

CHAPTER XVII

SHOULD I SEEK TO SPEAK IN TONGUES?

There is no doubt about the fact that the Bible teaches that tongues is a genuine spiritual gift. Neither is there any doubt that not a few Christians claim to have that gift and to experience results from it that ^{seem} are beneficial to their spiritual lives. With the spread of tongues to groups outside those commonly associated with it, many believers are wondering if this is something they should seek in order to enhance their spiritual growth. Have I really experienced everything God wants me to have if I do not seek the gift of tongues?

Of course, the answer to this and all questions about tongues must be found in what the Bible says about the matter, not what somebody's experience seems to prove or disprove. This is not to say that the experiences which many are having today are not real; of course, they are. However, the all-important question is, are they Scriptural experiences? You see, it is quite possible to have a genuine experience which, even though not against the Scripture, is not a biblical one. The only way to determine if any experience is biblical is to test the experience by the Bible and never vice versa.

Years ago I was helping in a church work in which there was a lady who was always dreaming dreams about me and the two other "young preachers" in the work. Through dreams she would communicate messages from God to us, and the messages always contained kind thoughts, comforting words and Scriptural sentiments. Never, to my recollection, was there anything unscriptural in them; yet it was open to serious question whether this dear Christian lady was having a genuine biblical experience in communicating revelation from God through her dreams. Experience must always be tested by the Bible as our final authority.

What can we learn about tongues from the Bible which will help us to

know what place this gift may play in a balanced spiritual life? If we approach this matter positively (note the way the question was phrased--"what can we learn . . ."), perhaps we will be able to avoid much of the fruitless discussion which often accompanies this subject. *Here are five things we can learn definitely.*

1. You Can Be Baptized by the Spirit and Not Speak in Tongues.

As we have seen, every Christian has been baptized by the Spirit, and this placed him in the body of Christ. This is an experience which occurs only once for each believer. In contrast, the filling of the Spirit may be experienced repeatedly and brings power in the Christian's life as he yields control. But the presence of tongues is not a necessary accompaniment or proof of the baptism of the Spirit. Notice the case of the Corinthians. Paul said (I Cor. 14:5) that all of them did not speak in tongues, and yet he made it plain that they all had been baptized with the Spirit (I Cor. 12:13). Obviously then, some had been baptized who had not spoken in tongues. Furthermore, not once in either letter to that church did he exhort those who had not spoken in tongues to seek to do so. It is not a necessary sign of the baptism with the Spirit, and any teaching which insists on this is not following the Scripture.

2. The Distribution of Spiritual Gifts Is Limited in Various Ways.

The giving of spiritual gifts is limited in several ways. For one, not every Christian has all the gifts. Indeed, it is doubtful if any believer (with the possible exception of some of the apostles) is given all the gifts. It is this variety in combination of gifts that each of us possesses that makes us dependent on each other for the proper functioning of the body of Christ.

Furthermore, not all the gifts are necessarily given to each generation of Christians, although we are often told that if God gave a certain gift in one generation He must give it in every generation because He is the same. This reasoning is frequently used to promote the more spectacular gifts today, but

there are two fallacies behind this kind of thinking. First of all, God's "sameness" or power is not affected by a change in His program. Giving a gift to one generation and withholding it from the next does not mean God's power is in any way lessened; it only indicates a change in His program. Or to change the example--if God decided to send an earthquake to release Paul and Silas from a Philippian jail and later decided not to release Paul from his Roman death cell, this does not mean He could not have done so. It indicates that for reasons best known to Him, His purposes are better served by release in one instance and by not releasing in another. Or again, if God gave Paul the gift of healing so that he could and did heal others and yet did not allow him to use that gift on his own thorn in the flesh, this does not mean God's power is not the same. Likewise, if God desired to give the gift of tongues to some in the first century but not even to any thereafter, this in no way indicates that He is not the same.

A second fallacy in this reasoning is the failure to realize that any spiritual gift given only once to one individual in all the history of the church is a gift to the whole church. The gift of apostleship, for instance, was given to a very few, but who today is not still profiting from that gift? Indeed, apostleship and prophecy are said to be limited gifts given only to a few people in the founding era of the church (Eph. 2:20). Actually, since we are no longer living in the founding period of church history, we would not expect God to be giving those gifts which were appropriate to that era. We do not need nor expect to have another Cornerstone for the church and neither do we need apostles and prophets today. These belong to the foundation, and we are high up in the superstructure in this twentieth century.

