

THE STRANGE THEOLOGY OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S 'STRANGE FIRE' - Part ten

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THE INSEPARABLE GIFTS OF TONGUES AND THE INTERPRETATION OF TONGUES

Let's look at **1 Corinthians 12:8-11** - "For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [9] to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10] to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. [11] All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills."

Just saying those words - "**tongues and the interpretation of tongues**" - sends shivers down some people's backs. Nothing has caused so much discussion, paranoia, foolishness and needless division as the subject of the role of the gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues in the church today.

1) **SOME REASONS FOR CONFUSION ON THE SUBJECT OF TONGUES AND INTERPRETATION**

- a) ***The gift is sometimes foolishly exercised in the church*** - That's what Paul had to deal with at the church in Corinth. Too many abuses. No interpretation. People who thought they were more spiritual because they had spoken in tongues. Because the gift is so visible abuses are more obvious and painful.
- b) ***There's a mind-set tilted against even the practice of these gifts when they are spoken of*** - When they're considered at all they're usually associated with some backwoods tent meeting, mingled with a brief news clip of snake handlers or occult practices. **MacArthur** repeatedly labors the point that Mormons and Hindus and a host of others frequently speak in tongues (p.137). So we Pentcostals end up guilty by association rather than Scriptural examination.
- c) ***Frequently there is simply ignorance about what the Bible says and teaches about the gifts of tongues and interpretation*** - People hear someone say, "**All tongues did was cause problems in the early church!**" They don't know any better than to just believe a statement like that.

All of these mistaken ideas are in spite of the fact that Paul says, "**Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed**"(1 Corinthians 12:1). But Paul's wish has obviously not been granted.

Jack Hayford's words are timely and inciteful: "**It's perfectly clear that the apostle Paul - not only a university graduate, but one of history's most respected thinkers - saw speaking with tongues as desirable and as worthy of respect in devotional exercise. As the man who is acknowledged as second only to Jesus Himself in securing the global establishment of Christianity, Paul not only expresses personal gratitude for the continuity and clear significance of such prayer in his own life, but he expressly disallows anyone's discouragement of the same.**"

1 Corinthians 14:18 "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you."Remember, this is the verse where, incredibly, MacArthur says Paul was merely exaggerating.

1 Corinthians 14:39 "So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues."

2) **REMOVING SOME OF THE CONFUSION REGARDING THE GIFT OF TONGUES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

I've already covered this point at length in previous teaching in this series. But John MacArthur's (and Justin Peter's) foundational point of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the New Testament on this whole subject is a ***confusion between the gift of tongues in the instruction found in 1 Corinthians and the sign of tongues at the outpourings of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts.***

Over and over and over again MacArthur blindly calls the recognizable language tongues in Acts chapter 2 the ***gift*** of tongues and then actually proceeds to ***measure*** the practice of that specific spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians by the experience in Acts 2.

MacArthur is absolutely adamant - ***"But the only detailed description of the true gift of tongues in Scripture is found in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost...."***(p.138).

His motive in this interpretive move is obvious. He wants to demand that the gift of tongues in the congregational use described in 1 Corinthians 14 be the ***same*** as the tongues in Acts 2. And seeing that the practice of the gift of tongues as described in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 ***doesn't*** appear as recognizable languages then the modern practice of the gift of tongues (and ***also***, I would point out, the teaching of the Apostle Paul on the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14) ***isn't valid***.

But this is interpretation by prejudice rather than by text. Everyone else can see this and MacArthur probably knows better too. What Luke describes in the Book of Acts is so obviously different from the gift of tongues described by Paul in 1 Corinthians. This difference is simply unmissable to the reader:

In Luke's account in Acts all spoke in tongues ***simultaneously*** - **Acts 2:1-4** - ***"When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. [2] And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [3] And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. [4] And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance."***

With the congregational ***gift*** of tongues Paul allows only ***one person at a time to speak out*** - **1 Corinthians 14:26-27** - ***"What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. [27] If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret."***

In Luke's account in Acts tongues need not be interpreted - **Acts 10:44-47** - ***"While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. [45] And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. [46] For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, [47] "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"***

When Paul teaches on the ***gift*** of tongues in 1 Corinthians the accompanying ***gift of interpretation*** is always required. Tongues must be interpreted for ministry to take place - **1 Corinthians 14:28** - ***"But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God."***

Something else should be noted. Paul says that when there is no accompanying gift of interpretation speaking in tongues should be restrained from being spoken ***aloud*** before the congregation. But the speaker, while ***internalizing*** or ***speaking quietly in tongues*** is still ***"speaking to himself and to God."*** It is still not ***valueless***. Earlier in this same chapter Paul makes it clear that there is a use of tongues that edifies the one speaking - **1 Corinthians 14:4** - ***"The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies***

builds up the church.”

