

Revival and 'Tongues'

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Quotations are from the Revised Version

IN SOME PARTS of the world considerable damage has been caused by the efforts of individuals to introduce the practice of so-called 'tongues' into assemblies. The usual method has been to convene private gatherings where Christians are urged to seek the 'gift', after which pressure is brought to bear upon their assemblies. On a smaller scale, similar methods have already been adopted in Britain and there are reasons to believe that pressure is now going to be stepped up. It therefore behoves responsible brethren to give urgent consideration to the whole subject, so that proper guidance may be given before believers are influenced.

Revival

The issue is often confused because this effort to introduce 'tongues' is inter-twined with a call to seek 'revival'. Earnest Christians, painfully aware of the need of true revival, naturally listen to such a call with sympathy but we must be on our guard against the false assumption that there is some natural and necessary connection between 'tongues' and 'revival'. How any believer with the slightest insight into conditions at Corinth, where there was inordinate enthusiasm for 'tongues', can regard such manifestations as an essential prelude to or accompaniment of revival passes our comprehension. That they have occurred in the midst of some revivals is undeniable, but we may well ask whether they were intrusions. Many who would not go so far as to claim, what some do claim, that 'tongues' are a necessary evidence of new birth, nevertheless, regard them as an essential evidence of spirituality. If conditions at Corinth are not a sufficient answer

to such, may we ask them to think of the thousands of greatly used servants of God down the generations who neither possessed nor desired the 'gift'. Are we to dismiss them as having been immature or unspiritual?

Earnestness a Guarantee?

Because many who are so enthusiastic about their ability to speak in 'tongues' are earnest and devoted Christians we are asked to believe that they must, therefore, be right in their convictions. We gladly consent to the first proposition from happy experience of personal fellowship with some of them, but we beg to dissent from the dangerous proposition that a person's earnestness is a guarantee that he cannot be mistaken. Like our views, or anybody else's, they must be brought to the test of Scripture. Because of the sincerity of many of the adherents of the Tongues Movement, many brethren who ought to be giving assemblies a lead allow their commendable charity to override their duty to speak out clearly. Others seem unwilling to arrive at a decision for fear of discounting what may after all be of God. Certainly to do this would be a serious thing but, after all, leaders have a responsibility to lead and timidity and indecision are reprehensible in those who should be able to give sound instruction. Surely there is an urgent need to reach clear convictions; or are we to vacillate whilst young believers are being indoctrinated and then, when it is too late, deplore the consequences? Let us then settle down to an examination of the subject.

Tongues in The Acts

Considerations of space compel us to rely upon the reader making himself familiar with the passages to which we shall refer. It will be obvious to most that the tongues spoken of in Acts 2 were actual human languages and dialects. How else could anyone interpret such expressions as

'every man heard them speaking in his own language',
2. 6;

'how hear we, every man in our own language, wherein we were born?', 2. 8;

'we do hear them speaking in our tongues the mighty works of God', 2. 11?

If these quotations do not indicate clearly that what was

uttered in the Spirit was in recognizable languages, we might well ask how it could be made more clear.

The Purpose of Tongues

These tongues were not for the specific purpose of preaching the Gospel. The hearers heard, not the Gospel exactly, but a recital of 'the mighty works of God'. The preaching of the Gospel was left to Peter who was able to address the great concourse in one language understood by all. As Paul says distinctly in 1 Corinthians 14. 21-22 'tongues are for a sign'. This is the purpose they served on the day of Pentecost – they arrested the attention of the crowd ('they were all amazed and marvelled') and so gained attention to the message of the Gospel proclaimed by Peter. Further consideration of the Corinthian passage will be more appropriate later – our present point is that at Pentecost the manifestation evidently consisted in the Spirit-imparted ability to speak in languages previously unknown to the speakers but known to some of the hearers.

