

Bad Use of Natural Languages at Corinth

by John R. Rice

John R. Rice addresses the misuse of speaking in tongues at Corinth, emphasizing the need for clarity and edification in church communication.

Scripture: Acts 2:1, 1 Corinthians 14:1-18

Topics: "Speaking In Tongues", "Holy Spirit Power"

Description

John R. Rice addresses the issue of speaking in tongues, emphasizing the importance of seeking the endowment of power from God for soul-winning rather than focusing solely on speaking in tongues. He highlights the misuse of foreign languages in the church at Corinth, pointing out that God rebuked this practice as it lacked the miraculous power of God. Rice stresses the need for clear communication in church services, encouraging believers to edify others through prophesying and witnessing in languages that can be understood, rather than speaking in unknown tongues.

Transcript

There are many good people who are misled on this matter of speaking with tongues. They are very eager people. Often they are good Christians in the sense that they want all God has, and they want to please God. They are spiritually-minded, good people, but often they are rather ignorant of the Bible and that makes them a prey to people who come along with false doctrine and a good deal of emotion .and exhortation, with not much Bible teaching. But I want to show you what the Bible teaches.

Let us say it very clearly again, I believe in the endowment of power from on High. Most all evangelists, and certainly all those who are greatly used of God in soul winning, believe that one must have an endowment of power from God in order to do the blessed work of soul winning. I advise everybody, all the time to listen to the command of God to "be filled with the Spirit," to seek the endowment of power from on High. But on the matter of talking in tongues, a lot of people get the shell and not the main thing; a lot of people get the outward form they seek but they don't get any power. And so it gets to be an artificial substitute for what God is talking about -- the mighty power of God to win souls.

I remind you also that the one definitive case about talking in tongues in the Bible is in Acts, chapter 2. And there, devout men out of every nation under Heaven, Jews, came at this feast of Pentecost to Jerusalem. These people heard the Gospel in their own tongue in which they were born. God gave others power to preach to them and to hear them and tell them the plan of salvation. And so three thousand people were saved.

Now, it is a foolish thing to talk about Pentecost and not talk about what God is talking about. God was concerned about three thousand people being saved. That is what the whole thing is about, and that is what you ought to rejoice about, and that is what you ought to try to copy. They had the power of God to win souls. It is true, there was an incidental gift. I say incidental because it was a temporary matter. Here was an emergency, here were some people they wanted to preach to and they couldn't talk their languages, so God gave the miraculous power to talk in those languages in which other people had been born, and to give the Gospel to them in their languages. That is the case at Pentecost.

And I showed you there are nine certain gifts of the Spirit, and that God gives those "severally as he will," and not by your choice. We are taught to "covet earnestly the best gifts," and so we are taught to pray for a special endowment of power to prophesy or to witness in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are taught, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God." That is good, but nobody is ever encouraged to seek to talk in tongues or to seek a gift of tongues. It is not commanded, it is not even advised. It is a separate matter not often given in Bible times and certainly not often given now. Why? Because there is no occasion for it. It is not often that one meets somebody whose language you cannot understand and who cannot understand you. It is very rarely that one would need to ask God to give you a language so you can talk to a foreigner about Christ. So the gift of tongues was never very important, never often used in the Bible, and certainly not often used now. Oh, there is a lot of fraud and good people get hysterical; but what people seek today is not the same gift of tongues people had in the Bible, unless it is for the same kind of work that they had at the time of Pentecost.

Now Consider the Heresy of Foreign

Languages at Corinth

Now let us seek to have not just some thing to make a big show and claim we have something others haven't. Let us seek to have the power of God, seek to witness for Him and win souls. And let us learn from the Bible how to do it.

First Corinthians, chapter 14 is a strange chapter, strange because it goes into the whole matter of a tongues heresy they had at Corinth. You say, "Was that a heresy?" Yes. You say, "Didn't they talk in tongues?" They talked in different natural languages. It is very clear in this Scripture. Now they have to be given some restraint and some rules about it, in I Corinthians 14.

