spoke in foreign languages. Ecstatic utterances would not be surprising for unlearned men, but foreign languages? Unheard of. And in verse six these men said they heard them speak, everyone in his own language. So the foreigners marveled, not that they heard them speak in ecstatic utterances, but that they heard these Galileans speak in the languages of the foreigners. This is repeated in verse 11.

Now I want you to note something very crucial here. I believe you must understand this to understand the Scriptures on this matter. In Acts 2 the languages spoken were foreign to the speaker, not to the hearer. In this case God gave the miraculous ability to Galileans to speak in many various languages foreign to themselves. Now it is sometimes thought that the Galileans here spoke in their own language but the other nationalities present understood them in their own language. One might conclude this from verse 6 which says 'everyone heard them speak in his own language. So, according to this understanding, it was not the speaking, but the hearing that was miraculous. This, however, is not the case, because verse 4 says these Galileans 'began to speak with other tongues.'

Furthermore, the tongues spoken here were languages because in Acts 2:4 the Greek word is *glossa* and in 2:6 and 8 this is explained as *dialektos*, language. In 2:11 these *dialektos* are explained as *glossais* (tongues). One simply cannot get around the fact that speaking in tongues in these references is speaking in foreign languages, and the language was foreign to the speaker, not the hearer.

There is no reason to take Acts 10 and 19, two other passages where speaking in tongues occurs, to be something else than the miraculous ability

to speak in languages they had never learned. It would seem that in both cases God gave this miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages to verify the experience of the new believers. In neither case was there a need for an interpreter indicating that this was the miraculous ability to speak in languages the hearers understood.

B. A Language Foreign To The Hearer (1 Cor. 12-14)

So, let us now look at 1 Corinthians 14. The subject of tongues is dealt with in 12-14. Chapter 14 deals in depth with the tongues matter. And I propose that the gift of speaking in tongues here is the gift of being able to speak in numerous learned languages. The speaker understands the language but the hearers don't. If anyone should question whether it takes a gift to learn various languages, let them just be in a class with a number of other students and you will find that out very quickly.

Now my view of the tongues in 1 Corinthians is that they are tongues which are foreign to the hearer, not the speaker. In 1 Corinthians we have the words *glossa* and *laleo* used in the same clause in a number of references. However there is a significant difference between the tongues spoken here and in Acts. In every case here the speaking in tongues is in languages foreign to the hearer not the speaker as in Acts. The gift of speaking in tongues here could not have been the miraculous gift of speaking in other languages. You will remember that in Acts 2, the languages spoken were foreign to the speaker, not the hearer. So there was no need for an interpreter in Acts.

So, let us go to 14:27-28 (read). Now before we go on, let me make a comment here on the word 'unknown' in the KJV. If you are using the KJV it says, "If anyone speaks in an unknown tongue..." In the KJV, six times the expression 'unknown tongue' is used. All six times you will find it italicized, meaning it is not in the original. And here is the question, why did they use this word, 'unknown' tongue? I believe it is because

these translators viewed the particular language spoken as unknown to the rest, that is it was foreign to them. I am not sure if I am correct on that but that is my conclusion. That is precisely my view, but it is much clearer if you translate glossa plus laleo as foreign language. So the languages referred to here are foreign to the others present.

Now to this question: Since in Acts 2 no interpreter was needed, why should tongues be forbidden here if there is no interpreter?
Answer: In Acts the language was foreign to the speaker not the hearer, but here the language is foreign to the hearers, not the speaker.

Now according to my earlier propositions, the speaking in tongues here, with glossa and laleo, means these are foreign languages. And that these foreign languages were not the miraculous ability of speaking in foreign languages of Acts 2 is clear from the need of an interpreter. By the way, the ability to interpret from one language to another is also viewed as a spiritual gift.

Now let me just briefly show how these three principles and these two aspects of tongues help us with interpreting difficult sections in 1 Corinthians 14 (read 1-2). It says he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. If that means ecstatic utterances and the speaker does not understand what he is saying, how can it be said he is speaking to God? If the speaker does not understand what he is saying it is no communication at all. But look at verse 4. It says that he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself. If that is ecstatic utterances and he does not understand what he is saying he can be no more edified than anybody else that does not understand. Without understanding there is no edification.

If you have the KJV it says in verse 2, "...he who speaks in an unknown tongue..." I would translate, "...he who speaks in a foreign language..." And he who speaks in a foreign language can edify himself and he is speaking to God because God

understands all languages. And so these three principles and two points I made earlier solve, I believe, every difficulty on the subject.

III. THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF CORINTH

To fully appreciate the Corinthian tongues problem, it is important to understand the historical and cultural setting of the city of Corinth. I want to only mention a few things briefly. For those interested in a little more detail they could get the booklet which covers the geographical setting of the church, the spiritual climate of the church, and the form of church service. Here let me simply mention that Corinth was a seaport city with people from all over the world and from many different kinds of languages present. It was a cosmopolitan city.