The only two other occasions recorded in the Acts were at Caesarea, 10. 44-46, and at Ephesus, 19. 5-7, and whilst we are not warranted in saying that these were the only places (e.g., 'tongues' were prominent at Corinth although not mentioned in Acts) we do not get the impression that tongues were universally in evidence. In the absence of any indication to the contrary, the most natural assumption is that the use of the same term indicates that the manifestations at Caesarea and Ephesus were similar to those at Jerusalem. Certainly the events at Caesarea support this view. Men of the circumcision who accompanied Peter 'were amazed . . . because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God', 10. 45-46. How like the gift at Pentecost. Moreover in his address to the Jews later at Jerusalem Peter says of this incident 'The Holy Ghost fell on them, *even as on us* at the beginning', 11. 15. Peter was struck by the similarity and his words suggest that there had been no repetition of the manifestation in the interval between Pentecost and Caesarea. Here again 'tongues' were a sign, this time to convince prejudiced men of the circumcision party that the Gospel embraced Gentiles as well as Jews

and on the same terms. The account given of tongues at Ephesus is very condensed but we are left to conclude that the manifestations were the same in character and purpose.

Tongues at Corinth

Provided we are prepared to accept plain statements, the accounts of events at Jerusalem, Caesarea and Ephesus present no problems except in so far as the miraculous is always beyond our understanding, but when we come to the First Epistle to the Corinthians problems begin to confront us. Because of this, some expositors take refuge in the idea that the manifestations at Corinth were different in character from those at Pentecost, being a sort of ecstasy in which the individual gave emotional expression to the ineffable elation of his soul by sounds unintelligible to all except those who possessed the gift of interpretation. This solution seems to create more difficulties than it attempts to solve. What grounds are there for thinking that 'tongues' at Corinth were essentially different from 'tongues' at Pentecost? The adjective 'unknown' in the A.V. has encouraged this idea but this is an unwarrantable insertion, there being nothing in the text to justify it. With the omission of this adjective, a careful reading of the whole passage will reveal nothing inconsistent with the view that the 'tongues' were human languages. Is it not the case that problems arise in the Corinthian account because there the manifestations had got out of hand and were not fulfilling the function for which they were intended? It may be difficult to explain how a divinely imparted gift could be wrongly used, but at least we may say that this is no greater mystery than the impartation of the gift in the first place. We will touch on this later, but at this point it will be helpful to examine in more detail Paul's explanation of the purpose of tongues.

The Unbelieving People

'Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to the unbelieving', 1 Cor. 14. 22. Paul bases this explanation on Isaiah 28. 11-12 which should, therefore, be studied. Here 'people', as so frequently in the Acts and in the Epistles, means the people of Israel. Owing to the people's unbelief and disobedience, God was going to punish them by bringing in the invader. They would not heed God's plain messages

delivered in their own tongue so they would have the unusual experience of hearing God speaking providentially to them by the fact of foreign conquerors coming into their midst speaking other tongues, namely not unintelligible sounds but meaningful language – very meaningful! When this came to pass they would very forcibly be reminded of God's warnings, yet even so they would not, as a people, turn to the Lord. The 'tongues' at Pentecost were a sign to the Christ-rejecting nation of Israel that God was fulfilling His word; see e.g., Acts 2. 36. Happily thousands were thus constrained to repentance but the book of Acts shows that on the whole the Jews remained rejectors of Christ. Paul clearly meant the Corinthians to understand this.

Not Possessed by all

Although tongues were a gift from God for a specific purpose, this gift was not the possession of all. 1 Corinthians 12. 7-11 makes it clear that various gifts were distributed among various individuals – to one the working of miracles, to another discerning of spirits, to another divers kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. When Paul asks 'Are all apostles?' it is obvious that the answer is 'No'. So when he asks 'Do all speak with tongues?' the answer is equally obvious, v. 30. Why then should we be asked to believe that 'tongues' is a necessary sign of spirituality? In fact this gift is listed last in verse 28. That Paul means the order to be significant is clear – 'first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then . . . divers kinds of tongues'. Paul would have been happy for them all to speak with tongues provided its proper purpose was served, but even then he rated the gift as inferior to prophecy, 14. 5. But whilst all were not endowed with the gift of tongues, yet in one Spirit they had all been baptized into one body, 12. 13. This effectively disposes of the false claim that the bestowal of this gift is linked with the 'baptism of the Spirit' – a phrase which is given a meaning quite different from the teaching of the passage.

