



Are Tongues & Prophecy for Today?

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A non-starter topic?

Anyone who is vaguely familiar with the New Testament will know that it has a lot to say about tongues and prophecy. We find multiple examples of tongues and prophecy in the book of Acts. First Corinthians has chapters devoted to the topic of gifts, especially tongues. These gifts were certainly practised in the early church. Paul even instructed believers to desire and seek these gifts (1 Cor. 14:1).

In much of the contemporary Christian church, tongues and prophecy are practised on a large scale. Many would not even think to question their validity.

To start up a conversation which questions the legitimacy of tongues and prophecy for today would therefore seem to be a non-starter topic! However, I believe there are a number of sound, biblical arguments that indicate these biblical gifts are no longer available to the church today.

The main point of this booklet is to show that the revelatory gifts, such as tongues and prophecy, were temporary gifts for the early church, but were not intended for the entire church age.

Would God introduce arrangements that are temporary?

We might initially think that if God introduced something, it must last forever. He is God, after all, and knows everything. In the Bible, however, we find examples of God introducing arrangements that are only temporary. Two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, are mentioned below.

The Book of Hebrews specifically mentions that the Old Testament sacrifices, festivals and ordinances were temporary, and fulfilled by the coming of Christ. The whole old covenant is replaced by the new covenant (Heb. 8:7ff). Many of the Old Testament arrangements were pictures (called types and shadows) of the coming spiritual or heavenly realities in the New Testament (Heb. 8:5; 10:1). For example, the High Priest of the old covenant was a picture of the true High Priest, Jesus Christ (Heb. 8:1-2). Christ came to fulfil these Old Testament arrangements, and they then fell away when the new covenant was ushered in (Heb. 10:9). All these Old Testament arrangements were imposed until the time of reformation when Christ came into the world, and then they fell away (Heb. 9:10). They had fulfilled their purpose.

In the New Testament, we find that the original apostles, together with Paul, were a unique group of men. Their office was temporary, as it formed the very foundation of the New Testament church (Eph. 2:20). Two strands of evidence can be given that show that their office was temporary. Firstly, Paul specifically indicated that he was the last of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:8). An apostle had to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22). Paul therefore insisted that he too saw the resurrected Christ. It was much later than the other apostles, however, hence his apostleship was born "out of due time" (1 Cor. 15:8, NKJV).

Secondly, the New Testament does not set out the qualifications of an apostle as it does for elders and deacons (see 1 Tim. 3), indicating that the church was not required to select more apostles.

Even Wayne Grudem, who argues for the validity of tongues and prophecy for today, acknowledges that the apostolic office did not continue into the church age, and that there are no apostles today.

An important conclusion to reach, therefore, is that just because we find something practised in the early church in Acts, does not mean

that it must continue throughout the church age. The temporary arrangements of the New Testament had their purpose. For example, with regard to the apostles, the church today is still under apostolic authority, but this authority resides in the writings of the original apostles (the New Testament), not in the continued office.

The questioning of the validity of the gifts of tongues and prophecy should not therefore be dismissed simply because it is found in the book of Acts and regulated in the epistles.

So, what was the gift of tongues?

This gift was the ability to speak in *foreign, human* languages that had not been previously learnt (Acts 2:4-11; 1 Cor. 14:10-11). In Acts 2, it is very instructive that the characteristic of the gift that caught the attention of these dispersed Jews, was the fact they could *recognise their own language* that was being spoken.

Due to the widespread phenomenon called tongues today, which is clearly not a human language, many claim they are speaking in “angelic languages” based on 1 Corinthians 13:1. But 1 Corinthians 13: 1-3 is speaking hypothetically. In other words, this passage takes some of the gifts given to the church to their exaggerated limits. For example, no one is actually able to move any mountains, or understand all mysteries and have all knowledge (1 Cor. 13:2). Paul is speaking hypothetically in this passage to show the importance and supremacy of love. All the historic occurrences of tongues-speaking in Acts and Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:10 – 11, confirm that actual human languages are meant when referring to the gift of tongues.

The “mysteries” spoken of in 1 Corinthians 14:2 refer to previously hidden spiritual truths that have now been revealed in the New Testament (Eph. 3:9). They do not refer to unintelligible babblings. For example, the early disciples could know and understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:11), and Paul preached and made known these mysteries to the Gentiles and the church (Eph. 3:8-10). First Corinthians 14:2 therefore teaches that when someone speaks in tongues, they are speaking spiritual, intelligible truths in a foreign language.

The gift of tongues was direct revelation from God. The actual message in the foreign tongue was inspired, as when it was interpreted, it had the same value for the church as prophecy (1 Cor. 14:5). Prophecy, as shown below, was direct, infallible revelation from God.

The main function of the gift of tongues was not for the assembled church, but rather as a sign to the unbelieving Jews (see 1 Cor. 14:21-24 with Isa. 28:11). Tongues only had a secondary benefit to the church. That is why tongues *in the church* were out of place, unless interpreted (1 Cor. 14:6-7, 23).

