

# **St. Mary's Sermon Series**

**1 Corinthians 14:26-33a 39&40**

**Spiritual Gifts:**

**Speaking in Tongues (part 2)**

I want to begin this sermon with a brief recap of Speaking in Tongues – Part 1.

The gift of tongues is the Spirit inspired ability to pray in a language that has not been learnt. That language might be another human language or even the language of the Angels. We came to the conclusion that the gift of tongues was different from all the other gifts of the spirit which are given for the benefit of other people, with the specific purpose of building up God's people and building up the church; whereas the gift of tongues is to help the speaker to overcome their inability to pray. In particular this gift is helpful in our praise of God, a much neglected area of most people's prayer life. The gift of tongues then is **one** of the ways in which we pray in the Spirit and when used in a person's private prayer life does not need to be interpreted. Paul suggests that the gift can be either spoken or sung. We also concluded that, because of its very beneficial nature, the gift of tongues was available to all Christians; all we have to do is ask and step out in faith. We also saw that Paul valued and used the gift of tongues extensively in his own personal prayer life. Paul saw this as the primary use and function of this gift.

But Paul was also aware that the gift of tongues, when used appropriately, could be used beneficially in the life of the church. As far as the use of the gift of tongues was concerned in the life of the church, Paul's concern was for intelligibility and he saw no value whatsoever in people demonstrating that they had the gift of tongues just for the sake of it - as seemed to be happening in the church at Corinth. If no one was able to understand what was being said Paul considered it to be a complete waste of time. So, in public worship Paul preferred to speak five words, which were understood by everyone, rather than 10,000 words in tongues.

Paul was adamant that the reason for this was that: if someone, who was not a believer or not a member of the church, came into the meeting while everyone was speaking in tongues, they would instantly be put off from joining the church, concluding that Christians are all crazy.

Of course, this doesn't mean that Paul forbade speaking in tongues within the context of a church service all together. Instead Paul gave very clear and specific guidelines for the use of the gift in the church. In any one meeting he allowed two or three people to speak in tongues, one at a time, provided that, on each occasion, there was also an interpretation. In this way everyone could benefit from the prayers that were being prayed and add their own amen (so be it). While Paul was happy for everyone to use the gift of tongues in their

personal prayer life he clearly recognised that not everyone had the ability to use the gift publicly within the church.

The gift of tongues is given, as a general rule, to missionaries taking the gospel to foreign lands, resulting in them not needing to take the time and effort to learn the language of the people to whom they are going.

If speaking in tongues is a spirit inspired prayer language, then the gift of interpretation is also a spirit inspired gift. It is not a learnt human ability. I am sure that we have all seen pictures from, for example, the European parliament, where a member has been giving a speech and all the other delegates are wearing headphones through which they are receiving an instant translation of the speech in their own language. The ability to translate a language immediately, impressive though it is, is still a natural, learnt ability and as such is fallible and open to mistranslation. Mark Stibbe gave a marvellous illustration of a mistranslation from a leader's conference he once attended in Norway. He said. "If a leader wants his people to bleed, then he must be prepared to haemorrhage." But his translator gave the following translation. "If a leader wants his people to bleed then they must be prepared to have haemorrhoids." Mark concluded that a lot of the pastors were shuffling rather uncomfortably in their seats at this point!

Perhaps the best way to explain how the public manifestation of the gift of tongues works is to give you an example. I have come across numerous true stories of how the Lord has used the gift of tongues to be a positive blessing to others. Let me share just one example with you:

A few years ago now I heard of a Jew who decided to go to church one day to prove to himself once and for all the Christianity was not true. During the course of the service someone prayed out loud in tongues. Quite unbeknown, the person who prayed in tongues prayed in perfect Hebrew, by name, for the Jew's mother who was seriously ill in hospital at the time. After the service the Jew went up to the person who had prayed in tongues and ask how they knew about his mother. Of course the person who had prayed in tongues was completely unaware of what they had prayed and was very surprised by the translation of his prayer. When the Jew discovered that this person did not know a single word of Hebrew

or anything about his family, but had been praying in the power of the Holy Spirit, not surprisingly he was convinced, not that Christianity was not true but in fact that it is true and gave his life to the Lord.

Although this was an appropriate spirit inspired use of the gift of tongues, I don't think Paul would have been particularly impressed with this example because, in the strictest sense, there was not a public translation of the tongue and the majority of people in the church were unaware of what happened at the end of the service. However this example has many similarities to what happened on the day of Pentecost, when the disciples rushed out onto the street proclaiming God's praise in languages that the spirit gave to them. The crowd, despite coming from many different places and speaking many different languages, all heard them speaking in their own language and therefore didn't need an interpretation, as they instantly recognised what was being said in their mother tongue, although the disciples might have appreciated a translation.

I want to finish by addressing another very common error with the gift of tongues and interpretation. As we saw last week, speaking in tongues is a beautiful prayer language addressed to God. It follows logically that any interpretation of tongues should also be a prayer addressed to God. Over the years I have been in several meetings when someone has prayed out aloud in tongues and, quite rightly, the leader of the worship has asked us to wait on God for an interpretation. On every single occasion someone has given a word from God, which I believe has been incorrectly understood to be the interpretation. In my view what we have had instead has been a prophecy. Both the tongues and the prophecy might well have been inspired by the Spirit but, because of the incorrect understand of the gift, we have been denied a full appreciation of the tongue. What should have taken place is that the leader had asked everyone to test the prophecy that had been give to see if it was truly from the Lord and also ask everyone to go on listening to the Lord until someone had received the correct interpretation.