

J. KYLE PAISLEY MEMORIAL FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Lord's Day Morning Sermon Notes

10th September 2006

Read: Acts 2: 1-11

The NT Gift of Tongues

I wish to address you today on another important subject, namely the NT practice of speaking in other tongues. I have addressed this issue before at various times but never at a Lord's Day morning worship service. But I feel it necessary to do so for the important reason that there is tremendous confusion on the subject due to the claims of those who are part of the modern tongues speaking phenomenon.

The commencement of this modern phenomenon is to be traced right back to January 1st 1901 when a lady named Agnes Ozman, as it is recorded, spoke in tongues. The event took place at Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas, USA – a school operated by Charles K. Parham, who then initiated the view that tongues speaking is the primary evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. From that point, the modern tongues speaking movement spread across the world, so that today in its most recent form – the Charismatic movement – it enjoys the support of millions of individuals.

A church must examine this kind of phenomenon and adopt its own position concerning it; and the only way to do so is by bringing it to the test of Scripture. “*What saith the Scriptures...*” must always be our watchword when dealing with areas that are controversial; and certainly this issue is most controversial. It is really impossible to cover every aspect of this issue in one message, thus I wish to set before you some main points.

I. FIRST THE TONGUES OF THE NT ARE HUMAN LANGUAGES

This entire passage in Acts 2 is exceedingly clear on this point – the gift of the Spirit on this occasion was the ability to speak in the tongues or languages of the hearers without having to learn those languages. The word for “tongue” in some of these verses is *glossa*. The word is used in the NT of the organ of speech – the physical tongue, James 3: 5. It is also the word always used in the passages where the NT gift of speaking in tongues is in view. But the vital point is that it essentially refers to human languages. For example, in Revelation it is employed 7 times with reference to human languages in the well-known phrase – “*every kindred, and tongue, and people and nation.*” Here, it is obviously used with reference to the people of the earth and the languages spoken in such.

But with reference to the subject before us today, Acts 2 is most clear that the tongues spoken at Pentecost were human languages. See v.8 – the comment is important: “*our own tongue wherein we were born.*” The reference is plainly with respect to human languages. Then immediately there is a list of nations represented, v.v. 9-11a. Then note the comment in v.11b – “*we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*” There can be no doubt but the reference is to the languages of the nations represented. Note v.6 – the word for “language” is *dialektos*; used also in v.8 where it is translated *tongue*, giving us the English word “dialect” which denotes the language used in a certain part of a country or nation. A dialect could be a variation of the main language of a nation. The use of this word demonstrates the remarkable nature of the gift – the apostles were enabled by it to speak in the very dialects of certain nations as well as the main languages. The Spirit in giving them this gift enabled the Apostles to master those languages & dialects immediately & directly without having learned them previously and employ them in delivering God's word.

The importance of this basic point that the tongues of Acts 2 were human languages is of great in that it sets the pattern for the later references to the gift. It is worthy of note that there are only three other places in the N.T. where “tongues” are mentioned after Acts 2 – Acts 10, Acts 19 & 1 Corinthians. We have not time to examine all these passages, but note Acts 10: 45-47 – the same Greek word is used. The detail here would point to the gift as is employed in Acts 2. V.46 – those who listened heard them “*speak with tongues and magnify God.*” Cornelius & his household spoke with “tongues” and the listeners knew that they were magnifying God. Obviously they understood what was being said, implying that the speakers used a human language. Thus, the gift was the same as is in view in Acts 2. Note v.47 & compare with Acts 11: 15 – the words indicate that the experience at Caesarea corresponded with the experience of the Apostles at Pentecost. Thus, we may rightly conclude that since the gift in Acts 2 was the ability to speak human language without study, the same is true in Acts 10.

II. SECOND, NT TONGUES WERE A MIRACULOUS SIGN

See 1 Cor 14: 22 and note the words “*wherefore tongues are for a sign.*” The word “sign” is a standard N.T. word used 77 times. However, in the vast majority of the usages of the word in the N.T. it is either associated with the miraculous or is used directly of the miraculous. For example it is used in expressions such as “*signs and wonders...*” or “*miracles and wonders and signs.*” Thus, when it is stated in 1 Cor 14: 22 that “tongues are for a sign...” we would certainly conclude that N.T. tongues were a sign in the sense of the miraculous.

It should be added that some misconstrue these words completely. They will agree that tongues are a miraculous sign. But they will then proceed to teach that tongues-speaking is **the** sign of all signs regarding spiritual matters – i.e. that one is filled with the Spirit or that one is saved. Such claims are spurious but dangerous and are very damaging to spiritual life. Note:

(a) There was the genuine gift of tongues – Acts 2: 4. Note that the Apostles' use of tongues was “*as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” Thus, there was the genuine gift.

(b) However, every believer did not have this particular gift. See 1 Cor 12: 10 – clearly shown that in the disposition of the gifts *not everyone* received the gift of tongues. See also v.30 – “*do all speak with tongues?*” The question is rhetorical plainly showing that not all believers in the N.T. Church by any means spoke with tongues.

