

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
May 24, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 2:1-7; 1 Corinthians 14:13-19
Lesson Title: Gift of Languages

Introduction

The Book of Acts is an inspired historical narrative of what the early church experienced. The Epistles contain inspired doctrinal instruction for believers throughout the church age. In contrast, not every event recorded in the Book of Acts during the apostolic age continued throughout the church age.

The original gift of languages that we are studying today was an amazing spiritual gift that was given by God to be a sign to unbelieving Israel (1 Corinthians 14:21-22). The true biblical gift of languages, or the gift of tongues as it is called today ceased at some point in early church history (1 Corinthians 13:8). The last group to speak in tongues were John the Baptist's disciples whom Paul encountered in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). They were among the last remnant of Old Testament believers, who came to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

The Original Gift of Languages on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-7)

The second chapter of Acts records a turning point in the history of God's people. In Acts 1 the disciples were commanded to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1-8). In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit comes. Within the Book of Acts, there are over fifty references to the Holy Spirit. Of all the references to the Holy Spirit, none have created more interest and controversy than the gift of languages.

Verse 1-2

“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.”

The first occurrence of speaking in tongues in the New Testament is on “the day of Pentecost.” The word “Pentecost” means “fiftieth” or “the fifth part of a thing.” “Pentecost,” one of the Jewish feasts, was so called by the Jews because it occurred fifty days after Passover. The offering in this feast was the first two loaves made from the first wheat harvest portion of the year. It was given as a thank offering (Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Numbers 28:26).

On the “fiftieth day” after the resurrection of Jesus, “Pentecost” occurred. As defined in the Old Testament, the feast of Pentecost was in commemoration of

the first fruits of the wheat harvest. Jesus, by His own resurrection was the firstfruits from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

“Fully come” means “was fulfilled.” It is a word used to describe an event that takes place according to God’s timing. “Pentecost,” like the birth and death of Christ was according to God’s divine plan (Galatians 4:4; Luke 9:51). The coming of the Holy Spirit is often portrayed as the result of the disciples praying, seeking, and yielding themselves to the Lord. Yet, that is not true. The ten-day prayer meeting did not bring about Pentecost. Pentecost came as a result of God’s sovereign plan. Pentecost was a once-for-all event that will not be repeated.

Pentecost also came “suddenly.” The word emphasizes the element of surprise. Even though the disciples believed the promise that the Holy Spirit would come they were nevertheless taken by surprise. The “sound” association with the arrival of the Holy Spirit was “of a rushing mighty wind.” The word “wind” means “blast of breath.” The Holy Spirit is the “breath” of God.

“As of” means the “noise” the disciples heard was not a weather related event. It was “as of” meaning it was “like a rushing mighty wind.” This “wind” did not come from the north, south, east, or west. It came from “heaven.” The disciples knew what was happening was from God. Although they did not feel the Spirit they heard the “sound.”

“Wind” is often used in Scripture as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The “wind” or Spirit came and “filled all the house where they were sitting.” This “noise” literally “filled the house.” This was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was the fulfillment of Acts 1:5. The “sound” was heard all over and it began to gather the crowd. The breath of God literally filled the house where they were gathered.

Verse 3

“And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.”

The disciples could have never comprehended the significance of the Spirit’s arrival without the Lord miraculously illustrating it to them. These New Testament believers who had just been baptized into the body of Christ received God’s presence as “cloven tongues like as of fire.” “Cloven” means “parted. That does not mean the tongue was parted, but that the tongues were separated one from another. “Tongues” is the Greek word *glossa* meaning “language.” It is plain that the “tongues” here on Pentecost were intelligible languages and not some ecstatic, unknown speech.

The “cloven tongues” were symbols of the different languages in which the disciples would declare the grace of God to all who were present on the day of Pentecost. These “cloven” or parted “tongues” that “sat upon each of them” was testimony that every one of them had received the Holy Spirit. “Each of them” includes the apostles and the 120 that were gathered on Pentecost (Joel 2:28-32).

Verse 4

“And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

“And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues” signifies that Spirit-baptism and speaking in tongues at Pentecost was a group experience. There is no record here of individuals seeking the Holy Spirit or the gift of tongues. “All” were “filled” and “all began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

To be “filled” with the Holy Spirit is to be under His control. “Other tongues” means “different languages.” “Utterance” means “to enunciate plainly, to declare.” When the disciples were “filled with the Holy Ghost,” they spoke in known languages “*the wonderful works of God*” (Acts 2:11). If the “other tongues” were some kind of unknown ecstatic speech, how did the hearers recognize the content of the speech without an interpreter?

Verse 5-6

“And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.”

These “Jews, devout men” were Hebrew men who had most likely traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. “Now when this was noised abroad” means these men miraculously heard the same sound of the wind as the disciples. When this “multitude came together” near the upper room they “were confounded.” They were astonished and bewildered “because that every man heard them speak in his own language.”

Verse 7

“And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?”

They were all amazed that they heard the message of the disciples in their own particular dialect, the language to which they were born. Add to that the fact

that those speaking were “Galilaeans” and it was even more amazing! These devout Jews viewed “Galilaeans” as ignorant and uneducated.

