

CHAPTER 5

THE GIFT OF TONGUES IN THE ASSEMBLY

1 Corinthians 12

Paul presents church truth in 1 Corinthians 12 in a most helpful and practical way. The assembly is said to be the body of Christ, with each member functioning according to the working of a sovereign God. It is imperative that this body maintain a state of health. When each believer is edified, the body will be healthy. (Compare Colossians 1:28, which emphasizes that “every” member must be healthy!) When the body is healthy, the life of Christ will be manifested, and God will be glorified as He displays Himself in and by means of the local assembly.

In making provision for the health and proper functioning of the body, God has gifted each and every believer according to His sovereign choice and will (1 Corinthians 12:7,11). First Corinthians 12:8-10 gives a list of gifts classified into three categories. This deliberate grouping into three classes is not obvious

in the English text, but it is explicit in the Greek. The word translated “another” in verses 8-10 is most often the word *allos*, but the word *heteros* is used twice (in verses 9 and 10). *Heteros* is used in these verses to introduce a new and *different* class or grouping. *Allos* merely gives subdivisions of the *same* class. The gifts are classified in this way:

1 Corinthians 12:8-10

Category 1

Verse 8

to one	the word of wisdom
to another (<i>allos</i>)	the word of knowledge

Category 2

Verses 9-10

to another (<i>heteros</i>)	faith
to another (<i>allos</i>)	gifts of healing
to another (<i>allos</i>)	working of miracles
to another (<i>allos</i>)	prophecy
to another (<i>allos</i>)	discerning of spirits

Category 3

Verse 10

to another (<i>heteros</i>)	kinds of tongues
to another (<i>allos</i>)	interpretation of tongues

Tongues are listed in this third category of gifts. Thus the gift of tongues is grouped together with the gift of interpretation. The two go together. The one gift demands the other. Where there are tongues there must also be the interpretation of tongues (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:13, 27-28).

Consider first the gift of tongues. Verse 10 lists this gift and uses the expression “kinds of tongues” (*genē glōssōn*). This same expression is used in verse 28, “*diversities* [kinds] of tongues.” The word “kinds” means “classes” and this indicates that tongues are *classified* into different kinds. Any linguist knows that there are many classes or kinds of languages. In fact, 1 Corinthians 14:10 makes mention of this very fact: “There are, it may be, so many *kinds* [*genē*] of voices in the world.”

On the day of Pentecost it was evident that there were various *kinds of tongues* being spoken (Acts 2:7-11). Just as there are different *kinds* of reptiles (turtles, snakes, lizards, crocodiles, etc.) and yet they are all reptiles, so there are different *kinds* of tongues (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, etc.) and yet they are all languages.

The complementary gift listed in verse 10 is “the interpretation of tongues” (*hermēneia glōssōn*). The word translated “interpretation” is the Greek word from which comes the English word “hermeneutics,” the art and science of *interpreting* the Scriptures (explaining, giving the sense, giving the meaning). When someone in the assembly spoke in a tongue, the immedi-

ate response would be something like this, "What does it mean? Please explain. I do not understand!" In other words, *interpretation necessitates meaning!*

Meaningless utterances cannot be interpreted. One cannot give the meaning of something that has no meaning. The Scriptures *can* be interpreted because the words and sentences mean something! It is impossible to give sense to "nonsense syllables." As an example, consider these two well-known Christmas carols:

"Gloria in Excelsis Deo"
 ("Angels We Have Heard on High")
 "FA LA LA LA LA, LA LA LA LA"
 ("Deck the Halls")

The first of these can be *interpreted*. It means, "Glory to God in the highest!" The second cannot be interpreted. It is meaningless. It is merely the emotional expression of a person who is *jolly*.

So then, the fact that tongues necessitate interpretation indicates that tongues were not something meaningless. It was the job of the interpreter to *give the meaning*.

Related to this noun is a verb (*hermeneuō*) which means "to interpret." It is often used in the sense of *translation* from one language to another (see John 1:38,42; 9:7; Hebrews 7:2).

Another listing of gifts is found in 1 Corinthians 12:28-29. Here the gifts are listed according to their edificational priority (some gifts edify the assembly more than others):

First—Apostles)
Second—Prophets) *Foundational Gifts—Ephesians 2:20*
Third—Teachers)

Last on the list—“*kinds of tongues*”

In 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 a series of questions is asked, and Paul, in a helpful way, answers his own questions. The Greek construction *demand*s a negative answer to each of these questions. Are all apostles? The answer implied in the text is “*No [me]!*” Only a few specially chosen men were gifted and sent forth as apostles. Are all prophets? *No!* Only some were gifted as prophets. Are all teachers? *No!* Are all workers of miracles? *No!* Have all the gifts of healing? *No!* Do all speak with tongues? *No!*

Not every believer was gifted with the God-given ability to speak with tongues. Some, *not all*, had this gift! Do all interpret? *No!* This word “interpret” is a strengthened form of the word which was discussed in verse 10. Here in verse 30 is the word “hermeneutic” with a prefixed preposition (*dia*) which serves to strengthen the verb. Thus the word *diermēneuō* means “to interpret fully, to thoroughly give the meaning of what is said.” Thayer gives for one of the meanings of this verb, “to translate into one’s native language.”⁵ Such a usage is found in Acts 9:36 (NASV): “there was a certain disciple named Tabitha (which translated in

Greek is called Dorcas).”

“To interpret” means “to give the meaning of what is said.” When something is said in a foreign language, then the *interpretation* takes the form of a translation, because in order to give the meaning of a foreign language, one must translate. Thus when a foreign missionary who knows no English comes to a church to speak, he must be accompanied by an *interpreter*, and this interpreter actually functions as a *translator*.