

## ***THE GIFT OF TONGUES***

### I. Introduction

In a list of the Evangelical church's greatest controversies of the 20th Century, the gift of tongues would have to be near the top. This conflict abated somewhat during the mid-eighties when some leaders of the charismatic movement downplayed the importance of the gift.

The controversy arose over three main questions: Was it a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit? Was it essential for spirituality, and was it a gift to be exercised in today's church?

There many other difficult questions about the nature of this gift and we do not labor under the illusion that we are going to definitively answer questions that have been debated for decades. Rather, the goal of this briefing is to clarify the issues: Of what can we be sure, and what areas require further debate and study?

### II. Relevant Scriptural Passages and Linguistic Notes

- A. Relevant Passages: Old Testament: Num. 11:25; I Sam. 19:19-24; Isaiah 28:11-12; Joel 2:28. New Testament: Mk.16:17; Acts 2:4-16; 10:46; 19:6; Rom. 8:26; I Cor. 12-14.
- B. Linguistic Notes: The Greek word used in the New Testament for *tongue* is *glossa*. It is used in three ways: (1) as the physical organ (see the Epistle of James), (2) to describe something shaped like a tongue (Acts 2:3), and (3), to mean *language* or *dialect*. In Acts 2, the greek word *dialectos* is used as a synonym. The word *glossa* is used 48 times in the NT. Paul uses it 23 times in his writings, 20 of which are found in the I Corinthian passage. *Phona*, another word used in I Cor. 14:10 has as its primary meaning, *sound* or *noise*, but in this passage it has the secondary meaning of *languages*. Hence it too is a synonym of *glossa*.

### III. Historical Background of the I Corinthian Passage

- A. There was much controversy in the Corinthian church over several matters, one of which was the use of certain spiritual gifts (*ton pneumatikon*: literally, *the spirituals*). Apparently the main problem centered around the

exercising of the gift of tongues. A letter was written to Paul while he was at Ephesus with questions seeking his apostolic authority (see 7:1). Paul, in his reply, does not inform us of the questions; we only have his inspired answers. He begins his discussion about gifts with the phrase *Now about the spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant...* (12:1). It is left to us to discern the exact nature of the controversy by carefully studying the Apostle's instruction.

- B. It should be obvious that any historical data discovered about Corinth and its people will have important bearing on the accuracy of interpretation of this difficult passage. One historical note that may give direction to the tongues debate: Several varieties of mystery religion, for which Corinth was famous, were practiced there. Two of these mystery cults were those of Dionysus and Apollo. They had as their major focus the practice of religious ecstasy and glossolalia. One writer describes their ceremony:

*Following the torches as they dipped and swayed in the darkness, they climbed mountain paths with head thrown back and eyes glazed, dancing to the beat of the drum which stirred their blood.... In the state of ekstasis or enthousiasmos, they abandoned themselves, dancing wildly... and calling "evoi!" At that moment of intense rapture they became identified with the god himself.... They became filled with his spirit and acquired divine powers. Peter Hoyle, **DELPHI**, p. 76.*

#### IV. The Nature of the Gift

##### A. The possibilities

There is no unanimity among scholars about the nature of the gift largely because what is described in I Corinthians seems to be different from what occurred at Pentecost in Acts 2. Most agree with virtual certainty that the "tongues" in Acts 2 was the supernatural ability to speak a known human language one had never learned. The situation was thus: God-fearing Jews from countries all around the Mediterranean basin had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost and to worship in the temple. While there, the Holy Spirit fell on the new believers who then spoke about *the wonders of God* in the various dialects of the different countries represented by all the pilgrims (16 regions are mentioned, v. 9-11). Verse 8 seems to make it certain that they were speaking propositional truth in known human languages. Also, while it is not certain, the language of the text (the pronouns) seems to indicate that it was only the 12 Apostles who

were endowed with the gift (the Apostles were all Galileans, note v. 7). So, if the *tongues* at Pentecost were real languages, what exactly was the gift of tongues discussed by Paul in his first Epistle to the Corinthians? Was it the same supernatural phenomena exhibited as a sign to unbelievers, or was it something else entirely? These are the main possibilities given:

