

# Covet the Best Gifts

by G.W. North

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*The sermon explores the significance of speaking in tongues as a vital spiritual gift for personal and communal edification within the Church.*

**Scripture:** Acts 2:4, 1 Corinthians 12:7-14

**Topics:** "Spiritual Gifts", "Tongues and Prophecy"

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## Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of speaking in tongues as a valuable gift from God, asserting that the Apostle Paul desired all believers to speak in tongues while also encouraging the pursuit of prophecy for edification. North clarifies that Paul's preference for prophecy does not diminish the importance of tongues, which can also serve as a means of revelation and personal edification when interpreted. He argues that tongues should not be viewed as inferior but rather as a divine gift that, when used properly, can greatly benefit both the individual and the church. The sermon highlights the necessity of understanding and love in the use of spiritual gifts, particularly tongues, to avoid misunderstandings and abuses within the church community. Ultimately, North calls for a recognition of the value of all spiritual gifts, including tongues, as essential for the growth and strength of the body of Christ.

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## Transcript

Consider the words of Paul in chapter 14 -- 'I would that ye all spoke with tongues'. Although he goes on to say 'but rather that ye prophesied', and gives his reasons for so saying, this further statement does not invalidate or in any way diminish the power of the opening words. He was not saying, nor must he be misinterpreted to mean, 'do not speak with tongues; prophesy'. He said 'I would that ye all spoke with tongues', and he meant it. Lower down he says, 'I thank God that I speak with tongues more than ye all', and considering the fact that he was correcting a church of multiple and undisciplined tongues-speakers, that really is a tremendous claim.

In both these instances he uses the word 'rather'; in the first it comes as 'but rather that ye prophesied', and in the second as 'yet in the Church I would rather speak five words with my understanding ... than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue'. Now 'rather' is part of an adverbial phrase referring to preference; it has nothing to do with prohibition. Indeed he finishes the section with the instruction 'forbid not to speak with tongues', leaving that as his final commandment from God to them about it. Instead of barring the gift, he is here stating his preferences both for himself and them in ministry in the Church, and all he says is entirely consistent with the spirit in which he earlier urged them to 'covet earnestly the best gifts'.

But contrary to the manner of some, in order to exalt the highest and best, he does not falsely demean or discount that which may have a lesser function or be more common in use. He does not say, 'I refuse to speak in Tongues', neither does he say 'you should not speak with Tongues', in fact he says exactly the opposite, 'I want you all to speak with Tongues'. We also understand him as saying, 'I want to teach and edify others, so I would rather speak with my understanding'. He is desirous that the wealth of accumulated knowledge he possesses may be applied with understanding to his brothers and sisters, so he wishes to speak to them in his mother tongue with words easy to be understood.

This classic passage on teaching is unquestionably a reference to prophetic ministry and not to preaching or Bible teaching. He is dealing with the gifts of the Spirit, each of which when truly used is by divine inspiration springing spontaneously within the spirit of the person, coming through direct from God, unpremeditated both in inception and delivery. Such ministry is plainly understood both by the speaker and the hearer, but although given in understanding, it does not spring from the speaker's knowledge, although in course of delivery it at times takes up, mixes in, uses and applies that knowledge. At such times the minister is conscious that his stored-up knowledge is being used and spoken forth, but he is also aware that it is not by his own powers of mental selection.

What generally happens upon such occasions is that the Spirit takes of what He has formerly revealed, adds more, and pours it forth at will through that member. The man is not doing this as from himself; the Spirit is drawing upon the local reserves of knowledge which He has previously stored up in a man's heart ready for use as He desires. His is the revelation, His the knowledge, His the power, His the selection and application and His the responsibility for the utterance. It would be quite foreign to His method, as well as to the rest of the chapter if, without warning, the apostle should suddenly have changed from his exposition of what is all of God, to something which is mostly of man. Normal teaching results from stores of knowledge laboriously acquired by man, carefully checked and researched and stated in an orderly manner, but Paul was not referring to that when he spoke of teaching in this passage.

Rather he means and intends us to understand the kind and quality of ministry of which we have an example in Acts 2 -- sheer prophetic statement, informative and revelatory, spontaneously flowing from God. By his inspired knowledge Peter certainly taught others also that day, and while speaking prophetically to them in his own mother tongue, he, as well as they, gathered fruit in his own understanding. Although earlier, together with all the others, he had been given utterance in one or some of the other tongues distributed among them, for the purposes of teaching others, he leaves his newly-acquired gift and moves back into his native Aramaic tongue that by his understanding he should teach others also.

