

THE FALSE GIFT OF TONGUES

by Ray C. Stedman

Many of us, I suppose, have had some experience with what is called "fool's gold." You may have picked up a rock that had this shiny substance in it and thought you had found gold. Then you learned that it was fool's gold, a substance called iron sulphite which looks very much like gold and has deceived many into thinking they have found the real thing. But though it looks like gold, and is distributed among the rocks like gold, it does not pass the tests of true gold. If it is put to more than a superficial test one soon discovers that.

Perhaps all of us, at one time or another, have seen a counterfeit bill. The danger of a counterfeit bill lies in its close resemblance to the genuine. Counterfeit money that is badly printed doesn't stay in circulation very long, but if it is accurately printed it can sometimes cause considerable damage to our economic system. The test of a counterfeit bill is simply to compare it with a genuine bill. This is always the test of falsehood. It is impossible to know without a genuine, for otherwise you have no basis for comparison or standard of measurement. Failure to see this is one of the reasons why there is so much confusion today on the subject of glossolalia, the matter of speaking in tongues. We have taken time to discover the characteristics of the genuine gift of tongues in order that we might compare what we hear, and evaluate it as true or false.

There is a widespread manifestation of the phenomenon of glossolalia today and it is essential that we discover whether it is true or false, whether it is genuinely of the Spirit of God, or comes from another source and is a counterfeit gift. The only way that we can possibly know this is to lay it alongside that which is unquestionably true. This is why our previous study examined the true gift of tongues and commented on every reference in the New Testament to tongues, because if you have anywhere the genuine manifestation of tongues it will be Scripture. Therefore, anything that claims to be tongues today but is not like that presented in Scripture is patently false, no matter how sincerely it is offered or how helpful it may appear to be in the life of the individual who professes it. If you will take that statement seriously and carefully review it, I doubt if you can disagree with it. It must serve as the basis for measurement on this issue of tongues. They must be like what we discover in the Scriptures.

Now let's review the true gift of tongues that we may lay it alongside what we are seeing today:

1. First, the true gift of tongues is a normal language, spoken somewhere on earth, but not learned by the linguistic processes by which we ordinarily learn languages; yet it is clearly understandable by anyone who would happen to speak that language. It is not some unknown tongue in the sense that it is different from any language spoken on earth. It is spoken somewhere on earth, if it is the true gift of tongues. This rules out all gibberish, stammering, stuttering, or repetitious sounds. And, right at this point, much of what passes for tongues today fails.

I have attended scores of meetings where so-called tongues have been in evidence and very frequently it is an ecstatic, almost hysterical repetition of syllables over and over again. Sometimes it is the same syllable repeated endlessly in a continual jabbering. This is clearly not the Biblical gift of tongues. A meaningless jumble of incoherent syllables is not the true gift of tongues, for the Biblical gift of tongues is a gift of languages, known languages. Now, I recognize, to someone who is not acquainted with a language, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between gibberish and language. But no known language consists of the same syllable repeated over and over. And there is no question, if we take the Bible for what it says, that the Biblical gift was a language.

2. The second aspect of the true gift was that even if it were a known language, it must consist of praise and thanksgiving to God. It is addressed to God and not to man, for Paul specifically says, "He that speaks in a tongue speaks not to man but to God," {cf, 1 Cor 14:2}. There are never any tongues in Scripture except this. Tongues are never used for preaching, or exhortation, or prediction in the Scriptures. It is invariably praise and thanksgiving to God.

Here again the present manifestation is seen to be largely false, for wherever an interpretation is given it is usually some exhortation addressed to those present. Those of you who heard the recent television broadcast on the subject of glossolalia saw the program introduced by what was evidently a film of a meeting where they were allegedly speaking in tongues. I listened very carefully to that manifestation and to the supposed interpretation which followed, and the interpretation was an exhortation to the people present to receive the gift of speaking in tongues and a description of the blessing that would be theirs if they did. I knew when I heard the interpretation that this was not the true gift of tongues for the true gift is never addressed to man; it is addressed to God, and God does not exhort himself to speak in tongues. The true gift of tongues is praise and thanksgiving for the marvelous works of God, addressed to God. Every manifestation of tongues in the Bible in which the characteristic of it is given to us is always of this type.

3. The third mark of the true gift is that it must be publicly exercised as a sign to unbelievers, for again Paul specifically says that tongues are not a sign for believers but for unbelievers. On the day of Pentecost this is exactly the purpose they fulfilled. Though they were addressed to God, they arrested the attention of the unbelievers who were present in the public place, and became a sign to them. I believe it took place in the temple courts. The crowd regarded it as highly unusual, and a proof that God was at work.

