Tongue-Speaking in Corinth

Chapter Two

On Paul's second major journey to preach the gospel to gentiles, he went into Europe, preaching briefly in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens (Acts 16:12-17:15).
In Corinth, however, Paul spent a year and a half (Acts 18:1, 9-11) — a long stay for an apostle who was "constantly on the move" (2 Corinthians 11:26). Corinth was a seaport city with a reputation for immorality. There Paul found Jews and gentiles who wanted to be taught the Word of God.
After the congregation had been established in Corinth, Paul eventually moved on — to Ephesus in Asia Minor, Caesarea in Judea, Antioch in Syria, and, after a few years, to Ephesus again (Acts 18:18-23; 19:1).

Bad News From Corinth

While Paul was back in Ephesus, he heard about the Corinthian church. The news was not good — the new Christians were arguing among themselves about several aspects of Christian behavior. Their example made Christianity look bad, even to the immoral pagans!

The Corinthian Christians sent Paul a letter asking him for advice about a number of topics, including the topic of tongues. They had been speaking in tongues frequently, and they asked him about this spiritual gift. Their letter gave him an opportunity to give them the guidance they needed.

In his letter Paul criticized them because their arguments were ruining the unity that Christians ought to have. "Some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you" (1 Corinthians 1:11). "I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it" (1 Corinthians 11:18). "Your meetings do more harm than good" (verse 17).
In their disagreements, some of the people claimed to follow one Christian leader, and some claimed to follow another (1 Corinthians 1:12). The behavior of the Corinthian Christians was wrong, and Paul had to correct them.
"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (verse 10).

Paul Writes About Their Problems

In chapters 1-4, Paul tried to help the Corinthians see the problems of disunity. They were acting like unbelievers, not like Christians (1 Corinthians 3:3).
He told them what to do about sexual immorality within the Church (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:12-20) and lawsuits between Christians (verses 1-8). These subjects illustrate the problems the congregation was having. Paul had to set them straight with strong words.
Then Paul began to answer their questions. "Now for the matters you wrote about..." (1 Corinthians 7:1). First, he dealt with the topic of marriage in chapter 7.
Chapter 8 begins to address their next subject: "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up,
but love builds up" (verse 1).

What Is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?

John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize people with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:6-8). In Acts 1:5, Jesus told his disciples that they would receive this baptism in a few days. On the Festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples (Acts 2:4), fulfilling the predictions of John and Jesus. Peter said the Spirit had been poured out on them (verses 17, 33). Years later, the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and other gentiles (Acts 10:44-45). This was the same as the Holy Spirit being "poured out,"

From the way Paul writes his letter, we can tell that the Corinthian Christians were proud of their "knowledge." Paul points out that their knowledge, at least the way they were using it, was harmful to their spiritual growth. Their knowledge was causing arguments and divisions in the congregation. Love, he writes, is more valuable, and it is a better indicator of Christian living.

Chapter 9 explains Paul's right as an apostle, and chapter 10 continues the subject of food sacrificed to idols. In chapter 11, Paul comments on some problems the Corinthians had in their worship meetings.

Various Spiritual Gifts

In chapter 12, Paul begins a new section, which contains comments on tongues. "Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant" (verse 1). They needed instruction to help them use their spiritual gifts in a helpful way.

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, Paul tells us, even though they are all inspired by the same Spirit (verse 4). God gives these special abilities "for the common good" — so Christians can help one another (verse 7). Paul lists various gifts, including "speaking in different kinds of tongues, and...the interpretation of tongues" (verse 10).

What are these tongues? Are they foreign languages, like the miraculous tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11)? Or does this gift of tongues produce other kinds of sounds? The fact that a supernatural gift was needed for interpreting the sounds (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:13) indicates that the speaking may not have been a human language. But we cannot know whether modern tongue-speaking is anything like the Corinthian practice. Paul lists similar spiritual gifts in his letter to the Roman Christians (Romans 12:6-8), but that list doesn't mention tongues or interpretation. Corinth seems to have been the only church congregation where tongues were spoken regularly.

Not everyone has the same spiritual gift or ability, Paul notes. God distributes them: one power to one person, another gift to the next person, a third ability to another, just as God determines (1 Corinthians 12:8-11). By dividing the gifts in this way, God encourages members to work with and help one another.

The analogy of a human body illustrates this. Feet, hands, eyes and other parts serve different functions. By contributing to the body as a whole, the various parts serve one another. So it is in the Church, the Body of Christ (verses 12-27). God appoints people with various spiritual functions: apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, helpers, administrators and speaking in different kinds of tongues (verse 28).

or having "received" the Holy Spirit (verses 45, 47), or being "baptized" with the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15-17).

