

The *Praying in the Spirit* Series

Some Marvelous Effects of Praying in the Spirit

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Most evangelicals believe that one always remembers the day he or she became a Christian. I remember the day very well. I was alone in a half-completed apartment building off Interstate I-75 in Atlanta, Georgia. I was taking a lunch break from my summer job as a heating/air conditioning installer. The days preceding this found me asking serious questions about God, myself, and reality. The Sunday before, I had attended a Baptist church and picked up several tracts. Then as I read those tracts the weight of my sins became unbearable and I felt that I must return to the God of my childhood, the God my mother had so often entreated on my behalf, the God of my grandparents, the God who would deliver me from alcoholism and later deliver my father from alcoholism and lung cancer.

It is true that a person who becomes a Christian after childhood seldom forgets the day of his salvation; I believe it is equally true that he seldom forgets the day that he first expresses himself to God in a language of the heart. I happened to be at my mother-in-law's house, and I had been reading Robert C. Frost's *Aglow with the Spirit*. For many weeks I had sought God for a mighty endowment of power so that I might serve Him with greater effectiveness. That day I had found quiet room in the back of the house and (though many people say this figuratively) I literally did not put Frost's book down until I had read it through.

In the backyard, separated from the house, was an old unused garage. I took the book and walked to the garage for a private time of prayer. In that old, musty garage with windows too dirty to see through, I lifted hands and heart to God and asked Jesus to baptize me in the Holy Spirit. Within seconds syllables joined in a way I had never learned were rolling off my lips, and I knew a joy I hoped would never cease. Of all the objects in that old garage, I remember only one, a large worn-out wooden airplane propeller. I remember it well because it became a symbol of what was happening to me—I was soaring with God in heavenly places!

When I came back down to earth it was obvious to me that my experience would be difficult to explain. But inquiries came and I answered them as best I could. Two questions commonly asked about the experience were (1) Why bother to speak in tongues? and (2) What is the value of speaking in tongues? The latter question is legitimate and has many answers, which we will get to in a moment, but the first question is usually rhetorical and the person asking it isn't really interested in hearing an answer. If he were, two scriptural reasons could be pointed out to him.

First, Jesus said that speaking in other tongues would follow those who follow Him, "And these signs will accompany those who believe: they will speak in new tongues" (Mark 16:17). Critics are quick to point out that this verse is in the longer ending of Mark, which is not in the oldest and best Greek manuscripts. This is true, but actually its absence from early manuscripts and presence in later ones argues for its practice in *later* church life. Also, the "earliest and best" Bible manuscripts spoken of are from the fourth century, yet church fathers Irenaeus (A.D. 130-202), Tatian (c. A.D. 170), and perhaps Justin Martyr (died c. A.D. 165) make reference to the longer ending of Mark. Even the copyist of one of the "oldest and best" manuscripts (Vaticanus) left space for the longer ending but, evidently, was missing the end page of the source he copied (Horton, *Paraclete*, p.8).

The second reason we could point out for speaking in tongues is that "in the church God has appointed . . . speaking in different kinds of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:28). Clearly, if God has instituted something for the Church, we should accept it. Some do not today; some did not in Paul's day. God answered these doubters through Paul, "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:39) and "I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues. . . . I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you" (1 Corinthians 14:5, 18). Hardly the words of a man who considered speaking in tongues meaningless, useless, or soon-ending.

Answers to the second question commonly asked about this experience, that is, the value of tongues, are outlined in Scripture and confirmed in the twentieth-century charismatic experience. Here are three responses.

First, the Bible says that all the gifts of the Spirit are given “for the common good” of the Body of Christ or, in other words, to edify the church congregation in corporate worship (1 Corinthians 12:7), and this does not exclude the gifts of tongues and their interpretation.

In fact, while placing great value on prophecy, Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 14 that the one who prophesies is not greater than the one who speaks in tongues if the utterance in tongues is interpreted. These two gifts, the only two gifts that are dependent upon each other, are, I believe, a model for the Body of Christ. No gifts of the Spirit better illustrate the dependency and cooperation of a body of members all functioning together than do the wedded gifts of tongues and interpretation.

