

Q&A: On Tongues and Languages

Dave0 asks:

Will,

I've been aware for as long as I can remember the, quite stark really, difference between the "tongues" at Pentecost and what I would call the common contemporary understanding/experience. At Pentecost the apostles speak and are simultaneously heard by a multilingual audience "each one hearing them speak in his own language" (Acts 2) which is so different from someone speaking an unknown language and another translating.

What has prompted the question was idly listening to a radio sermon where the speaker (who knows who he was) suggested that 1 Cor situation was a multilingual congregation where Paul is requiring conventional translation of human languages, in a multilingual service. i.e. a VERY different understanding than what I have called the common contemporary of "tongues".

He was convicted by the difference in Greek work usage for "language" between the various passages. I haven't been overly convinced by my unknown radio voice, but I also deeply unsatisfied by the un-Pentecost-ian nature of what is usually claimed as the gift of tongues. As an aside I am also deeply unsatisfied (and usual quite vocal in that unsatisfisfaction) in the un-Pentecost-ian nature of "improved liver function", and "my back is soo much better" being claimed as the gift of healing.

Can you give me an unpacking to ponder.

David

Hi David,

From the top of my head to begin with.

I've always taken the words that describe spiritual gifts to be accurate but not necessarily precise – particularly when it comes to how supernaturally something is etc. So, for instance, is it right to speak of a doctor as someone with the gift of healing just as much as it is to speak of the latest revivalist? Assuming genuineness, and good fruit, I can't see why not. Similarly with those who are wise – where does the natural human wisdom flip to a divine “message of wisdom” (see 1 Cor 12:8) – does it, should it, does it matter?

And so when it comes to tongues I would be content if we find that it refers to all manner of utterances from something not much more different than being good at linguistics, to utterances that don't need an interpretation, to utterances that do, to utterances that are in private and somewhat echoing of the groanings of the Spirit in Romans 8. Without working through citations I suspect that examples of this spectrum could be found in Scripture.

To get to the passages you reference. The focus of the Pentecost experience of tongues in Acts 2 is less about some supernatural gift to the apostles individually but about their ability to speak with a common language. I drew out the connection with the reverse experience at Babel as God judges human empire. The tongues here act as an eschatological and ecclesiological sign that God's kingdom is here, in and above human empire, and he has formed an eternal people by the Spirit of the resurrected Christ. Whether this experience is *precisely* the same as the tongues that Paul speaks uses (more than any of us apparently) is not really here nor there – but I wager it is *enough* the same that it forms part of the basis such that Paul can speak of the Holy Spirit being a guarantee of an eschatological reality.

Your anonymous homiletician of the airwaves references the Greek. Acts 2:4 has καὶ ἤρξαντο λαλεῖν ἑτέραις γλώσσαις

καθὼς τὸ πνεῦμα ἐδίδου ἀποφθέγγεσθαι αὐτοῖς – “...began to speak in other **tongues** as the Spirit enabled them” (NIV84) The γλῶσ root (glos – from which we get glossary, glossalalia etc.) is evident and yes, it can be rendered as “languages”, but then that’s within the semantic range of the the English “tongues” anyway.

1 Cor 12, in the list of gifts, has (verse 10) ἐτέρῳ γένη γλωσσῶν – “..to another speaking in different kinds of tongues” (NIV84). The root is the same.

There is a slight difference in that Acts 2 has “*other* tongues” and 1 Cor 12 has “*kinds* of tongues” (the word “different” is an NIV “clarification”). Is this enough to draw a distinction between Acts 2 and 1 Cor 12. Apart from asking “Does it really matter?” (see my first point above), I would conclude that there certainly isn’t any reason to place a semantical chasm between the two uses.

Furthermore, if we *were* to highlight the distinctives in the usage I would suggest that Paul is actually taking it further *towards* the supernatural/personal/pentecostalist than away from it towards normal human linguistic endeavours. I get this from the context. 1 Cor 13 alludes to speaking in the “tongues of men and of angels”, and 1 Cor 14 – “anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.”

That’s my two cents worth of unpacking.

Q&A: What is “Contribute to

the needs of the saints”?

