22 - The Interpretation of Tongues

Regrettably, most of the world’s population has never heard of speaking in tongues. In addition, although most Christians have heard about it, most don’t believe in Tongues, much less the Interpretation of Tongues. So, welcome to being the 1%! Or perhaps the 1% or the 1%!! I think these facts are a testimony to how much the evil forces of this world fear *pneuma hagion* power and have fought to obscure its accurate understanding and operation. It seems that the adversary has even queered its use in some churches to a “freak show” display, compelling sincere saints to avoid it, robbing us of its blessings.

Let’s remember, we never came up with the manifestations of the spirit, God did. Did you dream up speaking in a language you don’t understand and then interpreting it? Of course not! Who would? But let’s also remember,

1 Cor. 1:27-29

but God chose the no-good things of the world to put to shame those who are wise, and God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong,

and the low-born things of the world, and the things that are treated with contempt—God has chosen these—and the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,

so that no flesh can boast in the presence of God.

When we speak in tongues – we have no reason to boast. Why not? We have no idea what we’re saying! When we interpret, we again have no idea where we’re getting the info we’re speaking… it’s just there! Once again – no boasting. If we feel foolish, it’s because we buy into the worldly idea that what we’re doing is foolish. We should remember that God takes the “foolishness of the world” and defeats the supposedly wise and strong.

We speak in tongues and interpret because Jesus said we could, and Paul said we should.

Mark 16:17

And these signs will accompany those who believe: they will cast out demons in my name, they will speak in new tongues,

1 Cor. 14:5

Now I want all of you to speak in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy, for greater is the one who prophesies than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church is built up.

This verse in essence says, “I want you all to speak in tongues, interpret and prophesy.” The world wants us to feel ashamed, shut up and hide. God wants us to spiritually let ‘er rip! God didn’t just give us the spirit to have, but also to use. Welcome to being a Christian. We live opposite to the way the world lives (and regrettably many Christians too.) We walk by the spirit. Too many others walk (right) by the spirit! What a loss! What a blessing to have a peek behind the physical curtain of this world and get to spiritually participate also! What a life Jesus allows us to have!

Wrong Ideas

The only thing that matches the ignorance of tongues and interpretation in the world is the amount of unsound teaching and practice in the church. The wrong teaching ideas seem random yet unending. I will handle some of them when we go through chapter 14 verse by verse. Until then, here’s three. Someone screams in tongues at a church setting - then someone else “interprets” in a moaning voice. Next, someone speaks in tongues for 1 minute then interprets for 5 seconds. Next a minister says there are three levels of tongues. The first is ‘tongues of men’. This is supposedly for those God is calling out for missionary work, for which the destination will be indicated by the language the speaker speaks and the interpretation. The second level is “tongues of angels” so that you can direct beings in the spiritual realm! The third level is “tongues unto God”. Holy headache! It’s hard to swim through the jellyfish of BS that Satan unleashed in the “river of the spirit”!

Most of the bad teaching and practice is discerned by what I call spiritual common sense. For instance, does the Bible address screaming and moaning? Sure, at the end of 1 Cor. 14 where God exhorts us to do all things “descent and in order”. Is screaming and moaning in order? Maybe in a Halloween fun house on Oct. 31st, but not in the assembly of the saints. How about 1 minute message in tongues and 5 seconds in interpretation? There’s no way that’s equivalent. Perhaps for the first sentence it was right, but the interpretation was interrupted much too soon. And how about 3 levels of tongues? Have you ever seen that in the Bible? No? Enough said! As I studied this field I felt like a butcher because I had to cut through so much baloney!

Perhaps you might ask, “Why do things get weird when we consider the interpretation of tongues?” The answer is because speaking in tongues has very little to do with our minds. Our minds start it, keep it going, and stop it – and that’s it. Other than not speaking in tongues, we can’t mess it up. When we start interpreting tongues, our minds get involved and craziness is possible. OK – it’s probable! Getting the spirit of God at the new birth doesn’t cancel our sin nature or fleshly mind. It is still there and plays a part in our lives as we all know. That’s why someone screams in tongues. They want attention. That why they moan an interpretation. They want to feel powerful and controlling. That’s why they invent 3 levels of tongues. They want to feel like they’re a theologian. It’s also why someone gives a 5 second interpretation to a 1-minute tongue message. They’re lazy or scared.

