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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-journal.php

TONGUES SHALL CEASE

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One of the most spectacular phenomena of the Christian faith during the past century has been a resurgence of an early church practice called "speaking with tongues." This phenomenon is purportedly a divinely-given ability to speak in a language unknown to the speaker.

Upon encountering individuals or groups that practice this, the young Christian is wont to ask of his spiritual counselors, "Are we missing something? If we are rightly related to the Lord, shouldn't we be displaying this gift, just as did the early church?"

When the Scriptures and church history are consulted on the question the following facts stand out:

(1) In the book of Acts there are three examples of early Christians speaking in tongues. (2:4; 10:46; 19:6)

(2) In the epistles there is only one treatise on the use of tongues as a spiritual gift, I Corinthians 12-14.

(3) When church history is examined, it is clear that the use of tongues did not continue past the apostolic age. Tongues were already a thing of the past in the early part of the second century. With few exceptions, not until the last part of the nineteenth century has any group claimed to have this gift.

(4) Turning back to the Scriptures, it is discovered that in the heart of Paul's treatise on tongues there is the statement that tongues are not permanent--that they are destined to cease (I Cor. 13:8).

Upon examining the facts there are the following two possibilities: (1) The gift of tongues will cease when the church age is over. For some reason it was neglected for 1750 years, but now it is having a genuine, God-given resurgence. (2) The gift of tongues was given along with certain other temporary gifts (also mentioned as stopping in I Corinthians 13) to fulfill a definite need in the first century church. Now this need has been fulfilled, and the gift has long since ceased.

The modern tongues movement is not a genuine continuation of the first century phenomena, but rather it originates from some other source.

In order to determine which of these opposing views is correct, it is necessary to examine the statement "tongues shall cease" to determine the following facts:

- (1) What is meant by "tongues" in I Corinthians 13:8?
- (2) What is meant by the verb "to cease"?
- (3) Under what conditions are tongues to cease?
- (4) When are the conditions fulfilled?

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE TERM "TONGUES"?

Its Use in the Book of Acts

There are three clear references to the gift of tongues in the book of Acts. These are found in 2:4, 10:46, and 19:16. Each of these will be examined in turn to determine the meaning of the term as it is used there.

(1) Acts 2:4. On the day of Pentecost, as promised by the resurrected Christ, the Holy Spirit came upon the waiting disciples. Verse four says, "And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (KJV). The context explains what is meant by glössais:

a. The term is modified by heterais which means "another of a different, or strange kind." Hence it was not the natural language of the speaker.

b. In verses 5-7 the Jews from every nation heard the speakers in their "own languages (diaktōi) wherein we were born" (v. 8). Thus the tongues were in the actual languages of men.

c. The content of the speaking in the different languages is given in verse 11: "The wonderful works of God" were being declared to them .

(2) Acts 10:46. When the Gospel began to go to Gentiles Peter was commissioned to evangelize a Gentile named Cornelius. When he preached to him the Holy Spirit came upon the hearers, so that the believing Jews were astonished: "For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God." Again the following facts may be noted:

a. In the context Peter identifies this as the same phenomenon that they had received in Acts 2, so that this also must have been with human languages, even though strange to the Apostle and his party.

b. The content of the speaking is revealed to be megalunontōn, exalting, extolling, glorifying, or as simply praising God.

(3) Acts 19:6. On this last occurrence mentioned in Acts, Paul has discovered some disciples of John the Baptist who have been unaware of the fulfillment of that which John preached and the establishment of the church. After resting their faith in Jesus as Messiah (v. 4), they were baptized in His name (v. 5). "And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came upon them; and they spake with tongues and prophesied" (v. 6).

a. This is the same phenomenon, and is described in almost identical phraseology as the previous references. They were speaking with strange but human languages.

b. There is the additional use of a second spiritual gift on this occasion--prophesying.

c. The content is not stated at this point, as this has been established in the first two references. There is no reason to suppose that this occurrence was any different.

The Use of the Term in I Corinthians 12-14

Paul devotes three chapters of I Corinthians to the place of tongues in the church. In chapter 12 he established the place of gifts in general. In chapter 13 he relates the gifts to that supreme grace of the Christian life, love. In chapter 14 he sets the gift of tongues in its relatively inferior place as compared with the gift of prophecy. A study of these chapters with regard to Paul's usage of glōssai will help in determining the meaning of the term.

