

March 20, 2011
Second Sunday In Lent

Rev. John C. Minihan
1 Corinthians 14:1-19; 39-40

BODY – BUILDING
“Tongue-Tied”

“Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.”

Got a quiz for you this morning...

Ready?

What do folks like Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian, Kato Kaelin, and Lisa Marie Presley all have in common?

Give up?

Well, they’re all – in some regard -- people who are famous just for being famous.

I mean, think about it!

How quickly can you tick off a list of their accomplishments?

Not very quickly, I’ll bet!

Paris Hilton’s only real claim to fame (that I know of) is that she’s an heiress of the Hilton Hotel empire.

Kim Kardashian’s primarily known for her figure.

Kato Kaelin had his 15 minutes of fame for living in O.J. Simpson’s guest house.

And, Lisa Marie Presley?

As far as I know, she can’t sing – but she is Elvis’ daughter! And, that’s what makes her famous!

In other words, they're all part of a celebrity culture whose reputation far exceeds their reality!

Athletes often fall into this mold too!

Anybody (besides Ed) remember a guy named Bucky Dent?

Bucky Dent, of course, played shortstop for the Yankees. And, as a native New Yorker, I can tell you, Bucky's a legend back in the Big Apple!

But, it certainly wasn't for the numbers he put up!

Dent was a career .247 hitter and managed only 40 home runs in 12 Big-League seasons.

But, "one" of those home runs came during a crucial playoff game against the Red Sox that helped win it for the Yankees.

And, for that, Bucky Dent will always be revered in New York!

The fact, is, whether its sports or culture or even politics -- reputation often far exceeds reality.

Well, sometimes reputation exceeds reality when it comes to spiritual matters too.

Case in point would be the way "speaking in tongues" always seems to dominate the discussion when talking about Spiritual Gifts.

Now, what do I mean by "speaking in tongues?"

I know some of you are familiar with what that means. Other may not be. So, for the sake of all being on the same page, let's define it like this...

“Tongues is the God-given ability to be able to speak in unlearned and unknown languages under the direction of the Holy Spirit.”

And, the reason we're talking about it in this series on Spiritual Gifts, is because “tongues” is such a controversial topic in the church and folks are still unsure what – if anything – it means for us today.

Back when I was in college and had just become a Christian, I met a man named Charlie who worked on campus and also pastored a little Pentecostal church in his home.

Charlie was a wonderful guy! He was great to talk with and he really loved the Lord. And so, from time to time I used to worship with Charlie and his family, along with some other college students.

Now, Charlie was a big believer in speaking in tongues!

And, like most Pentecostals, Charlie thought speaking in tongues was proof-positive, that a person was saved and filled with the Holy Spirit. And, as a new Christian, of course, this idea intrigued me!

But, was Charlie right?

Well, that's what I wondered.

Was the gift of speaking in tongues really necessary to authenticate someone's faith in Christ?

You see, the way Charlie explained it was that in the New Testament Book of James, it says that the tongue is the most unruly part of the entire body. And, that's certainly true. That's what it says in James 3.

Charlie was right about that!

And, the way Charlie figured it, was that speaking in tongues – these unlearned languages – was the evidence that the Holy Spirit was now in full control over a person’s life – because the most unruly and uncontrollable part of the body was now in complete submission to Christ.

And, I had to admit that Charlie’s approach had a sort of logic to it.

But, it was logical in the same way as saying that $2+2=22$.

It just didn’t fit.

Now, on occasion I heard Charlie and some others speaking in what they claimed were tongues. And, honestly, I can’t say they were or weren’t.

But, I never did myself and I came away from the whole thing thoroughly convinced Charlie was wrong.

He was sincere...

But, he was wrong!

You see, the Scriptures clearly mention “tongues” as a Spiritual Gift.

There’s no dispute about that!

And yet, the gift of tongues is always listed last or near last in any description of Spiritual Gifts. And, it makes me wonder whether its reputation exceeds its reality!

What I mean is this...

Speaking in tongues get’s a lot of attention in some circles, but, in all the New Testament it’s mentioned in only two places...

In the Book of Acts and in 1 Corinthians.

Now, that surprised me because I thought it would have been much more prevalent than that. I guess I really hadn’t considered it before.

(Now, it's true that we also find it at the ending of Mark's Gospel – but scholars are almost unanimous that the last few verses of Mark were a later editorial edition. They weren't Mark's original words.)

So, in the entire New Testament we find it in just two places.

And, where it appears in Acts, we find a pattern developing in which the gift of tongues always seems to be given to -- what we might consider -- a new people group, as a way of authenticating the reality of the Gospel.

For example...

We find the gift of tongues first displayed in Acts 2, at Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples and enables them to speak in other languages.

These languages are heard by foreign Jews who happened to be visiting Jerusalem and serves as a powerful witness to Jesus Christ.

