

THE GIFT OF SPEECH

By Steve Zeisler

The ability to communicate by means of speech is perhaps the most dramatic difference between human beings and other life forms. This God-given gift of speech may reflect in the deepest sense how human beings are made in God's image. God spoke, and heaven and earth came into being. And in the Logos, Jesus himself, God communicated with man.

This morning, we will consider some themes which flow from this ability to communicate through language as we study chapter 14 of the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Last Thursday, I attended my daughter's graduation from Junior High School. During that ceremony, two eighth graders used the time-honored vehicle of the graduation speech to share their thoughts with the assembly in a helpful and engaging way. In closing the proceedings, the principal in a solemn voice declared that the junior highers, having completed their requirements, henceforth were entitled to be known as high schoolers. I was struck by the fact that by means of a single word, the principal was empowered to make ninth graders out of kids who had formerly been eighth graders.

Words can be very powerful indeed, as we will see in this passage from 1 Corinthians. I will begin by reading some passages from Scripture which illustrate just how powerful a tool is speech.

And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.

In the beginning was the Word (or speech), and the speech was with God, and the speech was God.

And being roused, He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still.'

He cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' And he who had died came forth.

For the word of the Lord has exploded forth from you not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, but also in every place.

And after these things I looked and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me said, 'Come up here and I will show you what must take place after these things.'

'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My word will never pass away.'

Over and over throughout the Scriptures, it is the testimony of the word of God and of those who know God that his speech and our ability to declare his truth have profound, eternal and life-changing consequences.

PERCEPTIVE LISTENERS

I have been further sensitized to these things by observation of events in my home. The youngest of our three children has a communication handicap. He is very bright little boy with a lot to say, but he lacks the ability to say it well. Perhaps the best known example of this kind of disability is Helen Keller, a woman with a genius IQ who was born both blind and deaf. For years she was unable to communicate with others. At last, a gifted communicator drew her out and she was able to declare what was going on inside of her. Understanding can

take place then, when one speaks clearly, when another has a special ability to perceive speech that would otherwise be unclear, or both. Whether or not we become more profound in our ability to say what we want to say, or whether there is a listener who is profoundly able to understand and hear what we say, in either case communication takes place and it is a wonderful thing to experience.

All of that is by way of introduction to 1 Corinthians 14, which tells of the significance of Christians meeting together and saying what is true to God and to one another.

Pursue love, yet earnestly desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching? Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.

TONGUES AND PROPHECYING

There are two kinds of verbal communication which Paul refers to in this section-tongues and prophesying. In one of them the wonder of communication takes place because the listener extraordinarily extends himself to understand what is being said. In other words, God will hear the unintelligible speech of the person speaking in tongues who himself, as we will see in a moment, does not know what he is saying. His spirit within is causing him to utter praise to God but he does not know the content of it, nor does anyone else. Yet the Lord God by his perceptive listening receives praise from that individual, and the speaker in tongues (like Helen Keller) experiences the joy that comes with being cared for and understood.

The other kind of speech which Paul refers to is rational speech, called prophesying. This involves taking the time to thoughtfully understand the word of God and declaring what it says in such a way that it benefits the hearers. Both prophesying and tongues are forms of communication-one because the communicator is gifted at saying what he or she wants to say; the other because the listener, the Lord God himself, invests himself in creating understanding where otherwise there was only unintelligibility.

IN CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY

The subject of tongues can be very controversial among Christians. It is controversial among some in this church. Some are antagonistic towards tongues; others think it is more important than it is. It is critical to note that the entire section from chapter 11 through the end of chapter 14 covers the subject of Christians meeting together to worship. This has an important bearing on the issue of tongues. What Paul is talking about here is what should happen when Christians come together to use their spiritual gifts, though in verse 22, tongues spoken in a non-Christian setting-especially among Jews-are recognized as capable of arresting attention and quickening faith. Scripture does not promote any tongues-speaking in private.

Another misunderstanding concerns the level of control an individual has on the use of his gifts. Tongues and prophesying are on occasion thought of as an ecstatic, overwhelming experience, when one is spiritually taken over and must say what is given him to say. This is not in view here either. It is clear that Paul is saying that

any gift of the Spirit (specifically tongues and prophesying here) can be controlled by the individual. You can either speak in tongues or not. You can be told to take your turn and control whatever you have to say. The same is true of prophecy. So you do not have to say anything. If you have a gift, it is your choice whether to exercise it in a particular setting or not. We do not see here any reference to being overwhelmed by some experience or other.

