The Gift of Languages

A Present-Day Illustration

Elder Peterson opened his eyes and peered at the back of the young man in the pulpit.

If memory served him correctly, Minister Thomas was now praying in Hebrew. Thomas had started his prayer in Greek. He later added some Latin words and prayers. And now, some more than 15 minutes later, the 30 year old was speaking in Hebrew. How long was this prayer or pontification going to be?

From the looks on the faces of most of the congregants, Elder Peterson could see they were lost. Austin Thomas had recently graduated from Howard University School of Divinity. He was a bright young man with a broad grasp of theological concepts.

After the service, Elder Peterson sat across from a somewhat smug looking Minister Thomas.

"How did I do?" Thomas beamed.

"Not so good," Elder Peterson said. "Son, the purpose of worship and service is to glorify God and to equip the Body of Christ. God gifts people for the benefit of the Church. I'm afraid most people didn't get much benefit from your long prayer and monologue. They didn't understand the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin! You've been to seminary. You have great gifts in sharing the Word. You can help Scripture come alive to people. That's what I see the Lord is calling you to do."

Minister Thomas gave a sheepish look. "Thank you," he said. "I needed to hear that. I sure want to be of benefit to the Body of Christ."

1. ***How do all the gifts together help the church minister in the world?***

2. ***What does your church teach about the use of all gifts?***

3. ***How might a spiritual gift not benefit a church?***

The Languages at Pentecost

Acts 2:1-7, 12, KJV

1 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.
3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.
4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.
5 And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.
6 Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.
7 And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?
12 And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?

Acts 2:1-7, 12, NIV

[1]When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. [2]Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [3]They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. [4]All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

[5]Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. [6]When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. [7]Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?"

[12]Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

The Christians in Jerusalem had come together for prayer and fellowship "in one place," in a "house" (2:1-2). This gathering of believers occurred on the day of Pentecost, about 10 days after Christ had given parting instructions to the apostles and then ascended into heaven (1:1-9). The word

"Pentecost" means "fiftieth." It was the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks (or Harvest), which occurred 50 days (a week of weeks) after Passover. For Israel, Pentecost marked the beginning of the wheat harvest.

The Feast of Pentecost was one of three annual festivals for which all Jewish men were required to appear at the central sanctuary (Exod. 23:14-17). The population of Jerusalem could quadruple in size during each of these three festivals. This explains why such a crowd of "God-fearing Jews" were there from countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

Three miraculous phenomena marked this Pentecost. The first was "a sound like the blowing of a violent wind" (vs. 2). The Greek word translated "wind" here is related to the word for "Spirit" and signifies the coming of the Holy Spirit's power. The wind-like sound filled the house of the believers. The second was something that "seemed to be tongues of fire" (vs. 3), which broke from a single mass of flame into individual flames over the heads of each of the gathered believers. The third phenomenon was when the Spirit filled all of the believers and enabled them to speak in "other tongues," languages not native to them (vs. 4).

As the believers continually glorified God's greatness and wondrous deeds, everyone in the widely diverse crowd understood the message in his or her "own language" (vs. 6).

The multitude of listeners were "utterly amazed" because they supposed all the speakers to be uneducated Galileans (vss. 6-7). The general assumption was that Jews from Galilee were all ignorant "country folk" who would not know these languages and dialects. Therefore, the "perplexed" crowd wanted to know, "What does this mean?" (vs. 12). Peter then explained what it all meant in his great Pentecost message.

4. ***Why would Pentecost have been an ideal time for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the Gospel?***

5. ***What was the nature of the "other tongues" the 120 believers were enabled to speak when they were "filled with the Holy Spirit"?***

6. ***Why would the Jews at Pentecost be "utterly amazed" at what they heard?***

7. ***What purposes did the gift of languages serve at Pentecost?***

Exercising the Gift of Languages

1 Corinthians 14:13-19, KJV

13 Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret.
14 For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful.
15 What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.
16 Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?
17 For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified.
18 I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all:
19 Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.