However, although this is a factual account of a historic event, Paul when writing to the Corinthians later does not intend to imply that Prophecy has any superiority over Tongues in respect of quality of gift, as though we should infer from his remarks that Tongues are well-nigh valueless in the Church. All too often it is willingly assumed from a misunderstanding of 14:19, that Tongues has no value, purpose, sense or scriptural place in teaching or edifying the Church. But Paul plainly intimates in verse 6 that speaking with tongues (with interpretation: verse 5) in the Church can be as good a media of revelation, knowledge, prophetic power and doctrine as Prophecy. If a man with Tongues adds Interpretation to his gift, he thereby brings Tongues on to a par with Prophecy; doing so he will then excel to the edifying of the church, verse 12.

The inferiority of the gift (compared) to Prophecy lies purely in the realm of personal understanding; it does not lie in any imagined inferiority of quality or nature of the gift. When God gives the gifts He does not deceive people by giving stone for bread, or serpents for fish or scorpions for eggs. 'Tongues' is not of the nature of the devil (the serpent), or demons (scorpions), or man (stone), it is as pure and holy and spiritual as the Word of Wisdom or any of the higher functions. In common with all the other gifts it may be used by the devil, or demons or man, and so also may preaching and teaching; in fact everything. If we are men of understanding we shall recognise the fact that God can as easily give a word of wisdom by Tongues and Interpretation as by Prophecy.

How important then it is to see that God has based the whole construction of gifts for the body upon this foundation. By Tongues and Interpretation the prophet learns that upon occasions his gift is not indispensable; the apostle himself thanks God that he has the ability to speak with tongues more than all.

Tongues is a gift of God, totally in keeping with the humbling, debasing powers of the cross and His deliberate intentions in and through the Body of Christ in a world full of the wisdom and pride of men. Perhaps a further illustration of this may not be without value here. Paul speaks with peculiar insistence about 'our uncomely parts', reminding us that upon these we all bestow more abundant honour than we do upon the comely parts. Without putting too fine a point on it, we all realise the undeniable and indispensable importance of the function of the uncomely parts of the body and would freely admit that if these did not function aright there could be no comely parts. Carrying the analogy over to the gifts, we find no difficulty in identifying the 'uncomely' one among them -- Tongues.

Comeliness, by reason of its own intrinsic inner fitness, is a prepossessing quality appealing to our powers of perception and appreciation. Used here, it is an acknowledgement of cosmic beauty, of the rightness and correctness of something in fitting relationship to the whole. It is just here that Tongues seems to be all wrong. To the natural man (2:24), it is uncomely; it just does not seem to fit in with the whole; it sounds foreign, so it is an offence to his aesthetic sense, for there seems to be no reason for it. But Paul says it is upon the uncomely part that the more abundant honour is bestowed. Here then we may find one of the reasons for its abundance and honour in the Church.

It is noteworthy that the one occasion recorded in scripture when the Lord spoke unintelligible words which were misunderstood and misinterpreted by those who heard Him was when He hung upon the cross. We may be sure that John, who records them, did not understand them any more than the educated Roman Centurion who stood there with his soldiers at the time. When, later, the interpretation was given, and inscribed in scripture, everybody understood, but at the time when Jesus spoke, no-one knew what He was saying. Of course the words that Jesus spoke were a known language to Him, but without interpretation it was as totally unknown to those around Him then as to us for whose sake the interpretation was added.

The idea of Tongues is therefore seen to be associated with Jesus upon the cross, when He hung there an uncomely 'thing', a spectacle to God, men, devils and angels. Aesthetically the crucifixion is nauseating, artistically it is obnoxious, culturally it is barbaric, yet who will say that Calvary is spiritually uncomely or that cosmically it is not absolutely right, or that it is not intrinsically perfect? We, with God, bestow upon Calvary the most abundant honour, even though all the most bestial horrors were perpetrated there upon the man who then appeared to be less than the least of all -- a worm and no man. Even so with Tongues. It is only uncomely to those who have hid as it were their faces from it and for some excuse or another wholly unacceptable in heaven, have despised, denigrated or denied it.

Sadly enough some people refuse to have anything to do with the gift simply because those who defend its genuineness often do so upon the wrong grounds. This is unfortunate and we sympathise with all those who have had to endure these dogmatic outpourings, but none must think that he may be excused because of this. To insist upon giving Tongues a position or meaning other than the scriptures anywhere directly state is a sure way to bring the gift into disrepute. For instance by calling Tongues the initial evidence of the Baptism in the Spirit, zealots have harmed their cause. But any man who upon such flimsy excuses refuses God's gift is not less reprehensible than he who sometimes because of ignorance repeats the error and harangues the listener with the spurious claims being advanced.

To be sure the protagonists for initial evidence are wrong, but are they who allow themselves to be 'put off' by such extravagant claims any the less wrong? Suffice it to say that nowhere in the Book does any man say that a person must speak with tongues before he can claim to be baptised in the Spirit, and that ought to be accepted by all men; we must not allow preference to colour assumption about it. The scriptures neither state in words, nor do they support the idea, nor do they in any way imply, that Tongues is the initial evidence of Baptism in the Spirit (see [link pamphlet on the theory of Initial Evidence](#)).

A very real and simple reason why Tongues is so widely distributed among people baptised in Spirit is because fundamentally it has such a useful function to the individual. Paul states that he who speaks in an unknown tongue edifieth himself, and who will deny that this is of vital necessity to each one of us? It is such a pity that all too often people have misconstrued the apostle's words of correction in chapter 14 to mean that the possession and use of Tongues is at best a mistake on God's part.

Although Paul strongly reprobated the abuse of Tongues, he never once said anything which allows the suggestion that any of God's precious gifts are other than most beneficial when received and used with understanding and love. Understood aright the gift of Tongues must be confessed to be of great blessing both to the individual who has it and also to the Church privileged to have that person as one of its members. Behold the wisdom and love of God in this. Tongues is given by Him to be an instrument of edification to the person to whom it is entrusted. It is a personal love gift, an entrustment to understanding, and it is to a person's understanding that the whole of this epistle is directed.

Understanding persons easily recognise that Tongues are not a sign to the insider but are only to be used in this capacity to the outsider. They therefore hold and use the gift with restraint in the presence of the outsider, and for this reason: the outsider knows that speech in an unknown tongue to a group of men of one nation gathered together for worship is normally incomprehensible. If therefore he sees and hears all or even most of such a congregation speaking in languages unknown to each other, he will think such people must be without sense. For 'why', he will reason, 'do people speak in unknown languages when their purpose for coming together is to inform, teach, build up and communicate with each other? There must be something wrong with these people', he will say. If it be said to him that Tongues are intended to be a sign of God's presence and power, he will think 'how is it that they who talk about being baptised into God need signs to prove the presence of God to each other? They are mad!'

Without controversy such a common sense attitude would be quite correct. Why give signs when signs are not needed? Why do people who know and are already God's children revert to signs when plain language is understood? Lack of understanding is a serious handicap among God's children, marring many meetings and bringing precious things into disrepute. What is worse is that such misbehaviour is only a symptom of deeper trouble, much more serious than the resulting nauseous manifestation. That is why Paul starts at the beginning with the cross: all the sin which gave rise to the dreadful abuse of the gifts

is dealt with there, and can be dealt with by no other means.

It is true that Tongues are for a sign, but they must not be used as a sign to the instructed who have no need of signs. They have a precious ministry to the Church providing they are used with understanding in a controlled and limited manner, and, together with Interpretation, can prove to be most beneficial in building up the people. The most fundamental thing to grasp about Tongues is that the gift is imparted to be the means of self-edification. Contrary to what is sometimes implied by well-meaning folk, God is most desirous that men should possess this means of building up their own spiritual strength. He has planned it this way so that by building up himself, each individual may in turn make the fullest possible contribution to the whole.

A homely, common enough illustration may not come amiss here. What mother would be considered wrong and out of order if she was discovered to be eating food? Should she be reprimanded if she eats food like the rest of the family to whom she has devoted herself in love? Surely the greatest contribution she can possibly make to the rest of the family which comprises her body of love is to stay alive and well and strong so that she may constantly attend upon her acknowledged ministry of love. If she does not feed and build up herself, will she long be able to feed others? Would not all the family lovingly reprove her for neglecting herself should she mistakenly refrain from eating? Even so, the gift of Tongues is given as a special love-gift to the children of God that by its proper use each one who receives it may build up himself for the greater ministry of love and devotion to the whole body of love.

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