Paul begins the section by introducing his new subject. In 12:1 he writes, "But now concerning pneumatikōn, brothers, I do not wish you to be ignorant." Here the term pneumatikōn simply means "spiritualities," rather than "spiritual gifts." Many commentators take the term to include both the teaching on gifts and the resurrection, in contrast to the thrust of the first eleven chapters, on the "carnalities." In any case, the term "gifts" charismata is not introduced until verse four.

The first list of spiritual gifts occurs in verses 8-10:

- (1) The message of wisdom (logos sophias)
- (2) The message of knowledge (logos gnōseōs)
- (3) Faith (pistis)
- (4) Gifts of healing (charismata iamatōn)

- (5) Workings of miracles (energēmata dunamatōn)
- (6) Prophecy (prophēteia)
- (7) Discerning of spirits (diakriseis pneumatōn)
- (8) Kinds (families) of tongues (genē glōssōn)
- (9) Interpretation of tongues (hermēneia glōssōn)

In verse 28 and following Paul repeats the list with modifications, placing them in order of importance. He also presents them in terms of the person (e.g., prophet) instead of the gift itself (prophecy) in at least the first three cases:

- (1) Apostles (apostolous)
- (2) Prophets (prophētas)
- (3) Teachers (didaskalous)
- (4) Workers of miracles (dunameis)
- (5) Ones having gifts of healing (charismata iamatōn)
- (6) Ones able to do helpful deeds (antilēmpseis)
- (7) Ones able to govern or administer (kuberneseis)
- (8) Ones having kinds of tongues (genē glōssōn)

Paul then repeats the list to show that not all have all the gifts. In doing this he drops "helpful deeds" and "administrations" but adds last the gift of interpreting tongues.

During the first few verses of chapter 13, Paul mentions the futility of having gifts but not exercising love. The gifts mentioned are:

- (1) Tongues (glōssais)
- (2) Prophecy (prophēteian)
- (3) Faith (pistin)

In connection with the second one, "prophecy," it is uncertain if the "mysteries" and "knowledge" are part of the gift of prophecy or separate gifts.

In chapter 14:1 he encourages the Corinthians to pursue love, and seek spiritualities, but to prefer prophecy, because the one speaking in tongues is not speaking to men, but to God. Paul's argument in chapter 14 is that the purpose of believers coming together is to edify the church. Tongues without interpretation do not do this, because they are directed to God, and if they are uninterpreted, only He can understand them. Speaking in tongues without interpretation does not build up the Church. The tongues would be a sign to any unbelieving Israelite who was present (cf. vv. 21, 22), but to unbelievers in general the impression would be given that the Christians were crazy (cf. vv. 23, 24). So prophecy is preferred as a gift to be exercised in the church, and the gift of tongues may be exercised only if there is someone

present with the gift of interpretation of tongues so that the believers may understand and be built up.

In 14:26 Paul lists the gifts as they were used in a typical worship service:

- (1) One with a psalm (psalmon)
- (2) Another with a teaching (dīdachēn)
- (3) Another with a revelation (apokalupsin)
- (4) Another with a tongue (glōssan)
- (5) Another with an interpretation (hermēneian)

Observations and Conclusion

(1) Paul mentions about thirteen different gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues, apostleship, teaching, helping, and administration.

(2) At times Paul refers to the gift itself by name (as, prophecy), at other times he refers to the person who has the gift (as prophet), or to the content of the produced by the gift (as, word of wisdom).

(3) Tongues, then, is a spiritual gift which certain individuals possessed by divine bestowal. In function the gift permitted the person to address God in a strange language, which was a sign to unbelieving Jews, but for which most Christians in Corinth needed an interpreter in order to be blessed or built up in the faith. The content of the message spoken in tongues was pure praise to God for His person and His works.

The Usage of glōssais in I Corinthians 13:8-12

In 13:8 Paul states that prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will all cease. The question arises, in which sense of these terms is Paul using them here?

To begin with, Paul must be using all of the nouns in the same way, since the two verbs he uses with them are synonymous in meaning. Also, both verbs are alike in that with both, the idea of "cease" or "become inoperative" implies some action taking place which is brought to a halt. Thus he must be referring to the act of prophesying, and the act of receiving or imparting knowledge, the act of speaking in tongues and not the content or message produced by the act in each case.

Stanley D. Toussaint, however, attempts to prove that the terms

in verse 8 refer to content rather than the act. He writes:

The content of knowledge and prophecy that was known in the early church and has been recorded in God's inspired Word will be rendered inoperative when Christ comes for His own. The knowledge and prophecies in the Word are accurate and certain of fulfillment, but they are partial. The full revelation of Christ's presence will so completely over shadow these that they will be rendered inoperative [*italics mine*].¹

How the content of any message can cease to operate is not clear to this writer. The act of revelation to a prophet may cease, or the prophet himself may cease functioning, but the term rendered inoperative may not properly be applied to the content of a message.