1. The gift of tongues equals the ability to speak unlearned languages. (Same as at Pentecost)
  - a. Statement of the position: The phenomenon at Corinth was the supernatural speaking of known human languages that the speakers had never learned. These miraculous occurrences are exactly the same as the incident at Pentecost except for the need for the gift of interpretation (i.e. the gift of translation). Presumably, translation was necessary because the languages were not known by the Corinthians. The problem at Corinth then, according to this view, is easy to discern. Some who had the gift were exercising it in an improper way (without translation, etc.) and for selfish reasons (for self-edification). Speaking in such a miraculous manner was intended to be a sign to unbelievers (v. 22) that the Gospel was for all peoples. In other words, the Gospel of the New Covenant is cosmopolitan, and not just for the Jews, as was the Old Covenant (a.k.a. Mosaic Covenant). If any unbelievers were visiting the church at Corinth while the gift of tongues was being exhibited without translation, the unbelievers would think the Christians were quite mad (v. 23).

When this gift was exercised, the very words came from God. The speaker's intellect was by-passed. He himself did not know the meaning of what was spoken until he heard the translation. And although it by-passed the speaker's mind, it was assumed that the speaker could stop and start, or even suppress the gift until the next meeting. Otherwise the Apostle's instructions for its use would not make sense (14:26-28). Robert Gundry says:

*...in normative Christian glossolalia the speaker was not seized with uncontrollable excitement, but maintained self-control with the ability to wait or to keep completely quiet. (See 'Ecstatic Utterance' (N.E.B.) JOURNAL OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, Oct. 1966, pp. 299-307.)*

When the translation was given, it was the word of God in much the same sense as the utterance of one who had the gift of prophecy. Perhaps only the nature of the content varied. The *tongue-translation* utterance was more declaratory, i.e., the wonders of God; prophecy was more exhortational, e.g., *This is what you are to do!*). Apparently the person who had the gift of tongues might also have the gift of translation (see 14:5,13). (Note: the person with both gifts does not skip the gift of tongues as does the prophet, for then there would be no value to the sign.)

- b. Support: (1) Linguistic evidence strongly supports real language, i.e., the primary meaning of the word *glossa* is *language*, and the word for *interpret* (*hermeneuo*) means to *translate*. (2) Communication of propositional truth is emphasized, hence the need for translation. (3) A theological argument some use is that the miracle of Pentecost and gift of tongues reverses the Babel experience (Gen. 11). (4) Paul's quotation of Isa. 28: 11-12 (in 14:21ff) makes a strong case for human language. In this passage Isaiah is prophesying that when the people hear the foreign tongue of the enemy (the Assyrians) they will know that his prophesy of God's judgment is true. (5) Another strong argument supporting of the position that the tongues were actual languages, is that Paul wrote the First Epistle to the Corinthians (c. 55 A.D.) before Luke wrote Acts (c. 63 A.D.). Therefore, Paul, because of his prior acquaintance with Luke, would not write about a different phenomena. Note how Luke writes about Paul's involvement where tongues were spoken in Acts 19.
- c. Problems: (1) According to some, this view leaves us with too many unanswered questions. For example, if the gift is given by the Spirit, why did He not also include the gift of translation at Corinth if that was necessary? (2) Also, several references from the passage (chapter 14) leave us with some doubt that rational human speech is involved, e.g. 14:2ff. and v. 9: *So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?* See also vv. 14 and 18. (3) Some would say that the incidents of tongues speaking in Acts could be seen as involuntary acts. An Old Testament passage in I Sam 19 is also cited as an involuntary act.

## 2. Ecstatic utterances

## Two Forms:

Note: there is some debate about the definition of *ecstasy*. Some believe the definition centers around the fact that the utterance (whether a known human language or not) is an involuntary, uncontrollable act. Others say the *ecstasy* refers to the utterance itself which is not human language but could be either voluntary or involuntary.