Some today also try and distinguish between speaking in tongues and praying in tongues. However, Paul did not make such a distinction. A careful examination of 1 Corinthians 14:13-14 shows that Paul used speaking and praying in tongues interchangeably. They were not two different gifts.

What was the gift of prophecy?

In the Old Testament, a prophet was someone who spoke the very words of God. They received direct, infallible revelation from God.

This is clear from three main facts. Firstly, in the Old Testament, if a prophet spoke anything that did not come to pass, he was to be put to death (Deut. 18:19-22). In other words, a true prophet spoke the whole truth. It could be trusted as the very word of God.

Secondly, when the words of the prophets were written down, they became Scripture. The Lord Jesus affirmed the full authority of every word and detail in the Old Testament (see Matt. 5:17-19). Much of the Old Testament is the words of prophets.

Thirdly, God affirms that the prophets spoke His very word in the Old Testament (Jer. 29:19). To be a prophet was therefore a serious calling.

Joel 2:28-32 indicates that the gift of prophecy would extend to the New Testament, but be more widespread in the church. Exactly the same terminology is used of the prophecy in the New Testament as was used of the prophecy in the Old Testament, such as dreams and visions. Any Old Testament reader of Joel 2 would have understood that it was the same Old Testament gift which would be operating in the New Testament. In the New Testament, we find two strands of evidence to support the fact that the gift was the same.

Firstly, the entire church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. It would be a very flimsy foundation if the words of the New Testament prophets were something less authoritative than the Old Testament prophets. Secondly, Agabus, a New Testament prophet, used the same authoritative formula of "This says the Lord..." as in the Old Testament (see Acts 21:11, noting that the Holy Spirit is fully God).

The modern-day belief then, made popular especially by Wayne Grudem, that prophecy in the New Testament is something different to the gift of prophecy in the Old Testament is incorrect. Many people today *redefine* the gift of prophecy as someone saying

something that God spontaneously brought into their mind. Importantly, they allow that the modern-day prophets in the church can get some of their message wrong.

This is clearly an attempt to justify the current practices of charismatic churches, rather than allow Scripture to correct current day practices. If it is true that modern day prophets can get some of their message wrong, then there is no way of telling a true prophet from a false prophet, as both will have error mixed into their messages. In addition, it must be asked what value a message from God holds, if any portion of the message can be in error. How would people know what in the message can be trusted? This is discussed again later.

Paul does give instructions for New Testament prophecy to be assessed (1 Cor. 14:29). However, this does not mean that genuine New Testament prophets were fallible and their messages were mixed with error. After all, the Bereans were commended for assessing Paul's gospel (Acts 17:11), but this did not imply that Paul's gospel could contain error. Rather, the need to assess New Testament prophecy highlights the danger when someone stands up in a church and claims to have a message directly from the Lord. When this happens, the church cannot blindly accept everything that is said. Is the person a genuine prophet with the gift, or mistaken? Is this a false prophet?

Arguments that tongues and prophecy were temporary gifts

There are a number of considerations that indicate that the gifts which were based on direct, divine revelation were temporary. Two main arguments are noted below.

(i) *Finality of Scripture*

The apostles exercised a unique authority in the early church. Their writings were to be read in the churches, just as the Old Testament Scriptures were read in the synagogues (Col. 4:16). The apostolic writings were equal in authority to the Old Testament Scriptures (see 2 Pet. 3:2; Eph. 2:20; 1 Thes. 4:2; 2 Cor. 13:3; 1 Thes. 2:13; 2 Thes. 3:6, 14), and formed the basis of the New Testament Scriptures. The apostolic office, authority and writings were therefore foundational to the formation of the New Testament church (Eph. 2:20). Ephesians 2:20 indicates, however, that the New Testament prophets also participated in laying this foundation, reinforcing the fact that the revelation they received from God was authoritative and trustworthy.

As noted earlier, the apostles were a unique group of people. They were eyewitnesses of the resurrection, which indicates that when the original apostles passed away, they could not, by definition, be replaced. When the apostles passed away, they did not pass on their authority to others. Rather, their authority is still exercised *through their writings*.

The implications of the passing away of the apostolic office is that the Scriptures are complete and final. The Bible is a closed book, and the church is not able to add anything to it.

If there were genuine prophets today, however, the Bible would not be a closed book. I have argued in this booklet that prophecy in both the Old Testament and the New Testament was inspired, direct revelation given by God. It was authoritative. If a genuine prophet spoke today, their words could be written down and added to Scripture. The same applies to the interpretation of tongues.

Tongues that were interpreted were exactly the same as prophecy (1 Cor. 14:5).

The fact that the Bible is a closed book, strongly implies that God is not giving any more direct, authoritative revelation. This means that the gifts of tongues and prophecy are no longer necessary, as the word of God is contained and complete in the Scriptures.

(ii) Sufficiency of Scripture

Scripture itself teaches that it is completely sufficient to guide Christians into all truth and to direct them in living lives that please God:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

The sufficiency of Scripture is a wonderful and reassuring truth to the believer. Everything we need to know about how to please God in every way and in every age is contained in the Scriptures. When we walk according to the law of the Lord, we will be blameless (Ps. 119:1). In other words, God will not require of us anything that He has not revealed in the Bible. Someone has said that the sufficiency of Scripture means that if God had to speak today he would say nothing different to what He says in the Bible.