The Gift Misused

The perplexing problem is how a gift imparted by God for a specific purpose could get out of control and become misused,

but the fact remains. If what was happening at Corinth was in full accord with the mind of God, we cannot conceive that Paul would rebuke and correct them. The gift, though bestowed by the sovereign act of the Spirit, 12. 11, was, nevertheless, under the possessor's control. Men able to speak in tongues were to speak in turn which necessarily implies that one had to wait for the other. Moreover, if three had spoken, others were to consider that sufficient and refrain from exercising the gift, 14. 29. Then again, in the absence of an interpreter an individual must maintain silence. The principle is further illustrated in the case of prophets – if another received a revelation the first speaker was to stop, 'the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets', v. 32. One feature of the fruit of the Spirit is 'self-control', Gal. 5. 23, where temperance means self-control. We therefore do well to mistrust the words or actions of any who lose self-control or, to use an expression we sometimes hear, are carried beyond themselves. Although this state is attributed to the domination of the Holy Spirit it should be rather regarded as a warning sign.

The Work of the Devil?

Having said so much, we can almost hear someone confronting us indignantly with the challenge 'You say then that such things are the work of the devil?' Here is an issue so highly charged with emotion that we must face the situation quite boldly; at the same time we have not said that all states of uncontrolled ecstasy are attributable to the devil. Christians who can see things only as either jet black or glistening white, with no shades of grey, are of course obliged to draw a very strict line of demarcation on one side of which all is distinctly and wholly of God and on the other side equally distinctly and wholly of the devil. But life is not so simple as all that! Human nature is very complex and despite all the study which has been given to man's psychic constitution many mysteries remain. Under the stress of strong emotion or excitement, psychic forces can be released whose presence had before been unsuspected. Is everything absolutely of God in the life, worship and service of even the best of God's saints? Has this ever been true of any man with the one single and glorious exception of our blessed Lord to whom the Spirit was given

without measure? Paul would not have claimed it for himself. If we are going to draw this inexorable line of demarcation in everything, we shall have some difficult tangles to sort out. We are strange mixtures and the fall has introduced many contradictions in our nature. Far too little thought has been given to the interaction of spirit and soul and we suggest that it is quite possible for the Spirit of God to be acting on a man's spirit whilst his reactions are complicated by the interference of human emotionalism in the soul. Peter's noble confession in Matthew 16 was welcomed by Christ as a revelation given to Peter from the Father and he was pronounced blessed. Almost immediately afterwards, at least as far as the record goes, he is rebuked by Christ for uttering sentiments wholly out of line with God's purpose. The Lord's words do not of course mean that Peter was Satan – they need mean no more than that Peter was being an adversary to the Lord in this particular respect. In the same man we see on the one hand the effect of divine revelation and on the other misguided human emotionalism. In extreme cases people who inadvisedly surrender self-control ('let themselves go' – ominous words!) may find themselves caught up in what amounts to frenzy. A heavy responsibility rests upon men who adopt well-known techniques to arouse emotional excitement. The results can range from the dreadful scenes of abandonment upon which the popular illustrated press has seized, to confusion and disorder in otherwise estimable communities. The latter was evidently the case at Corinth and they were told plainly that God was not the author of that, 1 Cor. 14. 33. God is a God of order and so Paul's exhortation was 'let all things be done decently and in order', v. 40.

The Gift Regulated

We believe that the genuine gift of tongues in apostolic times was primarily intended to serve the purpose we have indicated above. If we are correct in this then we should expect that the gift would not be permanent. We shall later give our reasons for saying that this is exactly what Paul was preparing the Corinthians for; what we wish to observe now is that those who contend that the gift was intended to be permanent will at least be willing to allow us to judge modern claims by the standards set down by the apostle. Tongues were employed,

