

PROTOCOL

Using the Gift of Tongues at Neighborhood Church of Chico

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Introduction

The Triune God is constantly communicating His life and love to humankind in a variety of ways.¹ He desires that we live in deep, intimate relationship with Him in a dialogical exchange of understanding and affection. Toward that end, he has given the Church His written Word to inform, guide and correct the Church's teachings and practices (2 Tim 3:16-17). He has also given us His Spirit to direct us into all truth and empower us to boldly proclaim the gospel to others and express deepest thoughts and feelings to God (John 16:12; Rom 8:26-27).

One of the ways the Lord has chosen to grace the Church is through an unusual gift variously known as the 'gift of tongues,' the 'gift of languages,' *glossolalia* (from *glossa*, 'tongue' and *laleo*, 'to speak'), *xenolalia* (*xenos*, 'strange'), or *xenoglossy*.² The gift is mentioned in just two books of the New Testament, the book of Acts and the first letter to the Corinthians.³ In 1 Corinthians 12-14, the gift is referred to as a *charism*, one of several gifts (plural, *charismata*) with which His Spirit endows His Church.⁴ The role of all these gifts is to equip God's people to carry out His purposes on earth.

In part because of its unusual nature, the gift of tongues is frequently misunderstood and occasionally misused. Churches often resort to one of two extremes: unregulated use or

¹ See, for example, Job 33:13-22; Psalm 19:1-11 and Rom 1:18-20. God communicates Himself consummately in Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14; Heb 1:1-2) as revealed in Scripture (2 Tim 3:15-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21).

² These terms are all used interchangeably, with inconsistency, in the literature on the subject. Technically, it might be helpful to employ *glossolalia* in reference to Spirit inspired nonrational speech and *xenolalia* or *xenoglossy* in reference to speaking unlearned foreign languages. But the terms admit of considerable semantic ambiguity, so it is wise to not dogmatize the issue. For our purposes, the terms are used coextensively.

³ There is considerable debate in the scholarly literature as well as popular sources on the question of whether the relevant biblical passages (Acts 2, 10, and 19 and 1 Corinthians 12-14) are all referring to the phenomenon. Without going into technical details, we are of the opinion that these passages describe different expressions of the same general gift, *glossolalia* or the 'gift of tongues.'

⁴ See Romans 12:6-8, 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; Eph 4:11-12; and 1 Peter 4:10-11.

outright rejection. Because of these problems, and because church leaders are entrusted with the teaching and shepherding of local churches, the Board has developed this protocol to briefly explain our understanding of the gift and prescribe its use at Neighborhood Church. It is our hope that our attempt at a balanced, exegetically responsible, culturally appropriate, and spiritually sensitive treatment will please the Lord, honor His Word, and be a source of blessing and guidance to His people. In that hope we offer this protocol.

Our Understanding of the Gift

Based upon our understanding of the ‘gift of tongues,’ we confidently affirm the following:

1. *Glossolalia* is the supernatural ability to communicate in a language unknown to the speaker.
2. There appear to be two different variants of ‘tongues’ described in the New Testament. The first consists of recognizable foreign languages. In Acts 2, these ‘tongues’ were geographically localizable languages used by various ethnic groups throughout the circum-Mediterranean basin (vv. 5-11). This is the only incontrovertible occurrence of this variant of ‘tongues’ in scripture. In the other two instances of *glossolalia* identified in Acts (10:46 and 19:6), it is unclear whether the languages spoken were recognizable foreign languages or not, since this information is not supplied.

The second variant is described by Paul in the Corinthian correspondence (1 Corinthians 12-14). There is no indication at all that the phenomenon he describes as ‘tongues’ in these chapters is a known human language. Instead, it appears that this example of *glossolalia* is a kind of ecstatic utterance or nonrational speech (cf. 1 Cor 14:2-3, 14-15). Some scholars infer that Paul’s allusion to angelic tongues in 1 Corinthians 13:1 indicates that the gift of tongues includes languages of angelic as well as human origin. We, however, feel this conclusion is unwarranted, given the paucity of available evidence. What we can affirm is that *glossolalia* appears to consist of both known human languages and ecstatic speech of an unknown, and possibly nonrational, nature.

3. The gift of tongues appears to have multiple functions. The first and most apparent in the Acts narratives is to authenticate the filling of believers with the Holy Spirit. In this capacity, the gift served the early church as a witness both to unbelievers and believers with respect to the legitimacy of the extraordinary pneumatic encounter Christians had experienced (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:22; Acts 2:1-18; 10:44-46; 19:1-7).

A second use of *glossolalia* is described in 1 Corinthians 14:1-28. When coupled with interpretation, the gift of tongues can be a means of “strengthening” the church in much that same way that prophesy operates (1 Corinthians 14:26).