THE NATURE OF TONGUES

What then does the gift of tongues consist of? Verse 2 says that the one who speaks in a tongue "does not speak to men, but to God." The content of the address given in tongues by a Christian should be toward God, not toward men. I know of settings in which individuals have uttered in Christian meetings a series of syllables which no one present understood, then sat down and someone else interpreted what was said in words like this: "Thus saith the Lord to the congregation assembled here: someone in this room has a secret sin and needs to come forward now and confess it." These are not an expression of the biblical gift of tongues and interpretation. Tongues is not a means by which God gives messages to us. Rather, tongues direct praise to God.

If someone here were to speak in tongues in the biblical sense, and someone else were to interpret what had been said, I suspect it would be something like we find in the wonderful and awe-inspiring words of Psalm 111. On the Day of Pentecost, those who spoke in tongues declared the mighty works of God, as that Psalm declares. Verse 17 says that those who speak in tongues "give thanks" to God. Tongues are addressed to God, then.

A second observation we should make about tongues is, as verse 2 declares, that the one who speaks in tongues speaks "mysteries," and as verse 14 says, the one who speaks in tongues does not have his mind participate in the experience. The impression given there is that something inside your spirit begins to express itself verbally in praise, adoration and thanksgiving toward God and you do not know what it is you are saying. That is why Paul tells those speaking in tongues that they should pray for the ability to interpret their own speech, because eventually they could teach their own minds by hearing what their spirit had said to God. It is edifying to experience that your spirit will begin to use your tongue to express praise to God. But tongues-speaking does not engage the mind. You do not know what you are saying.

Romans 8 tells us that there are times when we do not know what to pray but that the Spirit prays for us. There, Paul is describing the experience of the Holy Spirit praising in "groanings too deep for words." I submit that that cannot be another description for tongues because tongues is exactly words, words that are not known to you that your spirit expresses, words that someone else with the gift of interpretation could interpret. But a step deeper than that is the Holy Spirit who prays inside of us because we do not know how to put into any kind of words, tongues or English, what we want to say to God. Thus, we note that prayer which is not understood by us is possible, offered either by our human spirit (tongues) or by the Holy spirit (beyond words).

A RECOGNIZABLE HUMAN LANGUAGE?

One of the questions that comes up is whether or not those who speak in tongues must do so in a language known to human beings. Is it a requirement that the gift of tongues be an extant human language? That is a tough interpretive call. There are good reasons to answer this question in the affirmative. Clearly, known languages are in view in Acts 2, the only place where tongues is described. Then, the Parthians, Medes, etc., understood what was being uttered in their home dialect. In verse 10, Paul says that there are "a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning." Here, the apostle indicates that some kind of human language is what he thought about when tongues were mentioned.

The circumstances in Corinth differ somewhat from those in Acts 2, however. It is clear that tongues were being used legitimately (with interpretation) in Corinth when no one within earshot understood them at all. The word "barbarian" used here was a derisive term coined by Greek conquerors to describe the nonsensical

syllables that the languages of conquered peoples contained. Some tongues (with interpretation) are deemed legitimate therefore, although they are unintelligible to everyone present.

Verse 12:

So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church. Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also. [The phrase "with the spirit," means "in tongues." "I shall pray with the spirit unintelligibly to myself, but I will also pray with the mind. I shall sing unintelligibly but I shall also sing with the mind."] Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

EDIFICATION

The last point I want to make about tongues is that their use should be edifying. However, without interpretation the only person edified is the speaker. Paul has already said that spiritual gifts should be for the common good. That is why he asks in verse 6, "if I come to you speaking in tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?" The thrust of his thinking here is to start with tongues, but he wants to get to a situation where the circle is broadened and where others can be included and encouraged. It is edifying of oneself to speak in tongues but that is not very important. The longing is that spiritual gifts should do others good also. If you speak in tongues, pray to interpret so that your mind can join your spirit in being edified. If others are present, interpretation is required so that all may benefit.