The next time we come across anyone speaking in tongues, it's several chapters later in Acts 10, where Peter's sent to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius.

Now, this is significant because Jews didn't associate with Gentiles and considered them "outside" God's Covenant Promise.

But, while he's there, Peter shares the Gospel with Cornelius and his family and they're all filled with the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in tongues and praising God...

Which comes as quite a surprise to Peter since he naturally assumed God's plan of salvation was only for the Jews.

But, he was still learning!

Then, the third and final time we find it in the Book of Acts is in chapter 19, when the Apostle Paul's travelling through Ephesus and he meets a group of

disciples who had been followers of John the Baptist but who knew nothing about Jesus Christ.

So, Paul shares the Gospel with them. They believe and are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in tongues.

And, that's it!

That's the whole documented account for speaking in tongues in the Book of Acts. Always to a new people group!

First to the Jews...

Then to the Gentiles...

Then to those disciples whose understanding was incomplete.

After this, the only other mention of tongues – at all – comes in Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

And, when it's mentioned there it's noted as a problem because of the way the gift was being misused and misunderstood.

You see, in Corinth, what had begun as a special gift authenticating God's Power and Presence, had deteriorated into a carnival side-show – of sorts.

People with more spectacular gifts – like tongues – began strutting around believing themselves to be better and more spiritual than those who didn't have them.

And, it appears their worship services had become a complete free-for-all where nobody knew what anybody else was saying and where everybody was only interested in their own spiritual experiences.

And, that's what's really got Paul's goat here in 1 Corinthians 14!

It wasn't that some people had or didn't have the gift of tongues!

It's just that tongues – or any other Spiritual Gift – only serves a purpose when they're used to build up the larger Body of Christ – which is the Church!

Other than that, speaking in tongues was little more than incomprehensible babbling which did nobody any good!

It reminds me of a missionary recruit who went to Venezuela for the first time.

This guy was struggling with the language and really didn't understand a lot of what was going on most of the time. But, he tried!

And so, one day he decided to visit a local church, but got lost on the way.

Well, he eventually found the place, but he got there late and the church was already packed. And, the only seat he could find was in a pew on the front row.

Now, he didn't want to make a fool of himself, so he decided to pick someone out of the crowd to imitate. So, he chose to follow the man sitting next to him in the front pew.

As they sang, the man clapped his hands, so the missionary recruit clapped his hands too.

When the man stood up to pray, the missionary stood up too.

When the man sat down, he sat down.

When the man held the bread and the cup for Communion, he held the bread and the cup.

He didn't understand a thing!

He just kept doing everything the man next to him was doing.

Well, after a bit he sensed the pastor was giving announcements.

People started clapping, so he looked to see if the man was clapping. He was -
- so the recruit clapped too.

Then the pastor said some words he didn't understand and he saw the man next to him stand up.

So, he stood up too.

And, when he did, suddenly a hush fell over the entire congregation.

A few people even gasped.

He looked around and saw that nobody else was standing. So he sat down.

Well, after services had ended, the pastor stood at the door greeting folks as they left.

When the missionary recruit stretched out his hand to greet him, the pastor said, in English, *"I take it you don't speak Spanish."*

The missionary recruit replied, *"No I don't. It's that's obvious?"*

"Well, yes," the pastor said,

"You see, I announced that the Acosta family had a newborn baby boy and asked if the proud father would please stand up."

The moral of the story?

If you don't know what's going on it can really be confusing – can't it?

Well, this is what Paul's driving at when he's talking to the Corinthians about speaking in tongues.

Sure they were doing it.

And, Paul didn't have a problem with it – except that it was causing discord in the church and turning their worship services into a free-for-all!

And so, Paul lays down some rules for them to follow – the most important of which was that if someone was speaking in tongues and nobody was there with the gift to interpret it – the one speaking should just sit down and shut up.

Of course, Paul says it in a much more genteel way. But, that's what he means!

Without the corresponding gift of interpretation all the tongues-speaking in the world is just a bunch of gibberish if nobody's around to help the church understand what's being said!

Now, that doesn't mean Paul was against speaking in tongues.

He said he spoke in tongues himself and wished they all could do the same.

It's just that Paul knew the most important thing about being a church together wasn't anybody's own individual experiences...

But, how they all built one another up together in faith!

Which has got to be our goal as a church family together too!

Author, Dr. Richard Pratt tells of receiving a phone call some years back from a friend who said, “Richard, I've got some money. Do you want it?”

(You know, I never get phone calls like that!)

And, Pratt says they talked for a while about the various kinds of ministry opportunities the money could be used for. So, the friend sent a large check, which Pratt adds, was “devoted to the work of the Kingdom.”

Sometime later, Pratt ran into this same friend and wanted to be sure to thank him again for his generous gift.

“We’re using it to serve a lot of people,” he said.