1 Corinthians 14:13-19, NIV

13 For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. 15 So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. 16 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? 17 You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.
18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.
19 But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

While the Spirit enabled the believers to speak in other

languages at Pentecost, the gift of speaking in tongues at Corinth seems to be different because it required interpretation. Paul told the Corinthians the gift must have interpretation or it "edified" (built up) the speaker without building up the whole church. Therefore, the tongues-speaker should also request the gift of interpretation, the ability to give the meaning of what was said.

Paul stated that only interpreted tongues could edify the entire church, but he also points out that interpretation increases the value of the gift to the speaker. If the tongues-speaker prays with the "mind" engaged—with the addition of interpretation—the speaker is edified, and the message benefits others.

Paul gave the example of a tongues-speaker who offers praise to God with the spirit only versus the spirit and mind together. Without interpretation, other members of the congregation are unable to enter into the tongues-speaker's expression of thanksgiving by adding their affirmative "Amen." This tongues-speaking experience bears fruit for only the speaker.

Paul's purpose was not to disparage the gift of tongues or to denigrate those who had it, for he himself possessed the gift and was thankful for it (vs. 18). But Paul preferred speaking "five" understandable words in any church in which he taught, instead of "ten thousand words in a tongue" (vs. 19).

Paul's fundamental goal was to benefit the whole church and thereby glorify God.

8. ***Why does Paul say that a tongues-speaker in an assembly should pray for the ability to give the meaning (interpretation) what he or she just said?***

9. ***What is Paul's point regarding praying with ones's "spirit" only versus praying with the spirit and the "mind" also?***

10. ***In this passage, why is Paul not belittling or disparaging the gift of tongues?***

11. ***What is Paul's ultimate advice on using the gift of tongues?***

Be Wise about the Gifts

When our second child was eight days old, I returned to church for the first time to present him to the church. A sister in the congregation came to me and said the Lord had given her a prophetic word for me: "The Lord has told me that you are to have another child." We were a young military couple living on a modest budget, and neither physically, financially, or mentally were we ready to hear such a message. It's not that we don't love children—I was the young mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old toddler and an eight-day-old newborn. After my initial shock and disbelief, I politely stated that if that event were to happen, I was confident the Lord would deliver the news to my husband and me personally.

Our two sons are adults now and that "word" never came to pass. The well-intentioned sister instead made a joyous introduction of our young son a bit burdensome.

No one in the church benefits if someone claims to have a gift and does not have it or misuses a gift in some way. A gift from God will always work for the good of the church and the benefit of the Kingdom. The gift of speaking in other languages at Pentecost not only empowered the once fearful body of believers, but was part of the ministry that brought 3,000 new believers into the church. The arrival of the Holy Spirit and the gift of languages was obviously beneficial from the start.

It is vital that as we exercise our gifts we remain in complete submission to the Word and will of God. We must only speak what the Lord has said and do what the Lord has told us to do.

12. ***Have you ever seen the gifts misused? If so, how did that affect your view of the gifts?***

13. ***Could we also be too restrained in our exercise of the gifts? Explain your answer.***

14. ***What is the responsibility of every believer in the operation of any gift—language or otherwise?***

The Gifts in Good Use

The gifts of the Spirit provide edification, exhortation, rebuke, and comfort for the Body of Christ. They give us strength to minister and show His love and power at work. However, we must always walk in obedience to Him as we use our gifts. They are instruments of righteousness, compelling men to come to the Lord. They are His gifts to be used only for His glory.

► *This week, pray about using your gift(s) only for the benefit of the Body of Christ, and also pray not to be deceived by those who are misusing the gifts, either in your congregation or somewhere else you see in the Body of Christ.*

KEY VERSE

What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. —1 Corinthians 14:15, KJV

So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. —1 Corinthians 14:15, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

May 25 through May 31

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Hosea 6:1-6—Love and the Knowledge of God.
Tues. Jonah 3:10—4:11—Abounding in Steadfast Love.
Wed. Galatians 5:16-26—Guided by the Spirit.
Thurs. 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5—Increasing Love for One Another.
Fri. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5—Love and Steadfastness.
Sat. Ephesians 3:14-21—Filled with the Fullness of God.
Sun. 1 Corinthians 13—Love Never Ends.