PROPHESYING

What then is prophesying? This is a greater gift than that of tongues. Verse 2: "desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy"; verse 5: "Now I wish...even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues,..." Verse 3 says that prophesying is for "edification and exhortation and consolation." Edification makes people more capable and less dependent than they were before. If we were to use a human arm to illustrate these three effects, we could say that edification would strengthen the arm. Where once there was weakness and incapacity, now there is strength and capacity. The second quality, "encouragement," has the same root as the Greek word *paraclete*, which is used of the Holy Spirit; it means to come alongside someone. Those who need encouragement are faltering, lonely or confused. They need someone to come along and put an arm around them, someone to walk alongside them and encourage them. "Consolation" is ministry to those who are broken, who have lost hope. There we might picture someone in the embrace of another, with both arms surrounding them to console them.

Paul is saying that this ability to declare the truth about God in such a way that it is exactly to the point of what someone needs to know, that it engages their thinking, has the effect of giving life to people in the form of edification, encouragement, or consolation. It is "other"-centered, not self-centered. It is not for self-edification, but redounds to the advantage of others. In that sense it is the greater gift. It has a wider circle, and thus does more good. Some good is done in the first case (tongues), but more good is done in the second. Therefore prophesying is a greater gift.

That is why spiritual gifts are always exercised for the common good. Spiritual gifts must operate in the arena of love, and the most loving thing is to do the most good for others.

HAND-RAISING

I have had a number of discussions as to whether people in this church should raise their hands while they are singing. The reason I bring this up here is that I feel this is roughly analogous to what Paul is saying about tongues in this section. You can act in such a way that your experience is maximized in worship, and that is a good thing, but you do need to take others into account. I would say that any thoughtful reading of the Bible would note that it was the regular practice of believers in both the New and Old Testament periods to raise their hands in worship. I do not think a case can be made that there is a problem with raising one's hands or closing one's eyes in Christian worship.

The problem with this practice is that it can be engaged in selfishly. It can be obtrusive and it can exclude others. If in your experience of worship you have not noticed that your hands are smack in front of someone's face, so caught up are you in your experience, and they find it disruptive, that is wrong. It is wrong in the same way that speaking in tongues without interpretation to the exclusion of others present is wrong.

In addition, some engage in hand-raising and other behavior that is unfamiliar to those around them as a pre-planned attempt to infiltrate and provoke schism in congregations that are deemed insufficiently spiritual by groups who are intentionally subversive. Secret promotion of church splits is always devilish, divisive and ruinous. However, having said these things, we must note that the Scriptures specifically recognize the raising of hands in worship (1 Timothy 2:8), and we should work toward maximum acceptance of any action that is offered to God from a pure heart.

A SIGN FOR UNBELIEVERS

Verse 20:

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, "By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me," says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers, but to those who believe. If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

What Paul is saying here appears to be contradictory. Tongues are a sign for unbelievers, he declares, and then he says that if an unbeliever wanders into a service and hears people speaking in tongues, he will think they are crazy. But what the apostle is saying is that tongues are a sign for unbelievers when they are in a worldly setting. And this is especially so among unbelieving Jews, as Isaiah prophesied of such, that by men speaking unfamiliar tongues, God would signify his presence. So if you are in a setting, such as a market-place or neighborhood, in which God's power needs to be testified to before people will listen, then speech in unknown languages which you have never learned, but which have been miraculously given to you by God, may in fact create interest where there was none earlier.

But if on the other hand people are already so interested that they come to church, thereby agreeing that something worth hearing will be said, what you need to do is speak to them in a way they can understand. Then the unbeliever is "convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you."

Prophesying is the clear presentation of God's truth in a penetrating way to a specific circumstance. It will have the effect of unmasking a heart, revealing secret fears, sins, hopes or longings. All of the weight of the secret, inner life is broken open and the individual who does not know God will find that God is present and

he will fall on his face in worship. His interest can be awakened by tongues, but he needs to hear the truth made plain in order to fall on his face and worship.

THE GIFT OF SPEECH

Speech is among the greatest of God's gifts. Christians are given the right to speak of themselves and of God. That is an extraordinary gift. If the speech is unintelligible to us, if it is in tongues and communication takes place because God understands when we ourselves do not understand what we are saying, that is a good thing. It still partakes of the great gift of being able to praise God. It is even better to be able to engage our minds, to think through the truth. But the remarkable miracle, the humbling one, it seems to me, is that God will let us say anything. We do not deserve to be able to name his name. We do not deserve to be able to sing one word of praise to him. It is a remarkable gift that he would let himself be known, that he would let us say aloud the truth of God. Whether the language is in tongues or prophesying is less remarkable than the fact that sinners saved by grace may speak of him at all.

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