

How This Common Idol Hinders Many Christians From Speaking in Tongues

There's no getting around the sad fact that charismatic Christians, especially those who speak in tongues, are often viewed as theological lightweights.

"If only you had more interest in biblical truths," some are inclined to say, "you wouldn't spend so much time praying in gibberish that neither you nor anyone else can understand. It seems you are so infatuated with spiritual experience that you disregard or rarely worry about what the Bible actually says."

I hope you can see how misguided this is. My defense of the legitimacy of tongues-speech is rooted in and tethered to Scripture. If it isn't, you should ignore what I say. I highly prize the mind and rigorous theological reflection, and this is in no way threatened or compromised by the fact that I daily pray and praise God in tongues. Here I hope to dispel the notion that speaking in tongues is a sign of anti-intellectualism or that people are afraid of deep theological thinking.

Mental Idolatry

While we must engage intellectually with all that Scripture says, we must at the same time be careful to resist what I call idolatry of the mind. I'm not suggesting the mind isn't essential for Christian living. The mind is not our enemy. Our minds are to be constantly renewed (Rom. 12:1–2). It is through our minds that we understand who God is.

There is no such thing as "mindless" Christianity. In fact, if you didn't make use of your mind, you would have no idea what I'm saying right now or any capacity to evaluate whether it is

true or false! And when people minimize the mind or treat it as a threat to true spirituality, they often end up in either godless living or a cult, or both. So let me explain what I mean by “idolatry of the mind.”

What I have in mind is the approach to Christian spirituality that argues nothing is of value unless it can be cognitively understood. And many of you are saying right now, “Yeah, that’s right.”

Well, no, it isn’t.

Again, many opponents of the gift of tongues insist that nothing that does not pass through the cerebral cortex of the brain is of value to build us up spiritually into the image of Jesus. Any notion that the Holy Spirit might engage with the human spirit directly, bypassing our cognitive thought processes, is anathema to most evangelicals. If it is to be spiritually profitable, it must be intelligible.

In one sense, they have a very good point. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is concerned with what happens in the corporate gathering of the local church. When all God’s people in a particular local congregation are gathered together, everything should be intelligible in order that all may be edified or built up. This is why Paul insists that if tongues manifest in the corporate gathering, there must be interpretation. He never denies that something good and helpful is happening in the life of the person speaking in tongues. But he rightly points out that it is entirely unhelpful for others if they don’t understand what you are saying.

But there is a vast difference between the necessity of intelligibility for the sake of the entire body of Christ, and whether a Christian can be edified, blessed and built up spiritually while speaking in uninterpreted tongues privately. Paul very clearly believed that tongues in the corporate

assembly must be intelligible or interpreted for the sake of others who are listening. But he is equally clear that profound spiritual fruit is possible in the life of the individual believer when that person prays in tongues privately, when there is no interpretation. Several things in 1 Corinthians 14 lead me to this conclusion.

First of all, in 1 Corinthians 14:2 (ESV), Paul writes, "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit." The lack of understanding applies not only to those listening but also to the person speaking in tongues. Yet despite this lack of cognitive understanding of what is being said, the person "utters mysteries in the Spirit," and these utterances are obviously of benefit to the believer's prayer life. If they weren't, Paul would have prohibited the practice, which he didn't.

Second, Paul says the person who speaks in tongues is truly praying to God (v. 14), praising or worshipping God (v. 15), and thanking God (v. 16). But he also says this can be done while his "mind" is all the while "unfruitful" (v. 14). By the word "unfruitful," he means either "I don't understand what I am saying" or "Other people don't understand what I'm saying" or perhaps both. There is a strong likelihood that Paul is referring to his own comprehension or lack thereof. After all, he says, "My mind is unfruitful"—not "Your mind is unfruitful" or "Their minds are unfruitful." In other words, Paul doesn't understand what he is praying or how he is giving thanks or in what manner he is worshipping. But praying, praising and giving thanks are most certainly taking place!

The immediate response of many is to say: "Well, if one's mind is unfruitful, if one doesn't understand what one is saying, then it is worthless. Why would anyone find benefit or blessing in something he doesn't understand? Surely Paul's response to his mind being 'unfruitful' is to stop speaking in tongues altogether. Shut it down. Forbid it."

But that isn't Paul's conclusion. No sooner does he say his "mind is unfruitful" than he makes known his determined resolve: "I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also" (1 Cor. 14:15). We know Paul is referring to praying and singing in tongues because in the next verse he describes giving thanks with one's spirit as unintelligible to those who may visit the church meeting.

Many Christians are uncomfortable with reading Paul this way. They insist that if one's mind is unfruitful—that is to say, if one's mind is not engaged in such a way that the believer can rationally and cognitively grasp what is occurring—the experience, whatever its nature may be, is useless, perhaps even dangerous. Worse still, it might even be demonic. After all, if our minds are not engaged, what safeguards do we have against the encroachment of heresy? Subjectivism of this sort will serve only to diminish the centrality of Scripture in the life of the believing community.

I strongly disagree. If Paul had been fearful of transrational experience, would not his next step be to repudiate the use of tongues altogether, or at minimum to warn us of its dangers? After all, what possible benefit can there be in a spiritual experience that one's mind can't comprehend? At the very least, we should expect Paul to say something to minimize its importance so as to render it trite, at least in comparison with other gifts. But he does no such thing.

A brief word is in order concerning my use of the word "transrational." It may have caught some of you by surprise. First, let me be perfectly clear: there is nothing beneficial in being irrational. To be irrational is to be illogical or simply wrong in the conclusions one reaches or the beliefs one holds.