Had it been of God, you wouldn't have to have any restraint. Nowhere in the Bible does God say to people, "I have given you the power to work miracles but take it easy. Don't do it so often." The Bible never says, "You who have a gift of healing, don't two of you heal people at the same time."

But God does say that about the kind of tongues they had here in this chapter. Why? Because there were natural tongues being misused, trying to copy after the gift of tongues. So there is restraint and rebuke for what they were doing at Corinth. Now, why would you seek to have what they had at Corinth when the Bible says what they had was wrong, and God is rebuking them for it?

Let us read now the first twelve verses of I Corinthians 14:

"Follow after charity [Christian love], and desire spiritual gifts, but rather than ye may prophesy. For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue [unknown is not in the original, so here it is in italics] speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries."

Suppose somebody is talking in French and he can talk mysteries. He understands it, but I don't. Then, talking in French in a meeting where nobody understands. French is the thing he is rebuking here. He is speaking "mysteries."

"But he that prophesieth [that is, witnesses in the power of the Spirit] speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue [again unknown is not in the original Greek here, so he that speaks in a foreign language] edifieth himself...."

That is, the person enjoys testifying in French, for example, but nobody else can enjoy it because people don't know what he is saying. He speaks in a language they cannot understand.

". . . but he that prophesieth edifieth the church."

That is, one who speaks in the power of God in an ordinary language edifies others, and one can't do that talking in a foreign language to people. Now, it is obvious to see that he is putting a certain restraint on what they did and correcting some faults they had at Corinth. Now, does God ever give a miracle and then rebuke somebody for using it? I don't think so. Then it is not a miraculous gift they are talking about here. But read on:

"I would that ye all spake with tongues [I would like it if you all talked several languages], but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret "

That is, if you are going to talk in a foreign language no one understands, you do no good, so it is better to be filled with the Spirit and witness for God in the language people can understand.

"...that the church may receive edifying. Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues [speaking in foreign languages], what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? [If I don't say something you can understand, he says, why talk?] And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped?"

A child may pound on a piano, but you should play a tune. Just so, when you go to talk, it ought to have meaning.

"For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?"

Do Not Use Words People Cannot Understand in Services

When I was in the army there was a certain call for morning reveille, a certain mess call, a certain call for retreat, a certain call for taps at night. Those had to sound a certain way. If you give a strange set of sounds that has no melody or doesn't have any set form, that wouldn't do any good. That is how it is when one talks a foreign language to people who can't understand him. Now read verse 9:

"So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world [all kinds of foreign languages], and none of them is without signification. Every one of them has meaning. This is not talking [about some heavenly jabber but about the various languages, and they all have meaning.]

"Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me. Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts,

seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church." -- I Cor. 14:1-12.

What is that? Seek to say things in a language that can be understood, one which will bless people, the Scripture says here. So what they had at Corinth was a kind of a tongues heresy that needed to be rebuked. You say, "This is the unknown tongue." Notice throughout this chapter the word unknown is in italics which means the translators want us to understand it is not in the Greek form. You might not know Latin and that would be unknown to you, but the word "unknown" is not in the original here. It might be that if somebody talked in French, it would be unknown to you. That is what the translators were thinking about. But the word "unknown" is not in these Scriptures. This is not about "unknown" tongues except natural languages that are unknown to somebody. They were foreign languages. That is what the word means everywhere. God doesn't say they had a gift of tongues; He doesn't say miraculous tongues in this case. He is correcting the way they used foreign languages in that church at Corinth.

Now, you say, "They were foreign languages?" Yes. Why otherwise the rebuke? Why would he say then, "I would rather you speak five words people can understand than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue"? Why would he say that if they did not need correction? Now, remember this, God never gives a miracle and then rebukes it. If God had given a miraculous gift of tongues and God's Holy Spirit gave them tongues, then God wouldn't be rebuking it. At Corinth, then, they had a heresy -- using natural languages in the services. They thought that made them superior to their "unlearned" brethren.

Were these then talking natural languages? Yes. I want you to notice one word, "unlearned." It is mentioned several times. Verse 6 says,

"Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine?"