### a. Involuntary ecstasy:

- (1) Statement of the position: This view understands the gift of tongues to be verbal sounds and ejaculations that are uttered involuntarily under the influence of powerful emotional and religious feeling, i.e., under the power of the Holy Spirit. The key word is *involuntary*. The sounds emitted by the gifted may be real human language, gibberish, or a combination. It is argued that the three passages in Acts describe an involuntary act.

- (2) Problems:

This phenomena does not seem to fit the situation in Corinth, mainly because Paul's regulations limiting the practice of the gift to 2 or 3 per meeting imply that the gift can be controlled by the one with the gift. However, the above description does seem to fit, at least in some cases, what is seen today in some congregations witnessed by this writer and others (I mainly refer to the fact that it appeared to be uncontrolled or involuntary). This form of ecstatic utterance was common in the ancient mystery religions practiced at Corinth and is still seen in many animistic religions of today. Psychologists and anthropologists refer to it as *altered states*.

### b. Non-human language ecstasy:

- (1) Statement of the position: This form of ecstatic utterance is comprised of a number of sequences of sounds that appear to have the form of language but in fact do not when examined by linguists. (Research has shown repeatedly that the practitioner always uses phonemes of his or her native language.) This is

the view of some versions of the English Bible, e.g. The New English Bible. The KJV translators apparently also believed that the phenomenon at Corinth was ecstatic utterances in this sense. When the word *glossa* appears in the singular they translated it *unknown tongue*, not as in *unknown language*, but as a non-language. The word *unknown* is not in the original. The vocalizations according to this position could be heavenly languages (angelic), or simply the language of the Holy Spirit. It is a wholly controllable gift; the speaking can be stopped or started at will. Since the gift is not a human language, the gift of interpretation is not the equivalent of a translator. For this view the Greek *hermeneuo* means *interpret*, as one would a dream or a parable. This also meets the description of what can be presently witnessed in many charismatic churches, i.e. they do not appear to be human languages and in many cases they are exercised voluntarily.

- (2) Support: (a) Ultimately those who hold this view are deeply influenced by the English translations which render *glossa* as *unknown tongue*. (b) Others argue that Paul is referring to unknown tongues or non-human language in 13:1 when he says, *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...*. (c) It matches the experiences of many believers today. (d) Many verses in I Cor. 14 seem to demand non-language utterances, e.g., 14:2,14,15,18,19.
- (3) Problems: (a) It ignores the strong linguistic evidence mentioned earlier about the definitions of *glossa* and *hermeneuo*. (b) It downplays, though does not totally deny that the main purpose of the gift is to communicate some truth. (c) It also downplays the purpose of the gift which was a sign to unbelievers. It is hard to see how unbelievers would be impressed had the sign not been real languages the speaker had never learned. This problem is heightened by the fact that Paul warns that unbelievers would conclude they were mad. (d) In 13:1, note that Paul also says he speaks with the tongues of men! But what is even more likely, the greek indicates that Paul is speaking hypothetically. Note the same hypothetical argument in the following verses. He does not actually know all mysteries nor did he actually give his body to be burned.

### 3. A language of prayer

- a. Statement of the position: This view is similar to the previous view in that the gift is not an actual known human language. Rather, the emphasis is on the gift as a personal aid to worship whereby one prays to God in the spirit without going through the intellect. It is a prayer given by the Spirit through the human spirit. The sounds made by the gifted can be non-language sounds (no actual words, grammar or syntax) or the language of angels or the Holy Spirit. The position is based on the following passages: Rom. 8:26 ...*We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express*; I Cor 4:2a--*For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God*; I Cor. 14:14ff--*If I pray in a tongue....*
- b. Problems: (1) This seems to completely violate Paul's argument about the public purpose of the gift in that the gifts are to build up the Body and are for a sign to unbelieving observers. (2) The Romans passage does not clearly support this view. One of the key words in the passage is only used here, and is difficult to define. On the other hand, this passage clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit helps all Christians pray, not just those who have the gift of tongues. (3) In I Cor. 14:2 where Paul says *For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God* could be referring to one who speaks without a translator. (4) This version of the gift is very frequently observed today in public worship services during prayer times where many worshipers (both men and women) pray audibly and simultaneously. This certainly seems to violate Paul's clear instructions for use. (4) It is rather strange if praying in tongues is to be the norm for Christians that Christ himself did not instruct His disciples to pray this way.

