

Interpretation of Tongues

by G.W. North

The gift of Interpretation of Tongues is a spiritual gift that functions by direct inspiration from God, and is necessary for the proper functioning of the Church.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:4, Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:10, 1 Corinthians 14:1-5, 1 Corinthians 14:27-28, 1 Corinthians 14:33, 1 Corinthians 14:40, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Spiritual Gifts"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of the Interpretation of Tongues as a divine gift that complements the gift of Tongues, highlighting its role in fostering understanding and unity within the Church. He explains that this gift is not unique to the New Testament but has roots in the Old Testament, where figures like Daniel and Joseph demonstrated similar abilities. North stresses that the Interpretation of Tongues is a spiritual gift that operates independently of human education, requiring the interpreter to rely solely on divine inspiration. He warns against the misuse of this gift, which can lead to confusion and spiritual decline within the Church, and calls for a return to the proper order and purpose of spiritual gifts in building up the Body of Christ. Ultimately, he asserts that the gifts are meant to reflect the nature of Christ and serve the edification of the Church.

Transcript

Having for the purposes stated dealt fairly fully, though not exhaustively, with the gift of Tongues, we will turn to a consideration of Interpretation. Perhaps little more need be said about it than has already been said, for by its very nature it is linked with Tongues and owes its existence to it. Without its much despised 'twin' gift, there would be no need for it in the body. Behold the loving wisdom and perfect understanding of God intended by this gift. It is a tender reminder of the selflessness of the Christ's body, for it is given that members may pass on to others the blessing which has been peculiarly their own and could not be ministered to others' conscious understandings apart from the gift. Like its fellows, Interpretation is a most loving and tender gesture from the Lord.

Interpretation is not a gift which is peculiar to the New Testament Church. In the Old Testament we discover that such men as Daniel had the ability to interpret dreams, visions and languages (tongues). Indeed this man had such a variety of abilities that it is not surprising that he was raised to Premiership. Joseph also had the gift of Interpretation, though apparently he did not, as Daniel, have the ability to interpret languages (tongues). Nevertheless there is difference between the Old Testament and the New

Testament, and this difference is indicated in the special title given to the New Testament gift, namely Interpretation of Tongues.

The hand which wrote on the wall in the palace of Babylon spelled out the king's doom in a language other than his own. It was written in a tongue which was unknown to everybody including Daniel himself, but the Hebrew Prophet both spelled out the faded words and also interpreted their meaning to the king in full and miraculous detail. This however was an incident without precedent or repetition in the Old Testament scriptures, and appears upon its pages in marked isolation, whereas dreams and visions are not strange to the record.

With the advent of the New Covenant on the day of Pentecost, God revealed His hitherto unknown intention to distribute Tongues with liberality throughout the whole Church during the entire Church age. By doing this He also created a need, so in fulfilment of this specific need the Lord also bestowed with it the gift of Interpretation of Tongues.

Paul is very specific about this gift, he does not speak of Interpretation apart from adding 'of Tongues'. He did this lest the gift should be mistaken for prophecy. Interpretation of languages is a common enough ability among men. There are many people who have a natural 'flair' for languages and are brilliant at translating or interpreting one language or dialect into another, having great linguistic abilities and a well-trained mind. But this is not what Paul is speaking of. By Interpretation of Tongues he means an ability complete in itself, given from God and owing nothing to education. People with this gift have no need of training, although in some degree it will improve with use.

The difference between these two kinds of interpretation is best seen by observing the methods each uses. Normal interpretation depends upon clear understanding of the words being spoken and is given sentence by sentence as the speaker proceeds. The gift of God is entirely opposite to that: the interpreter has no knowledge of the 'Tongue' being spoken, he waits until the speaker has completed the whole message and then gives the interpretation as an utterance complete in itself. Neither the speaker in Tongues nor the interpreter of the Tongue understands the words spoken in Tongue.

In common with all the oral gifts, Interpretation of Tongues functions by direct inspiration from God; it is a 'Spiritual'. As to its operational method, that is, how it works within him, the interpreter does not know, 'Tongues' as revealed in scripture is Spirit (God) to spirit (man) by (Holy) Spirit through (a) man's spirit to Spirit (God), and is quite intelligible to Him. Interpretation of Tongues is from Spirit via, man's spirit to man's spirit and understanding. Finally understanding must be reached and edified, so God has given Interpretation of Tongues in a language understandable to others.

