



*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dearest family,

I was hoping on Sunday that the opening of my message would have you thinking in a way that you would be surprised at the connection I would then make with the final gift of the Holy Spirit that I had not been able to comment upon in my last (second of two) message 'Towards a Theology of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.' You may well have thought that my message was going to be about the righteous use of the tongue, and may have been wondering what that had to do with a series on Acts of the Apostles. As I hope I made clear, there is no more wonderful a righteous use of the tongue than the gift of tongues.

How's your tongue? Ever give you problems? Like what kind? Bitten your tongue recently, or put your foot in your mouth? Wished you could have taken something back? Spoken out of turn? Bad-mouthed? Run your mouth off? Spoken through a hole in your head? Amazing the number of phrases and idioms that describe what comes out of our mouths. Have you ever done a Bible study on the tongue? Here are just some of the kinds of tongues that scripture identifies: viper's tongue (Job 20:6); flattering tongue (Ps. 5:9); proud tongue (Ps. 12:3); lying tongue (Ps. 109:2); deceitful tongue (Ps. 120:2); false tongue (Ps. 120:3); forward tongue (Pvb. 10:31); naughty tongue (Pvb. 17:4); perverse tongue (Pvb. 17:20); backbiting tongue (Pvb. 25:23). Here are specific uses of the tongue that are condemned: gossiping, tale-bearing, false witnessing, whispering, slandering, falsely accusing, vain talking, defaming, tattling, lying, deceiving, backbiting, raging. And in the NT, the book of James is a veritable concentrate of bad news: a little member, boasts great things, is a fire, a world of iniquity, defiles whole body, sets course of nature afire, untameable, unruly evil, full of poison, blessing and cursing, capable of bitter strife. There are plenty of examples of unrighteous communication in Acts including lying, complaining, raging, threatening, bearing false witness, being abusive. (I mentioned on Sunday that on no less than 4 occasions, the root of unrighteous use of the tongue was named as 'jealousy.')

Can we take anymore? Given how unholy this member is, would we not want some good news about it? The tongues of fire at the day of Pentecost was an image of cleansing. It was about holiness. And that holiness was mirrored vocally in the gift of tongues. How incredible that God gives us a gift that has a pure and holy expression for our private praise and prayer, and intimate communication with the Lord. Doesn't that make the gift very desirable, and very necessary? There are at least four different descriptions: new tongues (Mk. 16:17); other tongues (Acts 2:4); divers tongues (1 Cor. 12:10); unknown tongues (1 Cor. 14:2) Common to all is the power given by the Holy Spirit to speak a language that expresses the inexpressible, that can dialogue meaningfully with God beyond the limits of intelligible thought and language. A public tongue must be interpreted and it is most likely that whoever speaks in an unknown tongue in such a way will most likely interpret because scripture says that they should pray that they can and will do. (14:13) That has been the normal experience here in COSC. Note that it says "different kinds of tongues" so although they are not gibberish but languages, they may be extinct ones, unused dialects now, or the tongues of angels (13:1) not just men. But the assumption is that they will not be intelligible to either speaker or hearer. (However, there are occasions when this gift has been

used by God to speak directly in the language of someone being addressed, as on the day of Pentecost.) Speaking in tongues is predominantly then a private gift, that edifies the speaker. So it is a crucial and non-negotiable means for building up your own spiritual life, your own spirit. Paul says that when we speak in tongues we speak "to God" so it is a gift for deepening relationship, for intimacy and for freeing intimate expression. Never forget that at the end of the day, this gift was authenticated by Jesus himself, the One who had said to "wait for the gift." (Acts 1:4)

If Paul was in church, he would not say anything different to what he said back then: that he would that we all speak in tongues. (1 Cor. 14:5) Don't go too quickly as a way of escape or avoidance to "Do all speak in tongues?" (1 Cor. 12:30) Paul also urges us to "eagerly desire" the gifts of God. If tongues is so important for intimacy, why on earth wouldn't we desire this gift for the deepening of our communication with Father, particularly in our praise and our prayer.

As well as the matter of tongues and edification, I suggested another important point seldom mentioned: that there was an inviolable relationship between tongues and racial reconciliation, and that when we exegete what kind of "sign" this gift is, we have to conclude from the text that it signed the fulfillment of Jesus' commission of the disciples to bear the gospel to the nations, beginning with their immediate world of all the nations that bordered the Mediterranean including Africans, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, Asians, present-day Europeans. Representatives of these nations said they heard "the wonders of God in our own tongues" (Acts 2:5-12). Tongues was a sign that not only witnessed to God's redeeming work for all nations, but was itself the means of communication of that witness to the gospel.

In all three incidents in Acts when tongues are imparted (Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6) it is in a multi-racial context, one of cultural and national diversity. So what am I saying that tongues is a sign for? God is no respecter of nationality. There is no divine toleration for racial superiority and ensuing racism. Prejudice was the barrier to the Gentiles getting the gospel from the Jews. If there were any doubts, Acts 10 settles the matter. It took the vision of the sheet with unclean animals, to break the bondage in Peter and prepare him to go to Cornelius' house. The sheer supernaturalism of this chapter, both through divine vision and voice to Peter, and angelic visitation to Cornelius, tells us that God is concerned that nobody misses the point, and that He will spare nothing in order for this truth to be relayed and received. What was the conclusion to be drawn from the manifestation of tongues to the Gentiles? The text tells us: "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation" (10:34) To think or live differently is not just to be ungodly, but to oppose God's love and His will and purposes. Of course the prejudiced Jews were surprised and can hardly disguise their rooted superior patronizing attitudes of heart: "even on the Gentiles"! From now on in Acts, the address of the gospel is consistently to "men of Israel and you Gentiles" (13:16); "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks" (20:21) If you take racial reconciliation seriously, you will take speaking in tongues seriously, as this gift will be a constant reminder as you employ it in your daily life, that your racial identity is a gift of God but insufficient for your redeemed identity in Christ, and the fact that you need to speak another language to enhance your intimacy with God, will remind you that God is the God of all tribes and nations. Everyone committed to God's reconciling purposes when it comes to race, needs to receive the gift of tongues as the sign of those purposes. Does that give you yet another timely and relevant reason to desire this gift?

Pastorally yours,  
Stuart