### 4. A coded message

- a. Statement of the position: Taking the cue from computer language, a more recent view is that the gift may have involved utterances that did not have the characteristics of human language, but nevertheless could communicate cognitive content in a code much as a computer program. This view arose from an attempt to understand the modern phenomena of speaking in tongues, which in the light of scientific studies, indicated a non-language phenomena, but still wished to

adhere to the dictum that the gift involved a rational communication of content. Hence the gift involves speaking in audible sounds that are unlike any known human language that are induced by the Holy Spirit to communicate a message that then can be de-coded by the one with the gift of interpretation.

- b. Problems: (a) It fails to fully account for the linguistic evidence (*glossa*) and it sees *hermeneuo* in the unlikely sense of interpreting a dream or parable. (b) Perhaps the major defect is it downgrades the gift as sign in our estimation. (c) It seems unlikely that Paul would speak of ten thousand words in a tongue (v.19) if he had in view speech that was encoded and not verbal.

## 5. Pseudo Tongues

- a. Statement of the position: The genuine gift of tongues involved the speaking in known human languages (i.e., cognitive communication) that one had never learned (as in view #1) as a sign to unbelievers, but at Corinth, those worshipping in the church were speaking ecstatically as in the pagan mystery religions (i.e., involuntarily and/or non-linguistically). Speaking in this manner had become a matter of spiritual pride as was also true of the practitioners of the mystery religions. It was an experience sought for its own sake. Paul teaches that the Christian gifts are for edification of others and his exhortation and rules for regulation are his way of curbing the practice.
- b. Support: (a) Those who hold this view claim there are numerous allusions in the Corinthian passage to the practice of the mystery religions. Examples given are: (1) In I Cor. 2:10--3:4, Paul contrasts the one who has the Spirit, i.e., the *spiritual one* (*pneumatikos*) with the one devoid of the Spirit (*psukikos*). In the mystery religions to have a manifestation of *the spirit* was extraordinary; it was a peak experience, whereas Paul teaches that in the Christian way, the spirit is always present and abiding. (2) In I Cor. 12:2,3, Paul gives two sources of spiritual utterances, one evil and one good. Paul seems to be implying that the immature Corinthians were not always perceptive as to the source. (3) In I Cor. 13:1, Paul says the ability to speak with tongues of men and angels without love is no better than being a *resounding gong* or a *clanging cymbal*. Both of these instruments were used in the mystery religions to

produce the emotional intoxication needed to experience the sacred. (4) In 14:2, Paul says *one who speaks in a tongue...speaks mysteries*. It is asserted that here Paul is alluding to the pagan mysteries and should not be viewed as being a commendation from the Apostle. (5) Women were not only prominent in the mystery cult ritual but were very emotional and vocal according to historical sources (Strabo). Since the early church largely followed the pattern of synagogue worship where men led in worship Paul may be counteracting this practice in I Cor 14:33ff. (6) In I Cor. 14:12, the NIV says, *Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts try to excel in gifts that build up the church*. The Greek, however, says more literally *Since you are zealous for the spirits....* The meaning, in context of their religious past, may be: *Since you have such a strong inclination toward spiritual things (or the mystical)...* . (7) *Speaking in tongues* was a well known practice in antiquity. The same phrase that Paul uses in the Greek *glossai lalein* is found in non-biblical sources. Wayne House says: *Possibly the carnal Corinthians, recent converts from pagan religions, were failing to distinguish between the ecstatic utterance of their past and the true gift of tongues given supernaturally by the Holy Spirit.* (p.142). Charles Smith forcibly adds to this position: *If speaking in tongues involved a supernatural speech in a real language, then every such utterance required a direct miracle by God. This would mean, in the case of the Corinthians, that God was working a miracle at the wrong time and wrong place! He was causing that which He was directing the Apostle to curtail.* (p.26).