It is most remarkable that there is not a single instance or hint in the New Testament of any private use of tongues. Every occurrence is in a public place or open meeting. We are hearing today that the primary use of tongues is for private prayer. On the TV program previously mentioned, such a statement was made, and if that is true, then it immediately stamps as counterfeit the manifestation of tongues in our day. All the gifts of the Spirit, we are told (including tongues), were given for the common good. You will find that statement in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in the 12th chapter. None is to be exercised privately. In fact, if you go through the gifts of the Spirit that are listed there, you can see that their very nature requires they be exercised in some public fashion and are not to be used privately. Therefore, when I hear someone say that he prays privately in tongues, though he may be perfectly sincere and believe he is receiving a wonderful blessing from the Holy Spirit, I know from the Scriptures that he is not receiving the true gift of tongues, for the true gift of tongues was never intended to be privately exercised. Let him who wishes to argue that point produce a single instance from Scripture of such private use of the gift of tongues. Scripture must be the test.

4. The fourth mark of the true gift of tongues is that it is not to be used in a church meeting unless it is translated, either by natural means, or the exercise of the gift of interpretation. Even then, it must be a language spoken somewhere on earth and an expression of thanksgiving to God. Tongues is never a medium by which the Spirit of God delivers a message to the church. It is always an expression of praise to God through a human voice box in a language spoken somewhere on earth as a foregleam of the day when the effects of evil in the human race will be done away and all men will understand one another again. That was the clear purpose of the gift of tongues.

Now when it is used in church, no more than two or three are to speak in tongues, and each speaking is to be translated. Otherwise no one is to speak in tongues. If there is no translator present, or no one with the gift of interpretation, there must be no tongues. This implies that anyone speaking in tongues should find out first if there is someone present who can translate, before the gift is exercised. If this control were put into practice in present day manifestations of tongues it would quickly eliminate the false from the true.

5. A fifth qualification of the true gift is that women are not permitted to exercise the gift of tongues in the church. Paul says so specifically.

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches, [it is in the context of the discussion on tongues] for they are not permitted to speak, but they should be subordinate, as even the law says. {1 Cor 14:33b-34}.

And he also says in this connection, interestingly enough, that

if any one thinks that he [or she] is a prophet or spiritual, he should

acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. {1 Cor 14:37 RSV}

That is, this isn't just old crotchety Paul talking, that old bachelor who never understood women anyway! No, this is an inspired apostle speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and writing the mind of the Lord.

This is a prohibition that greatly needs to be observed. It is significant that a majority of tongues speakers today are women.

Someone asked me if it was not possible for women to be among the group that spoke on the day of Pentecost. Yes, it is possible. That was not in the church, that was not a meeting of the church gathering together in the Lord, worshipping God. That was a public manifestation and, in that, it would be permissible for women to exercise the gift, but in the church Paul says "No." It is shameful, he says. This is the only limitation I know that prohibits women from speaking or exercising any gift in the church. They are allowed to prophesy, i.e., to speak, to talk, to exhort to edification and comfort. Women are not limited in this respect, but, in the matter of the exercise of tongues, they are definitely restrained in the church.

6. The sixth and last distinction of the true gift is that the gift of tongues is distributed by the sovereign choice of the Spirit and is definitely not intended for everyone. "Do all speak in tongues?" Paul says, {1 Cor 12:30b RSV}. And the implied answer is "No," for the manifestation of the Spirit is given by the Spirit, as he wills. It is the choice of the Spirit as to who speaks in tongues and who does not.

This immediately gives the lie to all claims of tongues as the unique sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, or that those who have not spoken in tongues have not been baptized or filled by the Spirit. We hear this so much today and there is much unscriptural confusion on this matter. We are being told that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an act subsequent to salvation and that it is accompanied by the sign of the speaking in tongues, but none of this is substantiated in the least degree by the Scriptures. That is an erroneous idea that has no support whatsoever in the text.

In the first place, the baptism of the Holy Spirit takes place at conversion, unquestionably so. It is that which adds us to the body of Christ, as Paul says in First Corinthians 12:13, and if we are not a part of the body of Christ, we are not Christian. "He that has not the Spirit of God is none of his," {cf, Rom 8:9b KJV}. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is not accompanied by any signs at all. It is an unexperienced reality by which the believer's life is made one with the life and being of Jesus Christ. There is no feeling attached to it, or sense of it happening at all. But it happens nevertheless. It is the impartation of the life of Christ to the believer.

Now the filling of the Spirit is quite another matter, and on occasion this matter of tongues is connected in the Scripture with the filling of the Spirit. But isn't it remarkable that there is never any statement that says that tongues is a sign of the filling of the Spirit? On one or two occasions when people were filled by the Spirit, they also spoke in tongues, but the two are not synonymous, nor do they always occur together. We read, for instance, that John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, but he never spoke in tongues. And it is recorded of him that he did no miracles. There was nothing spectacularly supernatural, if you please. Yet here was a man who, by the statement of Scripture, was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. The Lord Jesus was also filled with the Spirit all the days of his ministry, but there is no record that he ever spoke in tongues. This simply has nothing to do with the filling of the Spirit. If it does occur at that time it is a coincidental joining together of the gift of the Spirit with the filling of the Spirit, but the two are not the same.