Anonymous asks: *I heard or read this a while ago now, and made a note of it as I didn't understand what it meant. It said "Contribute to the needs of the saints." It was in some way in connection with things Christian should endeavour to achieve.*

I suspect you are alluding to a section of 2 Corinthians – chapters 8 and 9. In this section Paul is encouraging the church in Corinth to give of their finances to the offering he is taking up. This offering is for the church in Jerusalem in particular but there is a clear broader application in the attitude Christians have towards their finances etc.

At the beginning of the section, as the 1984 NIV renders it, Paul commends the Macedonian churches for their generosity and urges the Corinthians to follow their example:

*1 And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in **this service to the saints**. 5 And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. 6 So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7 But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.*

I've highlighted the key phrase, it's repeated again in the first verse of chapter 9.

In our church we have used this passage as the basis for teaching on giving and other matters financial. This passage takes us away from legalistic obligation to "tithe" or from some sort of prosperity expectation that giving to the Lord will be returned tenfold etc. Rather the emphasis here is that generosity is simply a marker of worship and our desire to follow the way of Christ.

There is a logic behind it. People have a problem with money if they bind themselves to it – either to the having of it, evidenced by greed and stinginess; or by the perceived lack of it, evidenced by yearning and clamouring. It would be appropriate to call such attitudes idolatrous. To follow Christ is to serve him, not our idols. We therefore make a choice to let go of our idols – and when it comes to money a good way to do this is to give some of it away. That giving is an act of worship, a symbol of allegiance!

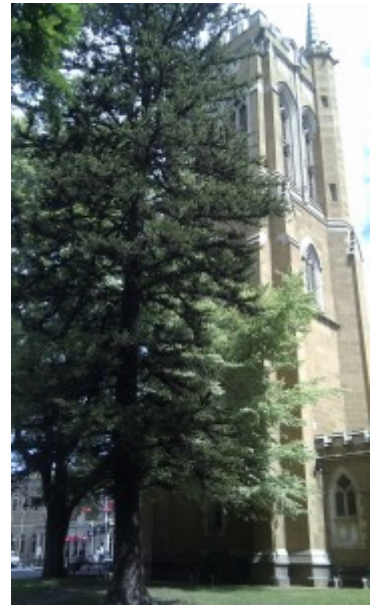
It is not meant to be legalistic. The Old Testament talks about firstfruits and 10% tithes – and there is wisdom in that as 10% is an amount that is usually impactful and representative of genuine desire, but is not overly weighty and burdensome. But it's about attitude, not rules – after all, all that we have belongs to God really.

Moreover, the giving is a blessing. A blessing to the saints, because it means that financial resources can be invested in various people and things to further the purposes of God in, with and through his people. Jesus is honoured, people are blessed, and we demonstrate a freedom from the love of money.

All in all, it's a good thing!

Bound for South Tasmania

Bishop John has announced that I am to be appointed as the new Senior Associate Priest of St David's Cathedral and as his Research Assistant.



He writes, "Please pray for Will and Gill and their children as they make their move from Burnie to Hobart in August and as they settle in to a new place and new season of their lives", and we would echo that request. There is much to do by way of logistics and organising schooling and accommodation etc down south as well as getting our house ready to leave here in Somerset. Please especially pray as we leave the Connections and Burnie church communities and connect with those at the Cathedral and in Hobart. In all this we have already seen much of the grace of God in sovereign providential provision and all manner of generosity and for that we are most thankful.

I am looking forward to working with the Dean of Hobart, The Very Reverend and most excellent Richard Humphrey who has a strong vision for the ministry of the cathedral in the city of Hobart. The opportunity to assist Bishop John as he leads the prophetic voice of the church in the community is also a privilege. Gill will continue as an honorary deacon and shape her ministry around the opportunities that become apparent.