Christianity as a whole is in many ways mysterious in the sense that it exceeds the limits of our finite minds. We

simply don't perfectly and comprehensively understand everything. Only God does. Paul said as much in 1 Corinthians 13:12 when he conceded that "for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

But one does not have to know something exhaustively to know something is true. Our knowledge can be accurate, so far as it goes, without being comprehensive. I know the truth of the incarnation, that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14a). But I by no means understand all the immeasurable implications of this or even how it is possible for an infinite spiritual being to become a finite human being while remaining both infinite and spiritual.

So when I speak of something being transrational, I simply mean certain truths or experiences transcend our limited and altogether human intellectual capacity. They don't contradict or exclude anything else revealed in Scripture. But they certainly exceed it. And my point is that there can be certain spiritual experiences that we can't fathom or reduce to a nice, neat theological formula, yet they are profoundly beneficial and edifying in ways we don't fully understand. This is certainly the case when it comes to speaking in tongues in one's private prayer closet.

Tongues in Action

In Romans 8:26–27, Paul refers to an unusual experience of every believer in which the Holy Spirit "helps us in our weakness." Clearly the apostle has in view a phenomenon that is not intelligible to us. He says that since we don't know what to pray for as we ought, "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26b). If something is happening in us or on our behalf through the Spirit in such a way that it cannot be put into words, then clearly, it is unintelligible. Words entail intelligibility. But this ministry of the Spirit either bypasses or in some

manner exceeds our vocabulary and mental grasp. And yet it is obviously of tremendous spiritual value.

If tongues is primarily a form of prayer in words we don't understand, how can it be helpful to us in our relationship with God? I certainly understand and appreciate the concern that gives rise to this question. Often when I begin to pray or sing in tongues, I find myself asking the same question over and over again: "God, I have no idea what I'm saying. Do You? I suppose I can only trust that my utterances make perfectly good sense to You. You are, after all, omniscient!"

People ask me this question about tongues more often than most others. They can make sense of why they pray in their native language. They know what they need and have no problem putting it into words that both they and others would comprehend. But when people are praying in tongues, they have no idea what the content of that speech is. Or do they?

The only way I know to answer this question is to describe my own practice. I don't have explicit biblical support for this, as if to say Paul or some other New Testament author says the same thing in some epistle. But given what I know of tongues and the nature of God, I think I'm on solid ground.

Before I pray in tongues, I rehearse in my mind—in English—the many burdens on my heart. I identify people by name. I speak to myself of their needs and the love I have for them. If my heart is weighed down with the suffering and afflictions of people in my church, I try to mentally articulate them, and even on occasion speak them aloud. Of course, the first thing I do is then to pray in English. I may have a long list written down from which I operate. In any case, I pray as clearly and passionately as I can for as long as I can. But almost invariably I run out of energy. I run out of words. I run out of ways to give expression to their needs and my needs. I run directly into the reality Paul mentions in Romans 8:26—I do not know what to pray for as I ought. I suspect that

everyone reading this, even those who are opposed to tongues in the church today, knows precisely what that feels like. It is frustrating. I often am overwhelmed with a sense of failure and both bodily and emotional weakness. What am I to do?

On the one hand, I put my trust and confidence in what Paul then says in Romans 8. He assures us all that the Holy Spirit happily compensates for our shortcomings and intercedes on our behalf with the Father, perfectly articulating in our place the needs we struggled to find words to express. Praise God for this glorious promise.

But I also respond to this problem by praying in tongues. Here is an example of what I typically say and do:

Heavenly Father, I come to You in the name of Jesus, Your Son and my Savior, and I do so in the power of the Holy Spirit. And I confess that I'm at my wit's end. I don't have anything left in my spiritual or intellectual tank. I've used all the words I know. But I believe I need to continue to pray for this person or that circumstance. So Father, I am going to trust the Holy Spirit to grant me words of a heavenly (or angelic) language that perfectly embody and express the inarticulate groanings and shortcomings of my heart. Thank You, Father, for hearing me in words of this heavenly language.

That's when I launch into prayer in tongues. It doesn't matter how long or short it may be. But in most cases it extends for a considerable period of time. In fact, almost without exception, I find myself praying well beyond the limits of what I could say if I were speaking only in English. I will often be heard (unintentionally) praying in tongues while working at other tasks. And I never seem to run out of physical or spiritual energy to do so.

Tongues is truly energizing. I feel exhilarated and refreshed instead of exhausted and depleted. Such is the power of the

Holy Spirit when we pray in and through Him and the gift He has bestowed.

In addition, 1 Corinthians 14:14-17 should forever put to rest any concern about the substantive and spiritually beneficial blessing that comes from speaking words that one's own mind does not comprehend. Here Paul states without equivocation his determination to both pray in tongues and pray in the language that he and anyone listening could understand. The former he calls praying "with my spirit" and the latter praying "with my mind." He uses the word "mind" to convey the idea that he and others could understand what was being said. It's important, says Paul, that we not only pray with the spirit (that is, in tongues), but also with the mind.

Therefore, when you "give thanks" with your spirit in an uninterpreted tongue, you are truly giving thanks! There is substantive content to your words despite the fact that neither you nor the outsider knows what is being said. When you speak or sing in tongues in your private devotional life, you are truly expressing your appreciation to God. Of course, should other people hear you do this in the absence of interpretation, they won't benefit from it. That would require interpretation.

But the fact that they can't be built up doesn't mean you can't. You can, and you are. Speaking and singing in tongues in private, even without interpretation, is real communication, genuine worship and authentic gratitude to God.
{eoa}

Sam Storms is the senior pastor of Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City. He is also an author, a former professor and the founder of Enjoying God Ministries.

CHARISMA is the only magazine dedicated to reporting on what the Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of believers around the world. If you are thirsty for more of God's presence and His

Holy Spirit, subscribe to CHARISMA and join a family of believers that choose to live life in the Spirit. [CLICK HERE](#) for a special offer.