Thus, to teach that tongues are **the** sign of all signs is a contradiction of these Scriptures, for the Spirit did not give the genuine gift to all & sundry in the early church. All believers possessed the Spirit, Rom 8: 9, but as 1 Cor 12 shows, not all believers in apostolic times had the genuine gift of tongues. The point is that the Spirit sovereignly gave the genuine gift to His servants to enable them to bring the Gospel in languages never previously known. Therefore, NT tongues were a miraculous sign, Acts 2: 4 – note that they spoke with tongues “*as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” This language denotes that tongues were the gift of the Spirit. See 1 Cor 12: 10 where Paul, in listing the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, says “*to another, divers kinds of tongues.*” Thus, tongues speaking in Acts was a supernatural & miraculous gift.

III. THIRD NT TONGUES WERE A MIRACULOUS SIGN TO UNBELIEVER IN THE SENSE OF BEING A MEANS OF BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO THEM

Again note 1 Cor 14: 22, “*Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe but to them that believe not.*” In Pentecostal/Charismatic circles it is taught very dogmatically that tongues-speaking is a sign to the believer, namely that he or she is in a good spiritual state etc. But such teaching is a reversal of the language & meaning of Scripture. The Holy Spirit teaches that tongues were a miraculous sign, not some personal identifying mark with relation to one’s spiritual state. Moreover, they were a miraculous sign **not to the believer but to the unbeliever**. It is to do despite to the Scriptures of truth to turn such a clear statement around, which is essentially what many caught up in the modern tongues experience will do.

But when Paul says that tongues are for a sign to the unbeliever, he certainly has in mind the original purpose of the genuine gift of tongues – preaching the Gospel to the unconverted in their own languages without the preacher having to learn those languages as happened at Pentecost. Thus, on that day God was signifying by the gift of tongues that the Gospel was going to go out into the entire world.

There is every reason to conclude that what happened at Pentecost happened again: namely that the Apostles used this gift to take the Gospel to nations whose languages they had never learned. Thus, tongues-speaking was a miraculous sign to the unbeliever in that sense that it was for his benefit & blessing in having the Gospel brought to him in his own tongue.

Taking again the original use of the gift in Acts 2 it may be clearly observed that the N.T. gift of tongues played a significant role in the redemptive purposes of God – that all nations were included in God’s redemptive programme. See Acts 1: 8 – the Gospel was to be taken to all nations, even to the uttermost parts of the earth, a work that would be accomplished by the pouring out of the Spirit. Thus, when He was poured out, the event was marked by this miraculous ability of preaching in tongues formerly not known – the Lord was showing that the Gospel would go to all nations or tongues. In that sense, as Paul puts it, tongues were a miraculous sign to the unbeliever. They had the Gospel brought to them in this miraculous fashion.

In the light of this, Paul’s words in v.22 are understood as a rebuke to the Corinthians when he says that tongues were a sign to the unbeliever not the believer – the gift was designed to benefit the unsaved and was to be used for that purpose of bringing the Gospel to them. But in Corinth believers were practising the gift in their own church meetings instead of using it to take the Gospel out to the lost. I would suggest to you that this was why Paul addressed the Corinthians on this subject – they were abusing the gift of tongues-speaking by not using it for its intended purpose in N.T. times. Note v.39 – “*forbid not to speak with tongues.*” These words must be understood in the light of God’s purpose in giving the gift – to take the Gospel to the unsaved. Paul certainly did not forbid the proper use of the gift as it was intended for N.T. times.

IV. FINALLY THE GIFT OF TONGUES WAS ALSO IN ORDER TO AUTHENTICATE THE APOSTOLIC MINISTRY & MESSAGE

The first reference to “tongues” in the N.T. is in Mark 16: 17 and the second reference is here in Acts 2. In Mark 16: 17 Christ made a prediction concerning the ministry of the Apostles – “*they shall speak with new tongues.*” It is vital to note that this prediction is in the context of making reference to the ministry of the Apostles. In the book of Acts no miracle ever takes place except in connection with the Apostles either directly or indirectly – indirectly in the sense of taking place either in their presence or through those delegated by them. Moreover, it is imperative to note that the miracle of speaking with tongues in the book of Acts never takes place except in connection with the Apostles, again either directly or indirectly.

The importance of this observation is clear: **Apostolic miracles including speaking with tongues were granted by God in order to authenticate the ministry & the message of the apostles.** Therefore, speaking with tongues, which, as noted, was obviously a supernatural or miraculous gift, was given directly by the Spirit of God for the purpose of validating the ministry of the Apostles and the message they delivered. Any study of the subject of *N.T. tongues speaking* must always keep this fact in mind. The whole tenor of the Acts 2 passage makes it clear that when the gift was exercised by the Apostles on the day of Pentecost what they had to say was characterised by great authority. Those who listened on knew that they were hearing the message of God, v.11 – “*we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*” Here is the point – the Apostles were addressing Jews, who at least revered the OT Scriptures as their authority in spiritual matters. Thus, since there was no written NT at that point, the miraculous gift like tongues speaking authenticated the message of the risen Christ as preached by the Apostles; see Acts 14: 3. Vital conclusion – once the NT was written there was no further need for the sign miracle – including the miracle of tongues as seen in the NT. The real gift, therefore, was temporary and has ceased, see 1 Cor 13: 8. Thus, what is practised today is not the NT gift and must be rejected.