Interestingly, scholars have pointed out that God’s scattering of the people at Babel was in a sense reversed at Pentecost, when God gave to man, once again, a common language. Today, we see the experience of speaking in other tongues breaking through denominational barriers that have stood relentlessly for years. A door has been cracked open, some would say blown open. . . blown open by the Spirit of God. There may be many beliefs among Christians, but there is only one Spirit. And the more we speak His language, the better we understand each other. In his book *The Emerging Order*, non-Pentecostal Jeremy Rifkin writes that people “are speaking in tongues and the evidence is that they are communicating more effectively with each other as a result. Rather than setting up barriers, speaking in tongues appears to be knocking down walls” (p.227).

In Pentecostal and charismatic churches the value of the gift of tongues in *corporate worship* has been inestimable as time after time the Spirit has penetrated man’s world of worship to awaken congregations to a plane of existence beyond this world. Many Christians who experience speaking in tongues testify that since their experience they have been awakened to their role in the church, and they have become sensitive to opportunities to minister in and out of the church. For some, this charismatic experience has renewed a love for fellowship with other Christians and a greater appreciation for the church.

Paul suggests a second value of tongues when he writes that he speaks in tongues more than all the Corinthians while to the church he prefers to speak with his understanding (14:18-19). The vast majority of tongues-speaking occurs alone in the prayer closet. Paul states that this kind of prayer edifies or builds up the one who is praying.

In what way does praying in the Spirit, that is, in tongues, edify a Christian? From personal experience and from the recorded experiences of others, I can say that the use of this personal prayer language has turned worried, fearful, depressed, bored, and doubting Christians into Christians filled with peace, joy, boldness, excitement, and faith. Throughout this worldwide outpouring of God’s Spirit, people testify to a deeper level of communion with God, to a greater sense of God’s presence and God’s guidance, to a greater power to overcome temptation, and to the dissolution of fear of being used by God. These are specifically effects of praying to God *privately* or *devotionally*, yet it is easy to see how such effects would be helpful not only to the individual but to the local church and the Church universal.

As God would have it, the effect of communing with Him at this level is not limited to what critics might call an emotional massage. Many Pentecostals and charismatics have found that after speaking to God with this language of the soul, they have been able to express praise, worship, petition, and intercession much more clearly in their learned languages. According to Paul, this is how it should be, “I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind” (1 Corinthians 14:15). Others testify that only by praying in tongues can they pray without human limitations such as ignorance of a need. Paul tells us that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:26-27).

Not only do these Scriptures tell us that when we pray in tongues, we pray for those urgent needs unknown to the mind, but they tell us that our prayers are “in accordance with God’s will.” This dissolves another human limitation, for so many times we waste our efforts praying for things that are not in accordance with God’s will. No wonder that some charismatics have stated that when they pray in tongues, they pray with an ability and an authority that is not their own—“the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4).

A third value of praying in the Spirit is that it propels the speaker toward God. This may manifest itself in the believer’s desire to triumph over temptation or seek out fellowship with other believers. But, to me, the most exciting effect occurs in those who testify that praying in the Spirit has created in them an

insatiable hunger for and delight in the Scriptures. Some have testified that after their charismatic experience, the Word of God seemed to leap off its pages into their hearts and minds.

In addition to these effects of praying in the Spirit, this gift has also been credited with rescuing burned-out missionaries ready to leave their labor and ministers on the verge of calling it quits. Others have testified that the experience allowed them to receive inner healing from childhood traumas. Still others have told how the experience brought healing to their troubled marriages. Charismatic George Mallone writes that tongues can even be helpful in bearing physical pain. He cites as proof his wife's singing in tongues during the birth of their second child (p.23)!

Whether it be Scripture reading, fellowshiping, praying, or witnessing, everything that is esteemed by evangelical Christendom is enhanced by the charismatic experience. It has put the name of Jesus on the lips of many, many who had been Christians for years but had been unable to speak His name aloud. Never have so many felt so comfortable about speaking the name of Jesus to the world. And *this* is the greatest value of praying in the Spirit.

