

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.