- c. Problems: This view seems to have the fewest difficulties, but in spite of this, it is not accepted by a consensus of scholars. Those who disagree with the above, generally give these lines of rebuttal: (1) The linguistic arguments are not unassailable. For example, Paul's use of *mysteries* in I Cor 14:2, does not have the sense given above (i.e., pagan mysteries). And in I Cor. 14:12, the plural *pneumatōn* is translated by all English versions as spiritual gifts, meaning the Corinthians were zealous for spiritual gifts. (2) If the Corinthian experience mimics the pagan experience it seems strange that Paul does not outright condemn it. Rather, at a minimum, he seems to condone the practice as long as it is done with the proper decorum or outside the church service.

## 6. The Composite View

- a. **Statement of the Position:** This view holds that the *glossalia* phenomenon, or the gift of tongues, is a combination of the supernatural speaking of languages not learned, and non-linguistic utterances. It is believed that this occurred at Pentecost. The participants spoke ecstatically (non-language), but also intermittently *spoke of the wonders of God* in the many dialects present at Pentecost. It is further argued that this form of glossalia was also practiced at Corinth but with the wrong emphasis necessitating Paul's regulations.
  
- b. **Support:** (1) They find linguistic support for this broad use of the term *glossalia* in the pagan literature (Plato). (2) It explains why the crowd thought the believers were drunk at Pentecost (2:13). (3) It resolves the apparent difficulties in the Corinthian passage if the broad view is adapted. According to this view, the main problem is the lack of interpretation of the known language utterances in the worship and the lack of order in the services. For many who hold this view it is not inappropriate to exercise this gift without interpretation privately whether it be language or non-language. Indeed Paul seems to encourage this use of the gift in private by using himself as an example (V. 18): *I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church....*
  
- c. **Problems:** While this view has something to offer, in our opinion it seems forced and guilty of special pleading. (1) The linguistic evidence cited is not conclusive. (2) It is just as easy to see how the believers at Pentecost could be assumed drunk if they were loud and animated. (3) The difficult passages in I Cor. 14 that seem to indicate non-language speaking are open to viable alternate interpretation. See for example the works listed by Gaffin and Clowney.

## B. Summary

Some of the above positions are more defensible than others. However, none alleviate all questions; none are unassailable. The above positions can generally be reduced to two approaches:

1. Views that see the Holy Spirit as originating the speech and using the human voice box to communicate a message which bypasses the mind of the speaker. This approach emphasizes the supernatural quality of the

event and its value as a sign to unbelievers. Generally those in this camp conclude that this spectacular gift ceased sometime in the First Century (cessationism).

2. Views that see the speech directed toward God as prayer or praise. The Holy Spirit vocalizes in the form of tongues (generally non-human language) some preconceptual or non-intellectual aspect of man. It originates in the human spirit but bypasses the mind of the speaker. Only God and the one with the gift of interpretation know the content. *Tongues enable one to express concerns resident in the deepest recesses of his being, concerns otherwise suppressed and inhibited by the superficialities of conceptualization and conventional language* (Gaffin, p.73). Those who come from this approach generally believe the gift is for the church today (non-cessationism) and the primary emphasis is for worship, either in public or private.

## V. The Purpose of the Gift

### Possibilities:

- A. To bridge the communication gap: The purpose being to rapidly spread the gospel without the missionaries having to spend years learning the language. There appears to be no basis for this view in the Scriptures. At Pentecost the Jews visiting Palestine all understood Peter's sermon (probably in Aramaic). (Missionaries would love for this to be the case! There are unsubstantiated stories of believers supernaturally preaching the gospel or praying for the lost [in their presence] in an unlearned language.)
- B. A sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit: This is the view held by a large number of older charismatic denominations. The view largely comes from the passages in Acts, particularly chapter 19, where speaking in tongues immediately follows the receiving of the baptism of the Holy spirit with the laying on of hands by the Apostle Paul. In this theological circle it is often common to see no distinction between the *filling of the Holy Spirit*, and the *baptism of the Holy Spirit*. However, the clear teaching of I Cor. 12:13, is that all believers are baptized by the Spirit at the moment of conversion. It is an act that unites all races into One Body; it puts all believers in Christ. It is important to note that this verse was given to a group (the Corinthians) which included many carnal Christians. The *filling* of the Holy Spirit has to do with His control over the life of the believer (Eph. 5:18) and produces in the believer the Fruit of the Spirit.