Words ought to mean something, even to the unlearned. And notice "unlearned" in verses 16, 23 and 24. Let us read verse 16:

"Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?"

Notice the word "unlearned." We are talking about a spiritual gift here that was going on at Corinth. We are talking about their using languages that unlearned, uneducated people could not understand. "Unlearned" comes up again in verses 23 and 24. Here he says:

"If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues [all speak with foreign languages; it doesn't say a miraculous gift of tongues], and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? [They will say that you are crazy]"

You say, "But I know Koine Greek in which Paul writes his letters. Over here at Corinth maybe we talk another language," or "Maybe we know they have learned Latin because the Roman soldiers are here." But common people don't know it. Then the Scripture says here that if somebody comes in who is unlearned, uneducated, who hasn't learned that language, won't he say you are crazy? And there is some reason for that. See verse 24 again:

"But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not [one unlearned] . . ." you can witness to him in the power of the Spirit and he will understand it.

"Unlearned" -- why does he use it? He is not talking about unspiritual but about people who haven't learned these various languages they are using at Corinth.

God's Restriction on Languages Used

in Christian Services

Now, what are you going to do about it? Well, he puts certain restrictions on it. He says if you are going to have them talking in foreign languages, have somebody interpret, and have somebody do it one at a time, and not more than two or three in a service.

I was in a revival campaign in Oklahoma. One night we had a blessed time. Some Indians were there from various tribes. One day a man was there and he said, "I have a friend here from the Kaw Indian tribe. He has been saved and would like to testify about what God has done for him, but he can't speak English. Can he speak in his?"

I said, "If you will interpret what he says, he may. Otherwise there is no use in him testifying. He would enjoy telling it to edify himself, but he wouldn't do anybody else any good unless somebody interpret."

So here the Lord is saying about these people at Corinth, "If you are going to have a foreign language that nobody can understand, you can't take any part. But tell them they must have somebody tell us what they say when they witness, and it has to be intelligent, and only one at a time, and only two or three in a service because you mustn't make a great deal about talking in foreign languages."

You see, then, it is all right for people of different languages and different cultural levels to come together in the church and do the work of God, but remember, all is supposed to make sense. Things must be done "decently and in order." And if you play the piano, it is supposed to have a tune, not just a sound. If you talk, it is supposed to have clear meaning. Paul says, "I would rather speak five words that can be understood than ten thousand words that cannot be understood."

Now, I want you to notice some restrictions that God puts here on this. First of all, there is a clear restriction on this. The fact that God puts restrictions on what they were doing at Corinth shows us that what they were doing was wrong. When God rebukes what they were doing, it shows it is not miraculous, not God-given. God never gave a miracle and then rebuked somebody for the way he used it. God never gives somebody a miraculous gift and then be angry with the way they use it. No, miraculous gifts don't need rebuking, don't need a restraint put on them; but they did in the use of natural languages over in Corinth.

Note then, on other gifts of the Spirit, did God ever say, "Here are two people working miracles. You are working too many miracles. You will have to slow it down"? Or did He say, "Here, two of you are working miracles at the same time. You mustn't do that"? Or did He say, "There are two of you here with the gift of healings and everybody is confused about it"? No rebuke on that. Why? It is a miracle. If God gives a miracle, it doesn't need any rebuke. It is done right or God wouldn't put His power on it.

And so what they had at Corinth was not done in the power of God. It was ordinary foreign languages, putting on a show in church, and so it is rebuked here.

Notice some other things where there were some misunderstanding about here. Somebody says, "But Paul said, 'I speak with more tongues than you all.'" That is verse 18. "I thank my God, I speak with

tongues more than ye all." Don't put in it what God didn't put in it. Paul didn't say, "I have a gift of tongues more than ye all." He said, "I am better educated. I know more languages." Paul is writing this in the Koine Greek; his own native language was Aramaic. He also could understand Hebrew and he spoke in Hebrew sometimes and he sometimes probably spoke in Latin. So Paul said, "In addition to my own native tongue I preach in Koine Greek everywhere I go. I do that more than all of you, but I don't do it for a show." And neither should you.

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