It will be seen then that of all the Spirituals, Tongues is the one gift which on man's side is most exclusively spiritual in operation. Except upon the rare occasion of which the day of Pentecost is an example, when Tongues are spoken nothing of what is said is understandable to man. In general all that men know of the gift in operation is that something has been spoken, that is all. This ability must be operated by spirit alone, and because this is so, in the last analysis by this gift every church must be judged.

Although this may at first appear strange to the mind, it is by the presence, practice and power of Tongues that the true state of any company is made apparent and must be adjudged spiritual or carnal. It is not that of all the Spirituals Tongues is the greatest, but because it is the simplest in operation, requiring nothing of man but his spirit and tongue, with obedience and faith. All God requires is the simple, intelligent

co-operation of which every new-born babe is capable; once this is known to a heart, to deny that to God is almost unpardonable. No gift is more entirely spiritual in function, nor more easily operated than this, therefore if carnality is entertained in a church, this is the gift which suffers first and most, for it is the most directly expressive of the spiritual state of man. It is a spirit exercise, a spirit utterance, more it is a spirit expression, and to the discerning spirit nothing is more clearly indicative of the state of the person(s) speaking. Therefore ultimately either by its use, abuse or non-use the true condition of any church is revealed.

We have already noted some of the more serious sins which worked among the Corinthians like leaven in dough. Because of their blatant defiance of God's ordinances and their consequent criminal disregard for each other, all discernment had ceased from the majority, so that, despite the liberal distribution of the higher gifts among them, many were weak and sickly and many slept. Healing, Miracles, Discernment of spirits, Faith, had all been given in possession to this church, but all were insufficient to meet the crying need that Paul knew to be there. Their former spirituality had been dethroned by carnality because the cross had been made of none effect, so impotence mocked their possessions and ministries, and emptiness their utterances. They had reigned as kings, but not now, and all because they had failed to accept, even if they recognised, the plain signs displayed by the abuse of Tongues in their midst.

This declension was all so needless, and Paul, with all his genius for using simple, homely illustrations, shows us this in chapter 14. In one of his most easily understood passages he draws our attention here to sounds and voices. Things without life can make noises, he says, and the instruments from which the sounds proceed are immediately recognisable; no intelligent grown person confuses a wind instrument with a stringed or a percussion instrument. From this basic idea he proceeds to draw a simple analogy and to apply some important lessons for us all to learn, namely these: when the oral gifts are in operation, the first thing to listen for is: (1) the voice, not the words; (2) the tone of the voice; (3) the volume of sound, and (4) what is being said. By this simple practice recommended by the apostle, priority is accorded to the voice first and to the message last. As will be seen, by this means the messenger is tested before his message is received. What a safety device this is.

Whatever be the speech of the man, whoever he be, the voice of that man is the surest indication of his spirit. A man's voice and tones reveal who and what he is. Although the Tongue is not known, the voice must without fail be immediately classified and understood. Whose and what spirit is being manifested, not what is being said, is of the first and utmost importance to the Church. In applying the test, certain invariable things must always be watched for, namely: (1) is it the one and selfsame Spirit spoken of in chapter 12? (2) is it the one and selfsame Love revealed in chapter 13? (3) is the tone of the selfsame quality as that which so adoringly worships Jesus, saying 'Jesus, Lord'?

Everyone must distinguish whether the voice which purports to speak from the Head on the throne is the same as that which speaks from the Body on the cross. Whether it be in the selfless pleading tones of 'Father forgive them' or the authoritative assurance of 'Today thou shalt be with me in paradise', or the tender compassion of 'Mother, behold thy Son', and 'son behold thy mother', or the heartbreaking misery and breathtaking mystery of 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' or the victorious 'It is finished', or the earth-shattering, rock-rending, grave-opening, gentle yieldedness of 'Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit'. If it be so, it is genuine, and its message acceptable; it is spiritual; whether it be whisper or shout, it is God.

This is true of all the gifts, but these things are ignored only at peril where Tongues are concerned, for they cannot be judged upon any other basis. Be sure that though a carnal person may know these things, when expressing himself among spiritual people, he cannot long disguise the condition of his spirit, nor for ever deceive the elect in this realm.

In relation to this, it is unavoidable at times that in the most spiritual of assemblies the kind of situation mentioned below may develop: a person may operate one of the commoner gifts completely in and from the soul(ish) realm, with the result that spiritual men are nauseated and saddened, yet at the same time some person may claim to have been greatly blessed by the demonstration. This kind of situation can cause great confusion and perplexity, but the difficulty is resolved when it is clearly understood that what comes from (a) soul can, and quite frequently does bless and minister to (a) soul, but only that which comes from the Holy Spirit will reach and bless the spiritual man.