Toussaint's contextual arguments for this point are as follows:

(1) Comparing I Corinthians 12:8 with 13:8, in the first reference the gift is called the word of knowledge, which looks at the expression of knowledge. The latter use in 13:8 is simply gnōsis, which he avers looks at what is known, or the knowledge itself. But here it seems Toussaint makes a comparison that is not to the point. The proper contrast is between the gift itself and the content transmitted by its use. Both terms he uses, the expression of knowledge, and what is known, refer to the content of knowledge. But Paul in 13:8 must be referring to the gift itself. Only a gift can cease to function or be rendered inoperative. The content of a message can be complete or incomplete, true or false, but it cannot be operative or cease to operate.

(2) His next argument is that the knowing in part, verse 9, refers to the content more than the act. This may be agreed to, as Paul is arguing that because of limited content the functioning of the gift will cease. But this does not prove the contention Toussaint tries to make it prove, that in verse 8 Paul is speaking of content. Rather, the limitation of content in verse 9 is the reason for the cessation of action in verse 8.

(3) I Corinthians 14:6 brings knowledge and prophesying together where the last term, doctrine, indicates that the preceding terms refer to content. But its use in 14:6 does not establish how he uses it in 13:8. Indeed, a closer usage of the term is in 13:2, where he uses the noun prophēteian with the verb echō, clearly meaning the gift or ability to prophesy, rather than the content of the prophecy.

Summary

I Corinthians 13:8 means that the charismatic gift of tongues, that ability of some Christians of Paul's day to address God in a strange but human language, will be made to cease.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE STATEMENT: TONGUES WILL CEASE?

The verb "cease" is the word pauō. For this verb in the middle voice, Arndt and Gingrich list these possible meanings: to stop, cease, have finished, be at an end. The use of the middle voice here may not be exaggerated in importance, since extra-biblical sources record its common usage in the middle, as of the ending of a festival, and of words coming to an end.

The corresponding gifts of knowledge and prophecy are both likewise to come to an end. The verb used to describe the termination of these gifts is katargeō, which Paul here uses in the future passive. Arndt and Gingrich suggest that in the passive it may signify: to cease or to pass away. II Corinthians 3:7, 11, and 13 use it as a substantive: that which is transitory, and I Corinthians 13:8 and 10, what is imperfect shall pass away.

The difference between the two verbs, pauō and katargeō is sometimes exaggerated. Their closeness as synonyms is plain in that both may be at times translated cease. The differences between them in Paul's usage here appears to lie in the nature of the subject of each verb. Both the gift of prophecy and the gift of knowledge are involved in the process of transmission of information from God to man, which is called revelation (apokalupsis). On the other hand, the gift of tongues is the ability to offer praise from man to God in a strange language. This essential difference between the knowledge and prophetic gifts on the one hand and the gift of tongues on the other is sufficient basis for Paul's using different verbs to indicate their cessation.

UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS ARE TONGUES TO CEASE?

In I Corinthians 13:8 Paul states that tongues will cease, along with prophecy and knowledge, without giving a reason in that verse. This is because he is there emphasizing the contrast between love and the gifts. However, in verses 9 and 10 he introduces the reasons for the cessation of the gifts. A negative reason is introduced by the gar of verse 9. Their lack of endurance is because, after all, they are only incomplete at best. Each prophet is given only a partial glimpse into the spectrum of God's truth, as his message is only to meet the need of the moment! (Compare Peter's statement of the O. T. prophets being conscious of their limitation in this way, I Peter 1:10-12.)

In verse 10 Paul states the positive reason. There is coming something better, something complete (to teleion) in contrast to the incomplete (to ek merous). The adverb hotan, "when," shows Paul expects it to come, but the time is not known to him.

The adjective teleion is at the heart of the dispute. Its basic meaning is perfect, or complete. Warren E. Tamkin lists three major views as to its interpretation:²

(1) The Parousia View. This view holds that at the coming of Christ the perfect state of affairs will be ushered in. Thus these spiritual gifts are all to continue to the end of this age. He states that Hodge, Lenski, A. T. Robertson and others hold this view. Typical comments follow:

Leon Morris in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary series writes, "Over against the permanence of love, Paul sees the certain passing away of gifts on which the Corinthians set much store. . . . In the very presence of God there will be no reason and no place for ecstatic speech."³

In the I. C. C., Robertson and Plummer write, "Tongues were a rapturous mode of addressing God; and no such rapture would be needed when the spirit was in His immediate presence."⁴

Meyer states that "Prophecy, speaking with tongues, and deep knowledge are only appointed for the good of the church for the time until the Parousia; afterwards these temporary phenomena fall away."⁵ (emphasis his).