“Wait!” you say, “How can our sin nature mix with and taint what comes out of our perfect spirit?” Sorry to say it, but how could it not?

Gal. 5:17

For the flesh sets its desire against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, with the result that you are not doing what you want.

Steve, are you saying that our flesh can mess up the manifestations? Yes, that’s certainly one implication of the above verse. We will be tempted to call undue attention to ourselves when manifesting, come up with made up doctrines, and/or get lazy or fearful – just as we saw in the three previous examples. The manifestation of interpretation of tongues begins our mind’s involvement with the manifestations and allows the flesh to interfere. What do I mean by that? When we speak in tongues, we have no idea what we’re saying so we can’t mess it up, right? To interpret tongues the mind gets involved. Here’s a definition of this manifestation from the Holy Spirit book. “The interpretation of tongues is giving the sum and substance, in your own language, of what you have just spoken in tongues.”

How does it work? Like this: We speak in tongues as long as we “feel” inspired to and then say the first thought that comes into our mind, then the next, and the next - until it naturally ends. Where do the thoughts come from? The answer is – God - “As the Spirit gives utterance”, remember? It certainly doesn’t originate from our minds because we have no idea what we just said in tongues. Then in faith we expect the interpretation and it’s there. How? Who knows? Who cares! It’s there just like speaking in tongues is also there when we expect it and speak. We activate and God energizes it.

Private Practice

Here’s some practical tips. Before starting, we clear our minds of any pre-planned thoughts or ideas. We want to relay what God wants relayed, not what we might want. Here’s another tip: When I started to interpret, I spoke in tongues for about 5 seconds and then stopped. Then in my mind I said “Go!” and said the next word or thought that came to my mind. Then the next, then the next, etc., all the way until there was a (super) natural ending place. I started with a short amount of tongues and a similar amount of interpretation - easier to get right. Another tip - I focused on transmitting the right information, not listening to what I was saying. I paid attention to passing the message along to the group, not listening or thinking about the content. I figured I would get blessed by the other person or persons who were manifesting later. My job was to manifest the best I could – maximize God’s message and minimize Steve’s flesh.

I stumbled in interpretation at first, but it worked out well after I practiced with a more experienced brother a few times. Soon I was able to interpret tongues with no flesh interference and people got blessed, just as I was blessed when I was on the receiving end of interpretations.

There is a natural tendency to not want to fail in front of others. Some call it “performance anxiety”. And that’s sort of understandable because this is the first manifestation most of us do in front of others. This is why private practice with an experienced brother or sister is valuable. We can learn our fleshly tendencies and eliminate them. We also gain more confidence as we successfully speak in tongues and interpret. Private practice alone is not prohibited by scripture and is possible because interpretation is an automatically energizing manifestation, like tongues.

Some teach that the interpretation should be an interpretation which reflects a prayer or praise to God. For endorsement of that idea, they quote:

1 Cor. 14: 2,17,

For whoever speaks in a tongue does not speak to people, but to God, for no one understands, but by the spirit he speaks sacred secrets.

For indeed you are giving thanks very well, but the other is not being built up.

To Whom?

The logic goes – if tongues is prayer, praise, and thanks to God, then the interpretation should indicate the same, only in the language of the people present. Keep in mind that the interpretation of tongues is not a knowledgeable translation of that which was spoken in tongues. That would be impossible because the content of the tongues is unknown to the speaker. The manifestation of interpretation of tongues is a divinely given interpretation of what you just said in an unknown language. Because of that, some think that the interpretation should mirror the form of prayer or praise to God. In contrast, some think that interpretation of tongues is like prophecy in that it is a message to the body of believers present for edification, exhortation, and comfort.

1 Cor. 14:3-5

But whoever prophesies speaks to people for building them up, and encouragement, and comfort.

Whoever speaks in a tongue builds himself up, while the one who prophesies builds up the church.

Now I want all of you to speak in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy, for greater is the one who prophesies than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church is built up.