Now I think that it is obvious, as we have gone through this, step by step, comparing of the true gift with the false, laying the present day manifestation alongside of the true, that most, if not all, of the manifestation today is counterfeit! It bears little or no resemblance to the Biblical pattern, and this must be the ground of our testing.

Immediately when I say that, the question comes to your mind, "Then where does this counterfeit originate? It seems to be such a blessing to people. They seem to get so much out of it. If it doesn't originate with the

Spirit, where does it come from?" Before I attempt an answer, let me say, first, that to call a manifestation of tongues counterfeit by no means impugns the sincerity or earnestness of the one who claims to have this gift. He is doubtless quite honest and well intentioned in what he claims. But that doesn't change the fact that he can be, and probably is, deceived on this matter, led astray by his own sense of dedication, by his own desire to have all that God wants him to have. He is tricked by the flesh into a false thing. Perhaps it is his own deep desire and sense of dedication which has taken away his normal caution and allowed him to become so gullible that he is led into this experience.

Such a thing is not limited only to the matter of tongues. You remember how Peter swore that he would never forsake the Lord and said to Him, "If you can count on any man, Lord, it is I. Others may forsake you but I never will." And he took him aside and began to rebuke him because he was talking about a cross, a crucifixion. Peter said to him, "Lord, be it far from thee. This must not happen to you. Spare yourself, Lord. This is no way for you to talk" {cf, Matt 16:22 KJV}. Peter was perfectly sincere, perfectly honest. He was entirely desirous of doing the right thing and he thought he was doing the right thing. Yet Jesus said that he was being led of Satan. "Get thee behind me Satan. Thou art an offense unto me for thou savourest not the things of God but of men," {Matt 16:23 KJV}. So it is quite possible for Christians to be sincerely mistaken, to be honestly confused, and end up, therefore, sincerely carnal and fleshly. This is true in many other areas besides tongues. These are the wiles of the devil. How he loves to trap us, trick us, deceive us, delude us and let us think we are getting something especially good. He is the one who, when we ask for bread, gives us a stone, or, when we ask for fish, he gives us a snake disguised as a fish. The Lord will not do that for he has clearly outlined in his word what we are to ask for. But the enemy leads us to ask beyond the Word.

Now where does this counterfeit come from? Let me say that the word "carnal" is the best explanation of the origin of the false manifestation of tongues. Incidentally, this is the word that Paul uses to the Corinthians. "You are carnal," he says {cf, 1 Cor 3:3 KJV}. They had all the gifts but they were carnal, fleshly people. They were exercising these gifts in such a way as to misuse them and abuse them and even unconsciously to imitate them in the false and carnal fashion. When we say that a thing is *carnal* we mean that it originates from our Adamic nature, our fleshly minds, i.e., our human nature. In other words, this counterfeit gift of tongues is a purely psychological phenomenon originating from a powerful subconscious desire to possess what seems to be a highly desirable symbol of divine favor. That strong subconscious desire is what does the trick and manifests itself in this false gift of tongues.

I think this is demonstrably true in that the manifestation of tongues, such as you hear widely demonstrated today, is also found among the cults. The Mormons frequently speak in tongues, and it is found in other religions such as Islam, for instance. Even among those with no particular religious convictions, we sometimes find this phenomenon, this jargon which is called tongues. Obviously, such occurrences are either carnally inspired or the direct activity of demonic powers.

When the false gift occurs in a church, it invariably becomes a religious status symbol and the power of suggestion soon spreads it abroad throughout the church. When it appears to be a mark of special divine favor, some esoteric experience to which only a privileged few can attain, then it soon creates a very deep subconscious desire for the manifestation of this in other individuals' lives. When that desire becomes strong enough, as it certainly does when there is a group that accepts this as a mark of the Holy Spirit and therefore calms all fears about it, then such desire, burning deep in the heart, bypasses the conscious control of speech in the brain and the subconscious mind takes over the tongue and produces whatever is expected or strongly desired. Psychologists have described this as occurring with people who have no strong religious convictions at all. It is a known psychological phenomenon.

It is an honest experience. I don't imply by this that anyone who experiences this means to deceive. He doesn't. He is quite deceived himself and what he does is done honestly, but nevertheless it is not of the Spirit. That is the point. It is not the true, Biblical gift. Because this is a psychological phenomenon, some people by constitutional make-up are simply unable to respond and this creates a very unhappy situation. There are some wonderful, born again Christians, earnestly desirous of having everything that God wants them to have, wanting to go on with God, who are deceived into thinking that this is a mark of divine favor. They struggle to receive this gift but never get it, and eventually fall into despair. From this there come those terrible divisions that so frequently mark the appearance of tongues phenomenon in the churches today.