not so much in directly addressing men, but in praising God: 'we do hear them speaking in our tongues the mighty works of God', Acts 2. 11; 'they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God', Acts 10. 46; 'if thou bless with the spirit . . . thou verily givest thanks well', 1 Cor. 14. 16-17; 'how shall he . . . say the Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he knoweth not what thou sayest?', v. 16. The value of the sign was entirely dependent on at least some of the hearers being able to recognize the language whilst realizing that it was not the speaker's native tongue. Those who did not know the language would be unedified. Here the additional gift of interpretation would be a complementary sign; another man's ability to interpret into the language of the majority an utterance made in the language of a minority would be striking evidence of the Spirit's work. No less striking would be the speaker's ability, having spoken in a tongue foreign to him, to interpret it into his own tongue in a congregation where the genuineness both of the utterance and its interpretation could be tested. See 1 Cor. 14. 13, 15, 23, 26. How totally different this is from the utterance of a torrent of sounds with no connection with any known language but which some other man is supposed to be able to interpret, that is, able to understand and express another man's inner spiritual exercises which that man himself did not understand. They expose themselves to grave dangers who are prepared to accept an utterance as being of the Spirit of God because it is ecstatic and further accept as authoritative an interpretation given by another when there is no means of testing it; 'prove all things', 1 Thess. 5. 21. It is not surprising that there have been cases where different 'interpretations' have been given to the same utterance, and who is then to say which, if either, was right?

The Corinthians were so fascinated with this gift that they were not content to use it for its primary purpose, a sign to the unbeliever, but they introduced it into the gatherings of the church. That this was quite inappropriate is made clear by Paul's emphatic assertion. Although more gifted in this very thing than they were, yet he would rather speak five words in the church with his understanding so as to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue, vv. 18-19. But as then so today, people who are fascinated with something

are not likely to heed such plain guidance as given by Paul who, acting with great realism, said in effect 'If you must indulge in the display of this gift in the church then there are certain minimum requirements which cannot be ignored in the interests of edification and good order'. We must leave others to judge how far these are observed where possession of 'tongues' is claimed today.

In the absence of an interpreter, one must not indulge the urge to speak in a tongue, v. 28. The reason for this was the very sensible and down-to-earth one, that if no one knew the meaning of what was uttered what possible profit was there to the company? Edification is the crucial thing – not a display of a miraculous gift; 'let all things be done unto edifying', v. 26; 'thou givest thanks well, but the other is not edified', v. 17. Speaking in tongues was to be restricted to two or at the most three and then only in turn – evidently there had been cases then, as there have been many now-a-days, of several speaking at once. Moreover, women were to keep silent and although there have been all sorts of attempts to make this mean something different from what it clearly says, silence here can only mean what silence means in verse 28. To judge how much subjection there is to Scripture in modern manifestations one needs to read the whole passage and then face up to the apostle's challenge, 'If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord', v. 37.

The Gift Temporary

We come now to some of our reasons for believing that 'tongues' were intended to be temporary and that when they had served their special purpose they ceased. Although the miraculous naturally makes a tremendous appeal, it has never been God's normal way of working – in fact it would then cease to be miraculous in our eyes. Miracles have occurred only at certain epochs with long stretches of time between. As far as we know, no miraculous power was given to any man before Moses. After Joshua there is a gap without miracles of about 600 years to Elijah's time. After Elisha there is a gap of about 900 years to Christ. John the Baptist, the greatest of

those born of woman and filled with the Holy Ghost from birth, did no miracle.

In 1 Corinthians 13. 8-13 Paul contrasts the things which abide with the things which shall cease – ‘. . . prophecies, they shall be done away . . . tongues, they shall cease’. Some ask us to believe that this means that when eternal conditions obtain these and other things will pass away; but what point would there be in saying that ‘*now* abideth faith, hope, love’ if these other things were also to abide until the end? The line of thought the apostle has in mind is quite clear. There was, of course, a time when he was a child and then quite properly he spoke as a child, he felt as a child and thought as a child. But he did not remain a child – failure to grow is a tragedy. He became a man and when he became a man he put away childish things. In this context there is no reproach in the word ‘childish’ – when he was a child these things were quite appropriate but had no place in mature manhood. The inference is obvious – that these temporary gifts serve their proper purpose in their proper time but cease to be appropriate when maturity is reached. The connection of thought strikes us more forcibly when we notice that the various terms in the A.V. ‘shall fail’ and ‘shall vanish away’ in v. 8, ‘shall be done away’ in v. 10 and ‘put away’ in v. 11 are all translations of one word – ‘kartargeo’. Remarkably enough the same word is used in 2 Corinthians 3 where the subject is the passing away of the old covenant after it had served its purpose and its replacement by the new. There the word is translated ‘done away’ in verses 7, 11 and 14 and ‘abolished’ in verse 13. That this is Paul’s idea with regard to the temporary gifts is clear from the fact that after his remarkable statement that he would rather speak five words with his understanding than ten thousand words in a tongue he appeals to his brethren not to be children in mind, but men, 14. 20 (R.V. marg., of full age).