This is an aside from Paul as he addressed the need for the public exercise of the gift of tongues to **always** be accompanied by the gift of interpretation. Paul is telling us **why** this is so. The gift of interpretation is essential in the church because without it **only the one speaking in tongues is edified**. But notice that Paul still says the one speaking in tongues **is** edified. His point is merely that this isn't **enough**. In the worship context of the local church the goal must be the edification of the **whole congregation**, not merely one **individual** - **1 Corinthians 14:12-13** - **“So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. [13] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.”**

I point out Paul's endorsement of the self-edifying result of the use of tongues because John MacArthur rules out **any** personal value in the practice. He simply has no way of handling Paul's endorsement of the value of speaking in tongues - **1 Corinthians 14:18** - **“I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.”**

The best MacArthur can do with this direct, simple, honest statement from the great Apostle is this - **“Because Paul did not specify when or where he spoke in tongues, the charismatic claim that Paul cultivated a private “prayer language” is sheer speculation.”**

Really? That's it? Just because Paul didn't include a list of every single place where he spoke in tongues - every single situation where he quickly prayed in the Spirit - we're free to totally ignore the fact that he says he **“spoke in tongues more than all of you”**? The only conclusion I can come up with from MacArthur's comment is if only Paul had included a **list of stops** and **times** where he spoke in tongues MacArthur would be charismatic today! Unbelievable is the only word to describe such twisted logic.

3) **THE NATURE OF ALL TONGUES IS SPEAKING INSPIRED PRAISE TO GOD**

I believe this is the most ignored point in traditional Pentecostal practice. Tongues is **always** speaking to God. This is true whether in the Book of Acts or the interpreted **gift** of tongues in the congregational life of the church. Paul makes his point in very clear words - **1 Corinthians 14:2** - **“For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.”**

Some will argue that this is Paul's description of **personal praying** in tongues, not the interpreted **gift** of tongues before the congregation. But this is simply **not** the case. The fact that **all** speaking in tongues is speaking to God is made clear consistently throughout the New Testament:

1 Corinthians 14:16-17 - **“Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? [17] For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.”**

1 Corinthians 14:28 - **“But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.”**

These are clearly Paul's remarks about the **gift** of tongues in the context of the need for **interpretation** in the church setting. The idea of a **“message in tongues”** is a concept totally foreign to the New Testament. And now we need to look at the practical significance of this point for the edification of the church:

4) **TONGUES AND INTERPRETATION ARE NOT THE SAME IN PURPOSE AS THE GIFT OF PROPHECY**

The two are not the same thing done in different ways. "Well boy, Pastor Don, that's the way I've always thought of it" And usually that idea comes from the way people read **1 Corinthians 14:1-5** - **“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. [2] For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. [3] On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. [4] The one who speaks in a tongue**

builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. [5] Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”

Paul is saying that prophecy has greater impact on the church than the gift of tongues *alone* (notice the key phrase, “*unless he interprets*” in verse 5). However, if the tongues are *interpreted* then *tongues and interpretation are just as edifying as prophecy*. But that doesn't mean they are the *same thing*. Two gifts can be equally *edifying* without being *identical*.

But there's still another question that has to be dealt with: *How come in most cases in our churches, the gift of tongues followed by interpretation usually seems to be God speaking to us rather than we speaking to God?* To deal with that issue we need to look at the gift of interpretation itself.

4) THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GIFT OF INTERPRETATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1 Corinthians 14:4-5 - “The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. [5] Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”

1 Corinthians 14:13-19 - “Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. [14] For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. [15] What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. [16] Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? [17] For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. [18] I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. [19] Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

The first basic point that needs to be stressed is that the Bible calls it the gift of *interpretation*, not *translation*. Two people could interpret the same expression of tongues *and give perfectly accurate interpretations though in completely different words*. It's the *sense* - the *meaning* - that must be conveyed.

The Holy Spirit guides the selection of words *only to the point of guarding the meaning*. He does not operate through us like voice mail. People's vocabularies are different and that will be reflected in the interpretation. Nothing is violated scripturally in this. People will *choose their words*, guided by the Holy Spirit. That's what interpretation is all about.

John MacArthur argues at length that the gift of interpretation is the act of actual word-for-word *translation* and says this is the only meaning of the word in 1 Corinthians. This is simply untrue. *Anthony Thiselton*, a scholar who is *not* charismatic, points out in his massive book, “*The Holy Spirit - In Biblical Teaching, Through the Centuries, and Today*,” that the more common meaning of Paul's term “interpretation” is “*to give the sense, or to put into words*.”

But back to our main point. I think the Scriptures are better honored when people interpret expressions of tongues with the interpretation speaking *to* God rather than *to* people. I think there are times when we are more shaped by our background and learned traditions of what we grew up with than by Scripture. But God is gracious and can enable the *meaning* of the tongues be communicated in either way. Let me give some examples of this from the way God speaks even through His Word:

Psalm 145:1-5 - “I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. [2] Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. [3] Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. [4] One generation shall

commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. [5] On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.”

Now look at Psalm 147:1 - “Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.”

Now the style of those verses is quite different. The first passage speaks directly to God. The second speaks to people about God. But the theme and message of both passages is the same. ***It's a wonderful and fitting thing for all of us to praise the Lord! We need to do it more!***

That's why Paul says that congregational tongues, when interpreted, is equally edifying to the church as prophecy. That kind of ***inspired praise and prayer to the Lord exhorts and encourages and builds up the whole body of Christ!*** It does it in a different ***way*** than the gift of prophecy, but it does it just as ***much***.

It also explains why ***the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation usually manifest themselves most effectively and naturally when people are preoccupied with and committed to exalting Jesus Christ through their sincere worship!***

This is of more than just theological interest. There are many different ways in which the Spirit gets quenched. I think there are times when God really prompts someone to give the interpretation to the expression of the gift of tongues in a corporate gathering. They sense that rising up of praise and inspired speech to Father God but ***hesitate to speak out because that's not the way they have seen interpretations given before***. They think they have to have a ***“message” in tongues*** from God to the people, which is really the purpose of the gift of ***prophecy***, not ***tongues and interpretation***.

I'm sure this is one reason people hold back in interpretation. They become unsure of themselves because the interpretation they sense doesn't fit in with the pattern they've seen others demonstrate. They feel compelled to suppress what God is genuinely giving them and live in unspoken confusion. And the church misses out on the edifying word the Spirit wanted spoken in that body.

Tongues and interpretation are designed to ***put the spotlight on some facet of God's glorious Person that will build hope and trust and worship in the hearts of the those who hear***. And it's badly needed in the church today.

5) THE GIFT OF TONGUES IS TO EDIFY THE WHOLE CHURCH FAMILY AS THEY WORSHIP WHEN ACCOMPANIED BY THE GIFT OF INTERPRETATION

1 Corinthians 14:1-5 - “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. [2] For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. [3] On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. [4] The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. [5] Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”

As we've been saying, the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation are ***always to be exercised together***. Please notice, Paul says that these gifts are to be exercised in a decent and orderly way - ***but they are to be exercised in the church!*** The body is never to look down on these gifts because people have to ***learn how to use them properly*** or ***because sometimes they make mistakes***. The body is to grow in love and understanding at those times (remember 1 Corinthians 13) and pray for each other and be patient with each other.

Perhaps you have seen different things happen. Sometimes two people start speaking out in tongues at the same time. One doesn't hear the other or doesn't know enough to stop. Sometimes a person speaks out in tongues and there is no interpreter. Because the one speaking in tongues has never given an interpretation before, they're afraid to exercise faith and give it themselves. Sometimes a sincere person can confuse what should be ***their own private praise and worship to the Lord*** with ***an expression of tongues meant for the whole body.***

Listen, all of these things have happened and will continue to happen in Pentecostal worship. But as long as we are growing and learning together, God will be glorified. And the church will be edified. ***The Bible is clear - no one is allowed to forbid or despise the gifts!***

If you see something that strikes you as weird or out of order in a church gathering, or somebody you know starts teaching something that is totally off the wall about the Holy Spirit (Who is called the Spirit of Truth in the Scriptures), remember the truth of God's Word, to be sure. But do something else as well. ***Immediately check your reaction.*** Do you run around to people outside the worship service playing detective to all the things that you don't think went as they should. Don't listen to people like that when they come up to you.

Do you find yourself saying, ***"Boy those charismatic people are all kooks"*** or ***"Why can't people just mature and grow up and live life like everybody else?"*** Or do you have enough maturity, understanding, and spiritual grace to ***separate the abuse from the intent of Father God*** Who says, "Don't let the fact that people make mistakes cause you to ignore the fact that the gifts of the Spirit are still good for My church. And I want to give good demonstration of His workings and gifts in ***your life!***"

Even so, Lord Jesus.