



Gift of Tongues

Introduction

A revival of speaking in tongues influenced North America and other parts of the world in the last century, and the effects of this revival continue today. This movement has had a broad scope geographically, culturally and socially. So it is not surprising that there has also been a wide variation in the experiences and degrees of involvement in this phenomenon, as well as in the acceptance or rejection of the people and groups who espouse this teaching. Some who speak in tongues teach and insist that the gift of tongues is the evidence or sign that one is filled with the Holy Spirit. Some who do not speak in tongues teach and insist that the gift of tongues is not for this age, but was only for the time of the apostles and the birth of the church. Others find themselves somewhere in between.

The Missionary Church believes the entire record of the Bible concerning the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of tongues must be understood against this larger backdrop.

A Spirit-Filled Life Will Be Characterized by Both the Fruit of the Spirit and Proper Use of the Gifts of the Spirit

We believe that every Christian should be filled with the Spirit. This truth must continue to have strong emphasis in our teaching and preaching. The Spirit-filled life has been a basic tenet of the Missionary Church from its beginning, and our Constitution states what we believe concerning the work of the Spirit in people's lives: "The divine work of making men holy begins in repentance and regeneration, yet, through a subsequent crisis experience, the believer is to die to self to be purified in heart, and to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that he may be separated wholly unto God to serve Him in righteousness and holiness. After the crisis experience, the believer is to be perfected in holiness in the fear of God and to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Historically, the Missionary Church has stood for a warm-hearted, vital experience of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. We have endeavored to hold to a correct interpretation of the Christian life as presented in the Scriptures. We believe there is an experience of the Spirit's fullness subsequent to the conversion experience. The vitality of this Spirit-filled life is dependent on a continual day-by-day abiding in Christ in complete abandonment to His will. This life will be characterized by both the fruit of the Spirit and a proper use of the gifts of the Spirit. We still maintain this position.

Possessing Spiritual Gifts Is Not Evidence for the Fullness of the Spirit

Gifts can obviously be counterfeited. The words of Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23 are sobering: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your

name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” If some of the greater gifts, such as prophecy, can be exercised so as to be regarded by Jesus as a work of iniquity, we should not be surprised when other gifts also become a counterfeit of Satan.

So while we recognize the gifts of the Holy Spirit as taught in Scripture to be valid gifts for the church today, no particular gift or gifts are the necessary or required evidence of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, nor are they considered as the evidence of Christian maturity.

Although there are several instances in Scripture where people spoke in a tongue following an infilling of the Holy Spirit, this is not normative throughout Scripture. We believe these instances are descriptive of what happened during a unique time of historical transition, chronicled in the book of Acts. However, the absence of explicit commands in the New Testament letters linking the practice of tongues to Spirit-filled living indicates that these instances are not intended to be prescriptive for all Christians in the church era. Furthermore, to insist that speaking in tongues is evidence of the Holy Spirit’s fullness invalidates the experience of all those believers whose lives have given abundant evidence of the power of the Spirit but who have never spoken in tongues.

The Gifts of the Spirit Are for “The Common Good” in the Body of Christ

Every Christian has at least one gift. “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). Spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit “just as He determines” (1 Corinthians 12:11). Christians should not expect to receive or to exercise any one particular gift, several gifts, or all the gifts. With this fact in mind Paul asked, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Corinthians 12:29-30). It is clear, grammatically and contextually, that the intended answer to these questions is, “No.” Therefore, Christians need each other.

Gifts are always related to service and are not to be used as a measure of Christian experience. We agree with A.B. Simpson when he said, “...our possession of these gifts does not affect our personal salvation and sanctification, and our standing with God as subjects of His grace.”¹ Gifts are not to be exercised selfishly, but are for the profit of the whole body.

The Gift of Tongues Must Be Practiced with Orderliness, Unity and Love

Speaking in tongues is referred to in scripture both in corporate and private worship. The guidelines for speaking in tongues in a corporate setting are found in 1 Corinthians 14 and state 1) that no more than two or, at the most, three may speak in a tongue during a service, and 2) there must be one present who can interpret. Paul says that in the church, he would rather speak five intelligible words than ten thousand in a tongue. Private speaking in tongues refers to a private conversation with God. Paul sees limited value in this, however, since the benefit consists only in the personal edification of the speaker-not the edification of the entire body (1 Corinthians 14:2, 4).

The gift of tongues is not intended to be divisive. However, due to the passion people have for their positions, both the acceptance and the rejection of tongues have often caused division in churches, homes, and other groups. Pride and division in the Corinthian church created problems in the unity of the body. The instruction clearly shows that loveless Christianity, unbiblical judgment of others, rifts in a congregation, and refusal to listen to the teaching of Scripture are not of the Holy Spirit.

Christians Should Be Known by Their Fruit Rather Than by Their Gifts

The Missionary Church considers the biblical distinction between the gifts and the graces of the Spirit important. The gifts of the Spirit are clearly presented in 1 Corinthians 12. The graces of the Spirit are bound together by love (1 Corinthians 13), and the desire for spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1) must be preceded by earnest pursuit of love. The graces of the Spirit are also identified as fruit (Galatians 5:22-23). It is evident that one may possess a gift or several of the gifts of the Spirit without enjoying the necessary graces of the Spirit. A gift, such as prophecy, can be exercised without the grace of love and thus be little more than noise. (1 Corinthians 13:1).

The graces or fruit of the Spirit make it possible for the Christian to exercise the gifts of the Spirit in a manner that will bring glory to God and will bring His blessing upon and enhance the testimony of the church of Jesus Christ. Since Paul presents love as “the most excellent way,” it suggests that love is the true essence of all the graces of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:31b). The truth of 1 Corinthians 13 indicates that this is so. All of the other graces or fruit spring out of love: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Christians should be known by their fruit rather than by their gifts. The most visible evidence of the fullness of the Spirit in the life of the Christian is love: love for God, love for the body of Christ, and love for a lost world.

Summary

The believer must have a passion for the Person of the Holy Spirit, the Giver of gifts. The Bible clearly teaches that the Christian life is a relationship with a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is made real to us by the Holy Spirit.

The Missionary Church believes that the consuming passion of the Holy Spirit is to present and glorify Christ (John 15:26). Anything that detracts from the central theme, Jesus Christ, lessens the effectiveness of the church. Like Paul, we are “resolved to know nothing...except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Seeking manifestations more than seeking Christ is a danger to be avoided. To quote A.B. Simpson again, “When we seek anything less than God, we are sure to miss His highest blessing and likely to fall into side issues and serious errors.”

Pastors should teach the Spirit-filled, victorious Christian life-not as an option for the Christian, but as a necessity. Our congregations need to know the deepened experience of the grace of God in their lives. We must not lose sight of what God has already done for us or deny His past blessings. We counsel our people to be “led by the

Spirit of God” (Romans 8:14) and “eagerly desire the greater gifts.” (1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:39).

1A. B. Simpson, Gifts and Grace (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1993), p. 1.

2A. B. Simpson

*revised by the 2003 General Conference