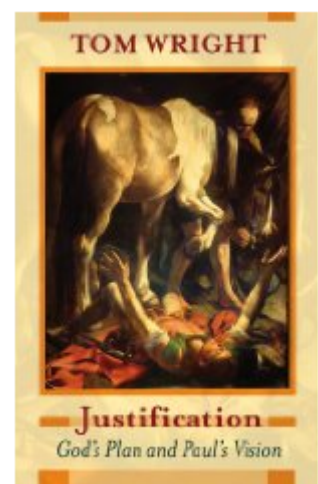
We will be leaving Burnie with some sadness, of course. There

are wonderful people and an awesome community here, many of whom have been with us and us with them through thick and thin and ups and downs. We arrived eight and half years ago, when we were in our twenties, with only the first three of our four children. This is where I made many first steps in ministry, and many mistakes, and learned much. We have walked through some fire and times of pain, but also times of excitement, passion and purpose. We rejoice in all that God has done, through Connections Church in particular, as well as the other places we have ministered. We look forward to what God will do through his people on the North West Coast. In everything there is a testimony of God's grace which we will never be able to forget.

So, onward Christian soldiers! With our eyes on him, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Review: Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision

I remember when I first began studying at College. We were taught exegesis of the Bible – applying literary and historical analysis, asking that all important question of “What did the text mean for the original hearers?”, and all that sort of thing. Many students who are used to a more devotional reading of Scripture find themselves stumbling. More than once I would read a passage, consider it's meaning as reasonably obvious, and then second guess myself: Have I been truly considerate of the context? Do I have a prejudicial hermeneutic that's getting in



the way? The vast majority of the time my initial conclusion was right – the meaning was plain.

It is in this light that I find myself describing N. T. Wright's *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* as an exegetical book. Firstly, because it is a book that requires two hands – book in one, Bible in the other. Secondly, because its unpacking of the New Perspectives has the same effect as the experience of novice exegetes. As I read Scripture from that perspective I get the mixture of “Isn't that obvious?” with “Am I reading that right?” with “It's not that controversial really is it?”

Apparently it is controversial. This book is a parry-riposte to John Piper's *The Future of Justification* which is itself “A Response to N. T. Wright.” Not having read Piper I can only infer from Wright's response that there are some theological differences surrounding some nuances of justification – for instance, what it means to be “righteous” before God (Piper wants an imputation of merit, Wright prefers the sense of legal acquittal), and the means of being made right (Piper elevates the salvific efficacy of faith in Christ, Wright elevates the covenantal consequences of the faithfulness of Christ).

I find myself very sympathetic to Wright and the New Perspective (if “New” is the right word). The applicable heart of it all is the sense of “God's-single-purpose-through-Israel-for-the-salvation-of-the-world.” It is a cohesive framework which draws the key aspects of the Christian kerygma into a God-honouring hermeneutic. Those theological things that are normally underdone or unsatisfyingly shoehorned in when needs must, instead find a full and fruitful place – the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation, for instance, and the salvific inherence of the resurrection, or the continuity of covenants old and new.

Wright is quite polemic in the early chapters when he

clarifies his framework and negotiates the sticking points. He is less so when he gets to the more beneficial Part 2 which covers exegesis in Galatians, Philippians, Corinthians, Ephesians and Romans. This is where I found the book most enjoyable, almost devotional in its usefulness.

In the end, in application (and proclamation?) the debate ends up being about nuances and emphases more than anything else.

Wright admits that “we begin to realize at last how the emphases of the old and new perspectives belongs so intimately together” as he summarizes a section of Romans:

(a) The overarching problem has always been human sin and its effects – idolatry, pride, human corruption and ultimately death.

(b) God launched a rescue operation, the single plan, through Israel, to save the world.

(c) But Israel, too, is part of the original problem, which has a double effect:

(i) Israel itself needs the same rescue-from-sin-and-death that everyone else needs;

(ii) Israel, as it stands, cannot be the means of the rescue operation that God’s plan intended.

(d) therefore the problem with which God is faced, if he is to be faithful to his own character and plan in both creation and covenant, is

(i) he must nevertheless put his single plan into operation, somehow accomplishing what Israel was called to do but, through faithlessness to his commission, failed to do;

(ii) he must thereby rescue the human race and the whole world from sin, idolatry, pride, corruption and death;

(iii) he must do this in a way that makes it clear that Israel, though still of course the object of his saving love, is now on all fours with the rest of the world.

In other words, God must find a way of enabling ‘Israel’ to

be faithful after all, as the middle term of the single plan; God must thereby deal with sin; and God must do so in such a way as to leave no room for boasting..

As the first year College student might say, "Isn't it obvious, or am I reading it wrong?"