These proponents believe that speaking in tongues with interpretation = prophecy. Which view is right? I’ll answer that question after one more consideration. Some teach that because interpretation of tongues is a separate manifestation (or gift, as some think) then one person speaks in tongues and another person is responsible for the interpretation. These folks quote this verse for backing:

1 Cor. 14:27

If anyone speaks in a tongue, let it be by two, or at the most three, and one at a time, and one must interpret!

That verse can lend itself to the understanding that the tongues persons must team up with a separate interpreter person so that they can follow that directive. But two other verses cast a shadow on that “two separate manifesters” idea.

1 Cor. 14:5,13 (Boldface added for emphasis)

Now I want all of you to speak in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy, for greater is the one who prophesies than the one who speaks in tongues, **unless he interprets**, so that the church is built up.

Therefore, let the one who speaks in a tongue pray so **that he can interpret**.

Both above verses exhort the speaker in tongues person to interpret, not find someone else to interpret. To add more evidence to that idea, some scholars believe that the Greek text of verse 27 can lean toward the “two or three tongues talkers” interpreting, not finding a separate “one” to interpret. So, the question becomes, “If in some churches one person speaks in tongues and another person interprets, what’s going on? Where does the interpretation come from?” The answer is simple. Who is the one who gives the utterance (the content) in tongues, interpretation and prophecy? The Spirit, God. So, because God knows that the person who first spoke in tongues will quit after their tongues message and not interpret it, he just gives manifester #2 (who thinks that they are interpreting) a message of prophecy instead. What happens? Everyone is edified, exhorted, and comforted. And usually, no one is the wiser!

God is, of course, more able and smarter that we can even apprehend much less comprehend. He has chosen to fellowship with us … a bunch of numb skulls - people who have the spirit but also have the unredeemed flesh, which fights against the spirit. This is why He made the manifestations sort of “numb scull proof”. Let’s look at an early record of humans manifesting the spirit.

Num. 11:16,17, 24-29

Yahweh said to Moses, “Gather to me 70 men of the elders of Israel whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting that they may stand there with you.

I will come down and talk with you there. I will take some of the spirit that is on you and will put it on them, and they will carry the burden of the people with you so that you do not carry it yourself alone.

Moses went out and told the people the words of Yahweh, and he gathered 70 men of the elders of the people and stationed them around the Tent.

Yahweh came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the 70 elders. And when the spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did so no more.

But two men remained in the camp. The name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad, and the spirit rested on them. And they were of those who had been registered, but they had not gone out to the Tent; and they prophesied in the camp.

A young man ran and told Moses and said, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!”

Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, one of his chosen men, answered, “My lord Moses, forbid them!”

Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all Yahweh’s people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his spirit on them!”

Let’s recap. Moses was getting burned out by the burden of leading Israel in the wilderness. God told him to get 70 of the best of Israel so that He could put his spirit on them and they could help carry the weight of Israeli leadership. Moses did that and God did what He promised – He put his spirit on all 70 and they prophesied. But an anomaly happened – two others beside the 70 chosen were prophesying outside the tabernacle in the general camp area. Moses assistant, Joshua, thought they were wrong to prophesy and wanted to shut them up, but Moses spoke one of the great prophecies in the Old Testament, “I wish that all Yahweh’s people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his spirit on them!” Of course, this became available on Pentecost and will also be fulfilled in the future as Joel foretold.

Now, why were Eldad and Medad prophesying outside the original 70? Because when Moses chose the original group, God agreed that 68 of the 70 were the top picks. God thought Eldad and Medad were ‘top 70’, but Moses missed them. God didn’t. He gave them the spirit and they prophesied too, openly showing to the nation that God backed their leadership ability and office. What about the two in the original 70 that Moses ‘mis-picked’ that were really perhaps 71st and 72nd best? The scripture says that they prophesied too. God blessed them despite Moses error and never spotlighted their “unworthiness”. This is how God works when He deals with “numb sculls”. He works around our shortcomings and usually never points them out just like He didn’t with Moses and the 72. And the extra prophecies blessed everyone - and never hurt anyone!