Criticism of Devotional Tongues

At this juncture we should look at two major criticisms of these biblically based teachings. First, some critics have adamantly held that not all Christians can have the gift of tongues, so we mustn't try to force it upon everyone. In a sense, they are correct. Paul clearly states that not all have the gift of speaking in tongues. The English translation of 1 Corinthians 12:30, "Do all speak in tongues?", becomes a rhetorical question that demands no for an answer. In the Greek version "no" actually appears. We could hardly expect any other answer after what Paul has just said about *diversity* of gifts and ministries (1 Corinthians 12).

Thus, this seems, at first glance, to refute the Pentecostal-charismatic position that advocates tongues-speaking for every Christian.

But if we look at the context of this passage more closely we see an important distinction. Paul is discussing here ministries and positions to be used in the church. In this regard, he is saying that not all have the gift of delivering an utterance in tongues for *congregational* edification or ministry just as all are not apostles or teachers within a congregation. He is not talking about the *personal* or devotional use of tongues, or the occurrence of tongues when a Christian is baptized in the Holy Spirit such as Luke cites in Acts 19:6. The natures of congregational tongues and personal tongues are identical, but their functions are quite different. A parallel listing of the differences between the two underscores this:

Personal tongues: All spoke in tongues simultaneously (Acts 2:1-4; 10:44-46; 19:1-7).

Congregational tongues: One person at a time is to speak (1 Corinthians 14:26-27).

Personal tongues: Tongues need not be interpreted (Acts 10:44-47; 19:1-7).

Congregational tongues: The gift of interpretation is required; tongues must *be* interpreted before ministry takes place (1 Corinthians 14:28).

Personal tongues: Tongues are spoken for personal edification (1 Corinthians 14:4).

Congregational tongues: Tongues are spoken to edify the church (1 Corinthians 14:12-13).

Personal tongues: The baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is evidenced by tongues-speaking, is for all believers (Acts 2:38-39).

Congregational tongues: The ministry of tongues is not for all believers (1 Corinthians 12:30).

Personal tongues: The giver is the Father through the Son (John 14:16; Acts 2:33).

Congregational tongues: The giver is the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

The gift of tongues is not unique in the sense that it is a ministry gift for some, yet may be exercised by all other Christians as well. This is a common feature among the gifts. For example, the Scriptures teach that all Christians should give; all Christians should show mercy; all Christians should help; all Christians should witness; all Christians should serve. Every Christian should practice all of these, even if he does not

have the corresponding ministry-gift of, say, serving or preaching. Likewise, all may speak in tongues, but all do not have the gift of tongues for use in ministry.

We see further evidence that all can have the personal gift of tongues in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:23. Here he suggests that the whole church can come together and speak in tongues: "So 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?" Paul does not recommend that this be done in a fashion that would give offense to unbelievers; nevertheless, if the potential is there, the point is proved—all may speak in tongues (Ervin, *These*, p.108).

The Pentecostal-charismatic interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12:30, "Do all speak in tongues?", resolves the apparent discrepancy. This verse has been a stumblingblock to numerous sincere Christians who feel with Gelpi that it is "decisive exegetical evidence" (p.75) that tongues do not accompany every baptism in the Holy Spirit. But to insist that this verse means that God wills some Christians never speak in tongues, creates a contradiction damaging to Paul's credibility and the Spirit's supervision of the Scriptures.

Furthermore, it is the anti-Pentecostal interpretation of this verse that makes tongues appear divisive and elitist in that it-not Pentecostal teaching—creates *haves* and *have-nots*. Pentecostals and charismatics believe that God will not deprive any Christian of this blessing for service that comes with the filling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His disciples, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). Every child of God can ask his heavenly Father for the Holy Spirit and His gifts.

The second criticism against the personal use of tongues is that such use appears to be egocentric and selfish. According to these critics, Paul discourages private tongues-speaking because self-edification is not a Christian virtue.

But if this were the case, we would also have to question prayer because it also builds up or edifies the believer. In fact, Jude (verse 20) commands us to build up ourselves with prayer. There is nothing wrong with seeking inner or spiritual strength. Private Bible study, prayer, and meditation, deeds of love all edify the individual; they are self-edifying without being selfish. Even as self-edifying prayer in the native tongue may prepare one to minister to others, self-edifying glossolalia may also prepare one for such ministry.