Pratt then said his friend replied saying, *“That’s what money is for.”*

Pratt says this about his friend:

“He believed that. God had given him success and money, but he understood that God’s gifts to us are to be used in the service of others.”

Then, he adds:

“The Christians in Corinth had many gifts of the Spirit that they used in worship. But these gifted believers had lost sight of the purpose of their gifts. They thought their spiritual gifts were for their own pleasure. Paul reminded them that every gift from God is intended for service to others.”

Every gift!

Even the gift of tongues!

Which begs the question...

“What can we really say about speaking in tongues today?”

Well, here’s where I want to do something unusual – at least for me.

I want to sum it up by giving you a quick rundown of what we know about tongues and the possibility of their use today. There are “10” points in this summary!

But, don’t get scared because they’re very brief!

First – Paul clearly counts tongues as a Spiritual Gift (1 Cor. 12:10).

Second – Paul freely acknowledges not everyone has this gift (1 Cor. 12:30).

Third – Paul himself had the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 14:18), but considered it of limited value unless accompanied by the gift of Interpretation (1 Cor. 14:5; 13; 19).

Fourth – The gift of tongues is far scarcer in the New Testament than we might have otherwise thought.

Beyond the Book of Acts and 1 Corinthians, it's never mentioned anywhere else which suggests that its reputation might exceed its reality.

Fifth -- While Paul said he wished all the Corinthians could speak in tongues, it was generally a problem because it fostered divisions in the church and disrupted worship.

Sixth -- Tongues is not a sign of salvation!

I want to repeat that!

Tongues is not a sign of salvation! Faith and confession in Jesus Christ is!

Romans 10:9 says: “...if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Seventh -- Tongues are also not a sign of spiritual maturity!

Some of the most faithful believers in the New Testament were never said to have spoken in tongues -- people like Stephen, Barnabas, Silas, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Apollos, and Aquila and Priscilla.

There's no record of them speaking in tongues anytime or anywhere!

On the other hand, the Corinthians spoke in tongues frequently and Paul considered them to actually be very immature in their faith.

And so, the sign of spiritual maturity isn't speaking in tongues or any other spiritual gift.

Rather, it's the Fruit of the Spirit we show in our lives...

Things like Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control (Gal. 5:22-23)...

Things that demonstrate Christ's character growing in us!

Eight -- Tongues may or may not still be a gift given by God today.

Good and faithful people disagree on this.

Some claim that the gift of tongues ceased after the Apostolic Age. Others believe the gift of tongues have continued and claim to have experienced this gift themselves. It's hard to tell!

And so, taking a hard line either way is probably unwise because we know all Spiritual Gifts are under the complete sovereignty of God. The Scripture says that "... *He gives them to each one, just as He determines.*"

In other words, it's God's business, not ours! And, I don't know about you, but I'm not going to try and limit God either way!

But, I do wonder if folks are sometimes attracted to what we might consider extraordinary signs as possible "shortcuts" to genuine spirituality. But, John MacArthur says:

Being truly spiritual is simply being true to Christ in yielding to Him day by day and moment by moment. It does not come at once for all of us; it comes in painfully small amounts – a bit at a time. But no matter how it comes, there are no shortcuts to spirituality

Ninth -- If the gift of tongues is still being given today, it would continue to fall under the guidelines Paul spoke about in today's text.

-- It could never be practiced in public worship without the accompanying gift of Interpretation...

-- Its use could not be for spiritual self-promotion, but for the building up of the entire church...

-- It shouldn't be forbidden – but would have to be practiced in an orderly way...

-- And, what's spoken must be in agreement with the basic confession of the Church, which is – “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3).

Tenth -- and finally – whether or not the gift of tongues continues to be given today, God still works in powerful and extraordinary ways in our lives and in the world today.

We just have to be on the lookout and be open to what the Spirit is doing.

Well, obviously it's a lot to chew on today.

But that's what this series on Spiritual Gifts is about...

It's about Thinking...

Exploring...

Discerning...

Praying...

And, trying to figure out where God has equipped you best for service in His Kingdom!

A visitor comes to a typical Presbyterian church one morning – grabs a bulletin – and takes a seat in one of the pews.

Nothing seems out of the ordinary until during the singing of the first hymn, the guy raises his arms high in the air.

During the prayers, he mumbles to himself incoherently.

And, during the sermon, he punctuates everything the preacher says with a loud, “Amen!” or “Hallelujah!”

Finally, one of the elders comes down the aisle and says to the guy, “*Say, Mister, what’s your problem?*”

“*Problem?*”

“*I don’t have any problem,*” the guy says.

“*I’ve just got the Spirit!*”

The elder looked at him and said, “*Well, you certainly didn’t get it here!*”

Well, whatever else we can say about the sometimes-controversial gift of speaking in tongues...

Let’s never say that you and I didn’t get the Spirit here!

Amen.