

Returning to the Primary Purpose of Tongues

The apostle Paul pointed out to the Corinthian believers that he valued his ability to speak in tongues. *“I thank God that I speak in [strange] tongues more than...all of you put together.”* ⁽¹⁾ On the other hand, he made it plain to the church that he rarely spoke in tongues during church meetings. *“In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.”* ⁽²⁾

If Paul spoke in tongues more than all the Corinthians put together and yet didn't speak in tongues in church meetings, when did he speak in strange languages? Well, obviously he spoke in tongues during his private time with the Lord. Not only that, but his claim that he spoke in tongues more than all the Corinthians put together required him to employ tongues a lot. Why did he bother with tongues? Why did he thank God that he spoke in tongues outside the church walls? Paul understood the primary purpose of tongues!

Speaking to God from the Human Spirit

“If I pray in tongues, my spirit prays,” Paul testified. ⁽³⁾ Through tongues the Holy Spirit equips the human spirit to commune with God who is spirit. Basically, the Holy Spirit gives a voice to the human spirit so it can pour forth praise and adoration for Jesus.

On the Jewish festival day of Pentecost, one hundred and twenty of our Lord's followers gathered in Jerusalem. *“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”* ⁽⁴⁾ The Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak from their human spirits. What were they saying? Acts 2:11 concisely records that the 120 were *“declaring the wonders of God.”* They were praising the Lord, not with their minds, but with their spirits.

Brother Paul loved Jesus supremely. Nevertheless, he found it impossible to adequately express his feelings for Jesus from only his extensive human vocabulary. So Paul, like the believers on the day of Pentecost, spoke his admiration of Jesus from his human spirit as the Holy Spirit supplied him with limitless vocabulary. How good it felt to speak the overflowing love for Jesus that dwelt in his heart!

When by himself Paul communed with the Lord using both his mind and his human spirit. *“I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.”* ⁽⁵⁾ His mind and spirit took turns worshipping his redeemer who mercifully met him on the road to Damascus. This undemonstrative communion with Jesus satisfied his spirit's need for the Lord's presence.

Focusing on the Primary Purpose of Tongues

“*Anyone who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God,*” Paul wrote.
(⁶) How plain can it be? Tongues are primarily for communing with God, not speaking messages to people.

The immature Corinthian believers misused the gift of tongues in church. As a result, Paul recorded detailed rules governing the use of tongues during public meetings. These guidelines occupy the majority of 1 Corinthians Chapters 12 and 14.

Consequently, many modern era Christians mainly focus their attention on the gift of tongues. Regrettably, this stress on tongues during public meetings diverts our attention from the primary purpose of tongues. Then we devalue the importance of tongues as a means of communing with God from the human spirit.

Many dear Christians who experience the baptism with the Holy Spirit speak in tongues when initially filled with the Spirit. After that, they use tongues less and less. This neglect of our God given ability to speak to the Lord from the human spirit robs us of the benefits of using tongues in private.

Unrestrainable Joy

Paul experienced huge disappointments and massive doses of physical pain. He stated, “*I have...been in prison...frequently, been flogged...severely, been exposed to death again and again.*” (⁷) We would naturally expect Paul to drag from one degree of depression to another. However, he plainly declared, “*In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.*” (⁸) Where was the depression? How could he experience unrestrainable joy when Christians disappointed him and unbelievers tortured him?

Part of the answer lies in his frequent use of tongues. Paul pointed out, “*He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.*” (⁹) Speaking from his spirit in languages supplied by the Holy Spirit reinvigorated Paul’s God-given joy. His joy didn’t originate in this world, his circumstances or his feelings. Joy that flowed from the throne of God sustained his unbounded happiness! It’s the same with us in the twenty-first century.

Due to legal blindness, I lost my driver’s license when only 29 years old. By age 34 I began using electronic recorders for achieving more and more of my office work. My secretary printed my sermon outlines in ever larger letters. Many other setbacks have occurred in my personal life and ministry because of my decreasing vision. I admit that depression and discouragement often attempted to smother my determination to continue in ministry. Fortunately, during my early twenties I began daily using tongues during my private communion with the Lord.

As a result, I experienced Holy Spirit edification that beat back attacks of despondency and despair.

I think that many ministers of the Gospel have failed to latch on to 1 Corinthians 14:4: *“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.”* They miss the self-edifying effect of partnering their spirit with the Holy Spirit in tongues. In partnership with the Holy Spirit, our spirits praise, magnify and glorify the God in whose presence is the fullness of joy. These expressions of our delight in God allow super human joy to flood our feelings and our thoughts. Depression loses its grip on our hearts and minds and *“in all our troubles [our] joy knows no bounds.”*

Self edification isn't selfish. The Lord who placed us in ministry edifies us by his presence so we can edify others by his power. Let's return to the primary purpose of tongues and use our spirits in communing with the God who depends on us to bless people.

Footnotes:

1. 1 Corinthians 14:18 AMP
2. 1 Corinthians 14:19
3. 1 Corinthians 14:14
4. Acts 2:4
5. 1 Corinthians 14:15
6. 1 Corinthians 14:2
7. 2 Corinthians 11:23
8. 2 Corinthians 7:4
9. 1 Corinthians 14:4