But what about tongues? Was this gift also limited to the early Christians? Hebrews 2:3-4 suggests this: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great

salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with diverse miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will?" Notice that certain spectacular gifts were given to those who heard the Lord ^(God also bearing them witness...) which were not given to the second generation Christians who lived in the first century. Tongues may have been one of those spectacular gifts which was limited in its distribution even within the first century.

3. "Whether there be tongues, they shall cease." This verse (I Cor. 13:8) plainly states that the gift of tongues will cease to be given. What apparently isn't plainly said is when that will or has happened. And yet there is in the verse itself a strong clue as to when. Three gifts are mentioned in the verse--prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (not general understanding, but the spiritual gift, see I Cor. 12:8). The same thing is said about the cessation of two of these gifts, prophecy and knowledge, namely, that they shall be abolished. Exactly the same verb and exactly the same voice of the verb (passive, shall be abolished by someone) is used of both prophecy and knowledge. However, the statement concerning tongues is quite different. The verb is different ("stop") and the voice of the verb is different (middle). Now we do not have anything quite like the middle voice in English. The nearest expression we have is a reflexive (myself, himself). An active voice verb is, for example, "the boy washes his dog." In the passive it would be like this: "the dog is washed by the boy." (Prophecy and knowledge will be abolished by God.) If we say, "the dog washes himself" we use a reflexive, but in Greek the middle voice would be used. This is what is said about tongues. They will stop or cease of themselves. In other words, God will be obliged to withdraw the gifts of prophecy and knowledge but not so with tongues, for by that time they will have ceased of their own accord. Now if we couple this statement with that of Ephesians 2:20 which says that prophecy was given along with Christ Himself as the cornerstone for the founding

of the church, then we may be forced to conclude that tongues (that is, the genuine Scriptural gift) died out in that founding era too.

4. There Are More Important Gifts Than Tongues and These We Are to Seek.

When the apostle Paul lists the spiritual gifts in order of importance, he placed apostleship first, prophecy second, teaching third, then miracles, healing, helps, administration, and last in the list, tongues (I Cor. 12:28). Then he said that we are to earnestly desire the better gifts (v. 31). Here is the answer to the question posed in the title of this chapter. Should I seek to speak in tongues? No, I should seek the better gifts. For instance, I should seek to exercise the gift of helps which stands ahead of tongues in the list. This reaffirms what was said earlier about the importance of routine faithfulness as the primary manifestation of true spirituality rather than some spectacular demonstration that is like a flash in the pan. If you are concerned about whether or not you should be seeking the gift of tongues, follow this simple and clear teaching of the Scriptures and seek a better gift.

5. Christlikeness Does Not Depend on Speaking in Tongues.

The goal for every believer is Christlikeness, and the fruit of the Spirit is Christlikeness. That fruit, according to Galatians 5:22-23, does not include speaking in tongues or working miracles. Furthermore, as far as we know our Lord never spoke in tongues, so we can perfectly imitate Him without doing it either. No one need ever feel under pressure that his spiritual life is lacking in some way because he has not spoken in tongues, for Christlikeness does not depend on that. That deep and abiding fellowship with the Lord that we all desire is fostered by increasingly greater knowledge of the Lord, and that kind of knowledge comes through deeper understanding of His Word.

Why all the interest today in speaking in tongues? This is not an easy question to answer. Undoubtedly, for many it relates to a genuine desire to

have a deeper experience with God. In some instances a Satanic counterfeit is very likely involved, for we know that he is trying to promote orderliness and a kind of godliness in his counterfeit religious experience. I doubt that Satan is willingly or happily involved with fanatics, but he may delight in sidetracking believers from more important activities by leading them into the things we have been discussing in this chapter. The fact that seeming blessing may attend some of these experiences does not necessarily prove that they are of God, or that they are the source of the blessing. God may enter any situation and bring good out of it.

Sometimes when students graduate from seminary they miss the Lord's leading and are sidetracked by Satan into a different ministry. And yet during the course of the years they have blessing in this ministry. How does one explain what seems to be blessing outside of the will of God? There are many factors involved in such a situation. Satan did lead them astray. But God rescued the situation and brought blessing to their ministries. And yet such blessing, even from God, does not right the wrong they committed when they missed the leading of the Lord on graduation.

Likewise, some believers miss the best means for fostering their spiritual lives, and yet blessing seems to follow. But, of course, that does not justify using lesser or even counterfeit means to spiritual maturity. If there is any doubt about something as debateable and apparently unimportant as tongues, why not stick to those basic and scripturally clear means of spiritual growth? "Covet earnestly the best gifts."