With this in mind let us look at Ephesians 4: ‘Till we all attain unto . . . a fullgrown man . . . that we may be no longer children’, v. 13. In what connection is this said? In relation to gifts given by the ascended Lord. What are these gifts? Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, v. 11. The first two are foundation gifts, see Eph. 2. 20.

Tongues are not mentioned and the gifts of evangelists, pastors and teachers are not openly miraculous. Yet notice that the purpose of these gifts is 'for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: till we all attain unto . . . a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'. This is surely comprehensive enough - this is 'edifying' indeed. Will any one claim that 'tongues' can add anything to that? It is highly significant that this passage with its echoes of 1 Corinthians 14 should make it so clear that the gifts enumerated are now adequate for the accomplishment of God's full purpose in the saints and this accords perfectly with the view that the gifts mentioned in the context of 'tongues' were to serve a temporary purpose until the more perfect order was established. People who are infatuated with the spectacular tend to be impatient with anything which opposes their view. We only ask a patient consideration of what has been put forward.

A more Sinister Aspect

Whilst we believe that much which takes place now-a-days in the exercise of so-called tongues can be attributed to the triggering off of emotional stresses which normally lie dormant, it is unhappily necessary to point out that the devil can intrude into companies of believers under the cover of 'tongues'. We have all heard of cases where individuals who were supposed to be speaking in tongues by the inspiration of the Spirit of God were all unconsciously uttering blasphemies which would never have been suspected but for the fact that there happened to be present a person who was able to recognize the language. The present writer has never felt free to base anything on such reports, even when there was good reason to believe them, because it has not been possible to get first-hand corroboration. But there now lies before him as he writes the signed statement of an evangelist of deserved repute to the effect that he was interrupted when preaching by a man who went off into 'tongues'. The evangelist thought he recognized a language and after the meeting asked another evangelist who knew that language if it were so. He confirmed this but asked to be excused from translating what was said because it was a mixture of blasphemy and filth,

including a curse on the preacher. Two other men who knew the language corroborated this independently of each other. Moreover there were present two believers whose native language it was and they agreed. Nevertheless, immediately the man had ceased to speak in 'tongues', a man had jumped up saying "I claim the interpretation". His interpretation was "I say unto you, God is among you in truth".

We are by no means asserting that this sort of thing regularly happens. We are satisfied that usually 'tongues' consist of nothing more than gibberish uttered under intense excitement, but there is no doubt that this sort of thing has happened and who is to say how often it happens unsuspected? Leaders in the Tongues Movement admit as much but not unnaturally they claim that it is the devil's attempt to counterfeit the real. We believe the explanation is that when a person fervently seeking an ecstatic experience 'lets himself go' he loses proper control of psychic powers and lays himself open to the influence of alien spirits, often with disastrous results to himself and to others. Let us take warning!

A Concluding Appeal

It is not altogether surprising if zealous and enthusiastic but inexperienced young believers are beguiled by the exuberance of those who claim the gift of tongues. They need inspired leadership to direct their zeal and energy into the best channels instead of allowing these fine qualities to be dissipated in the unhealthy pursuit of the sensational. Coupled with this there is need for well balanced instruction with emphasis on the fact that the characteristic work of the Holy Spirit in the believer is not the impartation of miraculous gifts but the development of Christian character. This is too big a subject for the present but we invite attention to Galatians 5. 22-23; Ephesians 3. 16-17; Colossians 1. 9-11 and 1 Thessalonians 5. 23.

Reprinted from *Precious Seed*, March-April, 1965.