(2) The Modified Parousia View. This view is like the first, except that some of the charismata of the Spirit may cease to function earlier than the coming of Christ. Exponents of this view include Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, Ironside, Findlay, and Toussaint. Since this view takes much the same view of I Corinthians 13:10 as the Parousia view, it will not be considered separately.

(3) The Canonical View. This position holds that Paul refers to the completed canon of the New Testament. When he wrote I Corinthians, many of his own epistles were not yet written, along with I and II Peter, Hebrews, Luke, and Acts, John's Gospel and Epistles, Jude and the Apocalypse.

Defense of the Canonical View

The Canonical view must be considered correct for the following

reasons. Logically, to teleion must refer to completeness or perfection in the same realm as that referred to by to ek merous. Since to ek merous refers to the transmission of divine truth by revelation, the other term, to teleion must refer to God's complete revelation of truth, the entire New Testament (taken of course with its foundational book, the Old Testament). The following considerations are pertinent:

(a) Verse 9 associates ek merous with knowing, which in the context of chapters 12-14 means a divinely given capacity to understand and perceive divine truth, that is, to see into the nature of things. It likewise associates the term with prophesying, and this function is that of being a spokesman for God, to bring a direct and immediate revelation of God's will for His people in any given situation (cf. 14:30). Thus both terms are in the realm of the revelation of God's truth to men.

(b) Both things referred to are in the neuter gender:⁶

(c) In John 14:25 and 26 Christ contrasts the truth He has given with those He will give to the disciples (tauta, these things, also neuter). This is directly parallel with Paul's statement in I Corinthians 13:10. In John 16:12 and 13 Christ promises the eventual writing of the epistles ("all truth") and the Apocalypse ("things to come"). It must have been apparent to the Apostle Paul that as yet all the Scripture had not been written, that all realms of truth had not yet been dealt with in the as yet partial New Testament writings.

In conclusion, to teleion must refer to the complete revelation of God's truth as promised by Christ, i.e., the complete Word of God, the Bible.

Consideration of the Parousia View

The chief argument for making to teleion refer to the parousia of Christ is drawn from verse 12: "For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known." Toussaint writes,

That which is perfect in verse ten is explained in verse twelve. Few would controvert the idea that verse twelve is anticipating the return of Christ for His own. The "perfect" thing then is the rapture and resurrection of the church.⁷

A closer look at Paul's argument will reveal that making the "face-to-face" refer to the Lord's return is not a required interpretation, although the terminology of Paul's illustrations seem to suggest the presence of the believer with his Lord.

Verse 11 and 12 contain three illustrations of the relationship of to ek merous to to teleion. In verse 11 the illustration gives a reason for the cessation of the three gifts. The period of the use of the gifts is like the period of childhood in understanding (prophecy or knowledge), speaking (tongues) and thinking (knowledge or prophecy). The period of to teleion is like the period of adulthood, when the ways of childhood are put away (katargeō, the same verb as in verse 8). There are no more incomplete childish concepts, childlike reasonings, and childish babblings for the mature man.

In verse 12 the two illustrations tell why to teleion is superior to to ek merous. The first illustration is of seeing a man's face in the polished but imperfect surface of a brass mirror (Corinth was famous for its mirrors) in contrast with seeing him directly, face to face. To refer this to the rapture and presence of the believer "face to face" with Christ is an inconsistent use of the illustration. If the mirror is metaphorical for something, then the "face to face" experience is also metaphorical. If the mirror represents imperfect knowledge, then the face to face encounter is metaphorical for the complete state of knowledge, and is not a literal statement of our future face to face encounter with Christ.

The second illustration of verse 12 may be considered to reflect Paul's incomplete understanding of God's truth as compared with the level of knowledge God has of him. Paul in his finite knowledge knows God and His ways only incompletely, but God in His omniscience knows Paul and his ways completely. As a hyperbole this would be a fitting illustration of the contrast between the limitations inherent in a message of one with the gift of prophecy or knowledge and the complete New Testament.