The unsanctified human soul normally gratifies itself upon religious promises, ideas, suggestions, explanations and pleasurable feelings ministered to it from and by other souls. It will feed on and enjoy pseudo-spiritual exercises, quite oblivious to what is going on, and totally blinded to the spirit-source from whence it all comes. This is quite normal and totally unavoidable in the unregenerate state which precedes New Birth in every man, or the state of carnality to which a man may afterwards sink. In effect carnality in the Church is nothing other than soulishness, which, although it be now religious, is nothing other than a reversion to and continuance in that from which it was originally saved. It is a spiritual death during which the soul sleeps (Ephesians 5:14) so deeply that it is quite unable to recognise or receive the things of the Spirit. It can and does however receive that which comes from the soul, delighting in and professing blessing from it. Once this is understood, much that puzzles many hearts is immediately explainable.

It is quite impossible to overemphasise the necessity to excise from the Church the soulish, unspiritual use of Tongues, for its undisciplined use genders even worse troubles. For example: A speaks in tongue, but not from the Spirit, B has the gift of Interpretation of Tongues; because A has spoken, pressure is immediately brought to bear upon B to give an interpretation. Should he be a carnal man, or not sufficiently taught of God, he may attempt to use his gift; if he does so, he also will be out of the Spirit, and all will be in the soulish realm, carnal; dead and death-dealing.

By such devilish devices whole congregations are brought under falsehood and much confusion arises, making what was at first bad thoroughly evil in portent. Moreover, once allowed and accepted, such practices will become habitual in a church, and if continued in will forge around unsuspecting hearts a yoke of bondage almost impossible to break. Worse than that, the practice will furnish just the correct grounds for ever-watchful evil spirits to come in undetected and work their deceptions with destructive power among the saints. Sooner or later such a state of affairs will without fail result in men becoming demon-possessed; what is worse, passing for Spirit-filled believers, these persons will set odd or unbecoming patterns of behaviour in the churches which will ultimately be accepted as the only genuine manifestation of the Baptism in the Spirit among that company.

However, although this is all tragically possible, and too frequently true, it is no reason for wholesale rejection of the Spirituals, nor for the denial of this particular gift, for the same may be said of other gifts, whether charismatic or otherwise. Together with its 'twin' or 'other half', namely Interpretation, Tongues forms a good foundation for the operation of the higher gifts.

Viewing the gifts as a whole, and remembering that with the exception of the latter two they are an analysis or itemising of the composite powers whereby the Lord Himself, in His day, worked among men, it is possible to almost descry in them the outline of the image of Jesus, a kind of structure of the powers upon which the whole frame of His working or ministry-life was built. His nature is revealed in chapter 13, and compared with it all the gifts or powers are as naught, having no meaning or worth except as they are manifestations of that Love-nature. Nevertheless the Lord is as much revealed in His works as in His nature, for His works are:

(1) an expression of His nature:

(2) a manifestation of His spirit:

(3) a demonstration of His power.

In the order of mention here we may see an outline somewhat analogous to a body-shape, having Wisdom as its head, Knowledge as its neck, Faith its chest, Healing and Miracles its two arms, Prophecy its heart, Discernment its trunk or torso, and Tongues with Interpretation its two legs and feet. To the seven powers by which He continuously worked during His earthly ministry, the Lord added two more and gave all to His bodily Church through which He still works among men to this day. The latter two are too widely spread among us to be overlooked, and may well merit the description accorded them above, namely the two legs and feet upon which the whole body stands.

If this privilege be granted these particular gifts, their acceptance and use among us in this capacity must be upon the understanding that they also betoken and carry the presence of the whole. Feet and legs of themselves, important as they are in their place and function, are surely not the most important members of the body. After all, it is quite possible for a person to exist without legs, but it is not possible for legs to exist apart from being members of a personal body. The whole must exist together as one, for that is the will and provision of God. Although it is graciously stated that the head cannot say to the feet, 'I have no need of thee', God is only speaking to the Body about itself from the standpoint of the ethics of life eternal. He has planned and created the body so, and therefore all must be as He wills.