In business, people call their preferred goals “plan A”. When something comes up that warrants a deviation from that, they call it “Plan B”. God knows everything and man’s shortcomings and has more plans than there are letters – in every language - combined! Being love, He always wants the best for everybody – in everything – all the time. When we mess up the manifestations, He still does His best to bless. When someone thinks their interpreting when they are really prophesying, He still blesses. When someone thinks they’re getting a message of knowledge when their getting a message of wisdom, He still blesses. When some think they’re getting healed but only have the trust to get “half healed” like the blind man Jesus once ministered to, He still blesses. God will do half healing, whole healing, 1/10 healing. He still blesses. This is who He is and what He does.

God’s Quality Control

Too many Christians fear doing anything wrong and therefore do nothing to pacify their fear. Of course they never do anything wrong – because they do nothing! Think if Moses acted like that. He made decisions based on what God told him and was 97% right - 68 out of 70. What would have happened if Moses was so afraid of failure that he chose no one? He would have burned out and stopped leading Israel which would have returned to Egypt. Instead, he obeyed God, Who blessed his trust and Israel continued to the Promised Land.

So, let’s say we speak 70 words in an interpretation and two of them are wrong. Will God blink the lights at the fellowship? Will he sound a siren out the TV speakers? No, God will cover for us just like He did for Moses. The only difference is that Moses knew he fell short while usually we have little clue.

Think about Moses response to Joshua’s exhortation to shut up the “extra” prophecies from the “unsanctioned” guys. Moses in essence said, “Are you telling me to stop the prophecies because I didn’t pick them to do it? Where do you think they’re getting the prophecy? From the spirit, right? Therefore, God is doing this! God is causing my mess up to result in more manifesting of the spirit and that’s what He wants. He wishes everyone would manifest – all the time.”

In the story of Numbers 11, we see different kinds of things that happen when the spirit gets manifested. Moses didn’t carry out the word of wisdom correctly. He was 97% right and 3% wrong. God covered it. An enthusiastic believer entered and tried to shut God and his manifesters down because of mistakes. God inspired Moses to say what he did – shutting no one down and showing approval on any and all manifesting. So, what do we learn? When there is manifesting of the spirit there are mistakes. What do we expect? Humans are numb skulls, right? Moses understood the mistake and carried on, while a young and learning Joshua overreacts and wanted to shut God down! The only difference in the two was the numbness of their sculls! What does God do? He puts up with all the lack by supplying what’s needed to provide the best outcome possible. In no regards does He quench the spirit. In contrast, He adds two addition manifesters!

These are some of the challenges we must overcome to manifest the spirit. Will we fall short in the manifestations at times? Of course! We are also card-carrying numb sculls! Get used to imperfection. We can’t let that stop us. Thankfully it didn’t stop Moses. In addition, sometimes believers will point out imperfections in our manifestations. We can’t let that stop us from manifesting. God’s prescription today is the same as it was then – more manifesting! That’s how we learn and get better. We sure don’t get better if we quit or shrink back because of fear. As the saying goes, “God can’t steer a parked car.” The answer to falling short in manifesting is more manifesting! Please get this point. Mistakes are common and expected. Spiritual success is groundbreaking and sensational every time! It’s bringing God and Christ into the world! It’s some of the greatest things we will ever do in our lives! We can’t allow a few mistakes to rob us and the church of that.

Too many of us try to pick apart the manifestations instead of just going with God’s flow. We let our heads get in the way. Too many of us try harder not to fail than to throw ourselves into successfully doing whatever God has asked us to do. Too many of us have “paralysis by analysis”. Confident action on what God has asked us to do is trust. Anything else is the flesh fighting against the spirit and we should squash it. Like a bad bug… in the name of Jesus Christ!

So, does interpretation of tongues reflect praise to God or a message to the church? The answer is… what’s the first word in your mind after you speak in tongues? What’s the next word? And the next.. until the end. Then ask someone what you said and you’ll have your answer.

We want to manifest with confidence, not doubt. We know God will cover for us as we do our best because He loves us. He doesn’t expect perfection, just persistence to do His will, which pleases Him. And as we learn, we do better next time.

Heb. 10:35

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which will have a great reward.

We manifest with confidence and will be rewarded. And if anyone (including ourselves) objects, we just manifest more and keep learning! (And bless ‘em if they can’t take a joke!)