

Tongues of Angels?

Alan Marshall – October 1992 (revised September 2000)

Paul's reference to the "tongues of men and angels" (1 Corinthians 13:1) is the basis for the widespread belief among Pentecostals that they speak in angelic tongues. The reason for wanting to believe this is clearly because tongues are seldom recognizable as a language of mankind. Some Pentecostals will think of their tongue as belonging to some far-off tribe, but this explanation becomes unconvincing after a while. Most of the world's population speaks languages that should be recognizable (as opposed to understandable) to someone in a typical congregation. For example, the only language I understand is English, but I can usually guess if a person is speaking French, German, or from a region such as Southern Europe (Italian, Spanish or Portuguese), Scandinavia (Swedish or Norwegian), or north-east Asia (Japanese Korean, Cantonese).

Does the bible provide solid evidence for belief in the gift of angelic tongues or should we rather expect tongues of mankind? The starting point of our investigation is Pentecost, and no one doubts that on this occasion, tongues of mankind are referred to:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."
(Acts 2:5-13 NIV)

The tongues of Pentecost fit well with Paul's understanding:

So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me.
(1 Corinthians 14:9-11 NIV)

Here Paul identifies tongues as "languages in the world". This phrase seems to be a clear statement of nature of tongues, identifying them as earthly languages, and I am surprised it receives so little attention.

If all the material so far relates to earthly tongues, what are we to make of the reference to the tongues of men and angels? Let's look at the context:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.
(1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NIV)

Paul is talking in superlatives in order to make a point. He is not talking about ordinary tongues any more than he is talking about ordinary prophecy or ordinary faith. He is saying if he has the ultimate in these gifts, the fullness of these gifts, so that he has "all faith" (literal Greek), fathoms "all mysteries", has "all knowledge", and all languages (the tongues of men and the angels) but not love, he is nothing. The text allows for angelic tongues but imply that these are exceptional.

What then is the significance of tongues? Certainly it is a miraculous demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit confirming the preached word (Acts 2, Mark 16:17-20). At Pentecost it not only confirmed the word but also communicated it. Tongues, when interpreted, can be a means of revelation but this is effectively little different from prophecy .

Beyond these practical considerations, I believe there is a theological significance to tongues which was apparent at Pentecost. Then it demonstrated that "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17). In other words, the gospel was not just for the Jews but for the gentiles as well, for "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9).

This revelation was so important that Paul described it as the "mystery of Christ", that "through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus." (Eph 3:4-6), such that "there is neither Jew nor Greek for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

The Pentecost event reminds me of another much earlier event in the Bible:

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel -- because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.
(Genesis 11:5-9 NIV)

Although the Bible never explicitly contrasts the two, a comparison of the Tower of Babel and Pentecost is thought provoking. In the former, God was scattering mankind through language. In the latter he was symbolically uniting mankind through a sharing in other nations' languages, overcoming the division that resulted from the former. At Babel, mankind was "scattered". At Pentecost, all the national groups

heard the gospel in their own language, confirming that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:23).

Among the early church fathers, Augustine spoke of “that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth” (Homily VI on 1 John).

If the biblical gift was one of earthly tongues, what then do we make of modern tongues? Apart from the fact that they are almost never recognized, there are other characteristics that trouble me, such as repetition, alliteration, and the use of a limited number of syllables in various combinations. If modern tongues are generally not the biblical gift, then what is their explanation?

A detailed discussion of that question is beyond the scope of this essay, but I find the explanation that it is a learned phenomenon very plausible. It is easy to see how people could be encouraged to utter a few syllables as they come to mind, and persuaded that this is a gift from God, go to build on this "vocabulary" with repeated use. If modern tongues prove to be, for the most part, a learned phenomenon, then the whole concept of "the baptism in the spirit" is called into question.

I should emphasize at this point that I am not aligning myself with the opponents of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. In fact I have been worshiping at a Pentecostal church now for nearly ten years. There are emphases on listening to God, ministering to the whole person, head and heart, and joy and power in the Holy Spirit which have been much neglected by traditional churches. Among my friends is at least one whose reception of the gift of tongues, without any previous teaching about it, cannot be adequately explained in the above terms. I have seen others miraculously healed, and delivered of evil spirits.

The contribution of traditional churches remains in their solid bible teaching, and their intellectual rigor. Pentecostal churches could benefit from some of this critical thinking in evaluating claims of miraculous phenomena. As real and joyous as the above genuine healings are, I believe any careful examination will show the majority of claims of miraculous healing are exaggerated or insubstantial. God cares for us, but for the most part his healing is by natural means.

This perhaps gives us some insight into what to expect from an examination of the phenomena of tongues. Just as in the midst of much talk about healing, there are some events which are truly miraculous, so in the midst of much seemingly insubstantial tongues, I am ready to believe the genuine gift of earthly tongues still occurs.

In a few months it will be one hundred years since Charles Parham and his followers first prayed for the baptism in the Spirit with the evidence of the gift of tongues, giving birth of the modern Pentecostal movement. It is time for both Pentecostals and the traditional churches to put their arguments and prejudices to one side, and to honestly and objectively seek to understand the modern phenomena.

Acknowledgements:

All quotations of the scriptures, unless otherwise stated, are from the New International Version (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, USA), 1984.

Recommended Reading:

Charismatic Chaos; John F MacArthur Jr.; Zondervan Publishing House

- I don't agree with everything in this book, and some criticism in my opinion is unfair, but I believe his position on the nature of tongues is essentially correct and agrees well with this essay.

Empowered Evangelicals; Rich Nathan & Ken Wilson; Servant Publications

- A very good balance that seems to capture the best of charismatic and evangelical teaching and practice.

The Beauty of Spiritual Language; Jack Hayford; Thomas Nelson Publishers

- Probably the best explanation of traditional Pentecostal teaching on tongues.

Feedback:

Some readers may wish to endorse this essay while others may have criticisms. All feedback is welcome if it is constructive. Email can be sent to:

alan.marshall@tpg.com.au

Distribution:

You can print out this essay, or download the electronic version, from:

www.alanmarshall.org/essays

All essays on this site can be reproduced freely without permission, provided they are not altered.