

Speaking in Tongues

Are Tongues the Least of the Gifts?

The usual argument runs something like this: "Tongues are mentioned last in I Corinthians 12:28. Therefore, they are the least of the gifts." The implication is that tongues are of such little value that mature Christians have no need to exercise such a gift.

Assume for a moment that tongues are the least of the gifts. What kind of logic would assume that the least of God's gifts is unimportant? Would we accuse God of imparting gifts of little value?

If God has "set some [gifts and ministries] in the church" including "diversities of tongues" (I Cor. 12:28), then surely they are needed and important! If God gave tongues as one of His gifts "for the common good" (I Cor. 12:7, NAS), then surely we belittle His wisdom by thinking we can be edified just as well without them.

The idea that tongues are the least of the gifts has no foundation in Scripture. Consider the following facts:

1. In I Corinthians 12:28, Paul classifies ministries and gifts as: "First apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." Notice that:
 - A. Paul lumps all the gifts and ministries (after miracles) together instead of retaining the system of classifying by order. The lack of the coordinating conjunction "then" after "gifts of healing" indicates either a common rank or a lack of classification.¹
 - B. First Corinthians 12:28 is an incomplete list of ministries. Evangelists and pastors, listed in Ephesians 4:11, are not mentioned here. Can we conclude that these key ministries, not being mentioned, are less important than helps, which are mentioned?
 - C. First Corinthians 12:28 is an incomplete list of spiritual gifts. In fact, only three of the nine gifts of the Spirit listed in verses 8-10 are mentioned here. We cannot properly conclude that tongues are the least among gifts not even mentioned. If anything (using this argument) the gifts not mentioned are even less valuable than tongues, for at least tongues are worthy of mention. This argument would place tongues eighth on a list of sixteen items: nine gifts, five ministries, and two offices—in other words, about halfway up the list.
 - D. Helps are listed before governments in 1 Corinthians 12:28; are they therefore superior? No, not according to the meaning of the terms in either English or Greek. Helps can be very menial, whereas governments ("steerings") encompass the leadership of the church. Obviously, at this point, Paul is not listing by rank. Furthermore, when the list in verse 28 is repeated in verses 29 and 30, helps and governments are left out—another indication that Paul is not attempting to rank all ministries and gifts from greatest to least.
2. In 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, the gift of faith is listed after the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge. Can we assume, therefore, that the gift of faith is less important? I think not.

3. In I Corinthians 12:8-10, gifts of healing come before miracles, while in verse 28 the order is reversed. Obviously, the mere listing of gifts and ministries does not establish an order of value; if it did, these verses would contradict one another.

In the same passage, prophecy, which Paul says especially to covet (14:39), is the sixth item mentioned. This makes no sense if the position on the list determines the importance of the gift.

4. In I Corinthians 13:1,2, speaking in tongues is listed first, before prophecy, knowledge, and faith. This does not look consistent with the "last=least" theory which so many Christians apply to verse 28 of chapter 12.

5. In 1 Corinthians 13:13, charity (love) is mentioned last, after faith and hope. Is love therefore less important? No, the same verse tells us that love is the greatest of the three, although it is mentioned last.

6. In Romans 12:6-8, we have another list of gifts and ministries. If we applied the "last=least" theory here, we would have to believe that ministering (serving) is more important than teaching; he that giveth is more important than he that showeth mercy; and he that exhorteth is more important than he that ruleth. But none of these propositions can be proved. In fact, good judgment would conclude that in each of the couplets just mentioned, the item mentioned second is more important than the one mentioned first—just the opposite of the "last=least" theory. Once again, the theory does not fit.

Surely we have no grounds to assume that speaking in tongues is the least of the gifts just because it appears last in one passage (1 Cor. 12:28) where six gifts are not mentioned, four gifts and ministries are ranked together (healings, helps, government, tongues), and only three ministries (apostles, prophets, teachers) and one gift (miracles) are ranked before tongues!

When Paul admonishes us to "covet earnestly the best gifts" (I Cor. 12:31), he is not implying that there is an absolute value-scale of the gifts from greatest to least, for this is nowhere spelled out in Scripture. Paul taught that the Holy Spirit distributes the gifts as it pleases Him (1 Cor. 12:11). And since each gift has a different function, the church needs them all (see I Cor. 12:17,21 and Eph. 4:16). Therefore, seeking "the best gifts" necessitates taking into consideration what gifts the church lacks (for, as this chapter stresses, the church needs all the gifts just as the body needs all its members). Seeking "the best gifts" also necessitates considering the ability and personality of the seeker, for the Lord's yoke (ministry) fits the worker in God's harvest field. Therefore, the seeker should seek to learn God's will when praying for a gift, in order to allow the Lord to distribute His gifts "as He wills" (v. 11).

The body of Christ is often confronted with problems that human judgment and action cannot solve. God has, therefore, granted the church the benefit of His knowledge, wisdom, and power through the gifts of the Spirit. Ministers in certain offices often need a certain gift to meet a recurring need. One might therefore seek that gift as the best for him under the circumstances. As with all things we seek from God, the dispensing is at the discretion of the all-wise, all-knowing, sovereign God. Our part is to desire spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:1).

Paul thought it best to encourage the Corinthians especially to seek the gift of prophecy (I Cor. 14:1).

Possibly, at Corinth, this gift was being over-shadowed by tongues, the Corinthians being more zealous for that which appeared more supernatural and mysterious. But he told the Thessalonians not to despise

prophesying (1 Th. 5:20), which may imply that prophecies were frequent at Thessalonica and in danger of being taken for granted. In each case, the admonition was fitted to the needs of the assembly.

If an abundance of prophecies was not the reason Paul warned the Thessalonians not to despise prophecies, then 1 Thessalonians 5:21 raises another possibility: that false prophecies may have been prompting the Thessalonians to "throw out the baby with the bath water," as some churches have done today. Paul said, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." That is: "Hold fast the good, including true prophecies mentioned in the previous verse, and do not dump the whole business because of error." Paul's response to abuse of the gifts was to correct and teach (1 Cor. 14), not to forbid the gifts (v. 39).

The contradictions inherent in the "last is least" system of interpretation are obvious and numerous. Speaking in tongues is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us never make light of it, despise it, or worse yet reject it because of personal prejudice or someone else's abuse of it. Paul didn't and we are to be imitators of him.²

¹ See H.A.W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook of the Epistles to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, p. 383.

² 1 Cor. 4:16: 11:1 (nas)

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