A third use may include private, personal edification. In this respect, the gift may function as a venue for personal worship and intercession apparently by providing the speaker with the ability to pray and sing with his/her spirit, perhaps bypassing his/her rational faculties (1 Corinthians 14:2,13-18).⁵

4. The biblical data indicate there are two settings for expressing the gift: public and private. Publically, the gift may be used in either an *evidential* or *instructional* way. An example of its evidential use is Acts 2, when the gift provided phenomenological validation that the disciples had had a genuine, Spirit-inspired experience (cf. Acts 2:13-17). An example of its instructional use is in 1 Corinthians 14 when, coupled with interpretation, it serves a didactic role in transmitting a revelatory message (1 Cor 14:5-6,27) The same chapter describes the private use of tongues. In this instance, *glossolalia* is employed in speaking to God as part of one’s devotional life (1 Cor 14:2,4-5,14-19,28).
5. The Apostle Paul evidently valued and exercised the gift himself. He spoke in tongues with apparent regularity (1 Corinthians 14:18) and expressed a desire that the Corinthian Christians each speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5). Although the gift has no value for edifying the body when used in a stand-alone capacity, it can be of definite value when coupled with an interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:1-28). Furthermore, *glossolalia* appears to have personal value as well. Paul declares that the one who uses the gift ‘edifies himself’ (1 Corinthians 14:4), something not said of any other gift, except perhaps, by inference, the gifts of service (7 Timothy 3:13) and leadership (Hebrews 13:17). From this we conclude that ‘tongues’ is a valuable gift that should be prized by the recipient.
6. Not all believers speak in tongues. This is the clear implication of Paul’s list of rhetorical questions in 1 Corinthians 12:27-30. While Paul wished each of the Corinthian believers to have the gift, it - like all others - is distributed among Christians according to the Spirit’s sovereign will (1 Corinthians 12:11). We may and should ask for this and his other gifts, but ultimately the Lord decides who receives which gift(s). Scripture never presents tongues, or any other gift, as a

⁵ It is worth noting that biblical scholars are divided on the issue of this third use of tongues. While there are numerous references in the Church Fathers to Christians speaking in previously unlearned human languages (cf. Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Hegemonious, Gregory of Nazianzen, Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, Augustine, and Leo the Great) the evidence for anything approaching a patristic consensus on nonrational speech is lacking. See, for example, Nathan Busenitz, “The Gift of Tongues: Comparing the Church Fathers with Contemporary Pentecostalism,” TMS 17/1 (Spring 2006), 61-78.

litmus test for spiritual maturity or health. Rather, it is afforded essentially the same status as the other gifts. One passage, in fact (1 Corinthians 12:27-31), seems to imply that *glossolalia* is numbered among the lesser (versus the ‘greater’) gifts. In another place, Paul explicitly states that one who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless the latter is able also to interpret, due to its limited stand-alone edification value (1 Corinthians 14:5,19). Therefore, we reject the teaching, held by certain churches, that those lacking the gift of tongues are unfit for Christian service, deficient in spiritual power, spiritually immature, less intimate with God, or, worse, unsaved, as both biblically unsupportable and potentially psychologically damaging.

7. The filling of believers with the Spirit in the book of Acts is sometimes accompanied by the phenomenon of tongues (Acts 2, 10, and 19) but not always so (Acts 4, 8, 9). And Jesus, despite having been filled by the Spirit, is never said to have spoken in tongues. Accordingly, our position is that a Christian may be filled with God’s Spirit yet lack the ability to speak in tongues.
8. Paul commanded that the use of *glossolalia* not be forbidden (1 Corinthians 14:39), a rather remarkable fact given the extent of its abuse in the Corinthian church. Instead, he prescribed, in 1 Corinthians 14:26-28, detailed guidelines the Corinthians were to follow to insure that everything be done in a “fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:40).⁶
9. The overriding issue determining the use of ‘tongues’ (as well as all other gifts) in public settings is the command that we love one another. This is the emphatic teaching of 1 Corinthians 12-14. If a Christian uses a gift in an unloving way, he runs the risk of confusing and hurting others. In such cases, a Spirit-given gift becomes a curse to the Church, rather than a blessing (see, for example, 1 Cor 14:23). It was because of this very legitimate concern that the Apostle Paul emphasized the primacy of love and delineated practical guidelines for using *glossolalia* in public settings, so as to minimize the opportunities for misuse and offence. His main point seems to be: “when in doubt, leave it out;” in other words, if a believer thinks that his use the gift might result in confusion,

⁶ It is important to understand these instructions within their socio-religious context. Paul is not attempting to dictate policy for the Church of every age and location. Rather, he seeking to correct specific abuses taking place within a local congregation in southern Greece during the first century. Moreover, this was a church in transition, before an appointed presbytery had been established. This is implied by the lack of any reference to elders and deacons in the extant Corinthian correspondence (cf. Phil 1:1). Thus, Paul regarded it as part of his apostolic responsibility to prescribe for the church what would ordinarily fall within the purview of the local church leadership: the orderly structure of their worship gatherings. Accordingly, Paul laid out guidelines to correct the abuses yet preserve the legitimate exercise of tongues. These considerations must qualify any attempt on our part to understand Paul’s directions in 1 Cor 12-14 as normative and trans-cultural guidelines for all churches at all times. Having said that, however, we believe these guidelines do contain a number of important principles that are universally applicable.

misunderstanding, or division, the law of love requires he abstain from using it in that particular setting (1 Cor 14:28). This guideline is consistent with the prescriptions the Apostle gives elsewhere for regulating Christian behavior (Rom 14:13-21; 1 Cor 8:9-13).

