

Week 3 - 2:1-41

A Theological Primer on Speaking in Tongues

In Acts 2 we see the first of three occurrences in the book where groups of people begin to speak in tongues. The word "tongues" first mentioned in vv.3-4 is the Greek word *glossa* and can be translated more literally as "languages." With this in mind, we see in v.4 the disciples are filled with the Spirit and begin to speak in other "languages". So, what exactly is going on when this happens? And what does that mean for us?

Context

As with any passage of Scripture, we need to examine the context of the passage and its place in the overall biblical narrative before we jump to any theological and practical conclusions. In this case, the setting of this event is key. This is happening on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is Greek for "fifty" and refers to the fifty days after Passover (Ex 14). Just as the Jews celebrate the annual Passover so too they celebrate Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks or *Shavot* (Hebrew for "weeks"). On top of that, the number fifty is fairly significant in Jewish culture as it relates to the number seven, signifying rest/completeness/wholeness when God created the heavens and the earth.¹ This was commemorated every week through the keeping of Sabbath. Much of the Jewish calendar weekly and annually revolved around the number seven. Take for example the Sabbath Year, where once every seven years Israel was not allowed to till the land and was commanded to be extra-generous to their neighbor (Lev 25:1-7, Deut 15). Or take the Year of Jubilee. After seven cycles of the Sabbath Year, the fiftieth year was called the Year of Jubilee where all debts were forgiven and all indentured servants would go free (Lev 25:8-22). Now putting this together: the receiving of the Spirit in the New Testament is meant to parallel the receiving of the law in the Old Testament. The fact that it happens on the fiftieth day after Jesus was crucified signifies completion, restoration, and celebration.

But then why do the disciples upon receiving the Spirit *also* begin to speak in different languages? At this time in Jewish history, many Jews lived scattered all over the Greco-Roman world - known as the diaspora. Every Jewish individual lived under some form of foreign occupation and as a result, many Jews adopted the languages and customs of their foreign oppressor. All this to say, when the disciples are able to speak in different languages, the Jewish people who traveled from different lands are able to understand what's being told to them.

This demonstrates a couple of things. First, God is reversing the curse of Babel in Genesis 11. In that account, God scatters the people for their sin by confusing their languages. Now through the forgiveness of sin and the giving of the Holy Spirit, God is bringing the nations back together through their ability to comprehend the gospel message in their native tongue. Second, the nations are being brought together through the gospel proclamation and the giving of the Spirit because Jesus has demonstrated through His resurrection that He is Lord of all of humanity - He is bringing the nations back together because the nations rightfully belong to Him (Matt 28:18-20, Phil 2:10-11).

In the book of Acts, speaking in tongues/languages then becomes the primary demonstration that the Spirit has come upon a new boundary of people. In the two other occurrences where this happens in Acts,

¹ For more on this see "Sabbath" by The Bible Project on YouTube - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFTLvKB3JLM&ab_channel=BibleProject

tongues/languages are spoken when a new boundary is crossed, and a group of people hears the gospel and receives the Spirit - Acts 10:44-48 and Acts 19:1-7.

There *seems* to be, however, another use of tongues outside of gospel proclamation that is not mentioned in Acts, particularly when it comes to prayer. In 1 Corinthians 14:2, the apostle Paul says - “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.” What’s interesting is, Paul is saying here that there’s a category of speaking in tongues that people cannot understand or interpret. Previously in Acts though, people were able to understand and interpret what those speaking in tongues were saying (Acts 2:6-11). So then, Paul seems to be creating this second category of speaking in tongues. If the first type is to be understood for the purpose of gospel proclamation, then this second type is to be understood for the purpose of private prayer. Paul will go on in 1 Corinthians 14 distinguishing between the two categories - if someone is speaking in tongues to God, then that is to be kept privately in prayer. If someone is speaking in tongues to a group of people, an interpreter needs to be on hand otherwise the church will be confused including any non-Christians who just so happen to be visiting (1 Cor 14:16, 26-32).

Application

Different theological camps are divided over the use of tongues - is it still applicable and attainable in the church today? Should we all strive to speak in tongues? Or to put it another way, are the passages in Acts descriptive or prescriptive? In other words, when we see instances of people speaking in tongues is the author simply telling us what happened (descriptive), or does it go beyond that? Is he not only relaying what happened but telling the reader that we should do what they did (prescriptive)? For those that fall on the descriptive side on speaking in tongues, the evidence includes that only Jesus’ apostles spoke in tongues and the New Testament speaks very little of speaking in tongues. *If* this was meant to be practiced by all Christians surely we would see more evidence of it outside of Acts but there isn’t, plus, there are no apostles of Jesus anymore; therefore, speaking in tongues is not applicable for us. For those that fall on the prescriptive side, they will mention that *all* of Acts is to be a blueprint for *all* of the church and just because something is not mentioned, does not mean it’s to be negated, to reach that conclusion would be an argument from silence; therefore they would say, speaking in tongues is applicable for us.

But as we saw earlier, 1 Corinthians 14 gives us a good framework to understand this spiritual gift. Paul says all Christians are gifted by the Spirit but that will look different from individual to individual, i.e. not all will speak in tongues. Paul does not outright deny the public gift, nor does he say everyone can do it. Like the other spiritual gifts, we should steward our gifts well according to the guidelines of Scripture in order that the message of Jesus will go out. It’s also important to note that in the same letter to the Corinthian church, Paul emphasizes church unity (12-13) and proceeds to categorize Christian doctrine of first importance, which is, that Christ died and rose again (15:3-10) - this is what ultimately matters. Carrying this line of thought, the Church has historically understood spiritual gifts, tongues included, as an open-handed issue that ought not to divide Christians. Because this is a secondary (or perhaps even a tertiary) issue,² our church takes such a position on the gift of tongues/languages: we are open-handed and value the diversity both streams of interpretation bring to our church family. While we have members and leaders who think differently on the issue, we believe there’s beauty in theological diversity as we are united around what matters the most - the person and work of Jesus.

² For more on differentiating between primary, secondary and tertiary doctrine see *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* by Gavin Ortlund or the article, “The Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity” by Albert Mohler - <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity>