

## —The Gift of the Holy Spirit—

### *Lesson 5, A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues Today, O. Palmer Robertson*

- I. NT tongues were revelational
  - A. Paul's usage of the term *mystery* in his letters has a very specific meaning which inherently includes the idea of the communication of divine revelation.
    - 1. Each of the following verses explicitly talk about a mystery as something once hidden in the OT, but now revealed in the NT with the coming of Christ and the appointing of His apostles, Mt 13.11; Rom 16.25; 1Cor 2.1-7; 15.51; Eph 1.9; 3.3; 3.4-9; 6.19-20; Col 1.25-27; 4.3; 1Tim 3.9, 16.
    - 2. In 1Cor 14.2, when Paul says a tongues-speaker utters mysteries, he's telling that that person is communicating truth known to him by divine revelation. Thus, tongues were a divine instrument for communicating God's revelation to the church in languages previously unknown to the speakers, cf. Acts 2.11; 1Cor 14.9-11.
  - B. In 1Cor 14.4-5, Paul declares that tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy, giving further proof of its revelational character—because prophecy is revelational, Ex 7.1-2; 4.15-16; Num 12.6-7; Dt 13.4-5; Joel 2.28; Acts 11.27-28; 21.10-14.
    - 1. Joel 2.28/Acts 2.16-17 describes the NT communication at Pentecost to be nothing new or different, but that which parallels Num 12.6-7. Joel's prophecy is that the consummation of the ages would be accompanied by extensive revelatory experiences in contrast to its sporadic outpouring in the OT. The Holy Spirit was not doing *a new thing* at Pentecost, but the same thing in a NT context. The experiences of the NT prophets fit the OT pattern, Acts 11.27-28; 21.8-11.
    - 2. Peter also confirms the revelatory nature of prophecy, 2Pet 1.20-21.
  - C. Paul makes it clear that the hearers in 1Cor 14 were edified by nothing less than the understanding of God's truth, whether by prophecy or by tongues-interpreted. It's the revelation from God by those media that edified the church, cf. Acts 15.32.
  - D. Tongues and prophecy were word-gifts, 1Pet 4.11, and therefore edified only by understanding. Both the speaker and the hearer were edified through understanding the message that was spoken. This challenges the modern idea of tongues as *a private prayer language that edifies the speaker, though he has no understanding of what he's saying*. If the speaker could be edified by tongues without understanding, then why couldn't the hearers? But Paul says tongues must be interpreted. No one is edified if no one understands, 1Cor 14.2. Edification through a verbal gift requires understanding.
    - 1. In 1Cor 14.14, when Paul says *my spirit prays*, he means that from within his soul he offers prayers to God. But this praying in his spirit is not without full rational understanding. Paul fully understands what he's praying, which is why he can give thanks for what he prays, v.15, 16-18.
    - 2. The contrast in this passage between *spirit* and *mind* is not between non-cognitive and cognitive, but between the *Holy Spirit* (spirit in vv.2, 14-16) and the *mind* of the recipient of the revelation. Paul's contrast here is that Spirit-worked speech in the case of prophecy and tongues does not utilize the speaker's existing language capacities, but is a gift from God. But in either case, the speaker fully understands the revelation he's receiving from God, which is how he can be built up by it, v.4, and why he can give thanks to God for it, vv.17-18.
  - E. Since interpreted tongues are equivalent to prophecy and both were revelational word-gifts, when a person spoke in tongues, he was delivering the very Word of God, infallible and inerrant in all its parts, 1Cor 14.2. And when the tongue was followed by its interpretation, the interpretation was also infallible, vv.13, 16-17.
    - 1. For this reason, the tongues being experienced today can't be regarded the same as NT tongues, apart from opening the door to continuing revelation beyond the Scriptures, Heb 1.1-2; 1Cor 3.10-11; Rev 22.18-19.

2. The effect of this conclusion would include bringing into question the completion and fullness of God's revelation, not only through Christ's apostles and prophets (Eph 2.20), but also through Christ Himself, Heb 1.1-2. Does God in fact have more to say beyond what Christ has said? If so, then Christ is neither the full revelation of God nor the fulfillment and consummation of the OT revelation and the foundation of the Church is not finished. These are dangerous conclusions, directly contradictory to the claims of Scripture, the Apostles, and Christ Himself, Heb 2.1-4.
- II. Tongues were foreign languages, Acts 2.6; 1Cor 14.9-11, 20-22.
    - A. There's no indication in Scripture that after Pentecost a different kind of *unintelligible tongue* was practiced in the church. On the contrary, it's clear that there was only one kind of tongue word-gift, Acts 10.47; 11.15; 19.7; 1Cor 14.9-11, 20-22.
    - B. The effect of this conclusion is to place the modern tongues-speaking activity outside the realm of valid NT experience from the outset. Whatever may be going on today, it's not the kind of worship-experience described by the Scriptures of the NT.
    - C. To suggest that the modern tongues phenomenon *is not* of the same kind as the tongues of the NT *and yet* a gift of the Holy Spirit for the church today is to open the door to almost any kind of experience-centered phenomenon.
  - III. NT tongues were for public edification, not private use
    - A. All of the Spirit's gifts were for the benefit of the church as a whole, 1Cor 12.
    - B. With this larger picture of the public nature of spiritual gifts, look again at 1Cor 14.18-19. The contrast is not between private tongues and prophecy or even between private tongues and public tongues. The contrast is between a revelation that edifies (being understood) and a revelation that does not (being foreign to the hearers).
    - C. The Corinthians were abusing the gift of tongues, not caring whether others understood it or not. They were being childish, 1Cor 14.20-22.
    - D. Moreover, every gift of the Spirit must be publicly tested by the church, 1Cor 14.26-33. But if private tongues exist, then it can't be tested—which is contrary to Scripture.
    - E. In v.28 Paul is not suggesting that tongues were for private use. Just the opposite, by saying that without an interpreter the tongues-speaker must remain quiet in public, he's saying tongues are *only* intended for public use.
  - IV. NT tongues were a sign of God's covenantal curse on unbelieving Israel, Dt 28.49; Isa 28.11-12; Jer 5.15; 1Cor 14.20-22.
    - A. Given the OT prophecies, it's clear that when foreign tongues overrun the Israel, it's a sign that God's judgment had come, Mt 21.40-45.
    - B. Thus, tongues served as *a transitional sign* from God that He was making a dramatic change in the history of redemption. He would no longer speak to a single people in a single language. The barrier between Jew and Gentile was brought down and blessing would now come to the foreign world in foreign tongues, Eph 2.11-14. Tongues marked the transition to a world-wide gospel. The tongues at Pentecost dramatically illustrated the universal character and intent of Christianity, Mt 28.18-20; Acts 1.8; 2.41; 10.44-48.
    - C. The church no longer needs a transitional sign, since the threshold to the world has been crossed, Col 1.6, 23.
    - D. Moreover, the church cannot abide any further revelation like tongues and prophecy gave the NT church, because *the very NT Scripture provided by those divine gifts* declares that God's revelation is complete and sufficient, 2Tim 3.16-17 and that the foundation of the church is finished and therefore stable and immovable, Eph 2.20-22; 1Cor 3.10-11.
      1. Also, the church needs neither pseudo-prophetism or pseudo-tongues. It needs no diversion from the plain and faithful proclamation of the Word once given, Jude 3; 2Tim 4.1-5; 1Cor 14.24-25; 2Pet 1.19-21; Heb 4.12.
  - V. *Conclusion*: while tongues were an important sign of revelation, the enduring role of inscripturated revelation must now be allowed its permanent place of priority in the church as it progresses.