- C. A sign to unbelieving Jews: I Cor. 14:22 says, *Tongues then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers;...* . The preceding context, which is a quote from Isa. 28:11,12 seems to strongly imply that this is a reference to a time when God pronounced judgement on the nation of Israel. When Israel mocks Isaiah for the seemingly simple repetitious message, God blasts them by informing them that God's speaking to them will be through stammerings and an unrecognizable tongue. In 701 B.C. the Jews were awakened from their sleep by the *babble* of Assyrian. Again in 609 B.C. they heard the Babylonian dialect. These Gentiles speaking in the midst of, and in authority over, the Jews was evidence of God's judgement fulfilled: His hand of blessing was off of them, at least for the time being while they were being judged. The same is true of the evil generation of Christ's and the Apostles' day. Hearing foreign tongues being spoken at the temple mount was highlighted by Peter's use of Isaiah to point out God's judgement on unbelieving Israel. Note the phrase *this people* in v.21. The argument goes back to Pentecost where Jews first were confronted with the sign of tongues and again in Acts 10 and 19, the gift was given as a sign to Jews that gentiles are included in the New Covenant. Note that in Acts 18:1,5, Paul addressed some Jews in Corinth about the claims of Christ. Paul, though an Apostle to the Gentiles, always made it a practice when visiting a new area, to first address the Jews. It may be under these circumstances that Paul himself spoke in tongues as he confessed he did many times (See I Cor. 14:18). This view is further confirmed when the writer of Hebrews, addressing Jews says: *...how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.* (Heb. 2:3,4). This verse would appear to give strong support. The sign then was to authenticate God's message and activity. It gave authority to the Apostles' message of the progress in God's plan of redemption. There is now a new covenant brought about by the work of Christ, and it is cosmopolitan in that it is for all peoples, Jew and Gentile. See also these related passages: I Cor. 1:22; and II Cor. 12:12
- D. As an apologetic or sign to unbelievers in general: By its supernatural nature it would seem logical to conclude that this gift would be used by the Holy Spirit to convict even lost Gentiles. Whether Jews or Gentiles, there definitely were unbelievers in attendance at Corinthian worship services. This is made clear in 14:16,22-24 where the Greek word *idiotes* is used. In this context it had the idea of anyone who had not been initiated into membership. Some specify that it was only a sign gift to unbelievers (Jew or

Gentile) when uninterpreted and exercised in a non-church situation. When experienced in the church, however, it had to be interpreted and was then for the purpose of edification (See Hoehner, p.59ff.).

- E. As revelation and for edification: Some see tongues and prophesy as sister gifts with the only difference being the fact that tongues must be interpreted. The message is seen as a revelation from God.
- F. A type of prayer used in worship: It is argued that this is taught in 14:2,4,14-17.
- G. A sign of spirituality: This must have been part of the problem with tongues-speaking at Corinth. The believers, described by Paul as immature and carnal, mistakenly thought speaking in tongues was a sign of spirituality. It was much-sought after and had become a matter of pride. Charismatic groups today almost universally reject the notion that tongues are a sign of advanced spirituality. However, the implication is often there.

## VI. Rules for the Practice of the Gift

In any discussion of Paul's rules for the practice of the gift of tongues one can safely assume from the text itself that something was amiss in the Corinthian church with regard to this gift, as it is the major subject of I Cor 12-14. The Corinthians had apparently misconstrued the importance of the gift and were practicing it in such a way that brought chaos to the worship services. Their witness to honest inquirers was at stake. We can safely assume the above because Paul teaches them that, compared to the other gifts, tongues are not as important. Apparently, as in the native mystery religions, tongues were being elevated as the supreme religious experience. Paul teaches that this violates the foundation with which all the gifts are to be exercised: in love and for the building up of the body. It is also apparent that many were speaking in tongues simultaneously without the utterances ever being interpreted. Women may have been dominating in the speaking, as also happened in the mystery religions. Therefore, Paul, because God is a God of order, gives regulations for the practice to curb their excesses. His rules are as follows:

- A. No more than 2 or 3 (apparently men) are to speak at a single meeting. V.27. This regulation only makes sense in the light of v.32 which says: *The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.*
- B. They are to exercise the gift consecutively. V.27

- C. Someone with the gift of translation must be present to translate (or interpret) each message. V.27.
- D. Women were to be silent. The problem here is the passage in I Cor. 11:5, where Paul does permit women to speak (*prophesy*) though with a head-covering. This is another enigmatic passage in I Corinthians that may have some cultural explanation. Women deeply involved in the mystery religions often shaved their heads. The head-covering mandate may have had something to do with this practice.
- E. The practice of tongues, however one conceives it, is not to be banned at Corinth. V.39.
- F. Order must prevail in the worship service. V.40.

## VII. The Duration of the Gift

Perhaps the only question more perplexing than the nature of the gift is the duration of the gift. Is the gift of tongues for today's church? There two conflicting answers:

- A. Cessationism: This view says the supernatural gifts were for signs in the early church and are therefore not necessary for today's church. Their argument is based on texts having to do with signs, e.g., Heb. 2:3,4, and I Cor. 13:8 (*where there are tongues, they will be stilled*), theological arguments, and the fact that the supernatural gift of tongues (as they conceive it) is not seen today and has not been seen since the First Century.
- B. Non-cessationism: This view, which sees the purpose of the gift of tongues as a prayer to God and as an aid to worship believes the gift is for today's church. They would cite verses in I Cor. 14, which seem to indicate their premise that it is a prayer to God and that it can be practiced in private. They would argue that Paul strongly urged that the gift not be suppressed (v.39). If it was important then, why not today? In addition, they would appeal to experience.
- C. The Problem: Neither side has a clear mandate from Scripture. Both sides appeal to experience which by itself is not sufficient to establish a doctrine. Actually, the former appeals to a lack of experience, which is nevertheless an argument from experience! (Note: the issue of

cessationism vs. non-cessationism will be dealt with in more detail in a subsequent briefing.)

## VIII. Concluding Observations

### A. What is clear

1. The gift of tongues was meant to communicate content.
2. Paul's rules for use are mandatory if exercised in worship services.
3. It can be controlled by the person receiving the gift.
4. Tongues should never be the basis or grounds for Christian fellowship.
5. The exercise of the gift is not a sign of spirituality, the baptism, or the filling of the Holy Spirit.

### B. What is unclear (where there is need for more debate)

1. The source of the content: is it God speaking, or is the source the Human spirit? In essence, it is a question about the exact nature and purpose of the gift.
2. Whether or not the gift is for personal edification, e.g., in private devotion?
3. Its importance: It receives scant mention in the NT outside of the Corinthian passage (only in Acts and in the ending of Mark 16 which may not have been included in the earliest manuscripts), yet Paul seems to put it on par with prophesy when properly exercised with an interpreter.
4. Whether or not women should exercise the gift in church.
5. Is it a legitimate gift for today? Should believers seek it?

For Further Study:

Blomberg, Craig L. *NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY: I CORINTHIANS*.  
 Carson, D.A. *SHOWING THE SPIRIT: A THEOLOGICAL EXPOSITION OF I*

**CORINTHIANS 12-14.**

Clowney, Edmund P. *THE CHURCH*. See Chapter 16.

Fee, Gordon D. *THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS*.

Fee, Gordon D. *GOD'S EMPOWERING PRESENCE: THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL*. See pp. 146-261.

Gaffin, Richard B. Jr. *PERSPECTIVES ON PENTECOST*.

Grudem, Wayne. *SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY*. See pp. 1016-1087.

Hoehner, Harold W. *The Purpose of Tongues in I Corinthians 14:20-25*. In: *WALVOORD: A TRIBUTE*.

House, H. Wayne *Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth*. in: *BIBLIOTHECA SACRA*, vol, 140. pp.134-150.

MacArthur, John F. Jr. *CHARISMATIC CHAOS*.

Smith, Charles R. *TONGUES IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE*.

Witherington. Ben, III. *CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY IN CORINTH*.