All these terms refer to the same thing: The Holy Spirit is given to God's people. The promised baptism is available to all who believe (Acts 2:38-39). Paul indicated that people usually received the Holy Spirit when they believed (Acts 19:2). The book of Acts records several instances when people were filled with the Holy Spirit (see page 8).

Paul and the other New Testament writers do not use the phrase "baptism of the Spirit," but they do write about the Holy Spirit being given to God's people. The Spirit is available to all believers as "a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13-14).

In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul writes that all believers are baptized by the Spirit into the Body of Christ, the Church. In Ephesians 5:18 he tells us to "be filled with the Spirit." In Greek, a writer could use a different form of a word to indicate whether a command was for a onetime event or for a continual activity. Paul used the continual form, indicating that Christians should always live according to the Spirit. He was not writing about an unusual experience that initiates people into a new status.

Nothing in Paul's epistles suggests that the gift of the Spirit comes in two steps or blessings. He does not suggest that the gift of tongues, for example, is evidence of having more spiritual power. Romans 12 doesn't even mention tongues as a gift of importance. Church leaders were not required to have the gift of tongues. Instead, they should be able to teach in language that could be understood (1 Timothy 3:1-2, Titus 1:5-9).

What is the evidence of God's Spirit? What can prove that God is in us? His love. If we love others, if we love even our enemies, it is evidence that God's Spirit is guiding us.

If we are inspired to live God's way, if our lives show the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), we are giving evidence that God's Spirit is filling our minds and hearts. A good Christian example is a powerful witness to faith in Jesus Christ.

"Are all apostles?" asks Paul. Of course not. Neither are all Christians prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, tongue-speakers or interpreters (verses 29-30).

From the way Paul presents his argument, it seems that some Corinthians expected every Christian to have the same gift when it came to tongues. They doubted the spirituality of anyone who did not have that gift. That isn't a reasonable way to judge Christianity, Paul tells them. None of these spiritual gifts can be singled out as the one and only test of the Holy Spirit.

The Best Spiritual Quality

It is good to desire the greater spiritual gifts, says Paul, perhaps agreeing with something the Corinthians had written in their letter (verse 31). It seems that the Corinthian Christians eagerly desired to be spiritual and to appear spiritual.

In chapter 13, Paul describes the best evidence of spirituality — love. If love is not present, it does not matter what kind of miracle-working gifts a person might have (verses 1-3).

Paul mentioned "tongues of men and of angels" (verse 1). "Tongues of men" means human languages, but what are the "tongues of...angels"? There is no indication in the Bible that angels speak to humans in mysterious languages. Every time they spoke to humans, they were understood.

So why did Paul mention angelic languages? It may be that some of the Corinthian tongue-speakers claimed that their sounds were angelic. Or perhaps Paul used the term as the most exalted tongue-speaking he could imagine. And, of course, in the realm of spirits there certainly is a different vocabulary. In any case, Paul tells us that tongue-speaking without love would be nothing, no matter how "spiritual" it might appear.

God's way of life is based on love. Love perseveres and endures forever; it will never fail or become unnecessary (verses 7-8). In contrast, spiritual gifts will eventually no longer be needed. Knowledge, at least the kind that the Corinthians were proud of, will pass away (verse 8). Even prophecy, a gift that Paul praises, will cease.

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes [at the return of Christ], the imperfect disappears.... Now I know in part; then I shall know fully" (verses 9-12).

When God's people are resurrected and become completely perfect, special spiritual knowledge will no longer be important, because everyone will know fully. Divine messages and predictions will no longer be important, for the same reason. Tongues will likewise cease. Certain spiritual gifts have value in this temporal age, but they are not of eternal significance in the way that love is.

A Better Form of Speaking

Spiritual gifts do have value, so we should want to have them (1 Corinthians 12:31). But what kind of gifts should we desire? We follow the way of love. We should eagerly desire a gift that helps others. "Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church" (1 Corinthians 14:12).

Paul recommends "the gift of prophecy" (verse 1). He does not necessarily refer to predicting the future. The Greek word Paul used here means "an utterance inspired by God...the capacity or ability to utter inspired messages." The verb translated "prophesy" means "to speak under the influence of divine inspiration, with or without reference to future events" (Louw and Nida — see the bibliography).

In other words, the gift of prophecy is, as Edgar Goodspeed translates it, "inspired preaching." Today's English Version calls it "the gift of proclaiming God's message." Speaking in prophecy, Paul says, is better than speaking in tongues. "He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues" (verse 5). Why? Because inspired preaching can be understood, and tongues cannot (without an interpreter).

"Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men.... No one understands him.... But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort" (verses 2-3). Inspired preaching can be understood; its purpose is building or edifying the Church (verses 4, 31) — helping Christians live better lives.

Paul says it is good to speak in tongues, but it is much better to prophesy (verse 5). "I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue" (verse 19). "Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?" (verse 9).

"If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful" (verse 14). If the mind is unfruitful, it implies that even the tongue-speaker didn't understand the sounds. The speaker wouldn't be able to explain it without supernatural help (verse 13).

This is also shown in Paul's comments about musical instruments: The tune isn't identifiable "unless there is a distinction in the notes" (verse 7). Similarly, messages cannot be understood if there is no distinction in sounds. In the tongues spoken by the Corinthians, it seems, words couldn't be distinguished from one another. The message could not be understood.

Were the Corinthians speaking foreign languages that no one in Corinth understood?
Or were the sounds simply not part of any human language?

Paul doesn't clearly tell us. His comments cover both possibilities — sounds that had no meaning, or a foreign language that no one knew. In either case, the result was the same: In Corinth, the tongues could not be understood. They may have had some value to the speaker (verse 4), but they were of no value to the congregation.

Seeking After Signs

Jesus said in Mark 16:17-18: "These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." Some people have taken these verses as a requirement, as if it were a commission that Christians ought to try to fulfill to prove their authenticity. Some groups attempt to pick up poisonous snakes without being harmed. The handlers usually avoid being bitten, but sometimes they are bitten and die. The success rate does not matter. What is important is whether God wants his people to be doing this.

Should God's people do dangerous things so God will rescue them with a miracle for all to see that God approves of them? Are miracles necessary to prove that Christianity is right?

Faith does not come from seeing miracles. The Israelites who crossed the Red Sea saw numerous miracles, but they did not have the faith to obey God. And many Christians have believed without seeing anything dramatic. Faith comes when God allows someone to believe the gospel (Romans 10:13-14; John

Interpretation and Order

Paul used part of his letter to tell the Corinthian Christians how to use the gift of tongues. It seems that it was their regular custom to speak in tongues. But tongues had become a problem — enough of a problem for the Corinthians to ask Paul's advice about the situation.

For the specific circumstances at Corinth, Paul advised tongue-speakers to pray for the gift of interpretation (verse 13); it is only through interpretation that others could learn something from the sounds (verse 5).

"If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church" (verse 28). This implies that the speakers were able to control themselves. They had to be silent unless someone known to have the gift of interpretation was also there. They should speak in an orderly way. They should not disrupt services but contribute to them. Paul explained, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (verse 33). When spiritual gifts are being used, there is no excuse for confusion. If there is chaos, the people are not allowing God to work in them in the way he wants.

Paul stressed that worship services "should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (verse 40). Apparently the Corinthian meetings had been disorderly, with many people speaking at the same time. "If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (verse 23).

In contrast, Paul says, if some outsiders hear inspired speaking and teaching, they may worship God (verses 24-25).

So Paul gave the Corinthians some simple rules for improving the organization of their worship meetings. People could come prepared to participate in various ways, according to their gifts or abilities. The primary rule, based on the way of love, was that "all of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (verse 26).

Only one person should speak at a time, and there should be only two or three speaking in tongues in any one meeting (verse 27). (This rule applied to prophets, too.) If anyone speaks in a tongue, someone must interpret. If no one could explain the message, the tongue-speaker had to be quiet (verse 28).

Paul forcefully corrected the Corinthians on some of their problems, but on the topic of tongues he was gentle. He did not want the correction to cause more division than the problem had caused. "Do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (verses 39-40).

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6:44). The primary miracle is in the heart and mind, not necessarily anything that can be seen.

Moreover, God does not want us to do dangerous things in order to prompt his intervention. Satan tempted Jesus with such a challenge, and Jesus answered, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:5-7). We should not try to force God to do anything. Such conduct shows a lack of faith.

The scripture in Mark 16 is a prediction, not a command. It simply says that some Christians would experience these miracles; it is not a promise to protect all Christians, or to heal all, or that all would speak in tongues, or that all would cast out demons. It indicates that various miracles would happen; it does not say how often they would happen.

Miracles still occur today — healing, for example. Demons have been cast out. Christians have been miraculously spared from accidents. But others have died in faith.

The real proof of Christianity is not miracles. It is the love of God, the fruit of the Spirit of Christ in us, motivating us to love one another and to love and obey God (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22; John 13:34-35; Romans 8:14; Acts 5:32).