If therefore we may accept the above-suggested analogy we observe that Tongues and Interpretation do have an importance which must be regarded as necessary and fundamental to the Body for its proper function, and that being so, they are without question of the correct spiritual order. Looking and listening around in these days, it might be sadly concluded that instead of the head saying to the feet, 'I have no need of thee', it appears to be true that the feet are saying to the head, 'I have no need of thee'. Of course no-one would think of saying such a blasphemous thing, but that is how it seems to be working out, for in the majority of churches where the gifts are given expression, the higher gifts are markedly lacking in evidence.

In such churches it seems that it is generally believed that the correct approach to corporate worship is public engagement in free exercise of Tongues on the part of every member, to be followed later by an Interpretation of a more specific 'message' in Tongues. By such means it would appear that the assembly is trying to establish the belief that the feet are more important than the Head, which of course cannot be true, nor do such assemblies intend to convey this idea, but ultimately this is the inevitable impression which is unavoidably given. This is so obviously different from the order which is clearly set forth in this list of gifts. Therein it appears that the Spirit of the Body would rather manifest itself as it were from the Head downwards than from the feet upwards.

It is logical to assume and therefore may be presumed that if the feet and legs of a person are in the midst of an assembly, then so must the rest of that person be there also, even though nothing more of that person's presence and powers ever finds expression upon that or any other occasion. But would it not be more wonderful if churches could 'see' the Head more often than the feet and legs? Oh, for the expression of words of Wisdom and Knowledge among us, more than just the repetitious use of worshipping or communicating Tongues so widespread in the churches. Not that we would eliminate the gift, indeed we must not do so, but following Paul's instructions, we ought to control it.

It would seem that in three ways the apostle sought to promote the healthy growth of the Body by:

- 1) controlling the use of the less important gifts,
- 2) exhorting us to 'covet earnestly the higher gifts,
- 3) pointing out what should be our purpose in possessing and using whatever gift(s) we have.

When commanding decency and order among us he does so in two different realms. The first is to set limits to public use of Tongues whereby also he limits Interpretation of Tongues, and the second is to draw attention to the way he has deliberately arranged the order and manner in which the Spirit of the Body would minister the powers of the Lord. By means of the greater gifts, the Spirit of the Body expresses to the Body as from and within the Body, that our glorious Head is speaking.

It must surely be for this reason that Paul instructs us all that we are to hold the Head. All speech is expressed through the Head. No member of the body is endowed with power of speech save the head. Therefore it must be assumed that whatsoever the body would say is spoken by the lips of the body which are in the head. The body itself cannot speak, it is the person, the spirit within or of the body which speaks. Therefore it ought to be properly understood by each member of the Body that when he functions in a gift he is implying that it is the Head who is speaking or acting.

This is why Peter when speaking of judgement commencing at the house of God, says 'if any man speak, let him speak as the oracle of God'. Plainly he is saying that Gods judgement is that unless anyone is speaking as the Head, he ought not to speak at all in the church. When it is recalled that the apostle was not thinking in terms of modern church function, but was pronouncing upon church conduct in his day, when expression through the gifts was normal church order, his forthright statement becomes the more powerful. These men lived in clear understanding of truth. They perfectly understood the mystery of the Body.

Matthew records that the first word which Jesus spoke about the Church was 'I will build my Church', and Paul, to whom was entrusted the revelation that the Church is Christ's Body, tells us in many different ways that we are to build up the Body. So we have before us a scripture which informs us that it is Christ who builds the Church and a sample of many others which plainly show that the members also build the Church.

This then is the high calling of every member of the Body, and this is the real reason for the gifts, otherwise called Spirituals. They are the chosen means of co-operation with Christ for the unification and consolidation of the whole Church. It is He who is building the universal Church. He is the overall Head. We in our limited capacity and local settings build up the visible expression of the Church in these places, but only when we do so by these means are we a true church. Building up a local church we are also

building the universal Church, for whether it be He or we, it is the same. He is the builder if when we speak we 'speak as the oracles of God', and when we act, 'we do all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

In the Church all must be done with the purpose of building it up a spiritual body unto the full stature of Christ. The Church is His Body in its entirety, from head to feet it is Him. It exists for the presence and manifestation of His Spirit in the world, and the gifts or Spirituals are given to His members that they may be used for:

- 1) demonstrations of His power to man outside of the Church, and
- 2) edification of the Body itself.

The Body is not to be content with more or less representing Him, or generally being in His likeness, it must be in His image, that is, spiritual.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/gw-north/interpretation-of-tongues/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net