The Operational Gift of Languages at Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:13-19)

After having shown love as the more excellent of the spiritual gifts, Paul confronts the Corinthians in regard to their sin in misunderstanding and misusing spiritual gifts. A careful study of 1 Corinthians 12-14 reveals that the Corinthian believers were misusing and abusing some spiritual gifts. At the head of the list was the gift of tongues. In 1 Corinthians 12-13, Paul laid the foundation for his criticism of the misuse of spiritual gifts in chapter 14. First, all spiritual gifts are to be used for the good of the entire body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Second, all spiritual gifts are to be exercised in love (1 Corinthians 13). This was not how spiritual gifts were being used in Corinth. Some Corinthians had taken the original gift of tongues and distorted it into some type of heavenly prayer language or ecstatic gibberish that no one understood. In addition, the women seemed to be leading in this misuse of tongues which was a clear violation of Scripture (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

An accurate interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 reveals that Paul is not endorsing the use of tongues but rather showing the inferiority of the gift and establishing restrictions and regulations of the gift in regard to public worship. The Corinthians had so confused and counterfeited the original gift of tongues that Paul had to write an entire chapter to deal with the issue.

It is clear that Paul speaks sarcastically to the Corinthians about this subject. Paul knew that the gifts of tongues would cease when the mature stage of love was reached. That was obviously a long way off for the Corinthians. Since they were not even close to spiritual maturity, he encouraged them to at least seek the best spiritual gifts so their lives and public worship would not be a joke.

Verse 13

“Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret.”

Paul is not encouraging the Corinthians to “pray” for the ability to “interpret” tongues. Please remember Paul is using sarcasm to this carnal bunch of believers. Paul is saying in effect, “While you are jabbering away in whatever language it is that you are using, you could at least have someone ‘interpret’ or explain what you are saying.” It is hard to understand how the Corinthians placed such an incredible emphasis on speaking gibberish that nobody, not even the one speaking understood.

Whatever type of language the Corinthians spoke had no edifying value (1 Corinthians 14:2). Only God could understand what they were attempting to

say. This is not an endorsement of something spiritual; it is a reproof of something carnal.

Verse 14

“For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful.”

Is Paul endorsing or authenticating some type of heavenly prayer language? No. The word “spirit” is the Greek word *pneuma* {pnyoo-mah}. This word “spirit” can be translated “spirit, breath, or wind.”

Paul is saying, “If I pray in some undiscernible language, I am just wasting air, or breath. My ‘spirit’ or breath is filling the air, but there is nothing intelligent or productive in what I am doing.” In other words, it bears no fruit and helps nobody. Tongue praying is mindless and useless.

Verse 15-16

“What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. 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?”

“What is it then” is Paul asking, “So, what am I to do?” His answer is “I will pray with the spirit,” and “with the understanding also.” Paul will use the “spirit” or the breath that is inside of him as well as his “understanding” or his brain. Paul will do the same when he “sings.” When Christians pray or sing in English, God understands English. When Christians pray or sing in German, God understands German. Do not feel spiritually inferior to those that misinterpret Scripture because you haven’t spoken in some weird gibberish or prayed in some pagan language nobody understands. Jesus Christ Himself in His high priestly prayer in John 17 prayed to the Father in a known language. If you pray or sing in your birth language or known speaking language, that will do!

“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?” Praying or singing in a strange language serves absolutely no purpose. If the “unlearned” or someone who does not know what you are praying or singing attends your worship service how can they ever say, “So be it,” or “Amen?” Whatever it was the Corinthians were doing was having no spiritual benefit for themselves or anyone else.

Verse 17

“For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified.”

Paul is saying, “If you are praying or singing in some unknown language, you may be sincere about blessing the Lord or giving thanks, but “the other” or no one else is “edified.” Failure to edify others with your spiritual gift violates Scripture (1 Corinthians 14:12).

Verse 18-19

“I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.”

Paul recognized and possessed spiritual gifts. In fact, he was thankful that he spoke “with tongues more” than the Corinthians. When Paul said, “I speak with tongues more than ye all” he is not talking about the counterfeit gibberish the Corinthian’s were speaking. He was talking about the real gift. Though we have no specific record where Paul exercised this spiritual gift, he obviously possessed it and used it “more than” the Corinthians.

Paul wants the Corinthians to know that when he was assembled “in the church” for public worship, he would “rather speak five words with understanding” that “others” might be helped, than to speak “ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.” The word “tongue” here is a reference to the counterfeit gift the Corinthian’s were using.

Paul’s argument is clear. He knew the original spiritual gift of languages and tongues would cease in a few years. What he said in these verses would give some guidelines for future use until the gift ceased or the Corinthians matured. He was warning the Corinthian’s against self-serving and carnal substitutes for the true spiritual gift.

Conclusion

When you talk about the gift of languages on the day of Pentecost it should cause you to rejoice over God’s divine plan to reach the unbelieving world with the gospel. To somehow re-define that glorious truth into some kind of self-edifying gibberish is an insult to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it takes away from the magnificence of how the Lord birthed His church and brought sinners into salvation from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.

The gift of languages in the Book of Acts is the same gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians. If you read the Bible that truth is not difficult to understand. Although many today have chosen to embrace experience over truth, God’s

Word is true. Thank God for the gift of languages in the Book of Acts. Many souls are in heaven because of this miraculous phenomena. Thank God for the boldness of Paul to confront and reveal the misuse of those gifts by the Corinthians. May the Lord help us to rightly divide His Word in the understanding and use of spiritual gifts.

Amen.