



Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!

Psalm 34:3

On Worship Leading

with Pastor Steve

The Gift of Tongues in Corporate Worship

In 1987 a friend and I went to Anaheim, California to attend a worship conference at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. During one of the afternoon sessions following a time of worship, someone in the audience began to speak in tongues in the hearing of the entire assembly. There must have been a thousand people in the large auditorium, so I could just barely hear the person speak. However, almost the minute they began I felt my heart jump out of my chest. I thought, "Oh no; I've got the interpretation to this tongue!"

As soon as the person finished with the tongue I began giving what I thought was the interpretation. When I finished giving the word the audience resounded with shouts of praise and applause. I was relieved thinking I must have nailed that one.

In the next session John Wimber, the pastor of the Anaheim Vineyard at the time, was the featured speaker. During his teaching he mentioned that we had strayed from the biblical order of worship during our last session. He explained that a message which was given in tongues had been followed by a prophetic word and not the interpretation of the tongue. The scripture text he used was 1 Corinthians 14:2; *For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.*

He didn't single me out, but immediately I knew he was talking about the interpretation I had given. I could have crawled under my seat. In a very loving, pastoral way, he went on to share that if a person speaking in tongues is speaking to God and not to man as Paul taught, then the interpretation of that tongue should be to God and not to man. The word I had given was speaking to man and not to God; I indeed had a prophetic word, but not the interpretation of the tongue.

I had not heard that passage taught that way. It had been my experience, in the Charismatic Movement, that anything spoken after a tongue was the interpretation of the tongue. However, I realized that what John Wimber was saying made a lot of sense; in fact he was right and my experience, though sincere, was wrong.

The Apostle Paul gave us specific instructions on the use of tongues in our worship gatherings. Though he specifically targets speaking in tongues, I believe the same principle he outlines governs singing in tongues as well. There are some who might interpret the instructions given by Paul as suggestions, but it is my perception that Paul gave them as commands which contain the mind of God (1 Corinthians 14:37). He wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:23, *Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongue, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?*

The answer to Paul's rhetorical question is yes, they will think you are out of your mind. There were even those on the day of Pentecost who thought the 120 were drunk. So if an uninformed or unbeliever comes into our worship service and we are all singing or praying out loud in tongues at the same time what is the profit? There is none according to Paul.

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say Amen at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

1 Corinthians 14:14-17

For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

1 Corinthians 14:8-9

However, he goes on to say that if we are prophesying the secrets of the heart will be revealed and the person will fall on his face and worship God and report that God is among us (1 Corinthians 14:25).

Paul states that all things should be done for the edification of all (1 Corinthians 14:11, 26). He points out that the one speaking in tongues edifies himself but the other is not edified unless the tongue is interpreted (1 Corinthians 14:4, 17). He continues by saying, *If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God.* (1 Corinthians 14:27-28)

By saying that each one should speak in turn, he makes it plain that individuals should not be speaking in tongues out loud at the same time. It also appears that Paul is teaching two separate uses of tongues; one spoken in the hearing of all which is to be interpreted and the other which is a “prayer language” spoken in private between an individual and God.

Should tongues be used out loud as part of our worship services? It is certainly permitted by scripture in some cases. Tongues are for a sign for unbelievers not believers (1 Corinthians 14:22). So if we are in a service where we know all the people are believers there seems to be no reason for the gift of tongues to be used out loud with accompanying interpretation. However, if an unbeliever is present the Holy Spirit might use a tongue and an interpretation as a sign which would enable an unbeliever to embrace the gospel. (Note: The visitors in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost heard the wonderful works of God in their own language. Their amazement prompted Peter’s preaching of the gospel which resulted in the conversion of about 3000 souls.)

Paul concludes his teaching by saying, *Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order.* (1 Corinthians 14:39-40) Some groups put the emphasis on “let all things be done.” Other groups put the emphasis on “decently and in order.” The first group may allow the worship leader or pastor to lead the entire congregation in singing or praying in tongues out loud at will, but the second group may not allow tongues at all under any circumstances. My perception is that both are wrong.

Though I always leave room to be corrected, it is my understanding that when someone speaks or sings in tongues for others to hear it should be interpreted. If tongues are appropriate for the service the entire congregation should not use the gift at the same time. Two or at the most three at any one given service should speak in tongues, each in turn, and someone should interpret.

When a person speaks in tongues he speaks to God and not to man. Thus it stands to reason that if someone interprets a tongue the interpretation is directed toward God (in the form of prayer or worship) and not man.

When someone sings in tongues as worship toward God (with no interpretation) in the form of a love song or new song it should be a private matter between the person and God. The same applies if the tongue is being used for intercession or other types of prayer.

Man’s interpretation and use of the gift of tongues has caused undue division in the church today. As beneficial as the gift is, it has been over-emphasized in some circles, while demonized in other circles. I believe Paul addresses this when he says, *Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.* (1 Corinthians 14:20)