Taken together, the above observations lead us to conclude that we are to esteem tongues as a valuable gift and not forbid its exercise. At the same time, we must have a sober assessment of the confusion and hurt that can result from its improper use. So, a responsible approach requires that the church develop practical guidelines regulating its use consistent with both Biblical instruction and local considerations.

Practical Guidelines

Based upon our understanding of the gift and of the unique variables comprising our historical, cultural, and ecclesial setting, we prescribe the following guidelines for the use of ‘tongues’ at Neighborhood Church.

1. We will uphold the legitimacy and desirability of *glossolalia* as part of our normal teaching diet, seeking to assign it the same relative importance given in scripture, neither overemphasizing nor underemphasizing it. Rather, we will teach that it is a valuable gift the Spirit gives to certain Christians, to be stewarded carefully and used wisely for personal edification and the good of others.
2. We will quickly correct any aberrant or divisive teaching on the subject. This includes, but is not limited to, any suggestion that the gift is required for salvation, that it is *the* evidence of being filled with the Spirit, and that all Christians ought to speak in tongues. Such distortions can put God’s people in great bondage by creating fear, envy, pride, and confusion. For these reasons, it is important that false teachings not be allowed to circulate unchallenged but be dealt with lovingly, biblically, and decisively.
3. We encourage the use of tongues in private devotional practice for those who have the gift and benefit from its use.
4. We encourage its use in small, informal gatherings and formal small group settings when the following two conditions are met: first, the speaker is well known to the other members of the gathering/group, and, second, the group is theologically receptive to the gift’s exercise. The presence of these two conditions – relational credibility and a favorable theological predisposition – make it possible to use the gift in a way that builds up and blesses others in love. To use *glossolalia* when these conditions are absent would be unloving and therefore wrong.

5. We encourage its *private* use in our public worship services in a devotional capacity during our times of singing and prayer. We want those who have the gift to feel great freedom using it to enhance their worship experience. We ask, however, that they keep their volume low so as not to disturb or interrupt the worship of others around them. This is what love does: it puts the needs of others above its own preferences (cf. Phil 2:3-4). If the speaker is too loud, he/she runs the risk of becoming precisely the kind of ‘resounding gong or clanging cymbal’ Paul warns against in 1 Corinthians 13:1.
6. Generally speaking, we will not encourage the *public* use of tongues in our Sunday services. This is because we have other settings for such use (informal gatherings, small groups, prayer meetings, etc.) and, on any given Sunday, we have large numbers of Christian and non-Christian guests for whom tongues speaking is alien and off-putting. Out of love for them, we will therefore limit our freedom by normally restricting tongues speaking in these venues to quiet devotional use.

However, this is not an absolute prohibition on the public use of tongues in its revelatory capacity. If a member of the church strongly believes the Lord has given him/her a *glossalalic* message for the body, that person should approach the facilitator and share the message. The facilitator will ask if an interpretation has also been given. Depending on the response and other factors, the facilitator will then determine whether the message will be shared with the church.

The intent of these guidelines is not in any way to ‘quench the Spirit’ (1 Thess 5:19). On the contrary, it is to prescribe ways for God’s good gifts to be used in ways that optimally benefit the church while taking seriously the biblical injunction to love each other in tangible, even costly, ways.

Conclusion

Historically, the gift of tongues has generated inordinate attention and emotion. This was true in Apostolic times; it is true today. It is lamentably ironic that a gift given to promote intimacy with God and blessing for the church should become the locus of such misunderstanding and pain. Unfortunately, too many of God’s good gifts have been co-opted by the enemy to foment division within the Church: the Scriptures, baptism, Holy Communion, healing, confession, prophesy... the list goes on. The proper response in all these instances is not to jump to the opposite extreme and forbid their use, but rather to exercise the requisite care to understand and steward these precious gifts in a way that is biblically responsible, intellectually defensible, and relationally honoring.

We have tried to do that in this protocol. To the extent that we have failed, we ask your forbearance and grace. To the extent that we have succeeded, we give thanks to God and pray that this and all his gifts may, at Neighborhood Church and throughout the world, come to fulfill the purpose for which they are ultimately given: to bring honor and glory and blessing to the One who deserves our wonder, devotion, and unrestrained obedience and trust, the Lord Jesus Christ. 'To him be the glory forever!' (Rom 11:36)

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