Another possible interpretation is that Paul is contrasting the subjective knowledge that a person has of himself with the more objective knowledge that others have of him. The prophet's narrow insight given to him for a local need gives way to the more universal message recorded in canonical scripture. In connection with this it is noteworthy that Paul does not speak specifically of knowing as God knows him, but merely, "as I am known," the agent left unexpressed.

An objection to tongues being a gift "in part" and hence to be done away is seen by some commentators. This objection is that Paul does not mention tongues specifically as being "in part" in verse 9, while he does mention the other two gifts in this connection.

Several answers may be set forth:

(a) This omission in verse 9 can be because of the nature of

the gift of tongues in contrast to the other two mentioned. Tongues are not so obviously a revelation-in-part as are the other two. Yet tongues were a form of revelation of God. (1) In Acts 2, the pilgrims heard concerning "the wonderful works of God" in their own languages. These truths were Spirit prompted, and are thus a form of revelation. (2) In I Corinthians 14:16 and 17 the speaking in tongues is spoken of as the "giving of thanks," statements made about God and His works which the Spirit prompts, which are spoken in an appreciative manner.

(b) He does refer to tongues in his personal illustration of verse 11: "When I was a child I spake as a child." Just as the thinking and reasoning correspond to the gifts of knowledge and prophecy, this corresponds to the relative inferiority of tongues as a revelation of the praiseworthiness of God, as compared with the yet-to-be-completed perfect revelation.

Conclusion

The condition for the cessation of the spiritual gifts of knowledge and prophecy and tongues is the completion of the New Testament canon.

WHEN IS THE CONDITION FULFILLED?

Church history supplies the necessary information for the determination of when the New Testament canon was completed. A corresponding question is to determine if the manifestation of tongues actually ceased at that time. There is no attempt at this point to be rigorous, but only to state the generally accepted conclusions in this regard.

When Was the Canon of the New Testament Completed?

It is generally accepted in conservative circles that the last canonical book of the New Testament to be written, the Apocalypse, was probably written in the last decade of the first century. Thus the New Testament was complete about the turn of the century. Of course, circulation and collection of the books took some time after this, but it seems reasonable in the light of Paul's statement that after this no newly converted believers would receive these unnecessary gifts, and the older believers who had them would gradually be passing off the scene in the early part of the second century at the latest.

When Did the Gift of Tongues Cease Historically?

The consensus of church historians is that the gift of tongues ceased before the end of the first century. George W. Dollar cites a study by Dr. George B. Cutten of Colgate University of the historical

instances of speaking with tongues. His conclusion was that in the church of the Fathers, from the beginning of the second century on, "there was not one well-attested instance of any person who exercised speaking in tongues or even pretended to exercise it."⁸ Indeed, the second century fathers, as Irenaeus and Justin Martyr, had only "heard" of some who had done it. Church history thus demonstrates that about the time that the New Testament canon was completed, tongues "faded away."

Conclusion

The present day phenomenon of Christians claiming to speak in tongues has some other explanation than that it is a continuation of the New Testament practice of the gift. Such a gift is no longer necessary in that we have the complete New Testament, and the expression of our praise to God is in light of all He has revealed within its pages concerning Himself. There is not needed any dramatic use of strange languages as the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in the day of the early church. Israel as a nation met destruction in A.D. 70, and has been cut out of the tree of God's blessing so that the wild olive branches might be grafted in (Rom. 11).⁹

Twentieth century Christians are not "missing something" as long as they saturate themselves with the entire Bible, and in so doing "let the Word of Christ dwell in [them] richly, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in their hearts to the Lord."

DOCUMENTATION

1. Stanley D. Toussaint, "First Corinthians Thirteen and the Tongues Question," Bibliotheca Sacra, 120:480, October-December 1963, p. 314.
2. Warren E. Tamkin, That Which is Perfect: I Corinthians 13:10, unpublished critical monograph, Grace Theological Seminary, 1949. p. 27 ff.
3. Leon Morris, Commentary on I Corinthians, p. 186.
4. Robertson and Plumer, I Corinthians, p. 197.
5. Heinrich A. W. Meyer, Commentary on I and II Corinthians, p. 305.

6. No objection can be drawn because the original for "Word" is logos, a masculine noun. Rhēma is often used of the Scriptures and is neuter.
7. Toussaint, p. 312.
8. George W. Dollar, "Church History and the Tongues Movement," Bibliotheca Sacra, 120:480, October-December 1963, pp. 316-321.
9. See Zane C. Hodges, "The Purpose of Tongues," Bibliotheca Sacra, 120:479, July-September 1963, pp. 226-233.