Paul is not criticizing self-edification through tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:4, he is making a distinction. There is a time and place for the personal use of tongues, and correctly used, tongues can and do build up the believer. Thus, self-edification is not really the issue, but the use of tongues in relation to it.

It is true that there are charismatics who seem so caught up in the spiritual "highs" they enjoy that they make little contribution to the rest of the Body of Christ and certainly less to unbelievers. If a Christian is blind to the opportunity to minister to a human need because he is wrapped up in the experience of tongues-speaking, obviously he is misusing the gift and is being selfish. But this is not the kind of self-edification that charismatics believe Paul refers to. In fact, even some non-charismatics see a legitimate scriptural view of self-edification through tongues.

After examining "1 Corinthians 12-14, and . . . the witness of contemporary charismatics or neo-Pentecostals," Bernard Ramm concludes that "this speaking in tongues is for worship, edification, and personal devotions. This is apparently the legitimate and proper use of tongues in the Christian fellowship" (p. 115).

Peter Wagner of Fuller Seminary concurs: "Tongues are good for a personal spiritual experience with the Lord privately. Paul says, 'He who speaks in a tongue improves himself' (14:4). If there is no interpreter in the church, let him 'speak to himself and to God' (14:28). The personal testimony of many who have the gift of tongues is that through it they have enjoyed a fellowship with God more intimate than they had ever known before" (p.102).

While encouraging other avenues of self-edification, Bridge and Phipps write: "'He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself' (14:4), and herein lies the main value of tongues to the individual believer. Along with prayer in his native language, along with Bible study, along with corporate worship and participation in the Lord's Supper, along with the joy of witnessing to others, speaking in tongues builds him up. It does not replace nor is it a substitute for any of these other activities but is to be used alongside them" (pp.73-74).

Hoekema, a persistent critic of Pentecostalism who has written two widely sold books against Pentecostal-charismatic doctrine and practice, states:

Tongue-speaking has value for personal edification. . . . Paul admits that a person giving thanks in tongues can give thanks well, though he adds that others are not edified by such a prayer unless it is interpreted. . . . The fact that Paul did not forbid speaking with tongues. . . and that he thanked God that he spoke with tongues more than they all . . . indicates that tongue-speaking when used in this way must have had some spiritual value. (*Holy*, p. 57)

Richard Gaffin's equally adamant critique of Pentecostalism includes this begrudged concession concerning the personal use of tongues: "The passage does apparently contain indications which point to some kind of private exercise of the gift . . ." (p.82).

According to Donald Burdick, "Paul does not say, as some assume, that speaking in tongues in private is either useless or wrong. When he forbids the public use of tongues [without interpretation], Paul does not likewise forbid private use" (p.45).

Writing in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Schweizer states that "Paul obviously plays down speaking with tongues," adding, "He values it, however, for private edification" (VI: p.424).

Finally, non-Pentecostal Michael Green writes that the manifestation of tongues

edifies the individual. . . . This is not surprising, if it releases the inhibitions which keep us from prayer and praise of God. To be sure, Paul in this chapter is concerned to contrast speaking in tongues, which only edifies the speaker, with prophecy, which also builds up the church. But it is illicit for that reason to deny that tongues-speaking does edify the individual, as many commentators infer. No, it is one of the ways of growth in the Christian life. (p.164)

Conclusion

All of us, as Christians, desire the will of God to be wrought in our lives and our churches. Mark 16:17 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, respectively, tell us that followers of the Lord Jesus may worship Him with a language that transcends cognitively assembled communications and that God has set in the Church the gift of tongues. Since Jesus prophesied the use of tongues and the Father set them in the Church, we would expect them to have value. Indeed, the testimony from around the world is that this special prayer language is edifying both to churches and individuals. Tongues as a symbol of the Holy Spirit's penetration into our world are breaking down communication barriers, creating unity, enriching the spiritual lives of millions of Christians-inspiring them to pray, evangelize, and study the Scriptures. These effects prove that the experience can be a selfless, others-oriented experience and a phenomenon of which *all* Christians may partake.

In the Next Issue:

The Focus of the Charismatic Experience: Tongues, the Holy Spirit, or Christ?

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