I once heard a psychiatrist discuss this. He pointed out that this is a very severe danger and could easily give rise to suicide out of a sense of despair in not being able to rise to the level of accomplishment that others had.

Now this is not the way of faith. This is not the way of the Spirit. The Bible declares that the weakest believer in Jesus Christ has everything that the strongest saint ever had. You are complete in Christ! In Jesus Christ dwells "all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" {cf, Col 2:9 KJV}, and "you are complete in him" {cf, Col 2:10 KJV}, no exceptions. Therefore, it is possible for any believer by simply believing what God says, and acting on all that Christ is, to enter into the fullness that God has for him. This is true of any other saint in any other age. It does not depend on tarrying or waiting and pleading or some psychological make-up which either allows or does not allow the manifestation of such a gift.

In closing, let me speak briefly about some of the results of this false gift. I have already mentioned one:

1. It is highly divisive. Invariably, where the counterfeit manifestation of tongues appears, the first result is that the church is split right down the middle. People begin to take sides. Those who are psychologically able to enter into the experience become victims of a feeling of superiority. This becomes very evident in the way they talk and act (though they may disguise this or try to subdue the manifestation of it). Those who cannot enter into this experience become resentful, or at least suspicious, and schisms and divisions arise.

A man told me not long ago of a church up in the mountains in which tongues made its appearance and the church was split in a terrible way. One woman had a heart attack as a result of these manifestations. This is a very emotional and divisive thing. I have seen whole denominations torn asunder by this type of manifestation.

2. Furthermore, it is diversionary. By that I mean that it is a trick of the enemy to distract our attention from the true work of God the Spirit, which is the exaltation of Jesus Christ, and get people off on a side track talking about gifts. They are so concerned with the gifts they forget the Giver and forget the outreach of the gospel and the need of hungry hearts around them. Even though very specious claims are made by the tongues people that this experience results in a greater interest of unsaved people, I have noticed that the interest is always focused on tongues, not upon the Lord, nor upon the gospel. This is a diversionary tactic to get us involved in some secondary thing rather than the primary, the exaltation of Jesus Christ.

These two things being true (it is divisive and diversionary), therefore, it also follows that it is devilish. I don't mean that tongues is a manifestation of demon possession. In some religions it may be that. I don't think that is the normal explanation of what we see manifest today. But it is a manifestation of carnal barrenness, which is ultimately of the devil. The Apostle James puts the two wisdoms side by side. He says, "There is that wisdom that comes from above which is peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, [i.e. easy to live with, reasonable] and there is that which is from below which is fleshly, sensual, devilish!" {cf, Jas 3:15-17 KJV}. There are only two sources. It is one or the other. Anything that arises out of the carnal mind, the flesh, the human, Adamic, fallen nature is devilish. It oftentimes has enough novelty about it to capture the imagination of people and fascinate them, even help them in some temporary fashion, but, if somewhere along the line they are not delivered by the Scriptures, or by some helpful counsel on this, eventually, following down this avenue, they run into a blind alley and end up in the wilderness of defeat and barrenness. I have seen it happen many, many times.

Now I don't mean to imply by this that everyone who speaks in tongues will be totally defeated in his life. The Spirit of God is ready to correct the manifestations of carnality in our life. He often is able to keep the manifestation of this thing to such a minimum area that only part of the life is affected by it. But if it is false it is not of God, and if it is not of God it is of the enemy. If it is of the enemy then its effect is bound to be blinding, defeating, deadening, and, ultimately, it will bring disaster. Therefore, we must be very careful that everything we see we test according to the Spirit of God.

It is the glory of the Spirit to uplift the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The mark of the Spirit-filled church is not a church that talks about the Spirit, it is a church that talks about Christ. The mark of the Spirit-filled

person is not a person who is concerned and talking continually about the Spirit, but it is a person who is concerned and talking continually about the glory of Jesus Christ. This is the work of the Spirit in our lives.

The true gift of tongues enhances that. There is no divisiveness that follows. It has a power to draw people together. I am speaking now out of what I read in Scripture, for, as far as I have any recollection or knowledge or ability to judge, I have never myself seen even one manifestation of tongues that I would call the true gift of tongues. I certainly would not take the position that it is impossible for the Holy Spirit to give this gift again today, but I am very certain that if he does, it will be right along the lines and in the pattern outlined and given in the Scriptures. This is the way the Spirit always acts. I am very confident, therefore, that as we test the present-day manifestation we will know, if we are ready to accept the Biblical pattern, whether the thing is true or false.

Title: The False Gift of Tongues

Series: The Tongues Question

Scripture: 1 Cor 12, 14

Message No: 3

Catalog No: 43

Date: May 26, 1963

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