

Is the Interpretation of Tongues the Same as Prophecy?

About 35 years ago, I was a brand-new believer in Christ. A Christian friend invited me to a church in Nashville, Tennessee. The place must have held at least 1,000 people and the worship was amazing. I had never experienced anything like it before.

It was during a pause in the worship that a woman spoke out in a beautiful language and I was overwhelmed by the sound of it. It was totally foreign to me but the effect on my heart was wonderful.

As she finished, one of the church leaders went to the microphone and said, "That's not a message for us. She is just glorifying God." I was thinking, "whatever that was it was a beautiful thing." Soon after, worship began again followed by a time of prayer during which I received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. It was an awesome day!

I have never forgotten that time of worship nor the woman who gave the utterance nor have I forgotten the church leader's response. I have pondered this for many years and it has brought me to a certain understanding about prophecy, tongues and interpretation.

I don't know whether or not the church leader's assessment on that particular Sunday in Nashville is the same position held across the Pentecostal world. However, I believe it is a widely held understanding that the utterance of unknown tongues in a worship service should be followed by a message from God as another form of prophecy.

In my experience, this has been the case. Yet, as the dear lady spoke out in tongues back in my very early experience, it was described as "glorifying God" and "not for us." Now, I beg

to respectfully differ.

Could it be that the utterance in tongues is meant to be just that, glorifying God or at least something directed to God? Looking at the Scriptures, there is a clear difference in prophecy and the utterance of unknown tongues. What I felt just hearing that first utterance of tongues would likely have been even more amazing if the congregation had been told what she was saying to God. The people would surely have been edified.

In 1 Corinthians 14:2 we read, "For he who speaks in an unknown tongue *does not speak to men, but to God*. For no one understands him, although in the spirit, he speaks mysteries" (emphasis added). Compare this to 1 Corinthians 14:3: "But he who prophesies *speaks to men* for their edification and exhortation and comfort" (emphasis added). In the same chapter, verse 5 says that the utterance of unknown tongues brings edification to the church when it is interpreted but there is no implication that tongues is the same as prophecy.

Consider also how the first utterance of unknown tongues was described on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2:11, the Cretans and Arabs said, "We hear them speaking in our own languages *the mighty works of God*" (emphasis added). The results included amazement and perplexity among the hearers. Those who had just been baptized in the Holy Spirit were *magnifying God for His glorious works!*

The characterization of the utterance of tongues as "a message in tongues" can be misleading. According to the Scripture, if it is a message, it is a communication *to God*. Whether it is prayer, glorification, praise, magnification or something similar, it is *directed to God*. We have been taught (or not) that what should follow an utterance in tongues is actually a prophecy, something spoken to people, when in fact, the interpretation should reveal something spoken to God.

It is possible that the interpretation is available (within the congregation) but it is not given because it is not recognized by the potential interpreter. An utterance in tongues is given and those who can interpret feel a praise rising in their heart but do not give it. What place does it have? They have not been taught to recognize it as the interpretation. They, like everyone else, are waiting for a prophecy.

It is also entirely possible that someone who is accustomed to prophesying will speak out in tongues, in prayer, perhaps, and then give a prophecy. I believe this happens and is not necessarily out of order. Really, the topic here is not identifying that which is out of order but that which is not being revealed since this tongue is likely a prayer in tongues and is not required to be interpreted but just exuberant prayer in tongues.

It is not inaccurate to refer to the utterance in "unknown tongues" as a message in tongues. That is accurate as long as we recognize who the message is directed to, and that would be God. Prophecy is God speaking to men. The utterance in tongues is man speaking to God.

Though this may seem minor to us it could be of great significance to God. We are not given much information about all nine gifts of the Holy Spirit but we are told to "Follow after love and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy" (1 Corinthians 14:1). All the gifts of the Holy Spirit are important and serve a very needful purpose in the body of Christ.

Another important aspect, aside from the accurate function of one of the Holy Spirit's gifts, is the release of those who have, or who could "move in," the interpretation of tongues. Someone who gives utterances in tongues for the edification of the body is instructed to "pray that they might interpret." This further emphasizes the importance of accuracy

since we are told this is worthy of our prayers and requests to God that this gift be ministered properly.

Nevertheless, if one does give utterances in tongues for the benefit of the body of Christ but is under the impression that the interpretation should be prophetic, it is likely they will not be open to an interpretation that is directed to God. Without knowing the interpretation should be something directed to God, they may be conflicted. God is not the author of confusion but it is entirely likely that an interpreter will miss the accurate interpretation if prophecy is expected.

In conclusion, prophecy is God speaking to man. An utterance in tongues given during corporate worship is a mystery spoken to God that needs interpretation. Accurate interpretation glorifies God and brings a deeper dimension to our corporate worship. Let us pray that the body of Christ will be blessed with this wonderful gift in greater clarity.

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