IV. THE ORIGINAL PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY PAUL IN CORINTH

I want us to now just briefly look at the original problem addressed by Paul in Corinth on tongues. Let me quote from my booklet on tongues, "Out of the foregoing studies we can begin to reconstruct some of the problem Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 12-14. They had people from many languages present in their meetings. Many of these people probably spoke numerous languages. In verse 18 Paul says that he speaks in more languages than all or any of the Corinthians, indicating that many of them spoke in a number of languages. Put into this the fact that there was much carnality in the church (1 Cor. 3:1-4). When carnality exists in the church much self glory seeking also exists. On top of that a number of men might share from the Word of God in the service. Add to that that the Corinthians viewed the ability to speak and pray in various languages as a sign of spirituality and then one begins to get the picture of the problem Paul is addressing at Corinth.

"How will Paul deal with this problem? In point 6, the interpretive outline of the structure and flow of 1 Corinthians 14, we find how Paul will deal with this problem (providing, of course, that the interpretation of the passage in the outline is correct). Paul will first show the Corinthians that prophesying (speaking to people to edification,

exhortation and comfort, see 14:3) is a superior gift to speaking in foreign languages. Then in the second section Paul will lay down regulations regarding prophesying and speaking in tongues."

V. THE DILEMMA IF TONGUES MEANS ECSTATIC UTTERANCES

Now I want to cover just one more point. Let us now consider the dilemma that is created if tongues in Scripture means ecstatic utterances. I quote again from my notes, "Before considering the interpretive outline and then the verse by verse commentary of 1 Corinthians 14, I want to briefly mention a major problem with the ecstatic utterances view. If speaking in tongues is ecstatic utterances and not human languages then that person cannot be understood by anyone except by God. God then must communicate the interpretation of that utterance to another who in turn then gives the message to the others in an understandable language. If, in a certain meeting, a person wants to speak in tongues how does anyone in the audience objectively know whether he can, in fact, interpret what will be said? Furthermore, if someone interprets the utterance so all may understand, then who is to say that the interpreter interpreted correctly? There is simply no objective way to know if an interpreter is present and there is no objective way to prove that what the interpreter indicated was said is what was actually said.

"On the other hand, if the tongues are foreign languages one can objectively determine if there is an interpreter present and that interpretation can be objectively tested.

"Several years ago a certain Mennonite church had certain members who were swayed to the charismatic position. Since I had family in that church and that church was historically not a charismatic church I called the pastor. In our discussion I asked what he would do if someone in church wanted to speak in tongues. He said he would ask if there was an interpreter present. So I asked how he would know there was an interpreter present if someone claimed he were an interpreter. Of course he did not know because you cannot know. You must take such a person's word for it without any proof whatsoever.

Furthermore I asked that if that interpreter said the Lord said thus or such how he would know that the Lord had said thus or such. And again he did not know for you cannot know. You cannot even tape record a tongues message and prove anything by it for nobody can prove or disprove whether what the interpreter said the speaker said was in fact true. I asked this pastor if he knew anywhere else in the Bible where God operated in such an uncertain manner. And again he did not know.

"How open to the Spirit of God are we to be with regard to accepting what others claim? As open as the Word of God and not beyond. Just because somebody makes great claims and he calls himself a Christian, that is not ground to accept everything put forth. If speaking in tongues is ecstatic utterances let it be shown from Scripture. If that cannot be done let us not be open to it."

CONCL: And so, in conclusion, my conclusion is that speaking in tongues in the Bible always only refers to one thing; speaking in foreign languages. Principle # 1 to prove this: When the Greek word *laleo* (which means to speak) is used in its literal sense it ALWAYS refers to a spoken word or words in a language that is understood by speaker. Principle # 2: When the Greek word *glossa* (tongue) is used alone it always refers to either the tongue as the physical member of the body, the organ of speech or to a language. Principle # 3: The third proposition is that when *glossa* (tongue) and *laleo* (to speak) are used together in a clause they always, without exception, refer to a foreign language or languages.

Then, in my view, there are two very important distinctions to be made in speaking in foreign languages. The first is that if God gives the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues, the speaker will speak in a language that is foreign to him or herself but not foreign to the hearer and so there will be no need for an interpreter. If the gift of tongues is the ability to speak in numerous other languages not understood in that setting, then an interpreter is needed.

Let me also mention in closing that in my understanding the Holy Spirit gives no gifts for self-edification. Every gift is to edify, or build up the body. And so Paul says in 1

Corinthians 14:12, "Even so you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel." And for those who understand the implications and will have this question, let me just say that yes, I am familiar with the cessationist view but I believe God still does from time to time give the miraculous gift of tongues.

I know this is very brief and once more, you will be able to download a more detailed study of this subject if you so desire at sermonaudio.com/lhec, or if you wish, there is a copy in the white cabinet just above the photo copier and if you wish a copy you may make one or talk to the SS department to help you make a copy.