The Scriptures guide believers through direct commands, laws, wisdom and general principles. These all need to be applied to our various situations, which forms the basis of decision-making.

It may be argued that the Bible is outdated, and Christians need more specific guidance from God in terms of direction for important decisions, or how to live in a modern age. This sentiment directly contradicts the sufficiency of Scripture. If we need additional revelation from God today in the form of speaking in tongues or prophecy, this must detract from the sufficiency of Scripture.

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture, then, strongly implies that direct revelation in the forms of tongues or prophecy have ceased.

But does the Spirit not still prompt believers?

I believe the Holy Spirit can and does prompt believers to do certain things, such as an act of kindness, or to witness to someone specific. There is a certain element of “revelation” in these promptings. An important difference between promptings and tongues and prophecy is that such promptings are certainly not infallible or authoritative. There is no real way to differentiate such promptings from our own thoughts and ideas, hence the believer should never treat them as authoritative or rely on them as a foundation for Christian living. In other words, promptings should not be classified as direct, authoritative revelation from God, as the gift of prophecy was.

In addition, “promptings” must always be subject to the general principles of God’s word. The Holy Spirit will never prompt people to sin, nor to short-circuit the instructions of Scripture. For example, the Bible gives principles on what type of a person a Christian should marry. A “prompting” to marry someone specific can never mean that a Christian can then neglect to assess a potential spouse according to these biblical principles.

What about the other gifts mentioned in the Bible?

The Bible mentions a variety of gifts (see for example 1 Cor. 12:4-11). Many of these gifts are valid and available today. For example, gifts of teaching, serving and giving are all available today (Rom. 12:6-8). The main point of this booklet is that the gifts of direct revelation from God, such as tongues and prophecy, were necessary for the early church while the Scriptures were being written. Once the Scriptures were available to the church, these gifts of direct revelation were no longer necessary.

What is the big deal?

As you are reading this booklet, you may still be thinking that this whole discussion is not such a big deal. If believers are “helped” by modern day prophecies, and feel empowered by speaking in tongues, of what harm can it be?

This last section then summarises some of what has been said before in this booklet and highlights the importance of the topic for the life of the church.

(i) Neglecting the word of God

Generally speaking, the Bible tends to be neglected when modern-day tongues and prophecy are practised. After all, the whole point of prophecy today is to give guidance that is updated and specific to our exact situation. This being the case, Scripture must take a back

seat as it may be deemed 'outdated' or not personal to one's situation.

This does not happen in every church that practises tongues and prophecy, but it is widespread in the charismatic groups of the church. I am aware of pastors and Christians who believe that if they speak in tongues, they do not need to read the Bible, as they are speaking the word of God.

(ii) False prophets

The New Testament and Paul warn of false prophets (Mk. 13:22; 1 Jn. 4:1). The question then, is how to distinguish a false prophet from the true? The biblical answer is that a true prophet speaks truth, and every prediction he or she makes comes to pass (see Deut. 18:21-22).

This is a major problem for the position that claims that New Testament prophets could get some of their message wrong. If a true prophet can deliver a message incorrectly and with errors, then there is no way to distinguish the false prophet from the true prophet, as both deliver a message with error in it.

This is extremely important for the modern church practices. To have people today claiming to speak on God's behalf with no consequences when what they say simply does not come to pass in any meaningful way, undermines the authority of the church. Can God not speak clearly and truthfully anymore? Is He limited by the instrument? It must be spiritually destructive if people in the church get used to either ignoring or treating lightly what is claimed to be "God speaking."

(iii) *Being manipulated!*

In the context of so-called prophets delivering specific messages from God, the risk of manipulation is very high. This is not just a theoretical possibility. Examples abound of people being manipulated by leaders who claim to be apostles or prophets. Immense emotional pressure is placed on the average church attendee, as they are told that to disobey the church leader is to disobey God.

The error that modern-day prophets can get their message wrong in places prevents these false prophets from being exposed. After all, true prophets, it is claimed, can get some of the message wrong.

(iv) *The value of a mixed message?*

As noted earlier, it must be asked of what value a message is from God if any portion of the message can be in error. As someone pointed out, a simple message “John should marry Ann” would be difficult to evaluate. Is it true, or did the prophet leave out the word “not?” That small word completely changes the meaning of the message. Or did the prophet get the name “John” wrong, and it should actually refer to “Don?” A gift that claims to speak a message from God but could contain error would be practically useless and morally confusing. Believers would be unsure whether to obey the message or not.

The sure foundation of the Bible

The closing message of this booklet must be to emphasise and highlight the sure foundation that the Scriptures provide in the life of a believer, as opposed to modern-day prophecies and claims of people speaking directly from God.

God has given us His very word, which is perfect and pure. It is written down in a book called the Bible. Every word in the original writings is inspired and trustworthy. It contains no error. It is completely sufficient for every believer of every age and in every situation to live a that pleases God.